The Anti-Heroine

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The Anti-Heroine

by cheshire_carroll

Summary

Hermione Granger knows she's not a good person. Disillusioned with life at only twelve years old; she is cynical, manipulative, ruthless and, above all else, a survivor.

For six years she has lived on the streets of London with only her sharp mind and her sharper knives to keep her alive, but a letter from an owl changes everything for Hermione, and the bond she forms on the Hogwarts Express with a timid boy with broken glasses, skinny wrists and a lightning-shaped scar will change the whole of Wizarding Britain.

Main Pairing: Harry Potter/Hermione Granger/Tom Riddle
I am truly awful at responding to comments as I tend to read them through the email on my phone, so please don't think I'm ignoring you. I'll do my best if it's a question, but even if I don't answer please know that I appreciate each and every comment you wonderful people have given me and thank you for taking the time to give me feedback xoxoxo
Prologue: How It All Began

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Prologue:

How It All Began

Saint Agnes Home For Orphaned Children was a neat little building, quite normal looking in every way. Run by a convent of nuns, the twenty-three children currently living there were good Catholic, god-fearing children. Well, all except one.

Hermione Jane Granger was not a normal girl, and in more ways then one. She was extremely intelligent for her age; at almost six years old, she could already read a newspaper, had decent handwriting and had conquered enough math to be considered a prodigy. Maybe her intelligence would have been viewed with awe and glorified if she didn't have her other unusual... ability. For as long as she could remember, Hermione had been able to make the impossible happen, like making objects hover in the air and fly across the room with nothing but a glance.

The nuns and the other children feared her and made her life miserable. With already strict punishments in place for the orphans, such as the bamboo canes wielded liberally by all the nuns and the leather strap of the stony-faced Mother Superior, whenever Hermione was caught doing something 'unnatural' the nuns would make her kneel and pray in front of a cross for hours on end or they would lock her in what the children called 'The Black Hole' for days, a small, windowless room without bedding, ventilation or light, going without food and sometimes without water... and the other children were just as vicious.

Living in the oppressive environment of St Agnes, the children had little means of escaping the sense of powerlessness, and one of those means was the bullying of those singled out as 'different'. They'd steal anything she owned, and they'd physically hurt her. She was different. She was a freak, the devil's spawn.

For three long, long years Hermione had lived under the harsh reign of the nuns and their attempts to exorcise the devil from her, the worst being when at age five Sister Bernedice was injured when her 'secret talent' caused a cup to explode and Mother Superior had burned her legs with a red-hot poker.

She used to be a sweet girl who sat on her mother's lap as Dr. Jeanne Granger read Shakespeare aloud to her young daughter, and learned basic arithmetic concepts with her father, Dr. Archidemus Granger. But when she was three years old, her parents had been cruelly torn from her, and she'd been sent to Saint Agnes's- or, as she called it, Hell. To survive, Hermione had had to become clever and cunning, with a side of ruthless, but even that was not enough. Not until the night, at age six, that she decided to take action.

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Hermione's POV:

Hermione stared at the shadows dancing across the whitewashed walls of the locked room she was in, with only a thin mattress and a bible, envious of their freedom, though relieved that she was finally in a room with light again, after three whole days in the Black Hole. Her thoughts turned to what got her locked up this latest time- she had, once again, been caught by the nuns doing the secret thing.

The day in question had started normal enough. She had risen with the rest of the orphans, ate her small meal of breakfast then set to work on the chores for the day- she'd been on gardening.

She actually liked the garden, partially because she enjoyed been out of the stifling institution that she had the misfortune to call 'home', but also because she liked making things grow, tending to them lovingly, even though by the end of the day her hands were often raw from tending to the garden without protection for her hands, and either shivering from cold winds or red from the sun.

Hermione let out a low sigh, as she reflected on what had happened that day. She had checked, she had been so careful, but Sister Bernedice, who still nursed a special dislike for her, had caught her doing the secret thing to mend her broken trowel. Which was why she was in a room alone, no one else wanting to share with the freak, her stomach still hurting because she'd yet to be given anything but bread and water, staring at the shadows dance.

God, she hated this place. She hated the stiff grey uniforms, she hated that all the lessons were pathetically easy and yet her intelligence earned her nothing but scorn, she hated the endless hours of praying, she hated the other children, who either ignored her or spited her, and most of all she hated the Sisters. More and more she'd find herself wishing that she had the strength to hurt all of them the way she was hurt.

Hermione took a deep shuddering breath and tried to imagine she was somewhere else, a better place in a kinder time, when she was loved and no one ever hurt her, and once she'd calmed, she turned her attention to the battered watch she'd stolen from one of the other kids, stolen because hers had been ripped off her wrist and stomped on by one of the older girls. She watched the second hand tick and then, at the stroke of midnight, Hermione squeezed her eyes shut, making her birthday wish as she turned six years old.

She wished, with all her heart, that she was free.

And then the padlock, locking her inside the room she had the misfortune of calling her bedroom, floated soundlessly to the floor, meeting the ground with a soft clunk. The door swung open.

Hermione froze for a few seconds, then decided to grant her own wish. She crept out of her room, silently slinking along the wall, hidden in the shadows. She made it to the kitchen safely and then set about getting enough food to at least last a few days- a loaf of bread, a couple bottles of water and a bunch of apples, unable to help her trembling with fear as she thought about what would happen to her if she was caught.

Next making her way to the coatroom, a room where the children were forbidden to go, Hermione found a small satchel into which she placed the food.

And then she used her secret thing to unlock the door of the orphanage and creep out into the dark of the night.

Little Hermione walked for hours until she reached the city of London. Her feet were bruised and blistered, her legs ached and her eyelids were so heavy she could barely see ahead. The first park
she found, she curled up under one of the thick bushes and fell into an exhausted sleep.

She slept there for three more nights. It was uncomfortable and cold and on the third night it rained, soaking her to the bone, until she used her secret thing to dry herself again. The food didn't last long and the nights and days stretched on forever. She was dirty and exhausted and starving, but it was still better then Saint Agnes's.

And then, on the fifth day of her new freedom, everything changed. That's when she met Sting.

Sting was a boy and he was ten. He'd also been living on the street for two years. He took her under his wing, introducing her to other homeless, street kids and teaching her how to survive. He taught her how to pick pockets so that they could eat. He taught her how to find the various hidey-holes, like burned out warehouses and vacant lots, how to spot dangers, like the police, and men with eyes that stared too long, too interested. He taught her where the good places to sleep were, and how to fight, both hand to hand and with blades, stealing for her her first switchblade.

It was Sting who told her she needed a street name, and so Hermione Jane Granger became just Jane. And, for the first time in years, Jane was happy.

Chapter End Notes

Saint Agnes Home For Orphaned Children is based on the Catholic Nazareth order's homes. For more than 100 years, the Poor Sisters of Nazareth cared for children in the order's dozens of homes across Britain. Orphans, abandoned babies and children deemed uncontrollable or accused of petty crimes were all put in the hands of the nuns who, to the outside world, epitomized kindness and compassion. However, many of those who were in the sisters' care have come forward to claim that, behind the locked doors of Nazareth House (all the homes had this name), the nuns maintained a ruthless regime. Beatings and acts of extreme cruelty were commonplace, they say, and together with the spartan existence in the home, gave them lives of utter misery, with allegations as recent as the 1970's. The Sisters are accused of using canes, sticks, wooden sandals and the leather belts around their waists to punish misbehavior. One girl, Helen Carter, "allegedly" (I HATE that word) had her legs burnt with a red-hot poker, to exorcise the Devil. For punishment, children were shut into a "black hole" without bedding, ventilation or light.

~Cheshire Carroll
Part One: The Philosopher's Stone - Chapter I

Chapter I:

Jane/Hermione's POV:

The flapping of wings woke her and Jane sat bolt upright as an owl of all things swooped over to her and landed on the stone steps of the doorway she was sleeping against, in the small alley. Iago let out a snarling, spitting noise from where he was, as usual, draped over her shoulders, and the owl gave a somewhat alarmed hoot and stuck its leg out revealing-- "is that a letter?" Jane asked, incredulously.

The owl hooted and hopped forwards a few steps, leg still held out. Eyes narrowed, Jane reached out cautiously, unfastening the letter from the owl's leg, observing the bird as she did so. If she wasn't mistaken- and she was very rarely mistaken- that species of owl was certainly not native to the area, maybe not even to the country. That meant that it most certainly should not be here, and likely shouldn't even be in Britain, unless it was part of some kind of private collection or had escaped from a zoo.

The private collection, she decided, as she unrolled the thick, yellowing paper –dear god, it was actually parchment of all things– was the most likely explanation.

And then she read the address and all thoughts of the mystery owl's origin left her mind, leaving a tingling fear. "Bloody hell," she whispered, allowing herself the rare use of vulgar language.

Miss H. J. Granger,
Empty Doorway, Dark Alley
London

Someone not only knew who she was before she became Jane, but they knew exactly where she was. Trying not to panic, she pulled out the letter and read, her eyes steadily growing wider and wider with each word.

Dear Miss Granger,

We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment. A professor will arrive at a provided location to give you an introduction into the magical world, as well as a tour of Diagon Alley. They will also be able to answer any questions you or your guardians have.

Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later then July 31.

Yours sincerely,

Minerva McGonagall
Deputy Headmistress

Jane blinked, several times, and took several deep breaths. Her mind was racing, incredulous, barely able to believe what she'd just read. How could magic exist and nobody realize it? Although... her eyes narrowed slightly as her mind worked overtime on this new puzzle.
Magic was thought to be impossible because there was no proof or logical explanation for it. But if there really actually was a magical community they would, in all probability, be so much more advanced and could easily hide any evidence that would prove the existence of magic. Which meant that it wasn't impossible, normal humans simply didn't have the information to prove the logic behind it.

Yes, Jane decided, that was most likely it. That problem solved, she absently stroked Iago's mangy fur as she stared at the owl in contemplation. It blinked back at her, slowly. It was waiting for a reply, she deduced, and she fished in her pockets for the ratty spiral notebook and old pen that she carried everywhere.

Dear Deputy Headmistress,

If this is indeed a genuine offer, and not an elaborate prank, then I would be happy to accept a place in your school. I do have to warn you, however, that my family is very poor and we will most likely not be able to afford the tutelage.

I can meet you tomorrow at the entrance of Hyde Park, London, at 9am, if that's a convenient time and place for you. My parents, unfortunately, won't be able to make it, as they both work long hours to support us. I apologize for the inconvenience, but they are happy to let me deal with this.

Yours sincerely,

H. Jane Granger

Ripping out the page, Jane gave it a doubtful look. She hadn't revealed her parents death due to the fact she was certain they didn't realize she was a runaway. As she had absolutely no intention of returning to either an orphanage or foster care, claiming her parents worked full-time to support the family was the best excuse she could give.

She gingerly attached the tiny slip of paper to the owl's foot, and shuffled backwards slightly, watching as it took off. She watched until it had flown out of sight, before returning to the letter to read the book list enclosed. "Bugger." She muttered, eyes scanning over the list. There was no way she'd be able to afford any of it- dragon-hide gloves? Three different sets of uniforms? Eight different books? Brass scales? Crystal phials? A telescope set?

At least she'd be able to bring Iago, she comforted herself, reaching up to scratch the temperamental cat behind the ears. Iago grumbled, but allowed it. She'd been with the crotchety cat since he was a tiny kitten that she'd saved from a dog- ever since she yanked it from the mutt's jaws, albeit leaving half the poor kitten's tail behind, the two of them had been inseparable.

Jane was confident in the fact she wouldn't be getting anymore sleep tonight and instead focused on making herself as presentable as possible. She couldn't do much about the fact that, like most runaways, she could be the poster child for street rats; just skin and bones and so malnourished that her eyes appeared overlarge in the bruised contours of her thin face, but she'd changed into her best, cleanest clothes– a pair of jeans that were only slightly torn and had faint stains, a black jacket with a working zipper and only three rips and a pair of black boots that were shabby but comfortable– wanting to make the best possible impression.

Nine a.m. found her anxiously waiting at the entrance to Hyde Park, her satchel hitched over her shoulder with Iago sleeping inside it. The satchel contained all the money she'd been able to scrounge up over the past few days but it had been a bad week and Jane was currently the sort of hungry that had her gut cramping. She only had enough change left for two cups of tea, however, and she knew better then to buy them right now. One tomorrow, one the day after. She'd load them
with sugar for the calories and that would be breakfast. She'd have to skip lunch or try to steal something and dinner would be a cup of water with a sachet or two of sauce which she'd call tomato soup.

Keeping moving would make it easier to ignore the clawing hunger, the emptiness in her stomach, and as the weeks grew colder and she grew hungrier she'd keep walking or running until the early hours of the morning, maybe two or three am, when she was honestly too exhausted to keep moving around.

Winters were always the worst and it felt as if it was coming early that year. Nobody was out and about, which meant she had no one to rob. She rarely had problems with staying warm with her special talent and all, but when she was hungry and tired, not unlike she was right now, her talent was weaker and she was always hungry and tired in winter.

There were other options apart from pick-pocketing to get money, if she was getting really desperate– Sting, she knew, sometimes broke into houses. He also competed in street fights, as did Pike and Sledge. Cat rarely had a problem finding clients as men were willing to pay for sex no matter the weather and Jackie, Jill and little Hornet carried around drugs for one of the local gangs.

Jane rarely participated in street fights; she was always so much smaller and weaker then her opponents which was too much of a handicap when they were already aware of her skill with knives. She also knew better then to get involved with gangs and a bad experience involving a close call had left her wary of stealing anything more then wallets and watches. She also couldn't make herself sell her body, despite it been the best way for a girl to get some quick cash, she wasn't like Cat and the other girls who could be having a conversation, go suck off a john behind a dumpster then walk back over, pop a mint in their mouths and continue the conversation like nothing had happened.

Jane had been eight the first time she watched one of the girls work, a fellow runaway who went by 'Sharpie'. The night had started with Sharpie down on her knees, the harsh stone of the pavement tearing more holes in her already ripped fishnet stockings and leaving the skin bruised and broken, though Sharpie hadn't seemed to care about the faint smudges of red she'd left behind on the pavement. Jane had found herself wondering more then anything why Sharpie wasn't bald, with how hard the john had been yanking on her hair.

It hadn't exactly gotten any better from there, with Sharpie mostly being pressed against a wall in an alley for forty pounds, making gasping and moaning noises that Jane still couldn't believe anyone could possibly think were genuine sounds of pleasure. At one point a john had hit Sharpie across the face hard enough to knock her down and Sharpie hadn't bothered getting up until he'd left– making the johns pay first had made much more sense after that.

It hadn't been Jane standing on that street corner, with chafed and bleeding knees, bending over to spit to empty her mouth as men drove away in their expensive cars, but Jane had felt as used and dirty as if it was.

It wasn't fair, it never was, that life had reduced someone like Sharpie to the desperate measures it had, someone intelligent and quick-witted and who'd had so much more to offer the world then she could on her knees.

Afterward, Sharpie had told her she was too young to be bending over anytime soon, but that didn't mean she shouldn't learn the tricks of the trade. "Yer gonna be real pretty one day, Jane," she'd said, "and yeh gonna need ta know how ta use that."

The lessons had been incredibly useful too. Sharpie and Lacey, another teenage runaway turned
prostitute, had taught her how they had to be able to use their sexuality and sensuality to lure men in, to keep them coming back for more-- some, like Sharpie with her bright red lips, fishnets and skirts barely more than a belt, dressed provocatively in order to tempt johns by displaying their "wares", while others would play up being a tiny, weak-looking thing men thought they could throw around, like Lacey in her pretty little dresses, batting her big blue eyes to get the johns lining up.

Jane had also learned prostitutes needed to be smarter and more observant then most people realised; they had to be able to profile their 'clients', to figure out if they should cut their losses and run, or how best to get someone off as fast as possible. They also had to be able to defend themselves too if things turned nasty-- they needed to know how to get away from people who were bigger and stronger then them.

But they weren't always successful, and Jane had seen firsthand what could happen when things turned nasty and the prostitute was unable to get away. It had been barely dusk and Jane had been close to where Sharpie, Lacey and some of the other girls worked their thing, close enough to hear screaming she'd been horrified to realise sounded like Lacey.

She'd been right too, it had been Lacey screaming-- but Lacey hadn't been hurt, hadn't even been bleeding for all her hands were drenched with red where they were pressed against Sharpie's chest.

At the sight of it, the ground had rushed up to meet Jane, her knees slamming and cracking against the red-stained concrete. A knife had been jammed between Sharpie's breasts, buried between her ribs right up to the handle, and blood had been pulsing around the hilt, pouring onto the ground and over Lacey's hands as she screamed at Sharpie to open her eyes, to fucking open her goddamn eyes!

But Sharpie hadn't and Jane had been violently shaking apart against the ground and against Sting's hands where he'd fallen to the ground next to her, a low moan escaping him at the sight of the blade stuck in Sharpie's chest.

"Say something!" Lacey had begged but all that came out of Sharpie's mouth was blood, great big gushes of it coughed up as she'd tried to breathe. Lacey went from screaming to sobbing to silence when the coughing finally stopped. She shook Sharpie's hand, trying to get her to move, but Sharpie's head had just rolled to the side and Lacey had curled over her best friend's corpse and just keened while Jane had turned and pressed her face into the curve of Sting's neck to muffle the sobs ripping out of her.

She'd never found out who'd stabbed Sharpie; he'd just been another faceless, nameless stranger who hadn't wanted to pay for what he'd taken.

And while the skill set she'd gained from Sharpie and Lacey had been overall useful and informative, Jane didn't think she'd ever be able to use it for the purposes that it had been developed, the fear and trauma linked with Sharpie's death having so far been too much of a deterrent. If that meant she had to go without food because she didn't have enough money, well, she wasn't hungry enough to reconsider her decision.

Yet.

Shivering slightly in the cool breeze of Hyde Park, Jane tucked her hands in her pockets, her fingertips icy numb. Yes, winter was definitely coming early this year, or maybe fall was coming harsh. Jane didn't really care which, either was bad news.

Winter meant cold and less money, which meant more hunger and longer days of working harder so she could scrape by. It meant the street rats, runaways, homeless and junkies of London all
dividing into either banding together in gangs or adopting an every man for themselves philosophy. Each year proved to be a daunting ordeal, but it was one Jane had dealt with and survived for six years now and she was unquestionably in a better position to handle it at twelve then she had been at six.

An odd feeling suddenly brushing over her body had Jane's eyes narrowing. She followed the strange tingling sensation, sharply turning to face an approaching man. He had shoulder-length hair that was a touch on the greasy side, sallow skin and a hooked nose. He wasn't unattractive to look at and his black suit gave him a debonair look.

He met her gaze and approached her, stopping a few feet away. "Miss Granger?" he asked, in a stiff yet silky sort of voice. Jane decided that, as far as first impressions went, this man had made a good one.

"Yes, sir." She kept her tone and posture perfectly respectful and it seemed to satisfy him.

"Follow me," he ordered, and Jane walked swiftly after him, having to move quickly to keep up with his longer strides. He lead them over to the nearest café and then to a table in an alcove near the back. The smell of the café was making her stomach hurt even worse but the rush of warmth accompanied by stepping inside was a welcome one. Jane picked at the fraying strands of her satchel, her nervous actions hidden by the table as the man threaded his fingers together and fixed her with a piercing stare.

"My name is Professor Snape," he introduced himself, "I am the Head of Slytherin House." Jane desperately wanted to ask what he meant by 'Slither-in' House, but she kept her mouth shut. She could read the impatience on the man's face and had a strong inkling that he was not meeting with her by choice. Quick and brief would be the way to go if she wanted to remain on his good side, definitely no asking the hundreds of questions she had despite the temptation of it.

Professor Snape seemed pleased by her silence, as she had guessed he would, and continued on. "Professor McGonagall," here he seemed to allow himself a small sneer, "sent me to answer any questions you have."

"I only have a few." Jane said, keeping her voice polite and her expression a touch on the shy side. She decided to address her most pressing issue first. "To put it bluntly, sir, my family has no money. We can't afford any school fees."

"There is a fund set up for muggleborn families who cannot afford Hogwarts that covers tuition costs and a stipend for uniform and supply costs," Snape said, his gaze sharp and assessing. "Where are your parents today?"

"They're at work, sir. They can't take any time off." Jane lied without pause, her voice and body language genuine. Snape looked like he didn't believe a word she said, but he didn't comment.

"What other questions do you have?"

"The letter mentioned something about a Diagon Alley...?" She let her voice trail off questioningly, and Snape nodded.

"A shopping district in Charring Cross. You can access it through a pub called the Leakey Cauldron. I can take you there today to acquire your school things."

"That's quite unnecessary, sir, and thank you for the offer but I wouldn't want to use up any more of your time then I already have," she smiled politely, "I'm quite comfortable doing it myself if you
just give me the address."

"In that case, when you enter the pub, ask the bartender, Tom, to show you the entrance." He directed and she nodded. "Surely you have other questions?" He then asked when she stayed silent, contemplating.

"No, sir, I'm sure there are books covering the subjects."

"In that case," he gave her the address to the Leakey Cauldron and stood, pulling a small silver key from his pocket. "When you enter Diagon Alley, one of the first buildings you see will be Gringotts Bank. Present this key to the goblins and they'll provide you with the assigned amount."

**Goblins?** Jane's mind was spinning, even as she stood up and accepted the key, her fingers brushing slightly against his lightly calloused palm. "Thank you." She said to the professor before adding a polite, "Good bye, sir," before hurrying out of the café, needing to get away from the smell, both so wonderfully tempting, yet the richness of it nauseating.

A group of businessmen were arguing up ahead and, seeing an opportunity she couldn't resist, she bumped into one of them, her hand snatching his thick wallet before he'd even realized it. "Sorry, sorry, sorry," she told the distracted man who glared at her and hurried along. A small smirk crossed her face as she opened the wallet and produced a twenty-pound note. It should definitely be enough to get her to Charring Cross. "Looks like today's our lucky day, Iago." She said. The cat let out a grumpy spitting noise, poking his head momentarily out of the satchel to glare at her, not pleased about having been bumped into the man. Jane just grinned.

Now with a bounce in her step, Jane headed towards one of the closest bus stops, unaware of the amused professor watching her retreating back.

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**Severus's POV:**

Severus couldn't help but feel amused as he watched the girl bump into the overweight Muggle jabbering away with his companions. He recognized the move all too well, and he wondered how long it would take the man to realize his wallet was gone.

Looking a tad more cheerful, Hermione Granger opened the wallet and a brief flash of relief crossed her face. She spoke a few words out loud, and he watched as a cat stuck its head out of the ratty satchel she was clutching tight to her body to mew at her. It was one of the ugliest cats he'd ever seen-- and that was including Argus's miserable creature. It was a flea-bitten, beat-up, mean looking, one-eyed menace.

He watched Granger walk over to one of the closest bus stops, watched her until a bus pulled up and she climbed on board. He wasn't sure how... comfortable he felt, letting the preteen traipse around London by herself, no matter how accustomed to it she seemed to be.

He usually hated having to introduce Muggleborns into the Magical world- they asked question after question, barely letting him finish a sentence, and their parents were just as bad. Dumbledore had had to force him to go meet Hermione Granger, with McGonagall unavailable at the meeting time the girl requested and out of the remaining professors he was the one with the most experience with the muggle world.

He'd stalked over to where the girl had said she'd meet her escort, annoyed and wondering which
one of the infernal children milling about was his charge, when one of the little cretins had stiffened slightly, then turned around, sharp brown eyes meeting his. He'd been moderately impressed that she'd been able to sense his magic as well as surprised- and immediately concerned- by her actual appearance.

Hermione Granger had looked half-starved and exhausted, with a restless, jumpy air about her. Even with the sheer volume of curly hair that she'd managed to bully into two braids, she was at least a head shorter than the average eleven-to-twelve year old, a small slip of a girl made of sharp, cutting angles from her bones pressing out against her stretched-tight skin. Her eyes, set in grey hollows, appeared far too large for her skinny face and her shabby, threadbare clothes did little to hide how pale and gaunt she looked; tiny and fragile with veins starkly visible against colourless skin and an expression carefully wiped blank.

If she hadn't been Muggleborn, he'd say she was a perfect Slytherin. She was unfailingly polite, her expression schooled and she had managed to figure out his general temperament quite quickly, correctly deducing that he wasn't a fan of question after question. Yes, she was quite a pleasant girl, very clever.

And, apparently, a pick-pocket. A good one, too, if what he'd just seen was any indication. Of course, that lead to the question of why she was such a skilled pickpocket, his suspicion being that the girl was severely neglected by her parents- a thought reinforced by her alarming appearance- and it brought a scowl to his face.

He couldn't stand it when parents neglected their children- the Grangers hadn't even come to meet him! For all they knew, he could have just been some pervert planning to take advantage of their daughter. Or perhaps they just didn't care.

Thinking back on the brief moment when her hand had touched his to pick up the key, her fingers so thin and frail-looking like brittle bird's bones, Severus grimly recalled the crisscross pattern of raised lines of her palms, a spiderweb of scars with some pink and knotted, others older and faded to white, and his suspicions of abuse grew stronger.

Scowl rapidly deepening, he turned and stalked away, over to an alley where he could disapparate to the Hogwarts' gates. He stormed up the path and into the castle, aiming for his dungeons, but was unfortunately intercepted by Albus and Minerva.

"Back already?" Minerva exclaimed, "it hasn't even been half an hour! Why, I haven't even set out yet!"

"Really Severus," Albus sighed. "What did you do to the poor girl?"

"I didn't do anything," he snapped at them with a dark scowl. "The child was polite, straight to the point and didn't require any assistance. I gave her the key, the address to the Leakey Cauldron and then she left before me."

Albus frowned slightly. "That's quite strange. What about her parents?"

"She came alone. Said they were working." Here he sneered. Gut instinct, finely tuned over his decades of life, had told him that was a lie, despite the perfect ease with which the girl had said it.

"Perhaps it will be prudent to keep an eye on Miss Granger," Albus mused. Minerva flicked her wand, summoning from her office a small, crumpled note about the size of a serviette.

"This was her reply," she said, showing the other two, "notice how she signed her name H. Jane
"That is indeed strange." Albus nodded, thoughtfully. "Of course, for all we know we could be overreacting. Perhaps the girl is just not fond of her name and prefers Jane, and her parents could very well have been working. Either way, Severus, if you're back then I'd like to discuss a slightly more serious matter with you."

More serious then a very likely neglected and possibly abused child? Severus sneered inwardly and raised a dark brow.

"Indeed, and what is this 'slightly more serious' matter?"

"Harry Potter's return to Hogwarts." Albus said, his face grave. Severus felt his lips thin into a tight line, and he tried to refrain from glaring.

"You better not be making me go visit the brat," he just about growled. Albus waved a hand dismissively.

"Of course not, my dear boy. I've sent Rubeus to go do that." Severus kept his expression blank. Sending Hagrid was a clever and carefully planned move on Albus' part. He could already hear the half giant singing the praises of the grand and mighty Dumbledore, greatest headmaster Hogwarts has ever seen, raving about the insipid boy's parents, the grand and noble House of Gryffindor, and the evil, slimy Slytherins of whom Hagrid had never quite managed to hide his dislike of.

By the time Hagrid had finished with the boy, Harry Potter would want nothing more then to be sorted into Gryffindor and dread the idea of being a Slytherin.

Severus nodded shortly at Minerva, and swept after Albus, wondering what the manipulative old coot wanted with him, regarding the Potter boy, now.

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Jane/Hermione's POV:

Jane slipped through the crowd, moving like a shadow. Diagon Alley was a truly fantastic place, filled with the strangest people, and absolutely buzzing with magic. She'd left her hair out, and the mass of wild curls was partially concealing the cat draped over her shoulders, making bad-tempered sounds.

With a bit of work, Jane knew she could be considered a pretty child, more during summer when she looked less like she was starving but in the colder months Lacey had taught her to use cheap makeup to give her face colour, to hide the shadows under her eyes and make her cheeks rosy, helping her to blend in with crowds. She had a face that wasn't memorable but still nice; heart-shaped with big doe eyes and framed by curly hair. With her sweet, childish looks it was easy to play up the innocent child angle when in fact the opposite was true. Thieving and whoring were two of humanity's oldest professions and those who lived on the streets were often forced to become masters at one or both, and Jane was no exception to the rule.

Sting had been the one to teach her how to pick-pockets as well as how to defend herself and fight with her body and her knives. He'd been a harsh taskmaster because there could be no room for error in the real world. Learning to defend herself and to fight meant ending up covered in black and blue bruises and cuts that sometimes went so deep they had to be sewn together with dental floss and her whole body would be left aching for weeks. Learning how to be a pick-pocket had
meant practicing stealing watches, purses, handbags and jewellery over and over for days on end with harsh penalties for mistakes.

It had been worth it, though. Now Jane could be walking next to a person and they'd never hear her there as she swiped their handbag, could smile sweetly right to someone's face while slipping their rings and bracelets and watches into her pockets, could brush against a passerby and come away with their purse or wallet. It was her entire livelihood and Jane had never let herself be anything but the best at whatever she did, be that fighting or stealing or using the switchblades she kept hidden on her at all times.

Like Professor Snape had said, Gringotts was hard to miss. The building was extremely grandiose and her first glimpse at the goblins with their pointed faces and long fingers standing guard at the outer doors of the bank intrigued her. She paused inside the second set of doors to examine the poem inscribed there:

Enter, stranger, but take heed  
Of what awaits the sin of greed  
For those who take, but do not earn  
Must pay most dearly in their turn  
So if you seek beneath our floors  
A treasure that was never yours  
Thief, you have been warned, beware  
Of finding more than treasure there

Analyzing it, she found her lips curving up in amusement. "That's a challenge." She murmured, aloud.  

"Clever girl. Not many people pick up on that." The voice was smooth, greasy almost, and Jane turned towards the two goblins standing at each side of the second set of double doors, both looking at her with clever, cunning faces.

"I... thank you, I suppose." Jane said, head tilted slightly. "May I ask if anyone has ever actually completed the challenge?" Both goblins chuckled, exchanging wicked grins.

"Many have tried, Miss."  
"But none have succeeded." Jane concluded, with a smile. "Your defenses must be very good."  

"You sound like you're probing for clues," one of the goblins noted. She smiled wider.  

"Oh, I don't think right now's the best time for me to try my hand at bank robbery. Not before I've got a wand, anyway. Maybe later when I know some spells." She winked at them and they laughed.  

"I'm Bogrod, and this is Uric." The goblin on the left introduced them both.

"I'm Jane. It's nice to meet you both." Jane smiled, comfortable talking to these odd looking creatures, familiar to her in the sharpness of their smiles and the keen intelligence gleaming in their eyes.

"And what is your business at Gringotts on this fine day, Miss Jane?" Bogrod asked.

"Just Jane, please," she said, "and I've come to get some money from the Hogwarts Fund for underprivileged children." She couldn't help but roll her eyes slightly at that. "Really, for the amount of spending money they actually give us, I'm surprised I bothered. Surely for such a grand
and noble school they could afford to shell out a few more galleons for us underprivileged."

"Yes, fifteen galleons doesn't exactly get you far." Uric agreed. "Though I suspect you have other plans in place to acquire what you need." He added, with a sneaky grin.

"Mm, I was considering a little prestidigitation." Jane laughed with the goblins before Uric accompanied her over to one of the high desks behind which an old-looking goblin sat.

"Gornak, this is Jane." He introduced her, "she's a smart girl," He added, turning to give Jane another quick smile, "a quick mind. She recognized the challenge."

"Indeed?" the goblin, Gornak, raised an eyebrow. "And what are you in here for, child?"

"Hogwarts Fund for the Underprivileged. My given name's Hermione Jane Granger but I tend to go by Jane." She said, handing over the silver key. Gornak nodded and stepped off the stool, disappearing behind a door then reemerging a few minutes later carrying a small velvet pouch.

"Fifteen galleons for Miss Hermione Jane Granger." He said, passing it over the desk along with the key. Jane pocketed the key and smiled.

"Thanks Mr. Gornak." He gave her a small but genuine smile and she said her good-byes to Bogrod and Uric before exiting the bank. Blinking slightly in the sunlight, she quickly went over the list in her head, picking out the necessities. Obviously, she was going to need a wand and she was going to have to buy one legitimately.

Yes, that would be her first stop, she decided, making her way down the cobbled street, avoiding any eye contact, just slipping through the gaps of the crowd, swift and unnoticeable. The wand shop, Ollivander's, was right near the end. It was quite a quaint little shop, she noted as she stepped inside. Long, slim boxes covered the shelves, not unlike books in a library.

"Anybody here?" she called out.

"Hello Miss...?"

Jane reacted to the sudden presence in her blind spot on pure instinct, one honed from years of rough-living. Her hand dove into her pocket and she had a flicked open switchblade at the throat of the man who had suddenly approached her from behind in one clean move.

Both of them froze, examining the other. He didn't appear threatening, he just looked like an old, strange man with large, luminescent eyes, but she knew better then to trust appearances. The old man gave a small smile and she didn't miss the sharpness in his eyes.

"I'm sorry for startling you," he apologized and Jane stared at him stiffly for a long moment, before she lowered the switchblade. She wasn't going to apologize for holding him at knifepoint, not when he'd shocked her like he had. "I suppose you're here for a wand?" the man mused when she stayed silent, "My name is Garrick Ollivander, I am the owner of this store and creator of many of the wands you see before you."

"Hi." Jane acknowledged, slipping the switchblade back in her pocket.

"I have a feeling your wand is going to be very suited to combat," Ollivander smiled and she found herself unsettled by the knowing look in his eyes. The old wandmaker moved behind the counter and started producing box after box, lining them up in a row. "Here," he said, opening first a dark green box. Inside it, nestled on red velvet, was a beautiful wand of carved black wood.
Almost reverently, Jane reached forwards and touched the smooth, glossy looking wood, only to almost instantly yank her hand back as it shocked her. "Ow!" She exclaimed.

Iago was not amused, digging his claws into her shoulder and yowling angrily before jumping off to go curl up on the whicker seat behind her. Ollivander was shaking his head, muttering something under his breath about ebony definitely not being the way to go, already opening the next box. A lot more cautiously this time, Jane reached forwards to pick up the wand. It didn't shock her at least, but it resisted her efforts to pick it up quite stubbornly.

"Certainly not holly either," Ollivander remarked. As they went through more and more wands, Jane could feel herself getting more and more frustrated. Finally Ollivander produced a box containing a wand made out of a pale wood, almost as white as bone.

Not expecting anything at this point, Jane reached out to touch it then gasped in pleasure as warmth rushed through her. "Yew and unicorn hair, twelve inches, unyielding. Not a common combination." Ollivander noted, with another creepy, knowing smile. Jane lifted the wand and rolled it around in her hands, soaking in the feel of it, the wood warming under her touch.

"How much?" she asked distractedly.

"Seven galleons." Was the reply and Jane fished through the velvet pouch the goblin had handed her, pulling out seven shiny gold coins.

She left the wand shop still in a daze, her new wand and her money pouch tucked snugly in her satchel, underneath a curled up Iago.

As she caught sight of a snobby looking mother and daughter, she shook her head slightly, pulling herself back into the game. The girl looked about her age, with dark hair and a nose that resembled that of one of those small dogs with squashed faces. She appeared to be going to Hogwarts too and Jane was pleased to see that all the mother and daughter's purchases appeared to be contained in the cauldron levitated in the air a step behind the girl. She recognized one of the visible books as one on her list- "The Standard Book of Spells: Grade 1". Excellent.

She tailed behind them, careful not to get too close, waiting for the best opportunity to strike. That time came when a massive, hairy man holding a cage containing a snowy owl almost collided with the pair. Jane casually cut across between the girl and the floating cauldron as the girl made screechy annoyed sounds and the woman made indignant gestures, snagging it and disappearing into the crowd before the girl and her mother even realized that they'd been robbed.

Honestly, that had been so simple it wasn't even fun.

Bolstered by her success, though, she tailed another family, this one exiting a shop called Madam Malkin's Robes for all Occasions. The girl looked like she was eleven or twelve and it only took a quick brush past to snatch the package containing the uniform, disappearing into the crowd as the girl started to shout.

Ducking into a side alley, Jane looked through her spoils, figuring out what she did and didn't have. She appeared to have a complete set of books, as well as the cauldron, one set of robes and one cloak. She could manage with one set of robes and one cloak, she decided, so that was fine. But there was still no hat, scales, crystal phials, telescope or winter cloak, plus she'd need a trunk and she'd have to figure out a way to hide all of her stolen goods- she couldn't just go walking about the streets that were her home with all this; she'd be mugged.

"Bloody hell." Jane swore softly, her mind working furiously to solve these first, in what would
likely turn into a rather long list, obstacles.

She was surrounded by witches and wizards—surely someone could manage some kind of spell to temporarily shrink all her belongings? True, it would mean she wouldn't be able to access any of it until the school term started, but at least she'd actually still have it all. Plus, she could choose two or three books to keep in her satchel.

Problem one sorted, she decided briskly. And she didn't have to steal everything now—it would probably be easier when she was at Hogwarts to nick other students stuff. Problem two sorted—well, sort of. Hopefully.

So, trunk next. Filled with a sense of purpose, Jane made her way down the Alley, scanning the stores advertising their wares on either side of the cobbled street. She passed by several flashy shops and then paused as she noticed a branch forking off from the main streets of Diagon Alley. Nobody seemed to be going down there—in fact, people seemed to be steering quite clear of the place.

Intrigued, Jane approached it. A battered old sign read Knockturn Alley and, deciding she may as well, she steeled herself and entered it. Compared to the brightness of Diagon Alley, Knockturn Alley seemed dim, overcast with an almost oppressive air about it. Her instincts pricked, warning her to be wary and watchful—and Jane was in the habit of listening to her instincts.

She walked swiftly along, cautious. She ducked into one of the first shops she came across and was pleasantly surprised to find it appeared to be some kind of secondhand shop. "Can I help you?" A nasally voice asked and Jane turned to face the shopkeeper. He looked like he was in a bad mood—or maybe that was just his natural expression, she mused, before smiling winningly up at him.

"Do you sell any secondhand trunks here, sir?" The man narrowed his eyes.

"Off to Hogwarts, then?" he basically grunted.

"Yes, sir," Jane nodded, staying polite. He narrowed his eyes, leaning towards her.

"You ain't a mudblood, are you?" he half-growled, "cause you ain't no pureblood, not dressed like that."

Jane assessed the situation quickly, her mind whirring—whatever a 'mudblood' was this man didn't seem overly fond of them. She was woefully ignorant of wizarding terms and for all she knew she actually might be one, though she suspected 'mudblood' was a slur rather then an official title.

Schooling her face into a disgusted expression, Jane replied hotly, "You think I'm a filthy mudblood?" The shopkeeper grunted, leaning back, seemingly satisfied.

"Halfblood, then?" Body language relaxed, tone not unfriendly—a halfblood was something okay to be, at least in the eyes of this shopkeeper, and it was certainly better then a 'mudblood'.

"Yes." She snapped, deciding that it wouldn't do to drop the act so quickly.

"Good. So, a trunk you say?" Jane nodded, and watched as the man shuffled around the shelves before returning, tugging a large shabby looking trunk after him. It was clearly secondhand, but it was clean, relatively undamaged and obviously well cared for.

"How much?" she asked.

"Five galleons." The shopkeeper grunted. Jane resisted the urge to bite her lip as she thought it
over. It seemed like a good price, she decided, and she nodded, producing the five gold coins.

Deciding that it would probably be in her best interest to leave the dark alley, at least until she found out what a 'mudblood' was, she hurried back out to Diagon Alley, failing to notice the second pair of eyes trailing after her that day, though the owner of these eyes, gleaming amber in the muted sunlight, certainly weren't quite as benevolent in their stare as the professor's had been.

Back in Diagon Alley, Jane found a nice witch with a daughter about her age and asked the lady to shrink her trunk for her. Mrs. Abbott had happily complied, helping her pack all her new things inside, including the cauldron, which she magically made fit into the trunk before shrinking it to the size of a tennis ball.

The day fading towards evening, Jane slipped unnoticed back into The Leakey Cauldron, taking to the shadows and never drawing attention to herself- that was the number one rule for a thief. With practiced ease, her fingers slipped nimbly into the money pouches that these magical folk carried around, a nice change to her usual marks who carried around those annoying bits of plastic called 'credit cards' nowadays instead of actual cash, listening to everyone for even a scrap of useful information.

Three hours later, the sky was dark and her patience had borne fruit. Her multiple hidden pockets were nearly bursting with all the money she'd nicked, more success then she'd had in the last few weeks combined, and she'd learned a few strange things about a boy who had apparently passed through the pub earlier. This boy, Harry Potter, had managed to survive a curse that was impossible to survive when he was an infant and somehow destroyed the man trying to kill him, a dark wizard they called 'You-Know-Who' in voices still hushed with fear, at the same time.

According to all these people, Harry Potter himself had passed through the pub earlier today and was about to start his first year of Hogwarts.

Jane wondered if he'd be likeable, or if he'd be a stuck-up little brat. She hoped for the former, especially if she was going to have to put up with him in her year level for the next seven years.

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Severus's POV:

"You want to what?" Severus asked incredulously.

"I want to test the boy." Albus said, as if what he'd just announced was perfectly reasonable. Severus resisted the urge to either start pacing or curse the older wizard. Instead he glared ferociously.

"And this is how you've decided to test the little brat? With a bloody obstacle course?"

"Yes," Albus nodded, face calm. "Rubeus, as per my instructions, today picked up the Philosopher's Stone, while accompanied by the boy. I told him it was of upmost importance to keep it secret, so our dear Rubeus will undoubtedly have behaved in a manner that will make young Harry quite curious."

"You assume," Severus pointed out, tone acidic, and Albus chuckled.

"He's a young boy, Severus- of course he'll be intrigued!" Severus ground his teeth together.
"What of the Dark Lord?" he asked, abruptly. "This will attract his attention."

"Indeed," Albus said thoughtfully, "perhaps this little test could prove to serve two purposes- a trial for our young Mr. Potter and a lure for Voldemort." Severus gave a low hiss at the sound of the name and scowled up at the Headmaster.

"I want no part in this, old man."

"But alas, my dear boy, you have no choice." Albus stated firmly. With an angry sound, Severus turned on his heel and stormed out of the headmaster's office, hating the truth in the old man's words. There had been no choice for him since the Dark Mark had been burned onto his flesh.
Chapter II:

Harry's POV:

The door to the compartment opened and Harry flinched slightly then felt his cheeks flush, embarrassed at his automatic response. Half peeking up from under his bangs, Harry got a good look at the person standing in the doorway.

It was a girl, body too thin to be just naturally slim, with curly brown hair that was on the knotted side, eyes the color of whiskey, one of the drinks Aunt Marge was so fond of, and sharp, prominent cheek bones. She was short, not ridiculously so, but enough for her height to be noticeable, and her clothes hung loosely off her frame. The jeans she wore were baggy and both stained with dirt and ripped in several places. Her oversized black jumper was also torn in multiple spots and her heavy black boots were looking worse for the wear, though they appeared to be quite sturdy.

Harry swallowed uncomfortably, hands unconsciously tugging at the hems of his sleeves. The girl's trunk was secondhand, and the cat draped over her shoulders had a torn ear, one eye, stark ribs, only half a tail and a torn lip, which gave a rather permanent impression that the cat was snarling.

"Um... hello," he said after she fixed her piercing stare on him for several long moments without saying a word. "Do you want to sit in here?" The girl pursed her lips as if in thought, then nodded. She made her way into the compartment with a certain slinking sort of grace and he stood up to help her lift her trunk, being careful to stay away from the vicious looking claws of the cat.

The girl settled herself down on the seat, her face still quite blank. "I'm Harry," he introduced himself. "And this is Hedwig," he introduced his snowy white owl who had fixed the cat with an assessing, wary look.

"I'm Ja-Hermione." The girl said, "and this is Iago." She added, as an afterthought, gesturing to the cat.

"Er, Iago? Does that mean anything?" Harry asked, and the girl- Hermione- gave her first actual smile.

"He's named after one of Shakespeare's greatest villains, a jealous, evil-hearted, malicious man who gets joy out of the pain of others."

"Well... he does sort of look like a villain, so I guess Iago suits him." Harry said awkwardly, and honestly that name really did fit the vicious looking cat. He wondered, though, what she'd been about to say before she switched to Hermione. Jay, maybe?

"I rescued him when he was a kitten." Hermione told him, her lips twitching up slightly. "Tried naming him Cuddles. He wasn't impressed, scratched the hell out of my arm." Harry couldn't help a laugh at the thought of the vicious beast still draped around Hermione's shoulders being called Cuddles. As if reading his thoughts, Iago made an angry spitting sound, fixing his remaining wide,
unblinking gold eye at him.

It was with a comfortable silence that the two sat together, half listening to the other children boarding the train, yelling excitedly at their friends and their parents. Owls were squawking indignantly and Harry picked out the sounds of more then one annoyed sounding cat.

The red-haired boy whose mother had helped him figure out how to enter Platform Nine and Three-Quarters poked his head into the compartment, "Um, anyone sitting there?" he asked, pointing to the seat next to Harry. "Everywhere else is full." Really? Harry thought, doubtfully. Everywhere else was full?

"Everywhere else is full?" Hermione asked, her skeptical voice echoing Harry's thoughts pretty much verbatim. The red-haired boy blushed, his cheeks turning a bright flaming red.

"W-well, I- um-" he started stammering and Hermione made a snorting sound in her throat, dismissing the red-head before turning to him and raising an eyebrow. What do you think? She seemed to be asking. Startled, Harry paused for a second then nodded slightly. He really didn't have a problem with the other boy sitting in here. It would be nice to meet another wizard his age. Hermione turned back to the redhead.

"Fine. Come in, sit down and for god's sake don't make too much noise." She ordered briskly. The boy nodded hastily, quickly settling down on the seat next to Harry and across from Hermione. Harry couldn't help recoiling slightly at the closeness and scooted over a bit to further the distance between them- he wasn't a fan of physical contact, not after years of another touch promising nothing but pain, be it Aunt Petunia's bony grip, Uncle Vernon's heavy-handed boxing of his ears or Dudley and his gang's fists.

Ron didn't seem to notice, but Hermione certainly did, her sharp eyes catching the movement instantly.

Hermione was a survivor, Harry decided, in the privacy of his mind. But, at the same time, she was more then just a survivor; she was a predator- a predator who had once been prey. She was completely focused on her surroundings, having chosen to sit where she had a clear view of the door and the entire compartment, and she held herself tensely, her face hard and her eyes sharp.

She... well, she sort of reminded Harry of himself. A rather tougher version of himself, he tacked on to this thought, after a short reflection.

"I'm Ron Weasley," the redhead started talking, looking and sounding annoyingly cheerful, "what's your name?"

"Er, Harry Potter," Harry introduced himself, already bracing himself for the Ron's reaction though he still ended up cringing when it came.

"You're Harry Potter!" Ron gasped, "Have you really got- you know..." he pointed at Harry's forehead, and Harry debated whether or not to show him, before pulling back his bangs and resigning himself to the fact that he was most likely going to have to do this a lot.

"Whoa!" Ron breathed, "so that's where You-Know-Who-"

"Yes," Harry interrupted the eager boy, "but I can't remember it." He added, trying to put an end to the uncomfortable topic. Ron, unfortunately, seemed to miss that completely.

"Nothing at all?" He asked eagerly.
"He doesn't want to talk about it," Hermione's sharp voice cut in. Harry felt a sense of relief even as Ron went red again and turned around to glare at Hermione. Harry tensed at this, his protective instincts automatically flaring, but he held back, somehow knowing that Hermione would not be impressed with him trying to fight her battles for her.

"Who are you, anyway?" Ron demanded rudely.

"Hermione Granger. You can call me Granger." Hermione answered, her tone one of distaste.

"That means you're a muggleborn, yeah?" Ron scrunched up his face.

Hermione gave Ron a droll look. "Aren't you the genius?" she drawled, voice just about dripping with sarcasm. Ron's cheeks were so red now that Harry was certain he'd be able to fry an egg on them.

"Want to go sit somewhere away from her?" Ron asked, turning back around to face him with an angry look on his face. Harry eyed the other boy incredulously.

"Are you serious?" he asked.

"Yeah," Ron nodded hurriedly, before lowering his voice slightly and leaning forwards, "she's a right bloody nightmare, isn't she?"

Harry stood up, feeling his anger growing inside him. "I think you should leave." He said coldly. Ron opened and closed his mouth several times, disbelief clear on his features.

"What?" he just about squawked.

"He didn't stutter." Hermione sounded amused, lounging back in her seat, looking for all intents and purposes like royalty. Ron glared, face still red, and got to his feet. He opened his mouth to most likely to dish out some sort of scathing comment when the head of a large, fat rat stuck out of his pocket. That's when all hell broke loose.

Hedwig gave a loud, shrieking caw-like noise in her cage, her gleaming eyes fixed on the rodent, and Iago lunged forwards with his claws outstretched. Ron gave a shrill scream that was actually quite impressing in sheer pitch and threw himself backwards, tripping and landing on his butt just outside the compartment. His fall ended up saving his fat pet rodent, though, serving to remove it from Iago's path. The rat let out a shrill squeak, burrowing back into the pocket.

"That cat's a menace!" Ron shouted, continuing to hastily shuffle backwards even as Iago made his way back onto Hermione's lap, the feline making odd snarling, spitting noises.

"And?" Hermione asked, raising an eyebrow before making a sweeping gesture with her hand that caused the compartment door to slam shut. Harry couldn't help but gape at her.

"How did you do that?" He breathed in amazement.

"I've always been able to do things like that," Hermione admitted after a short pause. "What sort of crazy stuff can you do?"

"Um, nothing that I can control." Harry admitted, feeling worried now. "I turned a teacher's hair blue one time and grew back my hair overnight. Oh, and once I ended up on the roof when some bullies were chasing me."

"That's impressive," Hermione said with a small but genuine looking smile. "Transporting yourself
Harry blushed slightly at her admiration.

"I-I can't control it or anything, though."

"Doesn't matter," Hermione said dismissively, "it would be a worry if you could. The fact that you have enough untrained power to achieve that means you're going to be a very, very powerful wizard. Me? I only learned how to control my magic because I had to."

Harry blushed deeper at her praise, or at least what he thought was praise, before focusing on the other thing she mentioned- she'd learned how to control her magic because she'd had to. Why? What did she mean by that?

"Any other funny incidents?" Hermione asked, honestly looking interested in what he had to say. It was really quite the novel experience. No one had ever really been interested in him before. Well, people seemed to be interested in the Harry Potter but not him, not just Harry.

"I'll trade you," he offered before immediately ducking his head, horrified at the casualness in which he'd tossed the comeback. Oh god, just when he thought he'd started making a friend- something he'd never, ever had before! He chanced a peek up at Hermione but she didn't seem upset, rather she looked like she was thinking.

"Once I made a man's underpants shrink to an extremely small size," she said, giving him a wicked smirk as he winced in sympathy for the male. "He made some very interesting sounds, curled up on the ground. Quid pro quo."

Harry wasn't exactly sure what that last bit meant but guessed that it meant something along the lines of it being his turn and he quickly searched his memory for another occasion in which he'd used accidental magic. "I set a boa constrictor on my cousin at the zoo," he remembered, with a grin. Hermione laughed then stopped suddenly, curiosity suddenly shining in those whiskey colored eyes.

"How did that happen?" she asked.

"Um, I was talking to the snake then Dudley shoved me to the side and the glass vanished."

"Did the snake say anything to you?" Hermione pressed.

"Yeah, it said, er, 'thanks amigo' when it slid past me." He remembered.

"So you're a parslemouth," Hermione said, sounding intrigued.

"A... a what?"

"A parslemouth," Hermione repeated, "it means you can talk to snakes. The actual language itself is called parseltongue." Harry squirmed, uncomfortably.

"That- it's a common thing for wizards, right?" He asked, hopefully.

"No, it's incredibly rare and there's a lot of prejudice surrounding it." Hermione replied, promptly, not sugar-coating her words. He found that he actually liked her frank honesty. "I wouldn't reveal that little gem to anyone you don't trust to keep it a secret, one hundred percent." She added, and then she paused. "Would you like me to swear a wizard's oath that I won't tell anyone?"

"What's a wizard's oath?" Harry asked, embarrassed by how much more Hermione seemed to
"If I break it, I lose my magic." Hermione answered bluntly. Harry's eyes widened.

"You-you'd do that for me?"

"Why wouldn't I?" Hermione's face was calm, "we're the same, you and I. I could tell the moment I saw you and I think you did too."

She was right, he realized with a start. The second he'd seen Hermione, he'd noted the way she held herself- defensive and tense; the state of her attire and belongings- shabby, broken and secondhand; and her figure- the unnatural thinness, with the wiry undertone of muscle. He recognized all this, because he saw it, every day, in the mirror.

"I... I thought that too," he told her, honestly, "you remind me of... of myself." Hermione gave a small smile, but a very real one.

"Yes. We're quite the pair of kindred spirits. So, oath time?"

"No," Harry said, shaking his head, "no oath." Hermione's smile was wider this time, and she actually looked... somewhat delighted, despite her following words.

"You're a fool, Harry Potter. A naïve one."

"We're kindred spirits." Harry reminded her, "We don't need an oath to keep each other's secrets." Hermione gave him a long, searching look.

"No," she said, finally, softly. "No I suppose we don't. We don't have anyone else in this world to rely on so we may as well have each other's backs." Harry couldn't help his smile because he thought that sounded a bit like she was saying that they should be friends.

The train journey past mostly in a comfortable silence. Both of them declined purchasing anything from the trolley and spent most of their time reading with Harry occasionally asking Hermione to explain something to him when he didn't understand it. He'd discovered very quickly that Hermione was very smart.

They both looked the other way while the other changed into their robes. Hermione's uniform looked clean and brand new unlike her other clothes, though they were about two sizes too big. She noticed him looking and gave a small smirk. "A nice family decided to donate these to me." Harry felt his lips twitch, getting the feeling that the 'donation' hadn't exactly been... donated, as such.

"I'd tell you to neaten up your hair but I suspect that's a lost cause." She then noted, sweeping her gaze over his appearance.

"Hypocrite." He pointed out and she laughed before casually running her fingers through her hair. Harry watched, astonished, as the knots unraveled and the curls untangled, leaving behind somewhat wild but now neat-ish hair. "How did you do that?" Harry gaped.

"I don't know," Hermione admitted, "I've just always been able to do it but never on other people. However," she pulled out her wand from her sleeve and pointed it at Harry's face. Harry couldn't help going slightly cross-eyed, trying to keep the tip in sight and Hermione gave a soft snort before murmuring, "reparo!" To Harry's surprise, the piece of tape holding together his glasses vanished, now unnecessary with the broken frame having been completely repaired.

"There," Hermione said approvingly, sliding her wand back up her sleeve, "much better." Harry
was about to ask her which book she'd learnt that from as he could foresee himself using it quite a bit in the future when the compartment door slid open and three boys entered. Harry recognized the middle one at once: it was the pale boy from Madam Malkin's robe shop. He was looking at Harry with a lot more interest than he'd shown back in Diagon Alley.

"Is it true?" he said. "They're saying all down the train that Harry Potter's in this compartment. So it's you, is it?" Harry mentally cursed Ron Weasley and gave the blonde a strained sort of smile.

"Er, yes," he replied, quickly scanning the other boys. Both of them were thickset, extremely mean looking and stood on either side of the blonde boy much like bodyguards.

"Oh, this is Crabbe and this is Goyle," the pale boy said carelessly, noticing where Harry was looking. "And my name's Malfoy, Draco Malfoy." Hermione made an amused sound, which prompted Draco Malfoy to look at her. "Think my name's funny, do you?" he asked.

"No," Hermione cut in, smoothly, "it's quite regal. Very befitting a Malfoy, actually. It was more the manner of your introduction, it reminded me of a rather interesting film I once saw called 'For Your Eyes Only'." Hermione cleared her throat before saying in a deep voice, "the name's Bond, James Bond."

Harry couldn't help a surprised laugh at the reference and Draco looked somewhat mollified which he assumed was a good thing if Hermione's appeasing of the blond was of any indication. He'd only known her for a few hours but he could already tell that Hermione wasn't the sort to needlessly pander to someone's ego- but she wasn't an idiot either. If she was acting like this way then she was doing it for a reason.

"So who are you?" Draco asked her and Hermione gave him a sweet smile.

"I'm Hermione Granger." She introduced herself and Draco's lip curled in distaste.

"You're a muggleborn." He said. Harry was surprised by the scorn and derision in the blonde's voice and he gave Hermione a nervous look but she remained calm.

"I wouldn't know. I never knew my parents," she told Draco.

"Oh?" He asked, looking surprised.

"I was left on the steps of an orphanage." She said, very bluntly. Harry looked at Hermione in horror while Draco gave her a much more assessing look then before.

"So you really don't know," the blond boy mused, "can you do much magic?"

"Oh, she's amazing," Harry quickly interjected, "she fixed my glasses and everything!" Draco gave Hermione one last evaluating look and then nodded. Harry felt relief flood his body as he got the feeling Hermione had passed some sort of test.

"You're probably a halfblood then. You wouldn't be powerful enough to do that already if you were a mudblood." He said dismissively, before turning back to Harry. On one hand, Harry felt indignant on Hermione's behalf, but the scorn in the blonde's voice was gone at least. "I heard you met up with Weasley, earlier." Draco said.

"Er, I did." Harry nodded, uncomfortably.

"You'll find out some wizarding families are much better than others, Potter. You don't want to go making friends with the wrong sort. I can help you there." Draco held out his hand. Harry froze for
a second before catching sight of Hermione gesturing behind the blonde's back for him to shake the hand so he did.

"I... I'll keep that in mind. Thanks for the warning." He said awkwardly, trying to be as diplomatic as possible. Draco gave a smug sort of smile.

"See you later, Potter, Granger." He nodded at both of them before leaving, Crabbe and Goyle trailing after him.

Harry waited until the compartment door slid close before turning to Hermione. "Wh-what was all that about?" he asked, weakly.

"Politics," Hermione said, her lip curling in distaste. "The Malfoy family are powerful players, Harry. We don't want to go making enemies."

"He was really rude to you," Harry muttered, "What's a muggleborn, anyway?"

"Someone born to a non-magical family." Hermione explained, "as compared to the Malfoys who are known as purebloods as both parents are magical, and in the Malfoy's case the magic can be traced back hundreds of years giving them a rather noble sort of status. And then there's Halfbloods, who have one pureblood or Halfblood parent and one Muggle or muggleborn parent."

"So... you're a halfblood?" Harry said, remembering what she said to Draco. Hermione snorted.

"Hardly. I'm a muggleborn through and through, though chances are I do have some wizarding blood in my family a few generations back."

"Then why'd you lie?" Harry asked, still confused.

"Because muggleborns aren't exactly looked on nicely by all wizards," Hermione said, her lips pressed tight. She was angry, Harry realized, but not at him. "They think we're unworthy of our magic. It was safer for me to cast doubt on my status as a muggleborn. Especially if I end up in Slytherin."

"Slytherin?" Harry asked, startled by the idea that Hermione thought she might be sorted into Slytherin. "But aren't they all evil?"

"Not evil," Hermione shook her head, looking slightly amused, "they're ambitious and cunning."

"But Hagrid said there wasn't a witch or wizard in Slytherin who hadn't gone bad." he told her and Hermione snorted.

"Let me guess- he suggested Gryffindor?" Harry nodded, starting to feel quite unsure about his foundation of knowledge of the Hogwarts Houses.

Hermione sighed. "There's a lot of prejudice attached to the Slytherin House and with you being who you are, I don't doubt that you're expected to end up in Gryffindor, the House of the bold and noble and all that is inherently good" –another snort– "but that's lies, Harry. Anyone can go bad."

"Huh," Harry said, feeling a bit like his world had been tipped upside down.

"Besides," Hermione added, "I actually do suspect I'll end up in Slytherin, despite being a muggleborn."

"You are very cunning," Harry smiled weakly at her, "and sneaky. And really good at thinking on
"It's learned behavior," Hermione's voice was thoughtful now, "for people like us. It's how we survive."

And she was right, Harry realized.

"Do... do you really live in an orphanage?" he blurted out, before slapping a hand over his mouth, cringing. "Er, ignore that. I'm prone to the occasional foot in mouth syndrome." He admitted. To his relief, Hermione seemed more amused then anything else.

"It's half the truth. I did actually know my parents but they died when I was three. I remember them quite clearly- I'm... somewhat of a prodigy, you could say– I have a very good memory. They died in a car accident."

"I'm sorry," Harry said softly. Hermione gave a small, tired smile.

"Thank you, Harry. After that I lived in an orphanage until I ran away when I was six. I've been living mainly on the streets since." Harry's jaw dropped.

"On the streets?"

"It's easier then you think," Hermione said with a shrug. "Not in winter though... it's hell in winter. That's where my magic came into good use, though. I'd cast heating charms on myself. I figured that out when I was reading my course books."

"How did you afford the money to get all the books?" Harry asked.

"I didn't," she admitted, "I stole them from a snobby girl and the robe from someone else- for being witches and wizards and all, it's actually quite comical how easy it was to steal from them." She added, with a soft laugh, "I've only got about half the supplies I should have, though. I've only got one pair of robes and we're supposed to have three and I had to nick some protective gloves from a muggle store- I couldn't afford the dragon-hide ones and I'm going to have to save up for a winter cloak- or steal one. Basically all my money went towards my wand and trunk." She finished with a sigh.

Harry thought of the towering piles of gold in his vault and bit his lip. "I... I could get you the stuff you don't have." He offered, "I mean, you can pay me back if that would make you feel more comfortable." Hermione gave him a surprised look.

"Oh Harry, I didn't tell you that to make you feel like you had to buy the stuff for me. I was just trying to explain more about how life on the street works. You tend to spend any money you can steal or scrounge up on food."

"So stealing is your main income?" Harry asked, grinning at her. She grinned back, expression mischievous.

"Oh, Harry dearest, I know every trick in the book."

"Can you teach me how to pick locks?" He asked, thinking of all the time he spent locked in his cupboard.

"That was one of the first things I learned," Hermione agreed easily, "at the orphanage I stayed in the nuns used to put padlocks on our rooms and the cupboards and fridge so we couldn't steal any food. Of course, if they actually gave us enough so that we were at least halfway fed then we
wouldn't have to try and steal it in the first place." She narrowed her eyes slightly at this.

"We will be reaching Hogwarts in five minutes time." A crisp, feminine voice suddenly echoed through the train. "Please leave your luggage on the train, it will be taken to the school separately."

"I am certainly not leaving Iago," Hermione said, lifting the mangy, flea-bitten creature up into her arms.

"You could probably hide him in your hair," Harry suggested and Hermione mock-glared at him before just draping the cat around her shoulders again then hitching the hood of her robes over the top so that the cat was mostly hidden.

Harry's stomach lurched with nerves as they stood up and joined the crowd thronging in the corridor. The train slowed right down and finally stopped. People pushed their way towards the door, prompting several angry noises from Iago whenever someone knocked into him.

The platform was tiny and dark and he shivered in the cold night air. Hermione stuck close to his side but didn't try to touch him, something he found he was glad about. Kindred spirits, she had said. She probably didn't like being touched either.

"Firs' years! Firs' years over here!" a familiar voice called, and Harry turned to see a lantern bobbing over the sea of heads. "All righ' there, Harry?" Hagrid's big hairy face beamed down at him. "C'mon, follow me- any more firs' years? Mind yer step, now! Firs' years follow me!"

"The Gryffindor lover?" Hermione asked, her voice sarcastic as they carefully followed the gigantic man down a steep, narrow path.

"And Dumbledore worshipper," Harry recalled, "he kept saying how Dumbledore is the greatest wizard of all time." Hermione raised her eyebrow and made a thoughtful hmm-ing sound. "What?" he asked anxiously.

"Don't you find it just a bit too coincidental that the person sent to introduce you into the magical world not only apparently adores Dumbledore but literally stated that Slytherins are evil?" She asked, raising an eyebrow. Harry almost tripped over in his surprise.

"I... huh?"

"Hagrid's not a professor and it's the professors who are supposed to be sent to introduce and educate muggleborns and those who don't really know about magic to this world," Hermione explained, "but instead you were sent someone who is most likely not just indebted to Dumbledore judging by the near hero worship, but is quite prejudiced against Slytherins. Did Hagrid sing the praises of Gryffindor?"

"He... he told me that my mum and dad were in Gryffindor." Harry said.

"I'm not surprised." Hermione muttered. "How much do you know about your parents?"

"Hardly anything. I... I wasn't allowed to talk about them at ho-with the Dursleys. My mum's sister and her family. I live with them." He admitted.

"I'm assuming that you idolize your parents." Hermione's voice was soft and Harry had to swallow before answering.

"Yeah," he admitted, quietly. "I really do."
"And your first instinct after learning your parents were in Gryffindor?" Hermione prompted.

"I wanted to be Sorted there too. To make them proud." Harry just about whispered before looking at Hermione again. Her face was expressionless but his felt pale. "I was... I- someone really wants me to be in Gryffindor." He said, shocked at how easily he had been manipulated.

"Yes," Hermione said quietly, dipping her chin in affirmation. "He really, really does."

"He?" Harry asked confused and then comprehension hit him. "You think Dumbledore?" He gasped, wide-eyed.

"Yes," Hermione nodded her expression now thoughtful, "I do. Very much so."

Before they could keep talking, Hagrid yelled out, "Ye'll get yer firs' sigh o' Hogwarts in a sec, jus' round this bend here." And then there was a loud 'ooooh'. Harry too gasped as the narrow path suddenly opened onto the edge of a great black lake. Perched atop a high mountain on the other side, its windows sparkling in the starry sky, was a vast castle with many turrets and towers. It was amazing.

"No more'n four to a boat!" Hagrid called, pointing to a fleet of little boats sitting in the water by the shore. Hermione seemed to instantly stiffen as she looked at the water, a brief flicker of something that almost resembled fear showing on her face before it was hidden behind a blank mask and a hint of steely determination. He followed her to one of the boats and they were joined by a round-faced, anxious looking boy and a plump, pink-faced girl with blonde pigtails who was clutching the front of her robes, terror clear on her face.

Harry was pretty sure if he didn't know how to school his face to hide his emotions so well he'd look the same. Hermione's face was almost eerily blank. "Everyone in?" shouted Hagrid, "right then- FORWARD!"

The fleet of boats moved off all at once, gliding across the lake, which was smooth as glass, and Harry took this as an opportunity to try and sort out his thoughts.

Hagrid... Harry just wasn't sure what to think of him. The man just seemed so... genuine. But he could be, Harry noted. Hagrid was nice; he wouldn't have suspected that he was being used. Used by someone who obviously had a great deal of practice of playing people. Someone, who he now suspected, went by the name of Dumbledore.

Harry absentbly bent his head as the little boats carried them through a curtain of ivy that hid a wide opening in the cliff face. They were then carried along a dark tunnel, which seemed to be taking them right underneath the castle, until they reached a kind of underground harbor, where they clambered out onto rocks and pebbles.

He and Hermione walked side by side, still sticking close together, as they all tripped and stumbled up a passageway in the rock, finally coming out onto smooth damp grass, right in the shadow of the castle. Harry resisted the urge to pant as they walked up a massive flight of stone steps and then they were there, standing outside a huge, oak front door. "Everyone here? You there, still got yer toad?" Hagrid raised a gigantic fist and knocked three times on the castle door.

The door swung open revealing a stern looking witch, who instantly took over. She led them into an entrance hall of some kind and along a corridor before halting outside a doorway from which Harry could hear the droning of hundreds of voices on the other side.

Harry could only half concentrate on the teacher's –Professor McGonagall she'd introduced herself
as—speech, instead he tried not to be sick. "Don't worry," Hermione murmured quietly, giving him a small but reassuring smile. McGonagall finished her speech and disappeared briefly.

"Oh god," Harry whispered to Hermione, unable to say- or think- much else, "oh god!" Iago lifted his head and rubbed his whispered cheek against Hermione's face, the first semi-affectionate gesture Harry had ever seen the furred menace give.

The appearance of several ghosts caused quite the shock and Harry almost jumped a mile high as they floated above him, before shooting a nonchalant Hermione a half scowl. "How can you not be at all shaken by that?" he demanded, playfully.

"I read about them in 'Hogwarts: A History'," was the prompt answer she gave and before he could respond McGonagall was back and leading them into the hall.

A sea of faces swam before him and Harry swallowed, again having to fight the urge to be sick. Ahead of them, McGonagall silently placed a four-legged stool in front of all the first years. On top of the stool she put a pointed wizard's hat. The hat was patched and frayed and extremely dirty—something Aunt Petunia would have never allowed in the house.

"Maybe we have to try and get a rabbit out of it," he whispered to Hermione, who snorted good-naturedly.

"I doubt that." Feeling slightly reassured by her words seeing as Hermione had spoken quite confidently and she had yet to be wrong about, well, anything really, Harry followed the gazes of the hall, all directed at the hat. For a few seconds there was complete silence. Then the hat twitched. A rip near the brim opened wide like a mouth- and the hat began to sing.

Harry gasped as the hat sung about the values of the different Houses, truly amazed. When at the end the whole hall burst into applause, Harry couldn't help but join in. Even Hermione clapped, albeit belatedly.

Professor McGonagall stepped forwards, a long roll of parchment in her hands. "When I call your name, you will put on the hat and sit on the stool to be sorted," she announced, "Abbott, Hannah!" The girl who'd been in the boat with them stumbled out of the line, put on the hat which fell right down over her eyes, and sat down. There was a moment's pause – "HUFFLEPUFF!" shouted the hat.

Harry watched the sorting, his stomach twisting and turning. His heart almost stopped when McGonagall called "Granger, Hermione!"

"Good luck," he whispered. Hermione smiled at him.

"Your choices are yours to make, Harry. Do what feels right. Don't let anyone manipulate you." She murmured, before walking over to the hat. She appeared calm and confident, to most at least, but Harry knew by now that she was as good as hiding her feelings as he was—better, even.

The hat seemed to be taking an awfully long time to decide where to put Hermione and Harry suddenly had the most awful thought that he might not be chosen at all. What would happen then? He thought, frantically. Oh god, oh god, oh go-

"SLYFTERIN!" The hat shouted. There was a moment of silence and then hesitant clapping filled the hall. Hermione wasn't deterred, however, and walked with confidence and grace over to the table, giving him a small smile once she was seated.

The line was slowly but surely dwindling, with the round-faced boy from their boat, Neville
Longbottom, sorted into Gryffindor after a pause longer then Hermione's, and Draco was sorted into Slytherin pretty much the very second the hat brushed against his impeccably styled hair.

And then, at last –"Potter, Harry!"

As he stepped forwards, he was uncomfortably aware of the whispers and pointing and was grateful when the hat dropped over his eyes so he didn't have to look at the hall full of people craning to get a good look at him.

"Hmm," said a small voice in his hear. "Difficult. Very difficult. Plenty of courage, I see. Not a bad mind either. There's talent, oh my goodness, yes- and a nice thirst to prove yourself, now that's interesting... so where shall I put you?"

Where should it put him? Thought Harry, anxiously, gripping the edges of the stool. Before he'd met Hermione, he'd have said Gryffindor in a heartbeat, or at least prayed that he didn't end up in Slytherin, but now...

"Slytherin will help you on your way to greatness, no doubt about that," the small voice said, "But Gryffindor would also aid you in your pursuit of your goals..." God, he wished Hermione could help him with this, he thought. Hermione... Hermione was in Slytherin. He liked Hermione. She was the first real friend he'd ever had.

"Slytherin," he whispered as quietly as he could, "I want to go in Slytherin."

"Very well," the hat said, "in that case – SLYTHERIN!"

The hat had shouted the last word for the whole hall to hear and even before the hat had been lifted off his head, Harry was well aware of the shock his sorting had caused. If he thought the whispers and stares before had been bad, they were twice as bad now.

He walked shakily over to the Slytherin table amidst the startled applause, most of which was coming from the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw tables. The Gryffindors seemed shocked and the Slytherins calculating.

He slid into place next to Hermione, and she gave him a soft smile. "I'm proud of you." She murmured, and his heart swelled in pride.

Chapter End Notes

In the books, Harry strongly bonded with the first person to show him kindness/friendliness (Ron), to the point where he stood up to the person being rude to Ron. Here, it's Hermione who's the first person to be genuinely friendly with him, so he bonded with her instead.

~Cheshire Carroll
Chapter III:

Hermione's POV:

Hermione kept her face expressionless as she lowered herself gracefully onto the stool. "My, my, my," a voice which she assumed belonged to the hat sounded in her ear, "you, my dear, are quite the enigma. Intelligent and talented, you’d make a fine Ravenclaw if it wasn't for the fact you'd scare them stiff!" Hermione's lips twitched slightly at that.

"Yes, not Ravenclaw... You're very loyal, but only to a very small handful of people and you've got quite the vindictive streak so most certainly not Hufflepuff! Hmm, Gryffindor or Slytherin? You're certainly brave, but you're just as cunning and ambitious. You've got quite the mind for politics too... I don't usually put muggleborns in Slytherin, but I really think you'll do best there."

"I agree." Hermione murmured.

"Yes, you truly do. Definitely SLYTHERIN!"

She ignored the moment's silence before the hesitant clapping, making her way over to the Slytherin table and sitting across from the blonde on the train- Draco Malfoy. Ignoring her new Housemates, she kept her eyes on the sorting- or, to be more specific, on Harry.

When it was his turn to go up his face was pale and she smiled at him, the best gesture of support she was currently able to give.

Harry Potter... she'd spotted him wandering through King's Cross Station and later placed him as the famed Boy-Who-Lived, recognizing him due to the fact he looked very much like the photographs of his father she'd seen in one of the history books she'd read, but that was something she'd noted only after she shared a compartment with him. Because it hadn't been the Boy-Who-Lived she'd noticed; it had been a scrawny boy whose skin was pale from not receiving enough sunlight, whose growth was stunted from lack of food and who wore glasses that had been repaired with sticky-tape and clothes that practically drowned his slight frame.

In other words; at best a neglected boy, at worst an actively abused one.

She'd followed him sedately, correctly deducing from the owl that he, too, was a wizard and wondering why he didn't seem to know where to go. She'd then watched suspiciously as a family of redheads talked loudly about muggles and Hogwarts in a way that seemed entirely unnatural, almost like they were actually trying to get the boy's attention.

She'd moved close enough to hear what they were saying and became even more suspicious when she learned that the boy didn't know how to get onto the platform. It had been written on her letter- why hadn't this boy been told?

Her ever mistrustful mind had then ran through several scenarios, before settling on the most likely explanation given the evidence- for some reason, someone had wanted the boy to run into the family of redheads. Her suspicions had grown further as one of the children, Ron Weasley, tried to
sit with them- all the other compartments were full, her arse!

Insensitive git, she thought, narrowing her eyes at the boy who was still standing in line and waiting to be sorted. She would figure out exactly what that Weasley family was up to, she decided- and she'd find out how that meddlesome, manipulative headmaster was involved too!

Harry had been under there an awfully long time and she was actually starting to worry when; "SLYTHERIN!" the hat shouted. Hermione snapped her gaze straight over to the headmaster, wanting to catch his reaction. The old man's eyes widened then narrowed, giving credence to her assumption that, yes; Dumbledore had definitely been trying to get Harry sorted into Gryffindor.

Again, the question was why?

Harry sat down next to her looking shaky and she ran through several simulations in her mind, looking for the words that would comfort him most. She wasn't sure of the level of physical abuse Harry had suffered but his appearance practically confirmed he'd suffered from severe neglect, therefore the emotional abuse levels were likely just as high. "I'm proud of you." She decided on, keeping her tone soft and warm. Yes, she thought, watching Harry heave out a sigh of relief- that had been just right.

The headmaster got to his feet once the last handful had been sorted (Ron Weasley had gone to Gryffindor where the rest of the red-haired family were already seated) and gave a great, beaming smile. One that definitely did not reach his eyes as he glanced over the Slytherin table. "Welcome!" he said, arms held wide, "welcome to a new year at Hogwarts! Before we begin our banquet, I would like to say a few words. And here they are: Nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak! Thank you!"

People clapped and cheered, but Hermione wasn't one of them. By her side, Harry wasn't either. "He looked at me funny," Harry murmured as they both turned back to the table, Harry with wonder in his eyes at the suddenly filled plates before them, "he's not happy about me being in Slytherin."

"No," she agreed, "he's not."

Unused to the massive amounts of food, Hermione chose several slices of thick, buttered bread to nibble on before sitting up straight, face washed clean of emotion as Draco Malfoy started speaking. "I have to say, I'm a touch surprised you're here, Granger." He drawled.

"I must have more magical blood then I realized," she responded to his careful baiting with a bland smile, "obviously if I was a muggleborn, I wouldn't be in Slytherin." There were several noises of agreement and attention was turned to Harry instead.

"I don't think anyone expected you to end up in Slytherin, Potter," Draco said, with a laugh.

"No," one of the older boys said, "Everyone expected the golden boy to be a Gryffindor."

"I don't know if I'm exactly a golden boy." Harry answered with a wry smile and Hermione held back her own smile at his answer. He'd caught on to the Slytherin House politics very quickly, it seemed. She hoped he could keep it up.

"No," the same boy chuckled, "obviously you're not. I'm Marcus Flint, by the way."

"Nice to meet you," Harry smiled and Flint actually smiled back.

"You any good on a broom, Harry?" he asked. Hermione felt Harry stiffen slightly beside her and answered for him.
"You'll have to wait and see." She winked at Flint. Harry gave her a thankful look as the attention turned to her.

"So, Hermione Granger. You're a Halfblood, right?"

"Judging by the strength of my magic I suspect so, but I never knew my parents." She told him, keeping to her story. It was even more important that they believed her now then it had been before. The snake pit was not the safest place for a muggleborn.

"How did you and Potter meet?" The girl she recognized as the owner of the cauldron and books she'd stolen, the one with a pug-like face, asked- Pansy Parkinson, Hermione recalled from the sorting.

"The same way most people meet, I expect," she told Parkinson with a very fake smile, "we said hello."

Iago chose that exact moment to make his appearance, sticking his head out from under her cloak and giving sharp hiss, clearly unimpressed with the fact she'd failed to offer him any food.

"Oh my god, that thing is hideous!" Parkinson screeched, eyes wide with horror as she completely forgot to keep badgering for answers that didn't concern her in the face of Iago's... less then typical appearance.

Hermione rolled her eyes at the annoying girl and summoned a miniature sausage from a tureen of them with a flick of her wrist. It was a basic skill she'd mastered years ago, moving things with her special talent- her magic- to help with her... prestidigitation. Magic had been a useful aid when it came to thievery, though she'd always been careful not to use it as a crutch.

Iago was satisfied by his sausage and Hermione was equally so- the casual use of her wandless magic hadn't been a spur of the moment decision because she'd known it would not go unnoticed. It showed she was obviously powerful and by their own standards she therefore could not possibly be a muggleborn- not without them having to contradict themselves and one of the core basis of their biased beliefs. In reality, she suspected if any of these children had grown up unaware of what their magic really was and had a lot of free time on their hands (or have a desperate need for something to distract themselves from the agony that was slow starvation) they'd figure out how to use their magic for the neat little tricks she'd taught herself through exploration and a lot of trial and error.

"Iago doesn't take any shit- any rubbish from anyone." She scratched said cat behind the ears and he made a rusty purring noise.

Conversation was carefully polite and Hermione avoided making small talk the best she could. At one point, Harry made a sudden hissing noise, clapping a hand to his head, and she frowned.

"What is it?" she asked, voice low.

"N-nothing," he replied and she raised an eyebrow, unimpressed with his answer. He sighed. "I... my scar hurt when I looked over at the teachers."

"Cursed scars don't tend to hurt for no reason," she noted quietly, "which professor?"

"The one with black hair that's kinda greasy," Harry answered.

"That's Professor Snape, our Head of House. He's a decent sort, really. Any others?" she pressed, "I haven't read about cursed scars before but delayed effects might not be uncommon."
"Um, Quirrell. The guy in the turban." Harry said after a pause, "When he turned away."

"I'll do some research," she decided, "and Harry?"

"Yeah?"

"I probably wouldn't tell anyone if I were you. Not yet, anyway."

"Agreed." Harry nodded before giving her a small smile. "I've told the only person I actually want to, anyway." Hermione had to fight her cheeks going pink, startled by the boy once again; the first time having been when he'd denied her offer of a magical oath– one that, almost ironically, she'd offered up with the intention of giving him the impression she was trustworthy, even though she was anything but. And now she actually felt the need to live up to the far too freely offered trust– and if Harry wasn't so bloody genuine, she'd have felt like he was manipulating her!

After dinner, the first years followed their House prefects to their new common rooms and Hermione stuck close to Harry, aware of his nervousness. Her own anxiety was buried deep under a blank mask of stoicism. Fear was a vulnerability– if you showed even a hint of fear living on the streets then you were eaten alive. Hermione had a feeling the snake pit was going to be similar in that regard.

The Slytherin Common Room was grand looking; all sleek furniture, low burning fireplaces and a number of green and silver banners decorating the walls. All the first years lined up looking nervous as Snape entered, cloak billowing out behind him. Absently, Hermione wondered if he cast a spell to create that effect. It was very dramatic and regal and she'd quite like to use the spell herself.

"Here in Slytherin, we have three rules," Snape started without so much as a 'welcome'. "Rule one- do not get caught." His gaze swept over them all, lingering momentarily on Harry. "Rule two- House problems stay within House quarters. Once outside of these walls, a united front will be presented. Rule three- do not become predictable."

The rules set in place were quite defensive, Hermione noted. Slytherin had definitely acknowledged its place as the 'enemy' and had consequently provided for as such.

On the streets, Hermione had lived by a set of rules too, rules thought up and followed by her fellow street rats in order to protect themselves and each other and to regain some uniformity in a world without any:

We don't steal from our own
Keep hitting them until they stop hitting you
First come, first served
Fear is a vulnerability

She had a feeling that most of their rules could apply to Slytherin house perhaps equally as well.

"First years," Snape continued, "if you have any questions or problems you will take them to a Slytherin prefect. Any rule breakers can expect to be punished harshly." Their Head of House gave them one last assessing look, eyes once again lingering briefly on Harry, before exiting.

"Well," she told Harry, smiling slightly, "that's certainly one way to make an impression."

With the exception of Parkinson, who'd yet to make any sort of good impression on her, Hermione's dorm mates weren't bad. Daphne Greengrass and Tracey Davis seemed to be old friends and they both seemed to know Parkinson too. Millicent Bulstrode and Lilyan Moon were
both quiet and courteous which was always good when sharing close quarters with someone. Well, she assumed the same applied when those close quarters were a dorm room instead of an abandoned factory or dried up sewer duct or whatever else served as 'base' at the time.

With Iago curled up next to her, Hermione relaxed into the four-poster bed and tried to enjoy what she'd considered a rare and luxurious treat for practically as long as she could remember. Except it turned out to be less of a treat then she'd expected. The bed was too soft. Too soft and too warm under her skin and face, and every dip and curve of the mattress and slide of the sheets felt like it was trying to drive her mad.

When morning came around, Hermione (which she still felt odd calling herself) was the first one up in her dorm, having slept poorly. And even if sleeping on the ground beneath her too-comfortable bed would have meant she wouldn't be so tired being singled out by her peers was certainly something she wished to avoid.

Hermione dressed quickly for the day, wrestling her flyaway curls into two tight braids before making her way down to the Common Room where she was pleased but unsurprised to see Harry already up, sitting on one of the leather sofas with a book open on his lap.

"Good morning," she greeted him and he smiled brightly at her, setting the book aside and quickly standing.

"Hi," he said enthusiastically before blushing slightly. Hermione's lips twitched. Honestly, Harry was quite adorable. He had the biggest, greenest eyes she'd ever seen, made even bigger by the thinness of his face, and he was almost as petite as she was. But she knew that her appearance, at least, was deceiving in its apparent vulnerability. She wondered whether Harry's was too, but doubted it. He just seemed to have this—this **innocence** about him, one that she couldn't deny was drawing her in.

Together, they made their way up to the Great Hall and tucked in to the delicious spread before them. Only a scattering of students were present at the early hour and even fewer professors. One of those professors was their Head of House. Snape, she noted, was looking at Harry in a very odd sort of way. His expression appeared... indecisive, if she had to guess.

By the time they'd finished breakfast, the rest of the professors- or at least the ones who had been present at the feast the night before- had arrived and the four Heads of Houses were starting to make their way over to their respective House tables, large stacks of parchment floating behind them.

"Miss Granger, Mr. Potter," Snape drawled as he stopped a few feet before them. Hermione thought he was addressing them and opened her mouth to respond when two of the slips of parchment from the pile zoomed out, floating over to hover before them. Curious, Hermione plucked it out of the air and examined it.

"Oh," she smiled, realizing it was her timetable. "Thank you, sir."

"Thank you." Harry echoed. Hermione gave him a sharp look and he quickly added, "um, sir," with a light blush. To his credit, Snape looked more amused then anything else and the indecisive expression from before gone, the feeling having either dissipated or been hidden under the mask Hermione recognized.

Kindred spirits, she'd told Harry they were, and Hermione had a feeling Professor Snape was a kindred spirit too. One learned to recognize their own kind. There were shadows in the eyes of those who'd suffered; shadows and invisible scars painted across them that only the likeminded
could recognise.

"Our timetables are the same," Harry said, looking over at hers, his face relieved. She smiled back at him.

"Excellent. We've got Herbology first- shall we go collect our books?" The corner of Harry's mouth twitched slightly and Hermione playfully mock-scowled as he answered in a pompous voice,

"We shall."

They were first to arrive at the greenhouse where Professor Sprout was waiting. Pleased to see some 'enthusiastic learners' as she called them, she was happy to answer Hermione's questions about the beginnings of Herbology and its uses in modern magic.

Hermione found herself fascinated by the healing properties ordinary Muggle plants could have when mixed together with the aid of magic and she couldn't help thinking how beneficial they could be to the runaways and homeless people out there who couldn't afford any actual medicine or risk a visit to the hospital to get treatment.

The first and only time she'd ever suggested going to the hospital, the reaction had been immediate.

"Janey, we go to hospital, they'll get the cops involved and the cops, they'll tell us they'll do what's best for us and catch us up tight." Lacey had said with her voice as anguished as her face as she stitched up a stab wound with dental floss while Hermione had tried to stem the blood flow with an old shirt and ignore the screaming and crying of Rooster, the boy they'd been trying to save.

"They'll catch us, put us in homes an' then it's lies and belts an' men in the night an' worse an' you can't--" Lacey's voice had broken then and, needless to say, Hermione had never suggested it again; not even when she'd had to watch people bleed to death in front of her or succumb to sicknesses that with the right medicine could have been easily treatable.

Rooster was the first person she'd seen die.
He'd been a fourteen year old boy, tall and thin with a shock of red hair, sly eyes and a knife-sharp grin. Personally, she'd liked the sticky-fingered boy-- he had been clever, with a cutting tongue and a biting sense of humour. He'd helped teach her pick-pocketing tricks and had given her sticks of gum when she got them right. He'd then bled out in front of her and died with his blood sticky on her hands as she'd tried to hold him together.

He might have been the first person Hermione had seen die, but he'd turned out to be far from the last.

When the rest of the class arrived down at the greenhouses, Professor Sprout launched into a lecture and they started their first lesson in how to take care of the strange plants and fungi Hermione knew didn't exist in the Muggle world- or, at least, the Muggle world wasn't aware that it existed there.

As the day progressed, both she and Harry became increasingly aware of the irritating attention Harry was gathering. Whispers seemed to follow Harry wherever he went and people craned on their tiptoes to get a glimpse of him when lined up in the hallways. Harry was mortified by the attention and Hermione, frustrated by it, vowed to find a way to stop the nonsense.

Iago, who rarely left his perch of her shoulders, helped slightly by glaring and snarling at anyone who got too close.

Charms, their second class of the day, was taught by a tiny little wizard called Professor Flitwick
who had to stand on a pile of books to see over his desk. At the start of the class he took the roll and Hermione had to cough to hide her laughter as, when he reached Harry's name, he let out an excited squeak and toppled out of sight.

Hermione and Harry both quickly figured out that there was a lot more to magic than waving your wand and saying a few funny words, which she occasionally translated from Latin to English to Harry who seemed interested in her knowledge of the obscure language.

Despite her lack of official schooling, Hermione had spent countless hours of her life in public libraries, most of which had functioning toilets and all either heated or air-conditioned depending on which time of the year it was. It also meant she'd had a lot of time to read, picking up a widespread amalgamation of knowledge over the years. Learning enough of the language to read Virgil's *The Aeneid* in its original Latin, a book series she'd remembered her mother owning and being fond of, had been an endeavour that took the better half of six months. Her mother had always loved the Greco-Roman histories--Hermione had actually been named for a character in Ancient Greek mythology, the only child of Helen of Troy.

She didn't tell Harry any of that, though--for all she enjoyed his company, Harry was still a stranger to her and most things to do with her parents were a vulnerability she guarded closely.

Their last class of the day was quite interesting from Hermione's point of view as she'd always been a bit of a history buff and enjoyed reading about times long past--*The Aeneid* being a prime example of her true dedication in this area. Harry, and every other student in the class it seemed, did not share her interest. Indeed, at the end Harry complained to her about how he'd struggled to even stay awake in the face of the monotone recitation of facts.

She could admit that the ghost who taught it, Professor Binns, was a little dry but the subject matter in and of itself was fascinating. Harry had given her a look when she explained this out loud and she gave up and said she'd figure out a way to replicate her notes for him.

With their day coming to an end, they managed to find themselves hopelessly lost while trying to return to the Slytherin Common Room. After wandering around the school for nearly an hour they came across a locked door. Hermione rattled the doorknob and let out an aggravated sigh of frustration, preparing to turn and continue on with Harry, when a loud voice exclaimed "Ah HA!"

Spinning around, she and Harry came face to face with the caretaker of Hogwarts, Argus Filch. The man smiled greasily at them and Hermione was about to explain that they were lost when he spoke first. "Trying to force our way into the forbidden corridor, are we? Brave little first years, aren't we?"

Swearing in her head, Hermione plastered on her most innocent expression and was about to start bluffing her way out of this when something startling happened.

A meow by their feet made Harry and Hermione look down to where Filch's cat sat. It was a scrawny, skeletal looking thing, with dust-colored fur and bulging, lamp-like eyes. Hermione's heart instantly melted. On her shoulders, Iago perked up and meowed back to the cat.

To Hermione's surprise, the caretaker's cat scampered over then stood up on its hind legs, hooking its claws in Hermione's robes to balance as the two cats appeared to have a full conversation with each other, mewing back and forth.

The three humans blinked, just watching the spectacle, until Iago jumped down onto the floor beside Filch's cat and the two felines intertwined their tails before wandering off. Hermione blinked.
"Did... did that just happen?" she asked. To her surprise, the caretaker let out a wheezing laugh.

"That's the ugliest cat I ever saw," he told Hermione, "'e's perfect for Mrs. Norris." And with that, the caretaker turned around and shuffled off.

Harry and Hermione traded bemused looks and then hurried off in a different direction before their good fortunes ran out.

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Severus's POV:

Severus had called Draco Malfoy, the son of one of his oldest friends, to his office after the first full day of the school year. He had Potions with the Gryffindor and Slytherin First years in three days and he needed to prepare himself for dealing with the Potter brat. Also, he was curious to see how the wily young Miss Granger was faring- a muggleborn in Slytherin was quite... unusual, to say the very least.

"Draco," he greeted the young boy as he entered his office.

"Good afternoon, sir," Draco smiled up at him.

"How are you enjoying Hogwarts so far?" he asked, genuinely curious.

"It's brilliant!" Draco replied enthusiastically, eyes lighting up. Severus allowed the boy to carry on about his first day for a few minutes before directing the conversation towards the two he was most curious about.

"Tell me, Draco, what do you think of the young Mr. Potter and Miss Granger?" he asked, arching an eyebrow.

"Potter's quiet," Draco shrugged, "hasn't left Granger's side much. Barely said two words to us in our dorm last night or this morning. Didn't really speak up in class either."

"And Miss Granger?" Severus prompted.

"Granger's not bad for a Halfblood." Draco admitted, "She's really, really powerful. She can levitate and summon stuff without speaking or using a wand. Plus she mastered everything in class today on her first try."

Halfblood? Severus hid his amused smile. Oh, that girl was clever- clever and sly. She'd obviously realized the... unsavory aspects of being a muggleborn in Slytherin and had acted accordingly. He wondered, though, how in Merlin's name she'd managed to convince a House that was, he could admit, full of Pureblood snobs that she had magical ancestors.

"Very well. You may go, Draco." He nodded, dismissing his godson then watching as the young blonde left.

"And the mystery thickens." He murmured, quietly to himself with a wry smile.
Harry's POV:

Harry found that the week passed by quickly. He really enjoyed his classes and found that he was actually quite good at them—especially with Hermione instructing him how to improve whenever he struggled at anything—and he was relieved to find out that he wasn't miles behind everyone else like he'd first feared.

The professors all seemed nice, at least the ones he'd met anyway, though Binns was undoubtedly the dullest 'person' he'd ever met. He enjoyed Charms, enjoyed looking up at the night sky with his telescope during Astrology, enjoyed working in the greenhouses during Herbology and even enjoyed Transfiguration, which was run by the stern Professor McGonagall whose opening speech had been a warning that if they messed around in her class they would "leave and never come back".

Defense Against the Dark Arts was treated like a joke by most of the year and indeed Quirrell wasn't exactly an astounding teacher, but Harry felt an odd draw towards the man that he couldn't quite explain. Hermione had also, much to his delight, managed to produce several actually instructive books on DADA that he'd enjoyed reading after finishing his homework.

So yes, he was enjoying his classes and even more then that, he was enjoying Hermione's friendship. Slytherin seemed full of indirect, discrete power plays, which confused him to no end, but Hermione seemed to navigate her way around them easily. She was supportive, friendly and seemed genuinely happy to spend time with him.

In fact, if it weren't for the Gryffindors, Harry would say Hogwarts was perfect.

The first time he was confronted with Ron Weasley and his mates, a muggleborn called Dean Thomas and a halfblood, Seamus Finnegan, he'd been waiting outside the girl's loo for Hermione to emerge and was surprised by their offensive stance.

"Potter," Ron sneered, a rather ugly expression on his face. "A slimy snake! You're a traitor and we're going to show you what we do to traitors!"

Harry had learned two very important things when it came to dealing with bullies, courtesy of his cousin- he either had to run or turn the other cheek. Harry was fast and could often outrun Dudley and his gang but he had a feeling that these three wouldn't quite be so easy to escape from.

That left turning the other cheek. Harry took a deep breath was preparing himself for the inevitable when Hermione stormed out of the bathroom, her eyes as sharp as shattered glass. Harry almost flinched away from her just by pure instinct upon witnessing the look of pure fury and loathing on her face.

"If you try this shit ever again and I swear on my mother's grave I will curse you within an inch of your life!" she hissed, her voice low and icy. Ron tried to sneer at her but it was obvious that he was intimidated as he took a few steps back. Dean and Seamus, too, looked uncertain. They had, after all, heard about the amazing Granger- the first year at the top of every class with a talent unmatched by any of her classmates. Hell, they'd even shared a few classes with her. She wasn't someone to trifle with.

"And what are you going to do about it?" the redhead tried bluffing.

"What are we going to do about it, more like." A smooth voice interjected. Harry jumped slightly at the sudden appearance of Draco Malfoy and his posse but he couldn't say he wasn't glad to see them. He remembered Professor Snape's words- a united front will be presented- and in that
moment he couldn't be happier about having been sorted into Slytherin.

"Why are you defending her anyway?" Ron hotly demanded of Malfoy, "She's a muggleborn!"

Harry froze slightly, half expecting all the Slytherins to turn on Hermione, but instead Hermione took control of the conversation with ease.

"Oh yes, I'm definitely a muggleborn," she said, her voice scathing, "a muggleborn whose scores have outdone several generations of Hogwarts students, including all Purebloods. A muggleborn who's powerful enough to do this-" Hermione raised a hand towards Ron, who tried to take several hasty steps back, but found himself frozen in place with Hermione advancing on him, a chilling look on her face, "-but I dare say that's either highly unlikely or impossible."

"It's impossible," Draco scoffed, "no mudblood could ever be as powerful as Granger."

"Indeed," Hermione nodded, "although, I must admit that Muggle violence does have its attraction." She said in a thoughtful voice, before pulling her fist back and punching Ron square in the nose. Ron let out a shrill screech of pain, falling on his butt as Hermione canceled whatever magic she had holding him in place. "Do not ever go near Harry again." She warned before turning and striding back to Harry.

To his surprise, she then held out her elbow. "Shall we?" she asked an for the first time, Harry touched her, tentatively linking arms with her. He could feel her twitch slightly at the contact and he too felt uneasy for a heartbeat, but then the moment passed and he came to the realisation that with Hermione he was safe. She wasn't going to hurt him.

He couldn't help the large, beaming smile that crossed his face as he answered her, mimicking his previous response. "We shall." And then they walked to their next class, Harry just about buzzing with excitement. Part of him wondered if it would be possible for Hermione and Dudley to run into each other...

Or even better... "How did you do that freezing thing?" He asked her, "could you teach me it?"

"Most of my little tricks I figured out through trial and error," Hermione said and Harry was surprised by how serious her eyes had turned, her mouth setting in a grim line. "Remember how your accidental magic apparated you to the roof to escape your cousin?"

"Yeah," Harry nodded, a bit confused. Hermione's eyes turned dark and, he couldn't help but think, dangerous.

"The first time I performed that particular piece of magic was as accidental as your apparating." She said, very quietly. Harry swallowed, not really needing her to elaborate on a situation where she'd been so afraid of someone that her magic had literally frozen them in place. "I figured out how to replicate the effect," Hermione added, her eyes losing the dark edge they'd gained as she'd revisited what was clearly a painful memory. "It's not very strong- it only lasts about a minute at most and I suspect a fully trained witch or wizard wouldn't be affected by it at all. But I've always found that for scaring people by not only making myself seem far more powerful but also rendering them powerless, it is gloriously effective."

Thinking about Ron Weasley's face, Harry couldn't help but grin and agree.

And yes, that was the first and last time that Ron ever threatened to teach him a lesson but it hadn't stopped the redhead from glaring at him every time they passed each other, or the snide comments traded. It also seemed that the animosity towards Harry had spread beyond Ron when a fourth year Gryffindor had cursed him. Hermione had performed a counter-curse, a general one
she'd looked up in the library for just such an occasion- the incantation was 'finite incantatem' and she'd promised to teach it to him- her face almost white in her fury, before she'd disappeared.

The fourth year in question had ended up in the hospital wing less then an hour later, having been temporarily blinded. When Harry asked a now returned Hermione how she did it- because he honestly had no doubt it was her- she gave a secretive smile and told him that the boy wouldn't bother him again. And so far he hadn't, and there'd been no other physical attacks.

Of course, the whispers of "Dark Lord in training" and "traitor to the Light" and "evil, slimy serpent" didn't exactly lift his moral, but the Slytherins seemed to enjoy it and his House was surprisingly protective of him, even the upper year levels. Hermione was also being treated with a great deal of respect by their housemates- especially after the incident with Ron and the fourth year. Apparently they approved of the viciousness of her retaliation, her cunning in not being caught, her just hospitalising a Gryffindor in general and her loyalty to her fellow Slytherin.

It was at the end of the week that Harry and Hermione made their way down to the dungeons for their first ever Potions lesson. Much to Harry's dismay they had to share it with the Gryffindors- which meant he had to put up with two and a half hours in close proximity to the House that believed him to be a "traitorous snake". Of course, seeing the steely glint in Hermione's eyes as they entered the classroom did make him feel better. Hermione was the best friend anyone could have- she was tough and loyal with a streak of vindictiveness that he had to admit made him feel touched when she turned it against those who'd wronged him.

The potions classroom, Harry decided as he and Hermione entered it, was by far his favourite, in a macabre sort of way. The classroom, which was situated in a dungeon located even further below the castle then the Slytherin Common Room, was filled with pickled animals floating in glass jars all around the room. The students entering after him were shivering, giving him the impression that the room was quite cold but he'd long since realized that her years on the streets had given Hermione the ability to wandlessly and wordlessly cast warming charms which she'd automatically applied to them both as they walked in.

It was one of the first spells she'd truly mastered doing on command, she'd told him the other day. Winters were icy cold and while she spent any time that she wasn't picking pockets in heated public libraries, the night times that she spent holed up in some makeshift shelter or other, sometimes with a few other street kids, the only real source of warmth came from her magic.

Hermione lead them over to one of the tables near the front and had her ink, parchment, textbook and quill all neatly laid out in front of her and her cauldron sitting neatly by her side before Harry had even opened his book bag.

He was slightly surprised when Iago stuck his mangy head out of her satchel to grumble at Hermione- lately the fleabag cat had been spending a majority of his time with Mrs. Norris. To both his and Hermione's delight, this had made Filch behave in an almost friendly manner towards them; when they were lost he seemed happy to point them in the right direction and they'd even shared a conversation or two- about the cats, of course.

Professor Snape swept into the classroom, his robes billowing out behind him in a somewhat intimidating manner, and Harry shrank back in his seat slightly and internally cursed how nervous he was. Hermione gave him a soft, calming smile and under the table her hand gently grasped onto his, a contact that no longer had him automatically tensing. To his surprise, he found it did help with his nerves and his hand seemed to squeeze tighter around here without him realising it, centring himself with her steady presence.

Snape started the class by taking the roll, pausing for a moment on Harry's name with his gaze
flicking over to him, before he continued on. Harry got the oddest sensation that he'd just dodged a bullet.

His Head of House's lecture was quite entrancing and Harry found himself leaning forwards slightly in his seat to listen. "You are here to learn the subtle science and exact art of potion-making," Snape said, in a voice barely above a whisper, "as there is little foolish wand-waving here, many of you will hardly believe this is magic. I don't expect you will really understand the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins, bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses... I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, even stopper death- if you aren't as big a bunch of dunderheads as I usually have to teach."

Harry noted out of the corner of his eye the looks that Ron and Dean were trading and the derisive twists of their mouths as they whispered to each other but most of his focus was on the professor before him.

"Weasley," Snape suddenly barked, causing the redhead to jolt, "since you seem to know this subject well enough that you don't feel the need to listen in on my lessons why don't you tell me what I would get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood."

Harry gained a great deal of pleasure watching Ron sit there with a stumped look on his face. He could hear the snickering of the other Slytherins and Hermione, too, seemed darkly amused. "I told you he was a good sort," she murmured quietly to Harry.

"You don't know? Pity." Snape sneered at Weasley, "Can anyone else tell me?" Hermione tilted her head to the side, as if considering whether or not to answer, before raising her hand. "Miss Granger?"

"Asphodel and wormwood make a sleeping potion so powerful it is known as the Draught of Living Death." Hermione said without pause or inflection.

"Two points to Slytherin," Snape said, before turning back on Ron. "Let's try again, Mr. Weasley. Where would you look if I asked you to find me a bezoar?" Ron flushed an ugly red, obviously unable to answer this question either. To Harry's surprise, he actually could- he'd joined Hermione the night before in covering (or re-covering in her case) the first few letters of One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi. The book was arranged in alphabetical order and though Harry wasn't sure exactly how a bezoar counted as either herb or fungi, they'd gone over 'A' to halfway through 'E'.

He wondered if he should put his hand up and then took a deep breath, steeling himself before raising his hand, pleased to see it was only trembling slightly. "Mr. Potter? Have you, perhaps, managed to bother to actually opening a book before entering my classroom, unlike Mr. Weasley here?" Snape drawled. Harry felt his cheeks go a bit pink and he cleared his throat.

"Um, a bezoar is a stone taken from the stomach of a goat." He tried not to stammer. "Sir." He quickly added as Hermione nudged him with her knee. Snape gave him another one of those intense stares before nodding coolly.

"Two points to Slytherin. How about one last try, Mr. Weasley. What is the difference between monkshood and wolfsbane?"

"I don't know," Ron scowled, "we weren't told we needed to remember any of this stuff!"

"Tut, tut- clearly you don't possess the skills of your brothers in potions." Snape said silkily and
Harry instantly realized that his Head of House had hit Ron exactly where it hurt most. Ron turned a brilliant shade of red and he glared furiously at Snape.

Harry had to say, he was extremely grateful that he wasn't in Ron's shoes right now. "I think that will be three points from Gryffindor, Mr. Weasley, for not being able to answer any of the questions and another three for your disrespect. Now can anyone answer the question?"

Harry turned to Hermione as one of the other Slytherins raised their hands to answer. "Why do you think he's picking on Ron?" he whispered, "not that I'm upset about it." Hermione gave a quick grin.

"I've heard Professor Snape is quite protective of his snakes," she whispered back, "I can't imagine he's too pleased with the way Weasley is treating you."

"Oh," Harry said, surprised, "I always got the feeling Snape didn't like me very much- er, Professor Snape." He quickly corrected himself as Hermione raised an eyebrow. He was half expecting her to wave away his thought as ridiculous but instead she looked thoughtful. Harry's lips twitched as he realized he recognized that look- it was the I've just had an idea or I'm about to anyway and I'm not saying anything yet in case I'm wrong but I never am' look. Okay, he added the last part but the rest was true.

"Yes, I did get that impression too."

They were all paired up and set to mixing up a simple potion to cure boils. Harry was delighted to realize he was actually a fair hand at potions- so far, anyway- and didn't need any added instructions from Hermione. It was probably all the practice he'd had cooking for the Dursleys.

Snape swept around the room in his long, black cloak, watching them all weigh dried nettles and crush snake fangs and criticizing almost everyone except Draco, who he seemed to like. Harry and Hermione managed to escape any criticism and even though Snape didn't point out to the class the perfect way they had stewed their horned slugs like he had with Draco, he did give them a short nod of approval.

Hermione was just collecting a phial of their finished potion when clouds of acid green smoke and a loud hissing filled the dungeon. One of the Gryffindors, Neville Longbottom, had somehow managed to melt the cauldron he and Seamus Finnegan were working with into a twisted blob and the potion contained in it was seeping across the stone floor and burning holes in people's shoes.

Hermione had reacted quickest, yanking her and Harry up onto their stools which left them the only ones with their shoes fully intact. The Gryffindor boy had been drenched in the potion and Harry felt sorry for Longbottom as he moaned in pain, angry red boils springing up all over his arms and legs- Longbottom was one of the only Gryffindors who never gave him any grief.

"Idiot boy!" snarled Snape, clearing the spilled potion away with one wave of his wand. "I suppose you added the porcupine quills before taking the cauldron off the fire?" Longbottom whimpered as boils started to pop up all over his nose. "Take him up to the hospital wing," Snape spat at Finnegan, before rounding on Weasley. "You- Weasley- why didn't you tell him not to add the quills? Thought he'd make you look good if he got it wrong, did you? That's another point you've lost for Gryffindor."

Harry had to admit that he didn't really blame Weasley when he opened his mouth and started protesting, but at the same time he didn't feel any pity for the boy as he ended up with a detention.

In fact, as he walked out of the dungeon, Hermione by his side, he announced to her that Potions
was his favorite subject so far. He didn't notice Hermione turn slightly to smirk at someone behind
them as he enthusiastically started a step-by-step recount of the entire lesson.

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- Severus's POV:

Severus raised an eyebrow at the cheeky smirk Granger shot him before she turned back around to
continue listening to Potter. The clever girl had picked up on his mixed feelings about her friend,
apparently, and was just as amused as he was that Potter had declared Potions his favorite subject.

As he strode on, he reflected over the lesson, not unlike Potter was though with a great deal less
enthusiasm then the boy. He'd expected to hate Potter, had expected the little brat to be a carbon
copy of his father. Indeed, before the sorting his suspicions had been confirmed as the boy was
almost identical to how Severus remembered his father being at that age, but then the boy was
sorted into Slytherin and the foundations of his beliefs started to crumble.

Potter was quiet, well behaved, attentive in class and genuinely seemed to enjoy learning.
According to Draco the boy was mild-mannered, consistently polite and didn't go about hexing
people in the corridors- even when people tried to hex him. Draco thought it rather weak of the boy
but Severus' thoughts were darker in nature and if he was correct then he couldn't blame Potter at
all.

Either way, he was reluctantly glad that Potter had Granger there to help him. The girl was a force
to be reckoned with; intelligent, powerful and very talented. She had more awareness, and
therefore control, over her magic then most fourth years even. Which was one of the main reasons
he wasn't surprised that the girl had gotten the better of the fourth year Gryffindor who had cursed
Potter (it wasn't proven, of course, but everyone knew it was her). Granger had quite the streak of
vindictiveness and apparently a talent for using simple spells to cause significant damage. The
'lumos' to the Gryffindor's eyes had not only left him blinded for three days but also completely
unable to identify his attacker.

He was also impressed with how she had managed the Weasley boy. Not only had she put in place
a powerful deterrent for the red-haired boy to not attack Potter but she had actually trapped her
fellow Slytherins in a position where they'd have to believe she was a halfblood as to consider
otherwise would uproot their belief system about muggleborns being less powerful, and she'd done
it without them even noticing. Her display of power, loyalty to her house and ruthlessness had also
put her in high regard with the older Slytherins.

The girl was quite the little evil genius and he very much approved. He also approved of the
broken nose she'd given Weasley. Vicious little thing, Hermione Granger was. Very, very vicious
and very, very clever. Severus couldn't help but snort- to think Albus had been trying to get Harry
to become best friends with the Weasley boy! Granger would be the one to keep the boy alive
better then Weasley could ever hope to. He could already tell that the girl was the sort of person to
do whatever it took to take care of and protect those she took under her wing and somehow Harry
Potter had been the one she'd chosen.

Entering the headmaster's office, Severus didn't bother to announce himself, knowing the old man
would be aware of his presence anyway with the eavesdropping spells he had in place outside the
entrance of his office.

"Ah, Severus!" Albus exclaimed happily as he walked through the door, "just who I was looking
"Save it, old man," Severus sighed, sitting down heavily. "Just say what it is you want to ask."

"Of course, my dear boy," Albus said, his expression now serious. "It has now been almost a week since the start of the school term. What are your thoughts on Miss Granger? I know that she and Harry are rarely seen without each other's company. Should this concern me? What is the girl's personality?"

"The girl's a master seducer," Severus admitted, "She has near-complete control over her expressions and emotions. She's brilliant at acting and one of the smartest students I've ever taught—something I can tell after one class she's that skilled and she's a muggleborn who's managed to convince all the Slytherins otherwise, backing them into a position that to say anything otherwise will be going against their own rhetoric."

Albus frowned, looking rather put out. "So she's using Harry."

"The opposite, rather." Severus snorted, before looking thoughtful. "Potter's the only person she appears to be... somewhat genuine with. She runs circles around everyone else, but Potter she treats like an equal."

"I'm not sure I like this," Albus said, still frowning. "I need you to keep a close eye on the girl, Severus."

"Of course, headmaster." Severus sighed.
For Hermione, the weeks started flowing past. There was a bit of mystery surrounding a report of an attempted break in at Gringotts that Harry told her was on the same day as he had visited the bank. Harry had also mentioned Hagrid collecting something on the same day from another vault that was "worth more then his job to be honest" which naturally made her suspicious– Harry too, now that he was more able to recognise the manipulation that Dumbledore seemed fond of weaving. Hermione didn't let it bother her much, though. Classes were enjoyable, the Slytherins were friendly, the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs were polite and the Gryffindors now knew better then to harass Harry.

It wasn't long until Halloween was upon them, and Hermione could tell from the way Harry was looking more and more morose as the day wore on that something was wrong.

As they read in the common room after classes had finished on the 31st, Hermione waited until most of the other Slytherins had left for the feast before curling up beside the boy who had become her best friend, the one who reminded her the most of the street rats she'd grown up around and found comfort in the familiarity his presence brought. She leaned her head on his shoulder in silent support, finding his hand with hers to entwine their fingers together and squeeze gently.

"Ready to go to the feast?" Harry asked sounding miserable.

"Why would we?" She asked, keeping her voice gentle. "I don't really feel like celebrating today and I don't think you do either." Harry immediately slumped and she knew she'd hit the nail right on the head.

"They died today." He said hoarsely, looking straight ahead at the fireplace as if the flickering flames held the secrets of the universe within them. "They died and for some reason I lived. It's not fair-" his voice choked slightly and Hermione waited patiently as Harry took a few minutes to collect himself before continuing. "Is it wrong," he whispered, "that for so long I wished that I'd died in the car crash my relatives told me killed my mum and dad? That I'd died with them?"

Hermione felt herself stiffen slightly at the mention of a car crash, her own memories momentarily surfacing of the truck skidding out of control, of her parents loud cries of surprise and her own frightened scream as it collided with their small car, sending it flying off the side of the bridge and crashing into the lake below.

And then she remembered the days spent in the Black Hole where she relived the accident over and over... her father had been free- well, as free as one could be while trapped in a car sinking to the bottom of a river, but her mother hadn't been as lucky. Trapped by bent metal, her mother told her father over and over to just leave her behind, to get Hermione to safety.

Hermione remembered screaming as her dad managed to unbuckle her from her car-seat and pull her out of the car and into the freezing water of the lake. She remembered the burning of her lungs followed by the intense relief when they broke the surface and she could breathe again.
Her father had swum her over to the side of the lake, pushing her up onto the bank before diving back down for her mother.

He never reemerged.

And a part of her died that day with them.

"No Harry," she whispered back, her voice trembling slightly as she answered him, "no I don't."

So they didn't go to the feast. They curled up together, bringing a certain comfort to the other in the knowledge that they weren't alone. By the time nearly an hour had passed, Harry suggested that they go to the library before it closed and she eagerly agreed, having wanted to cross-check a reference in her transfiguration essay with 'The History Behind The Incantation; Transfiguration Issue II'.

They were making their way down one of the more obscure corridors that Harry had found a few days ago when she paused suddenly, wrinkling her nose as she was hit by a foul stench. "Can you smell that?" She asked. Harry paused and sniffed then made a face.

"Oh that's just gross." He grumbled. "It smells like old socks and those public toilets that no one cleans!"

"Thank you, Harry, for adding such delightful imagery to th-" she started saying, her tone the epitome of sarcastic, when they first heard it- a low grunting and the shuffling footfalls of gigantic feet.

"Hermione," Harry said slowly, his eyes wide with fear as they started backing away from the massive creature shuffling around the corner of the corridor towards them. "What the fuck is that?"

"Language," Hermione muttered to him absently even as she stared wide-eyed and terrified at the creature. It was a truly horrible sight. Twelve feet tall, its skin was a dull, granite gray, it's lumpy body like a boulder with its small bald head perched atop. It had short legs thick as tree trunks with flat, horned feet and it was holding a huge wooden club which dragged long the floor because its arms were so long.

Grabbing a handful of Harry's robes, Hermione turned and ran, pulling Harry after her to the nearest classroom. They almost fell inside the room, shoving the door shut behind them.

Panting, they looked at each other frightened and panicked, listening as the shuffling of the troll drew nearer and nearer. Hermione, suddenly remembering a passage of a book she'd read, felt her face go cold as it drained from blood. "Harry," she whispered and she wasn't ashamed as her voice shook in her fear, "Harry, mountains trolls sniff out their prey." Harry paled as the troll stopped outside the classroom door.

"I... I think it smelled us." He whispered.

"Fuck!" Hermione hissed and then she was running again, dragging Harry with her away from the entrance to the classroom and just in time as the massive club slammed into the thick wood of the door, smashing it into smithereens.

"What do we do?" Harry shouted above the noise, looking about as terrified as she felt. Hermione's mind raced through every single bit of information she knew about trolls. She'd got them into this mess by pulling them into the classroom where they were cornered; it was up to her to get them out.
"Their skin is impervious to almost every spell," she said very quickly as she and Harry backed away from the advancing troll whose massive club was knocking over desks as it shuffled forwards, beady eyes fixed right on them.

"Almost?" Harry asked, sounding desperate.

"Only Dark spells can hurt it. I know some that might work but I don't know the wand movements, only the incantations." She had to choke back a sob. She didn't want to die, oh god she really didn't want to die. And Harry couldn't die— he just couldn't!

In her desperation an idea suddenly struck her and she pointed her wand at the wall behind the troll and shrieked, "bombarda!" The exploding wall caught the attention of the troll and in the precious few moments it turned its back to them she was running forwards and leaping, clawing, climbing, managing to fasten her arms around the troll's neck from behind. Her wand clattered somewhere on the ground but that didn't matter. Magic wouldn't help her here. But she knew what would.

Life on the streets had taught her to never be unprepared. That's why, holding onto the troll's thick skin with one hand, her other hand was already holding the flicked open switchblade that had been hidden in her sleeve and she was driving it into the troll's eye-socket with as much force as she could muster, forcing her arm nearly up to her elbow into the creature's skull, its eye bursting like an oversized grape as she drove the blade through the back of the socket, skewering its brain.

The troll made an absolutely horrific noise and Hermione had to fight to keep her grip, especially with the blood spurting from the wound, as the troll flailed around, its desperate movements those of a dying animal. It let out a gurgling sound, its still intact eye rolling back into its head, and then, with one last dying moan, the troll swayed on the spot and fell.

Hermione hit the ground next to it—hard—causing something to snap inside her chest while at the same time agony exploded in the shoulder of the arm she'd buried inside the troll's skull. The intensity of the pain nearly made her pass out, her vision blurring grey for several seconds, but then Harry was there beside her, cradling her head in his lap and speaking frantically.

"Oh god, Hermione, oh god, please say something! Are you okay? Please say you're okay! Please!" He begged, and Hermione managed to stretch her lips into what she tried to make look like a smile but ended up resembling more of a grimace.

"Don't worry Harry," she wheezed through blood-flecked lips, "it takes more then one measly mountain troll to keep me down." Harry was making mixed sounds like he was laughing and sobbing at the same time as Professor McGonagall came bursting into the room, closely followed by Snape and with Quirrell bringing up the rear. Quirrell took one look at the gruesome sight of the dead troll in the growing pool of blood, the destroyed classroom and the bloody ruins of the troll's right eye-socket with the switchblade still buried inside and let out a faint whimper, quickly sitting down on one of the desks that had been spared the troll's club.

Snape hurried forwards, leaning over her with his face expressionless. "Where does it hurt?" he asked, voice equally clear of all emotions.

"Ribs," she managed to wheeze out, "right side. Can't breathe properly. And my shoulder-dislocated or broken, don't know." Snape nodded, face turning grim, and with a wave of his wand her world went black.

When Hermione next woke, she was intensely relieved to find herself pain free. "Hey," someone
said and Hermione turned her head in the cot she was laying on to see an exhausted looking Harry seated in a chair by her bedside. She smiled at him as she pushed herself up into a sitting position and Harry immediately stood up to arrange her pillows so she could lean back on them.

"Thanks," she said and patted beside her, inviting him to sit on the bed next to her which he did, reaching for her hand as she leaned into him. Getting a good look at his face which looked tired and wan Hermione frowned. "Did you sleep at all while they healed me?" She asked and Harry gave her a half incredulous, half guilty look.

"That's the first thing you ask?" he asked in disbelief, followed by a quick, "and, er, no." Hermione sighed, shaking her head.

"Harry Potter, I swear you'll be the death of me." When Harry immediately winced, she realised her mistake. "I will admit that was not the best choice of words at the present moment." She said, her turn to be sheepish.

"You don't say," Harry muttered before he looked at her fiercely. "I swear to god, Hermione, if you ever do something like that again I will kill you myself. Slowly. And painfully."

"That's the best death threat you can come up with?" Hermione asked playfully with a roll of her eyes. "Oh that's just pathetic, Harry."

"You do better on a moment's notice."

"If you ever do something like that again, I will take you out to the middle of the Forbidden Forest to where nobody can hear you scream and tie you to a tree where I'll then skin you from the knees down so that you can experience the joy of all the man-eating creatures who live there. And while they rip the flesh off you from feet upwards, I will occasionally glance up to monitor their progress while I read 'Hogwarts: A History'."

"That was... descriptive." A dry voice said and both of them turned around to see their Head of House standing by the entrance to the hospital wing, Dumbledore and McGonagall a half step behind him.

"Thank you, sir." Hermione smiled, deciding to take that as a compliment before turning to Harry and arching an eyebrow. "Well?"

"Okay, okay, mine was kinda pathetic." He admitted, "how's this- if you ever do anything like that again, I will... um... er... chop you into little pieces then feed your miserable remains to a nest of acromantula?"

Hermione couldn't help but laugh at him, squeezing his hand so he knew she wasn't mocking him. "And so the student becomes... the student still."

"It's supposed to be and the student becomes the master." Harry reminded her and she raised an eyebrow again.

"Harry dear, let me assure you that I have a creative and cruel imagination I'm always delighted to put to use. Are you sure you're up to challenging me?"

"No." Harry said, with a pout that he'd probably later deny.

"As amusing as this is," Snape drawled, "I believe there's the small matter of the dead troll occupying one of the empty classrooms that we need to address."
"How long was I out for?" Hermione frowned.

"It's ten o'clock. In the morning." Harry informed her and Hermione let out a huff.

"Well isn't that just brilliant." She muttered. "Now I'm hours behind."

"It's Saturday," Harry reminded her.

"I know that." She replied, "but I happen to have a schedule. A schedule that I am now behind on."

"You both have the attention span of an infant," Snape interrupted them for the third time. "For all our sakes, save your idiotic chit-chatting until after you explain what happened last night!"

"Harry didn't tell you?" Hermione asked in surprise.

"I told them to wait until you woke up," Harry explained, face once again sheepish, "I only saw part of what happened."

"Fair enough." She agreed before turning to the professors. "Where would you like me to start?"

"How about why you weren't at the feast?" McGonagall snapped, looking at Hermione with narrowed eyes. Hermione had to fight to keep from retaliating- the Head of Gryffindor wasn't fond of her, she had realized early on, and keeping up the veneer of politeness and respect was something she just couldn't be bothered right now- her and Harry could have died last night.

"I would have thought the reason was obvious, professor." She answered McGonagall, her voice icy and her expression just as cold. "I'm assuming you can remember the significance of yesterday's date to some of us present?"

Understanding lit in the older witch's eyes and McGonagall gave a somewhat guilty look at Harry who was determinedly looking only at their still joined hands.

"I didn't even know the date of their... of what happened until Hagrid told me." He muttered as Hermione gave his hand a gentle squeeze.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Potter." McGonagall said, her voice now truly regretful. "I knew your parents well and they were wonderful people." Hermione fought to keep from wincing as Harry's grip tightened to the point she could feel her bones in her hand grinding together.

"Last night," she interrupted McGonagall, before the woman could upset Harry even more, "Harry and I stayed in the common room until we decided to visit the library before it closed for the night. We ended up walking straight into the troll's path," and here Hermione couldn't help but look down, unable to keep her stoic mask in place and not wanting the professors to see her vulnerability. "And then I messed up." She said with pure loathing in her voice, "I pulled Harry and I into a classroom to hide. I didn't remember until it was too late and we were already trapped that mountain trolls track their prey by smell."

"Miss Granger, seeing as mountain trolls haven't been covered in any of your classes and aren't included in the first year syllabus, I think you can excuse yourself for forgetting that one little fact in a moment of terror." Snape drawled but Hermione shook her head. There was no room for error in real life- out on the streets, people who made mistakes ended up dead.

"I should have remembered," she said bitterly. "The troll smelled us out, of course, and then smashed open the door to the classroom. I knew that the only spells that would get through the troll's skin weren't any I could cast so with magic not an option I went with the Muggle route."
"The Muggle route," McGonagall repeated, incredulously and Hermione lifted her head back up, her emotions now in check as she steadily met the woman's gaze, her eyes glittering coldly.

"I cast a blasting curse behind the troll to distract it and get it to turn around. When it did I jumped onto its back, climbed up to its neck and then used a blade to pierce its brain through its eye. That made my hands rather... slippery which along with the troll's flailing led to me losing my grip and hitting the ground as the troll fell."

"You managed to kill a mountain troll with a Muggle knife." McGonagall stated, her expression incredulous.

"Oh I know, not bad at all." Here Hermione allowed herself to smirk solely to rile up the professor she so disliked.

"And where did you get that knife, Miss Granger?" McGonagall snapped angrily, rising perfectly to the bait, "As talented as you are in my class, I doubt you have the ability to transfigure anything like that!"

Here Hermione paused before mentally shrugging and deciding to answer truthfully. "It wasn't a knife, professor," she corrected the Transfiguration professor who was rapidly growing angrier as she needled the woman, "it's called a switchblade. Good for self-defense. A dear friend of mine acquired it for me and I carry it everywhere I go."

"You carry one of those- those switchblades everywhere?" McGonagall just about squawked. Proud of how much she'd manage to stir up the strict, no nonsense professor, Hermione leaned back against her pillows and smirked.

"No."

"No? Then why were you carrying it last night?" McGonagall demanded.

"I wasn't carrying one of them, professor." She smiled sweetly. "I was carrying four."

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**Severus's POV:**

Severus had to admit that he was enjoying watching his little snake running circles around the usually cool-headed Head of Gryffindor. Granger was... clever didn't really sum it up anymore. He'd seen enough in Potter's mind to confirm that Granger was something else... something else entirely.

The terror she'd initially displayed when cornered by the troll had faded quickly to the cold expression that she'd assumed seconds before casting the bombarda- a curse that she technically shouldn't even know let alone be able to use. It was, he'd deduced, the expression that had crossed her face when she'd decided the troll had to die. And then she hadn't even hesitated.

Not once.

Stabbing someone was infinitely more difficult then it looked. He'd examined the girl's blade and while it was sharp, in the hands of an amateur it wouldn't have been enough to get further then to scrape against the back of the troll's eye-socket, a painful injury that would have infuriated the troll but not killed it. Granger had stabbed through bone and tissue while clinging to the back of a
twelve-foot tall mountain troll, driving the switchblade in deep enough to pierce the troll's brain causing severe, instant and extensive damage to the brain tissue, effectively incapacitating the troll. An added twist of her wrist had ensured that death followed quickly.

Granger knew how to use those blades she carried and it made him think of the criss-cross scars on her palms. They could be defensive wounds, cuts on the palm were not uncommon when defending against a knife, but Severus suspected the cause of the scars, all of which appeared to have been inflicted on separate occasions, was less defensive and more offensive. Like he said, stabbing something wasn't as easy as it looked. Not only did all the blood make it hard to keep a grip on a knife, but when a blade hit something resistant, bone for example, the abrupt stopping of the blade could cause the hand holding it to slide forwards, slicing along the palm. And folding knives, like Granger's switchblade, could also fold back against the hand holding it when hitting resistance, slicing across the palm.

Granger's hands had no fresh wounds on them which was even more telling then the fact all the blood hadn't made her hand slip. Snape suspected that she had had practice with those blades of hers— the blades her friend had stolen, if that glint in her eye had been any indication. A glint that he knew he only saw because she wanted him to. The only time the girl's mask had faltered after she'd snapped it in place the very moment she realized they were in the room despite the apparent way she'd let herself be 'distracted', a method that he, unlike Minerva and possibly Albus though he couldn't be sure, recognized she'd used in order to cause them to underestimate her, was when she told them about when she 'messed up'.

She was furious with herself in that moment and he hadn't needed to see her face or read her mind to know that. And, in a rare moment of compassion, Severus has decided that he didn't want the girl who was rapidly becoming one of his favorite students (and she was moving up the list with each new shade of red Minerva turned) to feel responsible for what had been an understandable error. What he'd told her had been true- mountain trolls weren't covered in Defense Against the Dark Arts until third year. That she'd even been able to identify the troll was a credit to her, especially considering she'd grown up unaware of magic, and more then what could be expected of the majority of the first years.

But the girl had dismissed his reassurances, instead quickly reining in her fury and cheering herself up by tormenting Minerva. Granger seemed fully aware that the Transfiguration Mistress did not like her and in all probability never would and had proceeded to wreak havoc on the woman's composure.

Severus approved.

But he could see how tired Potter was, the foolish boy having stayed up all night by his friend's side, and he interjected himself into the conversation- although, 'conversation' wasn't exactly the right word; Granger was playing Minerva like a cat played with a mouse which was a somewhat ironic analogy when considering the woman's animagus form.

"Now that it is clear my students have done nothing wrong and were simply the victims of being in the wrong place at the wrong time we can leave them to their healing. This has been quite the traumatic ordeal and I dare say Mr. Potter and Miss Granger handled it superbly. In fact, twenty-five points to Slytherin. Each." Severus smirked at a furious and flustered Minerva before turning and striding over to the doors of the Hospital Wing, pausing only to look over his shoulder and snap, "Mr. Potter, get some rest you foolish child. You look like you're about to keel over any second."

He waited outside the wing for Albus and Minerva to catch up. Minerva was bristling, and Albus
had a serious look on his face. "This is a conversation best moved to my office." He said, his voice grave.

"I should think so," Minerva huffed indignantly. Severus tried not to smirk too obviously as he followed the irate woman and the oh-so highly esteemed headmaster to the headmaster's office. Once in there, they all sat down, Minerva upset and Albus solemn.

"Hermione Granger is a danger and a disgrace!" Minerva immediately started ranting. "She may be extremely talented but-"

"Extremely talented?" Severus interrupted her tirade, raising an eyebrow at his fellow professor. "She's top of every single one of her classes, has mastered spells third years struggle with-and that's just the ones we actually know she can use, Merlin knows what else she's taught herself, and with her help Potter's the third highest student in the year level. And, on top of all that, she defeated a mountain troll to protect the boy. Imagine, if you would, what would have happened to Potter if it was the Weasley boy you tried to set up as his 'best friend' who'd been with him. They'd both be in pine boxes."

Minerva let out a sound that was half horrified and half indignant while Severus leaned back in her chair, satisfied with the points he had made. "I will concede," Albus stated, tone somewhat reluctant, "that Miss Granger acted with no regard for her own safety in order to keep Harry from getting hurt."

"In other words, you pedantic old fool, she risked her life to save him." Severus stated, voice purposefully bored. Minerva's lips tightened into a thin white line while Albus sighed heavily.

"Miss Granger is one of the most brilliant students I have come across in all my years at Hogwarts. She has the potential for greatness, but for Light or Dark?"

"She loves the boy," Severus said firmly, "I saw as much Potter's mind. She calls them both 'kindred spirits'. It's a Muggle term for those who are... alike in nature or circumstance, or both. They've been inseparable since the train ride." He decided not to add that it was Granger who had revealed the headmaster's manipulations to Potter. He'd gleaned that little gem when Potter caught sight of the headmaster walking in, though he'd had to keep to surface skims, not wanting to alert the boy to his presence- Potter had impressive natural defenses already in place.

"Speaking of minds," Albus said frowning, "Miss Granger appears to know Occlumency." Minerva let out a comical sounding 'oh my!' while Severus rolled his eyes in very real exasperation.

"She doesn't know Occlumency, you fool, she knows how to shield herself from her memories and emotions and she was on guard from the moment we entered the hospital wing. As Occlumency relies heavily on emotions being able to separate the two gives her mind strong enough barriers that a Legilimens would have to make their presence known to break through them, especially considering the fact that shielding herself from her memories means she already has natural barriers in place." He paused for a moment before adding, "Potter also has this ability, albeit to a much lesser extent and certainly not one that could keep a Legilimens out if they wanted to get in."

"The girl can separate herself from her emotions?" Minerva frowned, "is that why she looks so... cold all the time?"

"It's a coping mechanism," he informed the older witch, "abused children tend to develop it to lessen pain and to protect themselves from the memory of past trauma."

"Surely you're not suggesting that Harry was abused!" Minerva gasped looking horrified and
Severus abruptly found himself furious.

"Oh it's all about precious Potter!" He snapped, "did you not even spare a thought to Miss Granger?" He glared at Minerva who at least had the decency to look somewhat ashamed of herself.

"The girl doesn't exactly go around trying to make friends. If she acted at least-"

"At least what, Minerva?" he interrupted, "she's a muggleborn in Slytherin! If she acted anything else, she'd be eaten alive! But that's what it is, Minerva. An act. She's not a frigid little bitch-" he ignored the indignant noise Minerva made at his crassness and continued without pause- "she's kind and loving towards Potter as well as fiercely protective of him. If you recall, she was the one who protected precious Potter from your Gryffindors."

"She temporarily blinded Oliver Wood and broke Ron Weasley's nose!" Minerva exclaimed.

"We don't know she was the one who did that to Wood," Severus rolled his eyes- really, everyone knew Granger had done that to the fourth year, "and what she did to Weasley counts as self-defense. If you want to press the matter further then point loss, then Weasley will have to share equal blame- and equal punishment."

"I am afraid," Albus interrupted them, "that we have gone off track. Miss Granger did indeed save Harry from the troll, and at great risk to her own life, but the manner in which she dealt with the troll..."

"She probably only meant to blind it," Severus said, coolly, deciding to use Albus and Minerva's complete lack of knowledge on most things Muggle to his advantage and not mention the fact that Granger had definitely intended to kill the troll when she drove that blade through its eye. "Muggles children are taught that if they are ever attacked eyes are one of the most vulnerable parts of a body. Granger knew that spells would bounce off the troll and she and Potter would be unable to get past it, not with it blocking the doorway, so she did what she needed to get them both out alive."

Albus sighed, heavily, and nodded, looking weary. "I agree that Miss Granger does appear to be fond of Harry and has proven her ability to keep him safe. For now, I believe this friendship won't hurt either of them."

"Albus-" Minerva protested, but the wizened old man held up a hand, silencing her protests.

"But," he said, voice grave, "Severus I want you to make it very clear to Miss Granger that carrying Muggle weapons around Hogwarts is against the rules."

"Of course headmaster," he sneered, before exiting the office, leaving Minerva to bicker with the old man.

He had his own thinking to do.

And while he was doing that, he might just conveniently 'forget' to pass on Albus's message to Miss Granger. After all, one never knew when one might need a good blade handy.
Chapter V:

Harry's POV:

The weeks following the troll incident, he and Hermione had been hailed as some sort of heroes. Hermione dealt with this with the same cool indifference she treated most things—well, in front of others anyway. Behind closed doors was quite the different story that involved her storming back and forth across a room while muttering about what complete and utter "brain-dead morons" their classmates were.

Harry listened to her rants while making the appropriate noises while trying not to smile with how happy he was that she felt comfortable in letting down her defenses around him.

Entering November, the weather turned very cold and despite her constant application of warming charms Harry noticed that Hermione seemed to be shivering more and more. It was when he noticed during one Potion's lesson that her lips had acquired a blue tint that with the help of Blaise Zabini, one of his dorm-mates, he managed to send off an Owl Order for a black winter cloak with silver fastenings.

When it arrived he half expected Hermione to object to his purchase but instead she let out a sigh of relief and gave him a tight hug. "Thank you," she'd told him later, very quietly but voice full of sincerity. "Thank you for knowing what I need even when I'm too stubborn to admit it myself."

"What are best friends for?" he'd replied, meaning every word.

The Quidditch season had begun and Harry found himself quite entranced by the sport unlike Hermione who had refused to even mount a broomstick in their flying class, instead handing Madam Hooch a two and a half foot essay on the theory of flying and the mechanics behind it in compensation. Madam Hooch had reluctantly allowed her to stand to the side and after Longbottom's incident had asked her to take the Gryffindor boy to the hospital wing while she stayed behind and taught the class. Hermione had been only too happy with that and Harry hadn't seen her again until the next class.

When he asked her why she hated the idea of flying so much her face closed off and he quickly realized it was one of those topics. The topics that, despite how much they truly cared for each other, they just weren't ready to talk about and perhaps they'd never be. He didn't ask again.

The first Quidditch match was Slytherin against Gryffindor and Harry had dragged a reluctant, complaining Hermione to the stadium to watch with him. Draco, Blaise and Theo had joined them, laughing at the scowl on Hermione's face.

His dorm-mates really weren't that bad. Blaise seemed to enjoy riling people up and was always able to find something to complain about or pick fault in no matter what the topic was and yet the Italian was still one of the most cheerful people Harry knew. Draco was a cocky, somewhat shallow and spoilt-rotten brat but he was genuinely friendly towards Harry and didn't harbor any ill feelings towards Hermione either. Theo, a slightly weedier boy then the other two, was the one Harry liked the most out of the three. Theo understood what it was like to be the underdog, something neither Blaise or Draco ever could and Greg and Vince were too thick to even realize—
to use Hermione's words: "such shining examples of inbreeding at its finest, those two".

"Why anyone would ever want to play an outside sport in conditions like this is a mystery to me," Hermione said angrily as she wound her silver and green scarf tight around her neck. The scarf had been borrowed from one of her dorm-mates, Daphne, a pretty blonde Pureblood 'princess' who was gracious in all her actions with exceptional manners and a hidden sweet side that she only showed to those she approved. Iago, from where he was draped over Hermione's shoulders getting cat-fur all over the scarf, gave a grumbling, ill-tempered snarl of agreement while Mrs. Norris, who was curled up on Hermione's lap, purred, the sound reminiscent an old car engine that wouldn't start properly.

One of the older Slytherins shook his head as he looked across at Hermione. "I don't know how you did it, Granger, but that's the most impressive magic I've seen you work." He commented, nodding towards Mrs. Norris. The cat in question raised her head to hiss at the Slytherin who jerked back, instinctively looking over his shoulder for a rapidly approaching Filch.

Hermione let out a small laugh at that and Iago slunk down from her neck so he could curl up with Mrs. Norris, giving the older Slytherin his own scathing, one-eyed glare. Harry shook his head- he was with the other Slytherins on this. Filch absolutely despised every student in the castle and constantly bemoaned about the fact he wasn't able to string them up by their toes in the dungeons. Every student, that is, except Hermione and by default, it seemed, him. Hermione and Filch constantly stopped to chat when they crossed paths and both of them seemed to think the burgeoning romance between their cats was beyond adorable instead of terrifying.

Harry hoped that at least one of the cats was neutered, or otherwise unable to reproduce. He didn't even want to think about what their offspring would be like. He wasn't sure the world would cope- he knew Hogwarts certainly wouldn't!

Shuddering, he pushed that disturbing thought from his mind and tuned back into the conversation around him. To his amusement, and that of the surrounding Slytherins, Hermione was still ranting. "It's just pure idiocy that the Quidditch cup of all things motivates teenagers to spend hours in freezing, soaking weather, unites them into a solid unit and draws out determination like nothing else!"

"Of course it does," Draco interrupted, looking at her incredulously, "it's the Quidditch cup."

Hermione continued on as if he hadn't spoken. "It's bloody ridiculous, that's what it is! If that was required for just about anything else, everyone would whine and complain and drag their feet, but because it's the precious Quid-" Harry silenced her by covering her mouth with his gloved hand just in time for the loud blast of a whistle that signified the start of the game.

Hermione shoved his hand away, glaring halfheartedly at him before pulling a book out of her satchel and resting it gently on top of the cats to shield them from the wind as she started to read. To Harry's amusement she kept scowling as the wind tugged on at the pages.

Most of his attention, however, wasn't on her but on the game. Quidditch was exhilarating to watch and Harry wondered just how much more exhilarating it would be to play. Lee Jordan, a Gryffindor third year, was giving the commentary- one with his own personal touch that McGonagall kept interrupting to yell at the boy for his favoritism.

The game was fast moving, action packed and absolutely brutal. Harry now understood that the injury and fatality statistics Hermione had thrown at him as he'd dragged her down to the stadium were not an exaggeration. He could definitely picture the occasional accident turned deadly.
He booed as Marcus was hit in the back of the head by a bludger and cheered when the Slytherin Quidditch Captain retaliated by blocking the Gryffindor seeker, causing the boy's broom to spin off course. When Higgs, the Slytherin seeker, caught the snitch, Harry joined the rest of his House, jumping to his feet and cheering as loud as he could. Hermione mumbled something extremely uncomplimentary at them that made his grin widen further.

Satchel slung over her shoulder and a cat in each arm, Hermione was one of the first to return to the castle with a beaming Harry trailing a few feet behind her and raving enthusiastically with the equally excited Draco and Theo and an amused Blaise about the game.

All in all, it was a great day.

- Christmas was fast approaching and Harry woke one morning to find Hogwarts covered in several feet of snow. The Black Lake was frozen solid and the Weasley twins Fred and George, Ron Weasley's older brothers, were punished for bewitching snowballs to follow Quirrell around and bounce off the back of his turban.

No one could wait for the holidays to start. While the Common Rooms and Great Hall had roaring fires, the drafty corridors had become bitter and icy. When Professor Snape had come around the week before, making a list of students who would be staying for the holidays, Harry had signed at once. Hermione had stared at the list for several long moments and then neatly added her name under his.

"I'm going to miss Sting." She told Harry as they walked back over to the couches, "and some of the others, I suppose. There's a few of us who tend to band together during winter. But seeing him isn't worth slowly starving while trying preserve enough energy to use what I now know are warming charms to keep from catching hypothermia. The warming charms were never as effective when I'm exhausted and hungry. And lord knows how much trouble you'd get into without me, Harry."

Harry had to admit he felt a pang of jealousy whenever Hermione talked about Sting. He loved Hermione being his best friend and the insecure part of him borne of the fact he'd never had a friend before in his life was worried that he was just a replacement for Sting, the boy who Hermione told him had likely saved her life and who her affection for was always clear in her voice when she spoke about him.

But Harry pushed his jealousy and insecurities out of his mind the best he could and instead focused on what promised to be the best Christmas of his life.

Once the holidays finally started, he and Hermione were overjoyed to find out that they were the only ones left in their respective dormitories and that the Common Room was far emptier then usual which left all the good seats available. Hermione had demanded they finish their holiday homework before they started anything else and he had reluctantly agreed. Once they'd finished up though after two full days of hard work, Harry decided it had been a brilliant idea- he now had twelve free days where nothing was expected of him.

On Christmas Eve, Hermione snuck into the boy's dorm and they shared his four-poster bed, both looking forward to the next day.

Hermione woke first and let out a delighted shriek and the sound was so child-like and unlike her that Harry thought for a moment she was an imposter. But then he saw the small pile of packages at the end of his bed and let out a nearly identical shriek. A pleased looking Hedwig was perched
on the end of his bed, preening her feathers while Iago was lying on the rug on the dorm floor purring with Mrs. Norris curled up next to him and grooming his still-intact ear.

"Holy shit, we got presents!" Hermione just about squealed, grabbing his hands and dragging him out of bed. "I haven't had a real Christmas since I was three!" she said breathlessly, her eyes shining with excitement.

"Anything the Dursleys ever gave me was out of spite," Harry said, too excited to be properly upset about that fact.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Hermione asked, grinning at him. "Let's start!"

Deciding not to point out that she had been the one just about dancing all over the room and dragging him along with her, he followed her lead and picked up the top parcel from the pile of presents which were labelled with *Harry*. Wrapped impeccably in posh green paper with an elegant silver ribbon, Harry wasn't at all surprised to find out it was from Draco. The elegant quill and inkwell set looked handsome and expensive, another thing that didn't surprise Harry, but he was delighted by the present all the same.

Blaise had sent him a large hamper of some kind of Italian chocolate and a note asking him if he could pretty please convince Hermione to send him a copy of her History of Magic notes for his holiday assignment. Theo had bought him a pair of dragon-hide boots, which were actually quite comfortable and definitely a step up from his old trainers, and had also attached a request for a copy of Hermione's History of Magic notes. He gave it a week before Draco frantically owled him pleading for them too.

Harry was surprised to see that Hagrid had sent him a gift- he hadn't seen the groundskeeper much other then an occasional hello when they ran into each other in the hallways and Harry decided to make more of an effort to know the man. He resolved to at least go down and visit him today to thank him for the present- which looked like some sort of wooden flute that Hagrid had whittled himself.

The Dursleys, much to his shock, had even sent him a present attached to a note- *We received your message and enclose your Christmas present. From Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia*. The tiny parcel contained a fifty-pence coin. "That's friendly." He remarked. Hermione snorted.

"Wankers."

"And you tell me off for swearing." Harry rolled his eyes and Hermione gave him a stern look.

"Harry Potter, you are much too young to swear."

"You're less then a year older then me." He pointed out and she gave him a 'duh' look as if he had just proved her point entirely.

"Exactly."

Rolling his eyes- again- Harry turned to his last two presents. Saving the one he knew to be from Hermione until last he picked up a rather light-looking parcel. He unwrapped it, curious, and something fluid and silvery grey went slithering to the floor where it lay in gleaming folds.

"Er- Hermione?" he asked, unsure of what the weird cloak was. Hermione glanced over, raising her eyebrows in surprise when she saw the cloak.

"Well that's rare." She commented. "And very valuable. Is there a note?"
"Er-" Harry fished around in the folds of cloak for a note. It was strange to touch the shining, silvery material- it felt like water woven into material. "Here," he said, producing a note and unfolding it so they could both read it.

"Your father left this in my possession before he died. It is time it was returned to you. Use it well. A Very Merry Christmas to you." Hermione read out loud. "No name. Doesn't matter, I recognize the handwriting from Theo's chocolate frog card collection- the writing matches Dumbledore's signature."

"Um, can we go back to what it is?" Harry asked and Hermione grinned at him.

"Why don't you try it on and see?" A touch anxious- Hermione was smiling her evil smile- Harry threw the cloak around his shoulders then gasped as he looked down at his feet. Or rather, where his feet should be. They were gone. Dashing over to the mirror, his reflection looked back at him with just his head suspended in midair and his body completely invisible. He pulled the cloak over his head and his reflection vanished completely.

Hermione gave a very evil sounding cackle, like a witch from a movie. "Oh we are going to have so much fun with that!"

Laughing at her, Harry let the cloak spill from his hands onto his bed and turned to his last present. It was small and square. Curiously tearing away the paper, he revealed a small, wooden box.

"Should I be scared?" he asked her and to his surprise Hermione blushed and looked away.

"I- I know it isn't much, b-but I saw how much you liked Quidditch and I thought, you know..." Her voice trailed off as Harry lifted the lid off the box and gasped.

"Hermione, I love it!" A wide smile crossed Hermione's face as he pulled the slowly fluttering golden snitch out of the box. "You naughty rule breaker." He teased Hermione, as he held the snitch reverently, tracing one of the delicate-looking wings with the tip of a finger. "You stole this, didn't you?" Hermione shrugged, smiling at him.

"How can you try out for the team next year if you haven't had time to practice?" It was his turn to blush.

"How did you-"

"Harry," she interrupted him, her eyes sparkling with mischief, "I know everything. Plus you spent the next week after the Quidditch maps drawing little pictures of yourself on a broom chasing and catching snitches in the margins when you should have been taking notes."

"Oh." Harry smiled sheepishly at her before turning back to the snitch.

Hermione shook her head and smiled at him.

After breakfast the two of them made their way across the wide school grounds to where Hagrid lived in a small wooden house on the edge of the Forbidden Forest. A crossbow and a pair of galoshes were outside the front door and when Harry knocked they heard a frantic scrabbling from inside and several booming barks.

Hagrid's voice rang out, saying, "back, Fang—back!" His big, hairy face appeared in the crack as he pulled the door open. "Harry!" He exclaimed, face lighting up. "Hang on- back Fang!" Smiling wide as anything, he let them in while struggling to keep a hold on the collar of an enormous black boarhound. Hermione edged around it, quickly seating herself at the table and out of reach of the slobbering dog.
There was only one room inside. Hams and pheasants were hanging from the ceiling, a copper kettle was boiling on the open fire and in the corner stood a massive bed with a patchwork quilt over it. "Make yourself at home!" Hagrid beamed, releasing Fang who bounded straight at Harry and started licking his ears. Like Hagrid, Fang was clearly not as fierce as he looked. Hermione shuddered- his best friend was very much a cat person.

"This is Hermione, my best friend," Harry told Hagrid, who was pouring boiling water into a large teapot and putting rock cakes onto a plate.

"Hermione, eh? You're the one they're all talkin' bout. Smartest witch o' her age." Hagrid said and when Hermione turned pink at the compliment Harry wondered how much of her reaction was an act and how much of it was genuine. He was used to watching Hermione fake emotions around other people and understood that for her it was a second nature, but when she looked at him her eyes always softened slightly and that more then anything told Harry that with him she felt comfortable to be genuine. It was a heady feeling, that trust she had in him and he vowed that he would never do anything to break it.

"Oh thank you Hagrid! That's so nice of you to say!" Hermione exclaimed, smiling sweetly up at the giant man.

"Nothin' but the truth." Hagrid smiled at her and Hermione nodded, her eyes going slightly wide as she leaned forwards and spoke in a hushed sort of voice.

"I've wanted to take Care of Magical Creatures since the start of this year but Professor McGonagall says we have to wait until third year. She told me, though, that if I was interested I should come to you because you know more about magical creatures then Professor Kettleburn could ever hope to."

Harry watched as Hagrid just about swelled up in pride at Hermione's words- which he knew were blatantly false. McGonagall disliked Hermione and Hermione had never once shown any interest in Care of Magical Creatures outside the mild curiosity any student raised in the muggle world had. Harry wondered where his best friend was going with this as she ooh-ed and aah-ed and made all the appropriate noises as Hagrid excitedly spoke about different— and terrifying sounding— magical creatures. When Hermione discovered Hagrid's love of dragons, Harry resigned himself to sitting there and listening to them rave about how wonderful the massive, scaly beasts were.

"Dragons are used for guarding things, aren't they?" Hermione said suddenly, nudging Harry under the table with her foot. He quickly sat up straight and started paying attention to the conversation again. "I mean, I've heard they have them guarding vaults in Gringotts. I've never been anywhere but the foyer, though, so I don't know if that's real or just a story the goblins spread around."

"Oh it's real," Hagrid said, enthusiastically, "Harry an' I went passed one at Gringotts!"

"Isn't that cruel, though? Keeping them trapped underground?" Hermione asked, with a frown. "I mean, aren't there other animals who are better at guarding small places for long periods of time? Plus, is it really safe to have them down there, what with the wooden tracks Harry told me about?"

Actually, he hadn't said anything about wooden tracks but he didn't pay that any attention- he was used to Hermione knowing, well, everything.

"Aye, it is cruel," Hagrid agreed, looking disheartened before lightening up, "bu' yer right about there bein' other creatures- ye've got sphinxes an' Cerberuses, to start with."

"Have you ever seen either of them?" Hermione asked, eyes wide.
"I've actually got a Cerberus o' me own." Hagrid said enthusiastically, "leant 'im to Dumbledore this year to guard sommit, bu' -" 

"Is that what's in the third floor corridor?" Harry asked, unable to help himself though he quickly regretted it when Hermione glared at him. Hagrid looked shocked.

"'ow do you know about Fluffy?"

"Fluffy?" Hermione repeated, losing her glare as she turned back to face Hagrid sounding genuinely incredulous, "you named a Cerberus Fluffy?"

"'e's a gentle soul at heart," Hagrid protested.

"If Cerberuses are used as guards, does that mean he's guarding something? Is that the thing that someone tried breaking into Gringotts for? Didn't you say that the only place safer then Gringotts was Hogwarts?" Harry asked, eagerly.

Hagrid frowned. "Listen to me, you two- yer meddlin' in things that don' concern yeh. It's dangerous. You forget that dog, an' you forget what it's guarding', that's between Professor Dumbledore an' Nicolas Flamel-"

"There's someone called Nicolas Flamel involved?" Harry asked and Hagrid looked furious with himself.

"Harry," Hermione scolded him looking genuinely annoyed before she turned back to Hagrid. "I'm so sorry, sir- I didn't mean to distract us from our conversation- if I realized that it was a sensitive topic, I wouldn't have pressed. Is it... is it okay if I keep asking questions about dragons or should we go?"

Hermione pulled the most incredible sorrowful, wounded expression Harry had ever seen in his life and he wasn't at all surprised when Hagrid immediately melted before it, reassuring Hermione that he wasn't angry with her at all and that she was a sweet, sweet girl and Harry was a good boy and everyone got curious- he didn't blame them for being excited about a good mystery. With a sigh, Harry slouched back in his seat again and resigned himself to more dragon talk.

It was nearly a half hour later that they finally left Hagrid's hut, Hermione beaming and waving with her free hand at Hagrid as she promised to visit again soon. "Did you have to spend hours talking about dragons?" Harry moaned as they trudged back up to the castle.

"Don't exaggerate, it was only half an hour and it was well worth the effort." Hermione said. "We've got almost a whole week and a half left of holiday and I want to find out more about Dumbledore's little plan- starting with this mysterious package collected from Gringotts."

"Well, I suppose we can start researching Nicolas Flamel," Harry suggested before grinning when Hermione snorted. "Okay, definitely should have known better then to doubt you knew who he was already."

"Nicolas Flamel is the only known creator of the Philosopher's Stone. The stone is about the size of an adult's fist and can transform objects to gold and create a substance known as the Elixir of Life." Seeing his blank look Hermione let out a sigh. "It gives you immortality, Harry."

"Oh." Harry said in surprise before smiling at her. "You're the smartest person on the face of this planet, Hermione. Just so you know."

"Oh stop it." Hermione muttered, giving him a halfhearted shove. But Harry grinned, knowing that
this time the pink blush on her cheeks wasn't faked.

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Hermione's POV:

Stunned, Hermione had found herself stopped short in the entrance of the Great Hall when she got her first glimpse at what was inside. Never in her life had she seen a Christmas Lunch anything like this. To the street rat in her, this was what she thought Heaven must look like. A hundred fat roast turkeys; mountains of roasted and boiled potatoes; platters of chipolatas; tureens of buttered peas, silver boats of thick, rich gravy and cranberry sauce— and stacks of crackers every few feet along the table.

The wizard crackers were fantastic too— when she pulled one with Harry it didn't just go bang, it went off with a blast like a cannon and engulfed them all in a cloud of blue smoke while from the inside exploded a rear admiral's hat and several live, white mice who hastily fled, probably because of the interested looks the two cats who were both sitting on her, perched like an owl on one shoulder each, were giving them.

By the time Hermione finally left the table, she was laden down with a stack of things out of the crackers including a hideous bedazzled pink cloak, a pack of exploding snap cards and a crystal ball. Both Iago and Mrs. Norris had disappeared shortly into the meal and she had a feeling that those mice were going to end up as the cats' Christmas dinner.

She and Harry spent a happy afternoon outside, her reading while Harry joined a handful of Ravenclaws, Hufflepuffs and the Weasley family in a snowball fight. Hermione couldn't help occasionally, er, "helping" one of Harry's stray snowballs drift back on course and took a vindictive pleasure in making Ron Weasley's own snowballs turn back around and smash into his face, something he kept blaming his twin brothers for.

Rolling her eyes at a cold, wet and gasping for breath Harry, Hermione led the way back to their common room and sat him down in front of the fire to warm up, curling up next to him with book in her hands.

It had been the best Christmas day she'd had since her parents had died and she was genuinely sad the day was almost over.

The pair of them dozed off in the common room in front of the crackling flames of the fireplace, not waking until the chiming of the school clock at midnight. Yawning, Hermione rubbed her eyes and then grinned as a seriously brilliant idea hit her.

"Harry, I have a seriously brilliant idea." She told the green-eyed boy who groaned and flopped back.

"We're doomed." He moaned into the sofa cushion.

"Oh hush you," she huffed before grinning again. "So... you aren't interested in using your father's invisibility cloak to do a little nighttime exploring?"

Harry was up on his feet and dashing off to the boy's dorms to get the cloak before she could get in another word. Laughing, she waited for him to come skidding back down. "Here," he said breathlessly, throwing the cloak over them.
Hermione couldn't help sucking in a surprised breath as she looked down at herself and all she could see was shadows and firelight. "Do you know what this means?" she whispered and Harry grinned at her, eyes sparkling.

"It means the whole of Hogwarts is open to us."

"We can go anywhere in this and no one will know!" she added gleefully.

"Well where do you want to go first?" Harry asked, sounding almost breathless with excitement. She didn't hesitate for a second, the answer already on her lips.

"Restricted Section."

"I shouldn't have asked." Harry groaned, shaking his head in mock exasperation, and she laughed softly.

Together, they climbed through the mirage wall of stone that was the entrance to the Slytherin Common Room and crept through the darkened passageways of the school. The library when they reached it was pitch-black and very eerie and Harry lit them a lamp to help navigate their way through the rows of books. The Restricted Section was right at the back of the library and Hermione almost felt like drooling. After stepping carefully over the rope that separated these books from the rest of the library, she conjured herself up a handful of bluebell flames to light her way and wandered off among the stacks, absently telling Harry over her shoulder not to touch anything.

Entranced, she ran her fingers along the air just before the spines, feeling the magic in the old tomes hum. She could hear faint whispering coming from the pages and her fingers danced in the air as she tried to decide which book to choose first.

And then a piercing, bloodcurdling shriek split the silence.

"Oh Harry!" she moaned, hurrying over to where a guilty looking Harry was trying to shut a screaming book. "For the love of god," she hissed, snatching the book out of his hands and shoving it back in the empty spot before throwing the cloak back over them. Harry stumbled slightly, surprised by the brisk movement, knocking over the lamp with his elbow causing it to go out at once.

Now relying solely on her bluebell flames, they both started panicking slightly as they heard footsteps coming down the corridor outside. Hermione was on good terms with Filch but she doubted he'd be able to overlook this little 'slight'.

She and Harry crept past the caretaker in the doorway, Hermione giving Filch a silent apology as they slipped under his outstretched arm and streaked off up the corridor. She had to grab Harry's shoulder and pull him to a halt when her idiot best friend, so intent on getting away from the library that he hadn't been paying any attention to where he was going, almost ran straight into a tall suit of armor.

"Where are we?" Harry whispered after shooting her a guilty, apologetic look. She rolled her eyes at him then looked around, taking in their surroundings.

"Haven't a clue." She answered in a hushed voice and was about to say more when they both stiffened, hearing Filch's voice far too close for comfort.

"You asked me to come directly to you, Professor, if anyone was wandering around at night and somebody's been in the restricted section." Hermione couldn't help but feel slightly relieved when
she heard Snape reply, grateful it wasn't McGonagall or Dumbledore.

"The Restricted Section?" Snape asked. "Well, they can't be far, we'll catch them." Both of them standing as still as the statue behind them, Hermione and Harry watched with baited breath as Filch and Snape came around the corner ahead. They couldn't see her or Harry, of course, but it was a narrow corridor and if the two men came much nearer they'd knock right into them.

Harry tugged gently on her arm, backing away as quietly as he could. Hermione followed with her heart in her throat as he led them to a door standing slightly ajar to their left. Somehow, someway, they managed to squeeze through it and to Hermione's utter relief they managed to get inside the room without the two men outside noticing anything. Indeed, the pair walked straight past the empty classroom and she and Harry stayed as quiet as possible as they listened to the sound of the footsteps gradually fading away. There was a chill in Hermione's stomach, a cold swell of nausea as the familiar sensation of adrenaline coursing through her veins had her body tensed and ready to react to the slightest of sounds as she and Harry stood there against the wall and panted.

Harry, recovering from their close shave much quicker then she could, was already looking around curiously but Hermione was far too ready for violence to move. Her fight or flight instinct was finely honed from the years she'd spent living in a situation with the knowledge that any day could be her last, knowing that if she messed up or if she wasn't quick enough or smart enough or skilled enough she'd end up as dead as far too many of the street kids, runaways, addicts and homeless people she'd known.

Time seemed to drag on and on as she tried talking herself down, but with the adrenaline that was flooding her body triggering her survival instincts and pulling old memories too close to the surface of her mind even Harry's hand on her arm felt like a threat and had her fighting the urge to lunge away from him and twist his fingers until the bones broke. She was relieved when he finally let go of her, no longer quite so ready to attack as her pulse started to slow and the threat of hyperventilation was no longer present in every ragged breath.

She still kept her eyes fixed on Harry as he looked around the empty classroom, hyperaware of his every movement as she clenched her trembling hands into fists and talked herself down degree by degree until she could almost feel her fingers again, until she could breathe without checking the corners of the room and Harry's movements didn't have her fighting not to lash out or go for a blade.

"What's that?" Harry asked suddenly, pointing to an object that looked highly out of place in the abandoned classroom. Hermione very carefully did not react to his sudden action, holding her body entirely still even as her instincts screamed at her to arm herself and either incapacitate the possible threat or run.

Still aware of her breathing and making sure to keep her hands by her sides, Hermione looked away from threat/not-threat– Harry and took in the magnificent mirror Harry had pointed towards. It was as high as the ceiling with an ornate gold frame and was standing on two clawed feet. There was an inscription carved around the top "Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi" and going for the rather obvious assumption that it was in mirror-writing, Hermione tilted her head and slowly read it backwards. "I... show... not your face... but your... heart's desire."

"Sounds cool," Harry said as he moved closer towards it, "what do you think it does?"

"My guess would be it shows us what we most desire." She answered quietly, sympathy helping chase away the leftover adrenaline and remaining vestiges of fear as she watched Harry freeze in front of the mirror, clapping his hands to his mouth in what looked like an attempt to stop himself from screaming. He spun around, wide-eyed, before turning back to face his reflection.
"Hermione- there's a whole crowd of people standing behind me." He whispered urgently.

"I think it's your family, Harry." She said gently, walking over to him so as to tentatively rest a hand that was still trembling slightly on his shoulder, being very careful avoiding looking into the mirror herself. As if in a trance, Harry reached one of his hands up to touch hers, not seeming to notice her tremor.

"Mum? Dad?" he whispered in a choked up voice and Hermione felt her heart break for her friend.

"Oh Harry," she murmured, pulling him into a hug and ignoring the kick of fear from her still frayed nerves that the contact caused. Harry reluctantly let his gaze break from the mirror to hug her back, pressing his face into her shoulder.

"What is that thing, Hermione?" he asked, voice choked and muffled by her robes.

"I think... I think it's enchanted to show someone what they most desire." She answered quietly. "You... you see yourself with your family."

Harry made a sniffing noise, lifting his head and making to turn back around to face the mirror. Hermione stopped him, reaching up to grasp his face gently but firmly and turn his chin so that he was facing her. "That mirror is dangerous, Harry– it's an empty promise, a useless dream, and there's no place for dreams in the real world, only survival. Promise me you'll never come back here. Promise me Harry. Promise me!" She demanded.

Harry looked at her with wet eyes, looked at the fierceness in her own eyes and after a long moment he nodded. "Okay." He whispered, his voice thick with the tears he was fighting back. "Okay. I promise." Hermione smiled at him, relieved, but as she turned back towards the door the worst possible thing happened- she caught sight of the mirror in her peripheral vision.

Hermione stopped breathing as her entire body froze, the only movement that of her legs as they trembled with her paper-thin will to remain upright.

"Hermione?" Harry asked, touching her arm, but she didn't answer. She couldn't.

All day, every day, she kept her defenses in place, guarded herself against the pain inside her. She guarded herself from her darkest secrets, her worst traumas and her biggest heartaches. And, as she stared in the mirror, all those defenses crumbled at once.

When she was younger and her mind lacked discipline, when the defences she'd built weren't as strong, they'd periodically break down and she'd be hit with everything she'd buried and locked away all at once. Now she could hold it all back for up to a year before she had to let them down, too wary of it all becoming too much and bursting out at an inopportune time. She would always put it off for as long as she could, though, for as long as she possibly dared, because when she did let go it was like all her pent up emotions and memories spilled out, dizzying and out of control; suffocating her in panic as she drowned in the grief, pain and horror of her past.

But there was always one particular horror that never failed to rip away every shield she had, every defence she painstakingly built, to send her spiralling headfirst into everything she kept locked back, and it was staring right at her.

Hermione stumbled forwards, falling to her knees as one trembling hand reached out to touch the mirrored glass. And then the dam broke.

Silent sobs made her body shake as she hunched into herself– curl into a ball; smaller you are the less room they have to target. Don't make any noise; if they know it hurts they'll do it again and
again and again– clawing at her own arms, clawing at any skin her nails could reach, anything, anything to make something hurt worse then the grief and panic that was tearing her insides to pieces and ripping her apart as she spiralled down into her rage, her anger, her pain, her grief, her longing, her loneliness.

Memories slithered in her mind, wrapping around her in tendrils that squeezed tighter and tighter– no no no don't please– the images spilling before her as screams and cries echoed in her ears and left her desperately trying to suck in air– blood blood so much blood she did this she did this her fault– even as her stomach rolled and she felt herself begin to retch.

She hated when this happened. She hated how hopeless and helpless it made her feel, hated how weak she was, hated how it made her feel like a stranger in her own skin, a stranger she hated, a stranger that was useless and pathetic and fucking broken.

At some point Iago appeared, climbing up onto her and purring long and deep while Mrs. Norris crouched beside her, her lamppost eyes glaring balefully at the back of the room before softening as she nuzzled up against Hermione who bit back any noise that threatened to escape– her fault her fault her fault– as she tried not to fall apart.

Her body shook so hard with her silent sobs that it felt like her bones were rattling inside her and she couldn't breathe– don't cry, don't scream, don't you dare make a goddamn sound– couldn't even think properly the pain and panic was so overwhelming.

She felt like she was dying.

Hermione curled into herself as tight as she could and tried to hold all her broken pieces together until she was exhausted and raw and hollow and could hear the silence in the room once more, the echoes in her mind fading to nothingness. She kept her head bowed as ragged breaths tore from her throat, her shoulders hunched under the weight of her life and yet she felt empty of everything.

Painstakingly, she built up her shields and locked it all away again, far, far away, buried deep down in the recesses of her mind. Iago was a familiar weight around her shoulders, the rumble of his purr grounding her while Mrs. Norris started to bring feeling back to her numb fingers as she rubbed her whispered cheek against her hand.

Harry, when Hermione could finally make herself lift her head to face him, looked pale and sick and like he'd been crying himself. "Are you okay?" he whispered. She nodded back at him, empty and hollow, nothing left but broken pieces that she couldn't quite fit back together yet.

"That happens... about once a year." She said and when he opened his mouth to keep asking questions she elaborated on her answer before he could. "Usually on the... anniversary."

The sudden sensation of something nudging against her newly built defences had a flare of blinding rage flood the emptiness inside her and she very carefully did not react; instead she used the anger to pull her broken pieces back together, let the hatred stitch close the wounds on her soul and the spite give strength to her weak limbs.

"What just happened to you? Are you alright? What was that?" Harry demanded frantically and Hermione's lips twitched into a ghost of a smile as slowly forming plans of revenge began to erase the last of the hollowness inside her.

"That was how I survive. That was every little thing I have to keep locked away so it doesn't eat me alive."
Severus's POV:

Severus stood beside Albus, his hands clenched into fists as he watched the girl break down. When someone occluded for too long like Granger did, eventually it became too much and everything came spilling out.

Granger's break down was... something else entirely. Just like everything else about her. The sheer mental discipline to stay silent as she was torn to pieces inside honestly both terrified and horrified him, because in the short span of years that little girl had been alive she had been completely indoctrinated to react to pain by both making herself as small a target as possible and staying completely silent, not allowing herself to make a single sound even as she shook with tears and broke to pieces inside. And it sickened him to think about the horrors in her past, the traumas that she had suffered, that had led to such thorough indoctrination that even when she had no control over her own mind her body's automatic response to pain was to make herself small and keep herself silent.

Not even he was able to hold back all noise during the times, now years apart, when he let down his own barriers, always when hidden and locked away in his room so nobody could witness him fall apart before slowly, painstakingly pulling himself back together.

Severus felt a wave of anger on Granger's behalf—this was private, not some spectacle that he and Albus should be watching. And the pleased expression on Albus's face made him want to punch the old man. "Are you happy?" he hissed quietly knowing that the sounds Potter was making would cover up the sound of his voice. He'd already cast a silencing charm on the room the second he'd seen the look in Granger's eyes when she saw the mirror.

What sort of greatest desire tore open someone's mind and laid it bare for all to see? The Mirror of Erised was supposed to bewitch people, ensnare them with what they desired most so they would waste away before it, not break them to pieces.

"Do you not realize what this means?" Albus asked him quietly.

"It means that in her short life my student has already suffered untold horrors and is in an extraordinary amount of pain!" He hissed.

"It means that underneath all that, Miss Granger still feels." Albus said, a smile on his face like what he'd just said excused everything.

"We already knew that, old man!" Severus had to fight to keep from shouting at the headmaster, instead keeping his voice in a low, furious whisper. "She loves Potter, adores him! You didn't need to do—do this to her!" he gestured angrily at the curled up ball that was Hermione Granger. She'd finally stopped shaking several minutes ago. Mrs. Norris, Argus's cat which somehow the girl had manage to charm, just like everyone else she met, was glaring at them with its creepy eyes, fully aware of their presence.

"I truly did not foresee that she would accompany Harry to the mirror," Albus murmured in the closest thing to an apology Severus knew he'd get on Granger's behalf, "or that she would react the way she did."

"You're a fool." Severus muttered, watching with a sinking stomach as Granger lifted her head back
up, her eyes blank and her face an expressionless mask. She'd built back up her Occlumency
shields faster then he, a Master Occlumens, had ever done and she was only twelve years old. That
was not a good sign. "Putting the Mirror out there, even for Potter– you're a fool."

Potter looked pale as he anxiously hovered next to his friend. "Are you okay?" he whispered.
Granger nodded before going into more detail when Potter opened his mouth to push.

"That happens... about once a year." Her voice was empty of any emotion. "Usually on the...
anniversary."

Anniversary? Severus wondered, glancing at Albus and knowing from the older man's face, from
those twinkling blue eyes fixed on Granger, that he was thinking the same thing he was. The
anniversary of what?

"What just happened to you? Are you alright? What was that?" Potter asked frantically and
Granger's lips curved up slightly in a smile that wasn't anything close to what a smile should be
like.

"That was how I survive. That was every little thing I have to keep locked away so it doesn't eat
me alive." She stated.

*That mirror is dangerous... it's an empty promise, a useless dream, and there's no place for dreams
in the real world, only survival...*

What sort of life had that poor girl suffered?

Severus's stomach rolled violently and he had to turn away from the two children. "You're sick."
He whispered to Albus. Wisely the old man didn't reply. Severus wasn't sure if he'd be able to stop
himself from cursing the headmaster if he had.
Chapter VI:

Harry's *POV*:

When Harry woke up the next day, his first thought was of Hermione. The girl was curled up next to him, her lips pressed in a thin, white line. The scratches on her arms were hidden under long sleeves and the red rims under her eyes were gone. The only sign of what had happened to her last night was the dead look in her eyes.

That's when he made the decision.

"I slept in a cupboard under the stairs until I received my Hogwarts letter. I was forced to cook and clean for the Dursleys. Once Aunt Petunia purposefully tipped boiling water on my hands and then yelled at me for being clumsy and sent me to my cupboard. I'm never fed enough, Dudley beats me up at every opportunity he can get and Uncle Vernon just encourages it. They've never shown me one bit of kindness in all my life. I hate them." He felt tears prick his own eyes and Iago, to Harry's absolute shock, rubbed his cheek against his hand. The tomcat's fur was softer then he'd expected it to be.

Hermione looked at him then reached out to grip his hand tight in her own and he was relieved to see that there was life in her eyes once again. And then she spoke.

"I killed someone."

Harry blinked in shock, unsure if he'd just heard her right. "He deserved it," Hermione continued, still looking him straight in the eye, "and I don't– I don't regret it. He killed her. He did sick, sick things to her and then he killed her. So I killed him."

He didn't ask who 'her' was or 'he' was and he didn't need to ask what the 'sick, sick things' were. Instead, he hugged Hermione to him. "I think about killing the Dursleys all the time," he whispered in her ear. "Especially at night. This darkness seems to soak through my mind and all I can think about is how easy it would be to cut their throats open while they sleep."

"You'd have thought, that when I looked in the mirror, I'd see my parents." Hermione whispered back. "That my heart's greatest desire would be them. Alive. But it's not. When I looked in the mirror, I saw her. I was supposed to be looking after her; she was my responsibility. She moved out of my sight and then just vanished. I looked everywhere but it took me nearly twenty minutes to find them and I was too late, she was already dead. He was still standing over her, his pants still around his ankles."

Hermione gave a short bitter laugh, leaning her head against his chest. He held her tight. "I lost it. Just absolutely, completely lost it. He was a big man, strong, and I knew I'd have to catch him by surprise. And I did. Crept up behind him and used a switchblade to cut across his calcanean tendons," Harry wanted to ask what they were but didn't, scared that if he interrupted her then she'd stop altogether.

"The tendons just tore and snapped. It sounded like a wooden box lid snapping shut. The bastard hit the ground, making this awful, awful sound." Hermione shut her eyes and whispered the next
"But I was just so angry and he wasn't-- he wasn't screaming enough. I wanted to make him hurt more. So I cut off his... his parts." Harry almost blanched out of pure male sympathy, but instead reminded himself that the scumbag didn't deserve that sympathy, any sympathy, and he just hugged Hermione tighter. "She was so little," Hermione choked out, "she was practically just a baby. God, I thought Sting would hate me for losing her and letting her be killed." She buried her face in his shoulder and Harry could feel her tears soaking into his shirt. "But he didn't," she practically moaned. "He said that it was just part of life on the streets. That it was dangerous. I knew that, I did, I'd seen people die before but she... she was just like me and she was my responsibility and I failed her. And now I'm a murderer, just like him."

"You're not a murderer. Scum like that needs to be put down." Harry told her, his voice dark and fierce. If he looked in the mirror across from his bed, over to the left, he would have seen his eyes briefly flicker crimson, before fading back to green, almost just a trick of the light. And then Hermione looked up at him and smiled, a terrible, terrible smile.

"It turns out that bloody mirror did have some use. Dumbledore put it there. He was in the room."

"What?" Harry gasped, finding himself furious that not only had the headmaster put the mirror there for anyone to walk across but had spied on something as private and intimate as Hermione's break down.

"I felt him." Hermione said, her face going dark and vicious, her eyes shards of glass. "He was trying to get into my head."

"What?" Harry couldn't decide if he was more furious or horrified now.

"He's tried it before, after the troll incident. I read up on it-- it's called Legilimency. He's probably used it on you before."

"How come I didn't feel it?" Harry asked in panic, loathing the idea of someone in his head.

"I did some research. There's a type of magic that blocks it called Occlumency." Hermione explained. "People like us, our minds develop natural defenses to protect us. Mine seem to be further developed then yours since I can feel when someone's trying to get in."

"You're Hermione Granger, of course you're the best at it." He told her, feeling very pleased with himself when he got her to give a watery sort of smile.

"I started reading up on Occlumency, and I discovered more information on how to use it." She explained further. "It's very theoretical, but it blends in quite nicely with my efforts to become an animagus. Both require an obscene amount of meditation."

"Wait, wait, back up a second- you're studying to become an animagus?" Harry asked, shocked.

"Of course," Hermione said, with a wave of her hand and a glimmer of mischief in her eyes, "Harry it's me- were you expecting anything else?"

"Good point," he nodded, grinning, "carry on."

"Well it's taken a while to really get the hang of it, especially without someone to actually test the barriers, but I've improved enough that I noticed when he tried to read my mind after my... episode."

"That bastard!" Harry spat, hands curled into fists. He had never seen anything like what had happened to Hermione last night. He'd been terrified and honestly on the verge of running to get...
Snape, punishment for being out of bed be damned, when she finally snapped out of it.

Dumbledore was responsible for her pain last night.

And Dumbledore was responsible for so much more pain too– Dumbledore put him with the Dursleys. Dumbledore had been controlling his life since he was fifteen months old. Dumbledore had started to manipulate him from the very moment he entered the Wizarding world. Dumbledore was responsible for hurting Hermione.

The headmaster of Hogwarts was not going to get away with that- Harry wouldn't let him. Somehow, someway, Harry would make the man pay for what he'd done.

"He's a right bastard," Hermione agreed, her eyes bright and burning with barely contained fury, "but I've got a plan."

"Yeah?" He asked and when Hermione smiled her evil genius smile and he knew, instantly, that this was going to be good.

"We're going to steal the Philosopher's Stone."

Oh he was right- this was good.

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**Severus's POV:**

Severus paced in his office, a private war raging inside him. He was absolutely furious at the headmaster, of course, but that wasn't his main concern right now.

Granger.

She was far more advanced then your average first year but she was being treated like one. She wasn't being challenged, so she challenged herself. Spell after spell she was mastering with seemingly no effort. She had the sort of control between her mind and her magic that most adult wizards would be envious of. She was going to be a very powerful witch.

And she was damaged. Far more damaged then he'd originally realized. This was a worry, because he'd already been concerned about how damaged he'd theorized her to be.

He couldn't help but feel relieved that she'd connected so strongly with Potter. The boy grounded her, kept her from disappearing into herself; into her research, her magic and her mind.

He needed a way to rein her in slightly. A way to let her sink into studies of magic but in a controlled way.

And he needed to get the girl in therapy.

Severus sighed. He'd probably have better luck with the therapy.

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**Hermione's POV:**
Hermione was the sort of person who liked to plan at least five steps ahead, collect all relevant material and run multiple scenarios and simulations through her mind until she'd decided on the one with the best possible odds of success. That's why she was as surprised as Harry when she agreed to his insane plan of "let's go steal it tonight then".

It was almost midnight when they donned the invisibility cloak and set off for the forbidden third floor corridor. She was holding the flute Hagrid had made Harry in one hand and her wand tightly in the other. In Greek mythology the Cerberus who guarded the Underworld was tamed by Orpheus playing his lyre. As they didn't exactly have a lyre handy—or any other ideas for how to get past a giant three-headed dog—they were hoping any sort of music would have an effect on "Fluffy". Even if they got past the Cerberus there would be other obstacles she was guessing, but she chose to remain... optimistic. Or at least try not to have a nervous breakdown from not having at least three contingency plans.

As they reached the door, Harry turned around, looking a bit uncertain. "Er, maybe we should do a bit more investigating first." He suggested nervously and Hermione couldn't help laughing softly and kissing him on the cheek.

"God, I love you Harry." She said, actually sort of sure she meant it too.

"Me too," Harry told her, reaching out and wrapping an arm around her shoulders. She took a moment to lean into his embrace before stepping back and pointing her wand at the door.

"Alohomora."

There was a loud clunking noise and then the door swung open. Beside her she heard Harry gulp—loudly—at the sight of the three-headed-beast and the Cerberus started to growl. Hastily, Hermione raised the flute to her lips and blew. Playing with one hand, the tune was choppy and uneven and all her musical knowledge was theoretical so it hardly counted as proper music anyway, but it turned out to be enough to cause the Cerberus to... doze right off?

Not quite what she was expecting from "taming" but she'd gladly accept it.

Harry edged forwards, pointing silently to a trapdoor under the foot of the beast. She nodded and gestured for him to open it which he did. Kicking the door shut with her foot, Hermione cautiously made her way towards Harry, still playing the flute as she peered down the trapdoor with him.

She couldn't see anything except a vast expanse of darkness. Well, that was easily fixed. She pulled the flute back from her mouth to mutter a quick, "lumos!" before playing again, all-too aware of Fluffy starting to stir slightly.

Lumos was the same spell she'd used to temporarily blind the Gryffindor fourth year who'd tried cursing Harry and it was quite a nifty spell. Using her wand as a torch, she cast a brilliant beam of light down the seemingly endless shaft which, it turned out, actually did end. With a Devil's Snare.

On the plus side, the man-eating plant would break their fall. The down side? The man-eating plant was a man-eating plant. Devil's Snare, Devil's Snare... hates sunlight and fire! Triumphant, she nodded to Harry. "Really? Jump?" he asked doubtfully. She nodded then moved quickly as she stopped playing the flute.

"Don't freak out when the plant tries to eat you." She told him. And then she jumped.

Harry stood for a few moments, obviously indecisive, before wisely choosing to take his chances against the man-eating plant then the stirring three-head dog who, incidentally, was also a man-
Wise decision, she though, somewhat morbidly amused by watching him flail around in the grip of
the plant's tentacles while she relaxed into the strangling grip. "Stop struggling, Harry," she
ordered before casting in incendio which the Devil's Snare immediately cringed from, the plant
literally shoving them down and away from it and Hermione swore lightly as her knees hit the
ground underneath.

"You couldn't have mentioned the bit where you had a plan in place before you jumped?" The still
breathless Harry asked her sarcastically

"When did I have the time to do that?" She pointed out, but her faux-indignation was ruined by the
fact she was unable to help snickering as she did so- it really had been funny watching him stand
there with that gobsmacked look on his face.

"So evil." Harry sighed, shaking his head before following her lead down the dark passageway.
Neither commented on the strange whirring noise like hundreds of wings until they reached the
end of the passageway and walked into a brilliantly lit chamber.

"Hm," Hermione raised her eyebrows as she took in the sight before her. On the opposite side of
the chamber from where they were standing was a wooden door while the space between them and
it was filled with flying keys; small and jewel bright as they fluttered and tumbled through the air.
"I think you're going to need to catch the key to let us get through the door, Harry." She said.

"What? Why me?" Harry demanded, a bit panicked. "And why do we need a key to get through the
door– can't you just magic it open?"

"Dunderhead," she muttered under her breath, ignoring Harry's pout as she crossed the chamber to
the wooden door and tapped it with her wand. "Alohomora!" Just as she'd expected, the door didn't
budge.

"Urgh," Harry moaned behind her, "how am I supposed to catch the key?"

"Well if I was you, I'd probably use one of those brooms," Hermione said with a grin as she pointed
out the broomsticks laying to the side. Harry visibly perked up at this, just as she knew he would,
and dashed over to grab one of the broomsticks, mounting it then kicking off the ground without a
moment's hesitation. "You're looking for a big, old-fashioned one!" she shouted after him after
examining the lock, "it's probably silver!"

Harry spent the next few minutes weaving and diving and looking like he was having the time of
his life before he closed in on one of the keys and pinned it to the wall. Instantly, the rest of the
keys started shooting towards him, looking for all intents and purposes like they were about to
skewer him and Hermione shouted a freezing charm, casting them all immobile.

She grinned as Harry landed on the ground beside her. "That was excellent flying work," she
praised and Harry grinned back at her, his hard-won prize still held tight in his hand. "You're going
to make a great seeker, you know." She told him as he unlocked the door.

"And you could have frozen the keys before sending me off to go catch the one we needed."

"Well I can't do all the work," she teased before adding, "besides, you needed to prove to yourself
you could do it. Now you officially have no excuse for not trying out for the Quidditch team next
year, because let's be honest; Higgs is absolutely rubbish."

"You actually watched the game?" Harry asked sounding shocked.
"It's called multitasking." She said, amused. "There's no reason why I can't read and be aware of the game at the same time. I just make a habit of ignoring it out."

"Should I take the broom with me?" Harry wondered.

"Couldn't hurt." She replied with a shrug.

They stepped through into the next room and Hermione rolled her eyes. "Chess. Oh what fun." She said, sarcastically. "Excellent thinking with the broom, Harry."

"Do you even know how to fly one?" Harry asked looking annoyingly amused as he mounted the broom again.

"I know the theory." She scowled as she gingerly sat down on the room behind him and wrapped her arms around his stomach as tightly as she could. Harry laughed before kicking off the ground, letting out a delighted whoop as they soared into the air. She just held tight onto him with her eyes shut and tried to ignore the horrible swooping feeling in her stomach.

It was just as awful as she'd imagined. Ever since the truck had knocked their car over the edge of the bridge and sent it into the river below the sensation of falling had terrified her, almost as much as the dark did—she hated the dark; a hatred born from the three years she'd spent in the orphanage where she'd be locked in that tiny, pitch-black room; hungry, thirsty and so painfully alone, always with that fear that this would be the time they wouldn't let her out. Only years of the sheer necessity of it had her able to not quite overcome the phobia but be able to outwardly appear as if the dark didn't bother her at all.

At least she didn't have to play chess, Hermione comforted herself as the broomstick seemed to start angling back to the floor, increasing the falling sensation to the point where her heart was strumming erratically like a tension-tight wire and her lungs felt too tight as panic started building.

And then Harry was landing and she was gratefully stumbling off the broom and onto the ground, taking a moment to let out a deep shuddering breath and pull herself back together.

Seeing her nod that she was ready, Harry pushed open the next door only for them both to freeze at seeing what was behind it, and then gag as the smell hit them harder then a bludger.

"Well this isn't good." Harry stated as they both stated at the mountain troll that was even bigger then the one they'd previously faced. "Flying again?" He suggested and Hermione just groaned, closing her eyes and clinging to Harry once more as he kicked off the ground. As he soared into the air and up over the troll she concentrated on her breathing, the tightening in her chest making the air wheeze out of her lungs and the thought of having to do this again on the way back threatening to send her into a full-blown panic.

"Out of interest," Harry asked, having to shout to be heard over the sounds of the angry troll, "what are the spells that can get through troll skin?"

Seizing the distraction for what it was, Hermione pushed the panic back and concentrated in Harry's question. "The most well known one," she shouted back, "and the simplest one to cast would be the Killing Curse."

"Oh." Harry was silent for a second. "What's the incantation?"

"There's a reason I didn't try using the Killing Curse against the troll before," she answered, "It's an Unforgiveable Curse— and the whole Unforgiveable part is fairly of self-explanatory. Using it would earn you a life sentence in Azkaban— that's the wizard prison!"
"I'm not going to cast it, I promise, I just want to know!" Harry called out as he angled the broom towards the doorway and the sensation of falling turned her mouth dry and she felt like she was going to be sick, her fingers probably leaving bruises on Harry's ribs she was clinging to him so tightly

"It's Avada Kedavra. No wand movements needed, just sheer intention." She said in a shaky voice once her feet were back on the ground and she just about tore the door handle off in her haste to get it open.

Both of them staggered across the threshold, away from the angry troll, only to both let out shocked cries when a fire sprang up in the doorway behind them. It wasn't ordinary fire either, instead it was dark purple in colour. At the same instant, black flames shot up in the doorway leading onwards, trapping them inside the room. It was bright, though, from the flames and Hermione consoled herself with the fact there weren't any man-eating anythings trapped with them in the room which was a pleasant change of pace.

No, this room was mostly empty with only single table in the middle on which seven differently shaped bottles were lined up.

"Fantastic." Harry groaned as he looked back at the fire blocking their exit. "If we're stuck down here Snape will kill us."

"Oh relax," she said, crossing over to the table and picking up the roll of paper lying next to the bottles. It was a riddle and she couldn't help but smile as she read it out loud to Harry.

"Danger lies before you, while safety lies behind,  
Two of us will help you, which ever you would find,  
One among us seven will let you move ahead,  
Another will transport the drinker back instead  
Two among our number hold only nettle wine,  
Three of us are killers, waiting bidden in line.  
Choose, unless you wish to stay here forever more,  
To help you in your choice, we give you these clues four:  
First, however slyly the poison tries to hide  
You will always find some on nettle wine's left side;  
Second, different are those who stand at either end,  
But if you would move onward, neither is your friend;  
Third, as you see clearly, all are different size,  
Neither dwarf nor giant holds death in their insides;  
Fourth, the second left and second on the right,  
Are twins once you taste them, though different at first sight."

"Oh goodie." Harry said, not looking nearly as enthusiastic as she did, "I hope you know what to do because I haven't got a bloody clue."

"I'm a terrible influence on you, Harry," she said with a laugh, "had you even said 'bloody' before you met me?"

"Damn was the worst word I ever used." Harry admitted before gesturing to the table. "So, figured it out yet?"

"It wasn't hard," she shrugged, reaching forwards and plucking the smallest bottle up. "This one will get us through the black fire."
"There's only enough for one of us to drink." Harry pointed out, frowning at it.

"It probably refills automatically. It wouldn't make sense for it to only have one dose in here," She replied. Harry raised an eyebrow then snatched it out of her hand before she could stop him and downed it in one gulp. "I'm going to kill you, Harry Potter." She told him calmly. He gave her a sheepish look and backed towards the flames.

"See you in a bit!" he called, before adding a cheeky– "if you're right of course!" before disappearing beyond the doorway. Hermione ground her teeth together and was about to blast a hole through the damn wall to get to him, _flames be damned_, when the little bottle in her hand filled up again.

"I told him so." She lectured the bottle sourly before following Harry's example and downing it in a gulp. She shivered as a feeling like ice licked through her veins and hurriedly stepped through the flames after Harry. And then she froze, just like he had only a foot ahead of her.

Because in front of them was the Mirror of Erised.

"Can we smash it?" Harry asked, his voice shaky as he very carefully didn't look at its surface.

Hermione didn't bother replying, instead she pointed her wand at the loathsome thing and snarled, "**BOMBARDA!**"

As her curse collided with its reflective surface the mirror exploded. Everywhere.

Hermione and Harry had to hit the floor in order to avoid the the tornado of glass, whipping around the room in wild bursts of magic. Hermione watched in disbelief as Harry suddenly stood, remaining upright in the magical whirlwind of glass for a handful of seconds before he crouched back down again.

"Are you insane?" she hissed, glaring at the bleeding gash on his shoulder, a shard of glass having torn right through his jumper to the skin beneath, and several shallower cuts on his hands. Harry just grinned at her and held out his prize and she couldn't help her own wide grin at the sight of the large red stone. "I take it back, you're brilliant." She said, breathless with excitement. "The Philosopher's Stone... and it's all ours."

Once the glass had finally settled they both cautiously stood up, Hermione helping Harry apply pressure to his shoulder wound until it stopped seeping blood. "That was surprisingly anti-climatic." He told her and she couldn't help but laugh.

Making their way back out was actually almost harder then going in. The flying once again almost sent her into a panic attack— too many things had pushed her towards the edge in too close together, leaving her usual tight control shaky and thin. Adding to that, the troll was pissed off and more prepared and it took blinding it with a well-aimed lumos right to the eyes for them to get passed. "I'm starting to think you have an eye fixation, Hermione!" Harry snickered as they walked into the room with the chess pieces.

"I do not have an ocular obsession, thank you very much." She said, elbowing him in his ribs.

Flying over the chess set and getting past the still frozen in place keys was simple enough, but how to get back through the Devil's Snare from underneath took her nearly a half hour to figure out and she was grateful Harry had thought to hang onto the broom past the key room so once she'd blasted their way through the plant he could fly them up to the still open trapdoor.
Inspired by Harry's earlier teasing, she then proceeded to blast the Cerberus in the face with an over-powered lumos, blinding the massive beast long enough for them to get out. Slamming the door to the third floor corridor shut behind them and leaning their weight back on it, they both stood there panting and just looking at each other, not really knowing what to say after the thrilling bout of thievery and breaking of about a hundred school rules and several property laws too.

And then Harry spoke up. "Reckon we can keep the brooms?" He asked hopefully.

Hermione couldn't help it. She laughed.

The rest of the holidays passed at a lazy pace. She and Harry had hidden the Stone in her mattress and Hermione had carved some runes she'd found in a book into the wooden bedframe to keep it from being summoned, traced or scryed.

The two then spent a large amount of the time on the grounds with her focusing on her animagus studies while Harry practiced flying on his 'new broom' chasing after the golden snitch she'd stolen for him for Christmas.

The return of the rest of the students was almost disappointing but Hermione had to admit it was sort of nice to see Draco, Blaise and Theo again, as well as Tracey who'd sent her a book on interesting curses for Christmas and Daphne who'd sent her a beautiful pair of sleek, dragon-hide gloves, having noticed that Hermione didn't own a pair.

Neither she nor Harry quite knew what to do with the Stone yet-- Harry was all for destroying it but Hermione didn't want to, at least not until they figured out why the stone had been moved to Hogwarts in the first place and just who had broken into Gringotts trying to find it.

Hermione was also determined that they learn as much defensive and offensive magic as possible to both protect themselves-- Harry in particular-- against the meddlesome headmaster as well as to also be as prepared as possible for whatever obstacle he deemed fit to throw at them next.

And so the months fell into a familiar pattern for the two of them. After classes they'd go to the library where they'd read and do their homework and then they'd find an empty classroom where they practiced new spells she'd found. Occasionally Daphne and Tracey joined them, Tracey always having a new curse she was happy to teach them, and sometimes Draco, Blaise and Theo did, but more often then not it was just the two of them.

Hermione was further along in her animagus study then before and she'd found a book in the Restricted Section for Harry called 'Parseltongue: A Secret Art', and, much to his delight, Harry could now write in Parselscript and use Parseltongue to cast spells.

Hermione had devoted a portion of her time to learning Parselscript as well and had a rudimentary enough knowledge to be able to communicate with Harry in it when passing notes during class.

Life was going fairly smoothly and Hermione found that she was enjoying herself which made her wary-- in her experience, happiness didn't last.

Severus's POV:
It was nearing the end of the school year when Albus summoned him to his office. Severus had been enjoying the few and far between nature of the headmaster's little 'catch-ups' and hadn't been too pleased about this one.

To his knowledge, Potter and Granger had been staying out of trouble. Since the... incident with the Mirror of Erised, they'd both taken their studies even more seriously and more then once he crossed paths with a determined looking Granger making her way out of the library while balancing a precariously tall stack of books covering a variety of subjects in her hands– notably, the most frequently occurring topic seemed to be combative magic, both offensive and defensive. Severus decided that was not something he needed to pass on to the headmaster.

Potter's grades, having already been quite impressive, had improved in leaps and bounds and the boy appeared to be becoming friendlier towards others in the year level and not just the Slytherins. Granger was as standoffish as usual though she seemed to make the occasional effort for Potter's sake.

The worst thing he'd caught them doing was passing notes in class and even though he'd confiscated the note he hadn't been able to make sense of the squiggly lines and just threw it out, more impressed then annoyed with their cunning in creating a code only the two of them could read.

So yes, he was quite pleased with how Potter and Granger were going and he was also tired from a full week of teaching so he wasn't in the best of moods when he strode into Albus's office. "This better be good– I have a bottle of Odgens waiting in my quarters with my name on it and two glorious days free from keeping the moronic brain dead cretins I have the misfortune of calling 'students' from blowing up my classroom." He grumbled as soon as he walked through the door.

Minerva made a hmph-ing sound, obviously unimpressed with his manner.

"This is a very serious matter, Severus." Albus said gravely. "The Philosopher's Stone is gone."

Severus froze in place and blinked. Twice. "What?" He demanded in a strangled voice.

"I went to check on it," Albus said heavily, looking very old for a moment, "only I found that the Mirror was destroyed and the Stone was nowhere to be found."

An awful sinking feeling in his stomach had Severus sitting heavily on one of the many armchairs decorating the headmaster's office. "Do you think– is it– the Dark Lord?" he whispered, aghast. Albus sighed.

"I do not know, my dear boy. But I have certain suspicions and I'd like you to question Miss Granger." The sheer level of disbelief that flooded Severus almost managed to fully drown his fear at the thought of his old Master.

"Granger?" he asked incredulously, "you're actually blaming Granger? What of Potter! If Granger stole the stone then you can guarantee that Potter was right by her side!"

"No," Albus shook his head, his voice confident. "I know Harry. I am confident he is not that sort of boy who would steal the Stone."

"Despite the company he keeps, Harry is a very sweet child." Minerva agreed, "He's always so friendly to all the other Houses and always so happy to offer his classmates his assistance. It's the Granger girl's influence over him that's leading him astray."

"You're both wrong." Severus snarled as he stood sharply and glared at them both, "you're both so
wrong it's almost painful to hear you speak!"

"No, Severus," Albus said, his voice frustratingly serene, "it is you who is wrong."

Severus made a strangled noise and then turned and stormed out, heading straight back down to his dungeons, needing to get as far away from such sheer, blind idiocy as possible– he dealt with more then enough of that during the school week and wasn't paid nearly enough to put up with it from the headmaster and his deputy too.
Chapter VII:

*Harry's POV:*

"I want to know what's going on with Hagrid," Hermione said with a frown on her face. They'd just bumped into Hagrid in the library for the third time in two days which was very unusual seeing as in the entire school year, Harry hadn't seen Hagrid in the library once until now. Still, Harry groaned in dismay.

"Are you going to talk about dragons for hours again?" he asked.

"It was thirty minutes, and no." Hermione told him, rolling her eyes. "Harry, Hagrid is going to be a reasonably good source of information over the next few years. Being 'friends' with him could prove to be quite helpful. Besides, you like him."

Harry sighed and conceded to that point and Sunday afternoon he found himself sitting in Hagrid's cabin which felt even warmer then usual and watched Hermione flatter Hagrid while learning interesting facts about Magical Creatures—well, she claimed they were interesting facts anyway. He just felt sweaty.

"Hagrid, can we have a window open? I'm boiling." He interrupted the conversation to ask.

"Can't, Harry, sorry," said Hagrid and Harry noticed him glance at the fire. Harry looked at it too and then stared.

"Hagrid– what's that?" He asked, rather needlessly as he already had a fairly good idea of what it was. In the very heart of the fire, underneath the kettle, there appeared to be a very large black egg.

"Ah," said Hagrid, fiddling nervously with his beard, "That's er..."

"That's a dragon egg, Hagrid." Hermione said, her voice sharp now as she stood up and crossed the small room to crouch over the fire and examine the egg. "It's very, very illegal."

"I, er," Hagrid scratched his beard nervously, "I won it, see, a couple o' nights ago. I was down in the village havin' a few drinks an' got into a game o' cards with a stranger. Think he was quite glad ter get rid of it, ter be honest."

"I'm not surprised. What the f– what on earth are you going to do with it once it's hatched?" Hermione demanded.

"Well, I've bin doin' some readin'," said Hagrid, pulling a large book from under his pillow. "Got this outta the library- *Dragon Breeding for Pleasure and Profit* - it's a bit outta date, o' course, but it's all in here. Keep the egg in the fire, 'cause their mothers breathe on 'em, see, an' when it hatches, feed it on a bucket o' brandy mixed with chicken blood every half hour. An' see here- how ter recognize diff'rent eggs- what I got there's a Norwegian Ridgeback. They're rare, them."

He looked very pleased with himself. Hermione didn't. Harry wasn't either. "Hagrid, you live in a wooden house," Hermione snapped but Hagrid wasn't listening, instead he was humming merrily as he stoked the fire.

Harry groaned, trading looks with Hermione. Great, now they had to figure out what to do about
the illegal dragon Hagrid was hiding in his hut.

"Wonder what it's like to have a peaceful life." He sighed as they walked back to the castle.

"Boring." Hermione answered without missing a beat. "We'd hate it."

With exams drawing closer, the teachers seemed to be loading them up with more and more homework and Harry pushed his concern over the dragon egg situation from his mind. Then, one breakfast time, Hedwig brought Harry a note from Hagrid. He had written only two words: It's hatching.

"Oh fuck." Hermione said.

"What are we supposed to do?" Harry asked anxiously as they made their way to their first class. "I don't want Hagrid to get in trouble, but I don't want us to get in trouble either!"

"We'll have to figure out whether or not it's worth getting even more involved in this situation," Hermione said, frustrated, "Do you know how much trouble we could get in if it comes out that we're aware of an illegal dragon—"

"Quiet!" Harry hissed, noticing a sudden absence of movement behind them. Ron Weasley and his lot were only a few feet away and Weasley had stopped dead to listen. How much had he heard? Harry didn't like the look on the redhead's face at all.

He and Hermione quietly debated what to do all through their class, Hermione leaning more towards letting Hagrid figure his own way out of the mess and Harry wanting to protect him—Hagrid, after all, had been the one to buy him his first birthday present. Eventually they decided to go down to Hagrid's during morning break and talk to him before making a decision. When they arrived Hagrid greeted them looking flushed and excited.

"It's nearly out." He ushered them inside where the egg was lying on the table with several deep cracks in the black shell. Something was moving inside and a funny clicking noise was coming from it.

They all drew their chairs up to the table and watched for several minutes with bated breath. All at once there was a scraping noise and then egg split open and the baby dragon flopped onto the table. It wasn't exactly pretty; Harry thought it looked like a crumpled, black umbrella—its spiny wings were huge compared to its skinny jet-black body, it had a long snout with wide nostrils, the stubs of horns and bulging, orange eyes.

It sneezed. A couple of sparks flew out of its snout.

"Isn't he beautiful?" Hagrid murmured. He reached out a hand to stroke the dragon's head and it snapped at his fingers, showing pointed fangs. "Bless him, look, he knows 'is mummy!" said Hagrid.

"Hagrid," Harry said with a familiar sinking feeling in his stomach, "how fast do Norwegian Ridgebacks grow, exactly?" Hagrid was about to answer when the color suddenly drained from his face—he leapt to his feet and ran to the window.

"What's the matter?" Hermione asked sharply, alarm clear on her face.

"Couple o' people were lookin' through the gap in the curtains— it's some kids— they're runnin' back up ter the school."
Harry bolted to the door and looked out. Even at a distance there was no mistaking that red hair—Weasley and his buddies had seen the dragon and they had seen him and Hermione with it.

"Oh shit." Hermione swore beside him, her eyes dark with anger as they tracked Ron's movements back up to the castle.

They bid Hagrid a hurried farewell and made their way back to the Slytherin Common Rooms, trying to decide what to do. Hermione was all for cornering the Gryffindors and cursing the spit out of them until they swore an Oath not to tell anyone about the dragon or, more importantly, his and Hermione's involvement with the dragon but Harry thought that would make the situation worse and argued that there had to be an easier way.

That's when Hermione came up with option two.

"We kill the bloody thing and get rid of any evidence it ever existed."

Harry blinked at her. "What?"

"We get rid of the bloody thing and all signs that it ever bloody existed." She repeated.

"Oh." He said weakly. "Right."

Harry was very uncomfortable with the idea but spending the following day as the recipient of frequent smirks from Weasley and his buddies helped him make up his mind. He was a Slytherin, after all—self-preservation was a strong instinct and he cared more for Hermione and himself then the squashed-umbrella-dragon.

"How are we going to get it out without Hagrid noticing?" he asked glumly after classes were over and Hermione's eyes glittered.

"Leave that to me." She promised.

That night, using the Invisibility Cloak, he and Hermione snuck down to Hagrid's cabin from inside which Harry could hear loud snores. Hermione tapped the lock and muttered, "Alohomora," causing the door to swing open.

Harry couldn't help but cringe at the sight of the dragon. It had grown at least three times in length since the last time he'd seen it. Smoke kept furling out of its nostrils even as it slept and there were empty brandy bottles and chicken feathers all over the floor.

"How are you going to kill it?" Harry whispered, still feeling squeamish at the thought.

"Drown it." Was Hermione's answer, "I don't know any spells that will pierce its hide—there's a reason our protective gloves are made from it; dragon hide is tougher even then troll hide."

Harry watched unhappily as Hermione took a deep breath and pointed her wand at the dragon. "Wingardium Leviosa!" She whispered. The dragon stayed asleep as it floated up into the air and they both hastily backed out of Hagrid's hut.

Harry couldn't help but let out a small sigh of relief once they were actually outside again with the door shut once more and he turned to face Hermione. "What's the matter with it?" He asked, voice hushed— he was pretty sure this wasn't normal behavior for dragons.

"I drugged it earlier." Hermione said, her face grim with concentration, "sixth and seventh years who take NEWTs potions have hemlock in their potion kits and I... borrowed some. I put enough in
the brandy Hagrid feeds it to kill a herd of cattle– or, apparently, paralyze a dragon. I was hoping it would kill it."

Cautiously, the two made their way over to the Black Lake and Hermione pulled a face. "I don't like hurting animals." She muttered. "They're not cruel, not like humans are."

"We can still think of something else," Harry told her and Hermione's answering smile was knife-sharp, dark amusement glinting in her eyes.

"I said I don't like hurting animals," she said, "not that I can't or won't. I have my priorities in life and we happen to be much higher then a dragon." With that, Hermione casually flicked her wand to release the levitation spell, causing the poisoned dragon to fall into the Lake with a loud splash that made Harry cringe.

Hermione gave him a pitying look, easily reading the misery on his face as he watched the dragon sink, and she wrapped her arm around his waist and let him lean his head on hers. Together they waited as a stream of bubbles and steam rise up from where the dragon had dropped until no more bubbles emerged. The lifeless body of the dragon drifted to the surface of the Lake for a few seconds before sinking once more, this time for good.

Harry thought he was going to be sick as nausea churned in his stomach and Hermione pressed her lips briefly to his cheek. "It's alright to be sad, Harry," she said gently. "But you can either regret what we did and feel awful about it or stand by the reasons for which we made our decision and move on."

"But our reasons were selfish," Harry said miserably.

"Were they, though?" Hermione challenged him. "I wanted to protect you and I assume you wanted to protect me. I don't see anything selfish in that. It was us or it and I certainly value us far more. That's the decision I made and I can stand behind my reasons for it. Can you?"

Harry took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. He still felt sick thinking about what they'd just done, but Hermione was right. He didn't want her to get in trouble and he didn't want to get in trouble himself either. He valued them over the life of the dragon and had acted accordingly when the dragon's existence had threatened them. Was that a decision he could stand behind? "Yes," he answered both himself and her. "I can."

"Good," Hermione smiled, pride and warmth evident on her face. "Remember that, Harry. Now let's head back to bed– I'm exhausted."

Relieved at the thought of his bed after such a long, stressful day and the emotional rollercoaster involved in the dragon's death, Harry was glad to make the familiar journey back up to the Castle only to freeze at the sight of a grim faced McGonagall waiting in the Entrance Hall. And the Invisibility Cloak was stashed in Hermione's satchel.

"Mr. Potter, Miss Granger– what were you two doing out of bed and outside the castle at this late hour?" the Deputy Headmistress demanded furiously. Harry frantically tried to think up some excuse while Hermione's expression turned cold and she unflinchingly met McGonagall's angry gaze with a dark, icy one of her own.

"Who ratted us out?" She asked scathingly. "Considering the fact no one confronted as directly about our plans I'll have to assume it was a Gryffindor." McGonagall's glare increased tenfold at the not-so subtle insult to her House and Harry was impressed by Hermione's ability to stand firm against the older witch's fury because he felt about two feet tall and shrinking fast, but he also
wished she wouldn't rile McGonagall up further seeing as they were already in enough trouble as it was. He knew that was probably too much to ask of her though– Hermione and McGonagall had never gotten along.

"Misters Weasley, Thomas and Finnegan will be sharing an equal punishment as you." McGonagall said tartly which confirmed Hermione's Gryffindor theory, Harry thought sourly. "Now follow me at once!" The Deputy Headmistress ordered.

Harry tried to copy Hermione's face which was wiped clean of emotion as they followed McGonagall to her office where Ron Weasley, Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnegan were all already seated and looking furious.

"I am disgraced at all of you. Nothing gives a student the right to wander about the corridors after hours," McGonagall started lecturing, "I am deducting fifty points–"

"Fifty points?" Weasley interrupted, looking dismayed.

"Fifty points each," McGonagall continued as if she hadn't been interrupted. "And you will serve a detention this Friday. Now get back to your dormitories at once!"

Hermione waited until they were back in the Slytherin Common Room before voicing the same question that Harry had– "how the bloody hell did those three know we were out on the grounds?" She demanded, visibly enraged.

"I was hoping you'd know." Harry said glumly.

The day of their detention, Harry felt miserable and Hermione appeared to be in a right foul mood beside him. She kept muttering things under her breath in French whenever she caught sight of McGonagall or the Gryffindor trio that Harry had a feeling weren't very complimentary. Not that he blamed her, of course. He was rather upset with the Deputy Headmistress as well.

He consoled himself with the fact that Slytherin had only lost one hundred points, not like Gryffindor who'd lost one hundred and fifty. And to his utmost relief the majority of Slytherin didn't see to mind the point loss, too gleeful about Gryffindor's situation, and he didn't think Hermione cared either way about House points– she hadn't even batted an eyelash.

Really, he was pretty sure the only thing that really pissed her off about the situation was not knowing how Weasley and his buddies had found out they were out of bed after curfew.

The two of them were walking to the library, ready to make the most of the few hours they had before their detention, when they heard the sound of whimpering coming from a classroom up ahead. As Harry drew closer, tugging Hermione after him, he heard Quirrell's voice.

"No- no- not again, please–" Quirrell was pleading. He turned to Hermione and raised his eyebrows, silently asking her whether or not she thought they should go in. Hermione shook her head and tapped her ears. Keep listening, Harry realized, and he did as she advised, moving closer.

"All right– all right–" Quirrell sobbed and the next second he came hurrying out of the classroom, straightening his turban. He was pale and looked like he'd been crying. He rushed straight past them not even seeming to notice their presence.

Hermione blinked slowly as she stared at his retreating figure. "Well that was interesting." She murmured. Harry agreed with her, but didn't really feel like adding yet another mystery into his life.
"Come on, we want to get some study time in before detention." He reminded her before a horrified look crossed his face. "Did I just say that?"

Hermione burst into laughter which made a few passing students look at her with wide-eyes at her uncharacteristic behaviour. "Bloody hell, you're right. I've corrupted you."

Glad to see her smiling, Harry linked arms with her and tugged her along. They had just reached the library when Snape was suddenly in front of them, blocking their path. "Mr. Potter, Miss Granger, if I may have a word?" he said in a voice that was dangerously silky.

Harry winced as Snape turned and strode towards the dungeons with his cloak billowing behind him, recalling with painful clarity the three rules of Slytherin– the first being 'do not get caught'.

"Well, we're fucked." Hermione commented under her breath and Harry tried not to laugh nervously at her use of profanity.

But as it happened, Snape hadn't brought them to his office to talk about their nighttime adventure. No, what he wanted to talk about was worse. Much, much worse.

"I'm sure you remember the headmaster's warning at the start of the year about the forbidden third floor corridor," Snape began and Harry immediately froze then frantically tried to school his face so he didn't look as guilty as he felt. Chancing a quick peek at Hermione, he wasn't at all surprised to see her face was as calm and serene as ever.

"I do recall that he mentioned circumventing it would be a wise choice should one wish to evade an excruciatingly painful death."

"Yes," Snape fixed Harry with a look, obviously deciding he was the weak link– and he wasn't wrong. Hermione gave his hand a sharp squeeze and Harry suddenly remembered what she'd told him about Legilimency and how eye contact was the easiest way to accomplish it. Hastily, he moved his gaze away from Snape's eyes and instead focused on the wall behind the professor.

"Is there any particular reason why you're bringing this up, sir?" Hermione asked, her voice the epitome of innocence. Harry almost laughed at the sound of it– Hermione Granger was not an innocent, not by a long shot; she was the most conniving, intelligent, cunning, vindictive and loyal person he'd ever met and he adored her for it.

"That corridor contains a Cerberus that was guarding something for the headmaster and his friend. That something has gone missing."

"Well that can't be good." Hermione stated, her expression one of faux-concern.

"That's an understatement, Miss Granger. In the hands of the wrong person, this... object could be used to accomplish great evil." Snape sounded dead serious and Harry swallowed nervously.

"Wouldn't it be better, then, if the object was destroyed? To avoid the possibility of it being used to accomplish great evil?" Hermione countered and Harry was startled to see the corners of Snape's mouth twitch.

"Indeed, that was my own suggestion Miss Granger." He said, sounding amused before his expression turned serious again. "The headmaster suspects you, Miss Granger, of being involved in the... thievery of the object."

"Mm, and does the headmaster have any proof, or are his suspicions simply born from his prejudice against all things Slytherins?" Hermione asked scornfully, mouth curled in a sneer.
"The latter, I believe." Snape sighed and Harry noticed for the first time just how tired the man looked.

"Well, without evidence you can tell the headmaster that he can join his stupid Mirror in hell and that I hope whoever took the object had a grudge against him and blasted it into hundreds of little pieces in revenge. Good day, professor." Hermione said sweetly before turning and leaving the room. Harry remained frozen for a second then followed after her, horrified.

"Hermione," he hissed as he caught up to her and grabbed her arm to get her to stop walking. "What the hell were you thinking?"

"That I trust Professor Snape." Hermione answered promptly. "You should too. He may be a bit of a git, but he's on our side." He gave his best friend a doubtful look but she met his gaze steadily and he sighed.

"Fine. But if we get called up to Dumbledore's office or end up arrested then I am so blaming you."

"I wouldn't have it any other way." She smirked back at him.

At eleven o'clock that night Harry gave his farewells to the other Slytherins in the common room and with Hermione at his side made his way down to the entrance hall. He received a large amount of satisfaction out of seeing Filch waiting with a lamp and sneering at the three Gryffindor boys.

Upon seeing he and Hermione approaching Filch gave them a look that seemed more exasperated then anything else. When they got within a few feet of the caretaker Iago, who had been laying draped over Filch's shoulder, leapt over to Hermione. Mrs. Norris purred and wound her way around Harry's legs and then Hermione's legs, looking up at his best friend adoringly as Hermione crouched down to scratch behind her ears.

"Follow me," Filch ordered, giving both Hermione and the cats a fond look before leading them outside. He and Hermione fell back a few steps as they all marched off across the dark grounds and listened in amused glee to Filch's taunting of the Gryffindors who the caretaker appeared to have a great personal dislike of– Harry thought it probably had something to do with Weasley's older twin brother.

The moon was bright overhead but clouds kept drifting across it and throwing them into darkness. Up ahead Harry could see the lighted windows of Hagrid's hut and he heard a distant shout. "Is that you, Filch? Hurry up, I want ter get started."

Harry couldn't help feeling a small touch of relief as Filch led them to where Hagrid stood, his large crossbow in his hands, a quiver of arrows tossed over his back. Hagrid was, to quote Hermione, 'thick enough' to have failed in catching onto the fact that Harry and Hermione had been caught outside the castle after curfew on the same night his dragon had disappeared. From what Harry had gleaned between Hagrid's large, gulping sobs was that Hagrid blamed himself for leaving the door unlocked. Harry had felt guilty until he remembered Hermione's words and steeled himself against it– he still stood behind the reasons he'd made the choice he had and that wasn't going to change so there was no point in feeling bad about what they'd done.

"Abou' time," Hagrid said to Filch, "I bin waitin' fer half an hour already. All righ' there, Harry, Hermione?"

"We're as well as we can be considering we're about to go into the Forbidden Forest." Despite her
words, Hermione sounded more amused by the prospect then anything but her observation had caused the three Gryffindors to pale and Harry to gulp.

"Th-the Forbidden Forest?" Dean Thomas gasped, "but isn't that full of– of dangerous creatures like werewolves?"

"It's not a full moon, you idiot, but you're right. The Forest is filled with dangerous creatures, hence the 'forbidden' part." Hermione smiled slowly at Thomas, showing all her teeth.

"This– this isn't right! It has to be against the rules!" Weasley protested shrilly and Filch cackled slightly.

"That's your problem, isn't it? Should have thought twice about breaking the rules, boy."

Hagrid lead them to the very edge of the forest and held his lamp high, pointing to a narrow, winding earth track that disappeared into the thick, black trees. "Look here," he said, "see that stuff shinin' on the ground? Silvery stuff? That's unicorn blood. There's a unicorn in there that's bin hurt badly by summat. This is the second time in a week. I found one dead last Wednesday. We're gonna try an' find the poor thing. We might have ter put it out of its misery."

"And what if whatever hurt the unicorn finds us first?" Weasley asked, unable to keep the fear out of his voice.

"There's nothin' that lives in the forest that'll hurt yeh if yer with me or Fang," said Hagrid with confidence. "An' keep to the path. Right now, we're gonna split inter two parties an' follow the trail in different directions. There's blood all over the place, it must've been staggerin' around since last night at least."

"Excellent," Hermione said, rubbing her hands together, "Harry and I'll take Fang. We'll send up sparks if we find the unicorn."

"Green sparks if yeh find it, red sparks if yer in trouble." Hagrid said with a proud smile at Hermione's thinking. "All righ', be careful now. Let's go."

Harry and Hermione turned down the left fork of the path and walked swiftly along it as Fang gambolled along a few meters ahead. "What do you think hurt the unicorn?" Harry asked her after all sounds of Hagrid the three Gryffindors had faded.

"Unicorns are incredibly powerful magical creatures. Even werewolves aren't fast enough to catch one. Whatever– or whoever– hurt that unicorn and killed the other one is very powerful." Hermione said, her eyes scanning the path ahead and not looking at him. Harry frowned.

"Why would someone want to kill a unicorn anyway?" he asked, confused.

"Their blood." She stated simply. "A unicorn's blood can bring you back even from the brink of death, but at a terrible price– whoever consumes it is cursed to forever live a half life. Only those who have nothing to lose and everything to gain will resort to it."

"And who the hell'd want that?" Harry said incredulously.

"I can think of one glaringly obvious option." Hermione said, and Harry's eyes widened.

"Wait– you mean– Voldemort?"

"Yes," Hermione agreed, her voice grimmer now, "Voldemort." Harry looked at her in shock.
"So we're out here on our own and in the Forbidden Forest with Voldemort?" He demanded in a hissed whisper, wondering if she'd lost her mind and they were both about to die horribly at the hands of the Darkest wizard who'd ever lived.

"Yes, we're out here on our own and in the Forbidden Forest where, considering the need for unicorn blood, an extremely weak Voldemort is likely currently located, but right now we've got the advantage." Hermione said and the sharpness in her eyes had Harry relaxing– Hermione would never purposefully lead him into danger, that he was confident in. He trusted her.

"Okay, so what advantage do we have?" he asked not really able to think of anything.

"What do you think could have drawn a weakened Voldemort out of hiding and into the close proximity of the only man he was ever known to be afraid of?" Hermione prompted and Harry frowned, thinking.

"Probably something he could use to strengthen himself but what– oh!" Harry stared in wide-eyed wonder at his best friend. "The Philosopher's Stone. Bloody hell, you are brilliant. You are beyond bloody brilliant."

"Why thank you." Hermione practically preened under his adamant praise, "you know, you're quite clever too, Harry. You put that together much quicker then most would." Harry blushed at her words.

"I'm not that clever, not like you are." He said and Hermione tossed her head with a mock-snobbish look on her face.

"Nobody's like I am." She declared and he laughed before a rustling branch had him fall abruptly silent, the reminder of where they were– and who was out there with them– sending a sharp jolt of fear through him.

"What do you mean by 'we have an advantage'? I mean, we know what he wants but I don't see how that helps–" Harry broke off again as Hermione lifted her hand to show him the brilliant, blood red stone that had been hidden in her pocket.

"Argus told me what our detention was, a few hours ago. I connected the dots and made preparations." She told him, her expression dead serious as she looked at him with grave eyes.

"So... what do we do if we do come across Voldemort?" he asked her anxiously, not understanding at all what her plan was.

"We talk to him."

"We talk to him?" Harry repeated, wondering if he should revisit his earlier theory that Hermione really had lost her mind.

"We'll offer him a deal– he stays away from us and we give him the stone. If he agrees, we'll both swear a Wizard Oath. He won't be able to go back on this word then, not unless he wants to lose his magic." Hermione then paused and stopped walking, looking unsure for the first time. "I... I understand that you likely hate Voldemort seeing as he's responsible for the death of your parents so we don't have to do this. We can always just turn around right now." She offered, looking uncertain at how he would react to her plan.

Harry thought about it for a long, long moment. He thought about what Voldemort had done and then what Dumbledore had done. He thought about which one of the two he hated more– the one who had killed his parents or the one who'd left him at the Dursleys to suffer for ten years before
proceeding to try and manipulate him from the second he learnt about the Wizarding World.

"Better Hufflepuff than Slyth'rin. All of 'em Dark wizards came from Slyth'rin. Like Yeh-know-who." Hagrid had told him. But he liked it in Slytherin. He liked his dorm-mates. He loved Hermione. He just... fitted in his House. For the first time ever, he had people who were willing to fight for him, not just step back and watch as life beat him to a pulp.

You can either regret what we did and feel awful about it or stand by the reasons for which we made our decision and move on. Giving Voldemort the Stone in return for an Oath that guaranteed Hermione's safety from the Dark wizard– and his own safety, as him being in danger would have Hermione ending up getting involved anyway– felt beyond selfish. Was giving Voldemort a way to regain his body a choice Harry could ever live with? Were his reasons, if he made that choice, ones that he could ever stand behind or would he end up feeling guilty for the rest of his life? I wanted to protect you and I assume you wanted to protect me. I don't see anything selfish in that. It was us or it and I certainly value us far more then an animal. That's the decision I made and I can stand behind my reasons for it. Can you?

Yes, Harry thought. The Wizarding world had never done anything for him and he certainly didn't owe it– or its people– anything. If anything, it was them who owed him. Hermione though, she mattered. He would do anything in his power to keep her safe. Even without the Stone, Harry had little doubt that Voldemort would eventually find a way to regain his full strength and his body. And when that happened, Harry had little doubt that he'd be a target which would put Hermione in grave danger. Could he stand behind his reasons for making such a choice, though? Was helping Voldemort in in order to guarantee Hermione's safety a decision he'd ever be able to live with?

The answer to that was obvious to him.

"I don't like Voldemort," Harry said, finally giving voice to his thoughts, "but I don't hate the evil git. I despise him, sure, and I wouldn't mind seeing him dead but I don't hate him. My hate is saved for the Dursleys and the bastard who left me there," here Harry gave a bitter laugh. "I mean, what's one attempt on my life compared to ten years of misery and suffering? I'm not going to be anyone's pawn. Let's fucking do this."

"Are you sure?" Hermione pressed and he nodded firmly, steely and fierce in his resolve.

"This is a decision I can live with and I'm not going to let myself feel bad for making because I stand by my reasons. I value our lives more then those of anyone else, and maybe that's selfish and wrong but it doesn't change the fact that you're more important to me and your safety matters more then anyone else's." He said strongly and sincerely, meaning every word because the simple truth was that he cared more about Hermione and himself then the world and that would always be something he'd stand behind.

To Harry's surprise, Hermione pulled him into a tight hug before pressing her lips to his cheek in a chaste, lingering kiss. She then rested her forehead against his, her eyes soft and warm and proud as they met his. "I love you, Harry." She whispered.

"I love you too." He whispered back, swallowing past the lump in his throat. They slowly stepped apart and Harry discretely wiped his eyes with the back of his sleeve. "So, how do we find the evil git anyway?"

Hermione pointed to the trail of unicorn blood that left the path and led off into the depths of the forest.

"Er, should we really go off the path?" Harry asked.
"I can get us back if we get lost." Hermione assured him and then paused. "Well, I probably can. Trees all look fairly similar, especially in the dark."

"Well that just fills me with confidence," Harry teased her before turning serious. "I trust you." He told her. Because he did– he trusted her with his life.

The Forest had been dark and eerie enough on the path and it was twice as bad off it. Following the light of Hermione's wand, their path was marked by splashes of silvery blood and they walked along it for nearly half an hour before Harry reached a gap in the trees that opened up to a clearing and stopped instantly. "Oh," he murmured and beside him Hermione made a soft, sympathetic sound.

"That's... sad."

And it was. Harry had never seen anything quite as beautiful or devastating as the dead unicorn. Its long, slender legs were stuck out at odd angles where it had fallen and its mane was spread pearly-white on the dark leaves. Harry had taken one step forwards toward it when a slithering sound made him freeze in place. A bush on the edge of the clearing quivered... then out of the shadows, a hooded figure came crawling across the ground like some stalking beast.

Harry and Hermione watched, transfixed, as did Fang, as the cloaked figure reached the unicorn and lowered its head over the wound in the animal's side and began to drink its blood.

"I believe," Hermione whispered to him, her voice shaky, "that we just found Voldemort."
Chapter VIII:

Hermione's POV:

Hermione stood frozen, mouth dry and heart pounding erratically in her chest as she wondered—
and not for the first time— if this was really the right thing to do. But, steeling all her courage, she
took a deep breath and stepped forwards into the clearing. Her movements attracted the attention of
the cloaked figure and he raised his head and looked right at them, unicorn blood trickling down
the front of his dark robes. Fang let out a yelp and turned to flee and Hermione acted quickly,
knowing that when the boarhound reached Hagrid the giant man would run straight to them.

"Incarcerous!" she hissed, her voice as quiet as she could make it, and shining ropes of silver light
sprang from her wand to bind the massive dog. "Silencio!" She added when Fang started yelping
and the boarhound was forced into silence. Hermione let herself bask in her victory for a moment
before spinning back around as behind her Harry let out a strangled cry.

"No!" she cried out as Harry stumbled backwards, his eyes dazed with pain and his hands clamped
over his scar as he fell to his knees. "Stop!" Hermione shouted at the spectre that had started
moving swiftly towards them, dropping to her knees beside Harry with her wand out and pointed
defensively at the cloaked figure. A centaur suddenly galloped into the clearing, getting between
them and the spectre and rearing up on its hind legs, ready to defend her and Harry. A ragged gasp
escaped Hermione as she pointed her wand at the centaur. "Incarcerous! Silencio!" she repeated
and the centaur joined the boarhound, toppled over on the ground, silenced and unable to move.

The spectre paused, halting his movements and tilted his head slightly as if curious. And then he
spoke.

The voice sounded more like hissing then anything, but she could make out the words. "What isss
your purpossse child?"

"W-we have a proposition. My friend and I." She tried to speak with more confidence then she felt
from where she was on her knees next to Harry who was still clutching his head, strangled sounds
of pain being torn from his throat. She took a deep breath, fiercely shoving her mounting panic
before she got them both killed.

"Proposssition?" Hissed the spectre, "what do you have that could possiblly interesst Lord
Voldemort?"

"How about the Philosopher's Stone." This was Harry, voice shaking and raspy with pain as he
pushed himself up off the forest floor, one hand still pressed against his forehead and his face
twisted in pain.

There was a long pause before the wraith-like figure spoke again. "It isss to my underssstanding
that the ssstone isss hidden in the ssschool? What makesss you think that you can sssucceed in
retrieving it?"

"We don't think, we know." Harry's voice was still shaky but he was speaking with more
confidence now and she stood up, waiting a moment to make sure her legs would support before
before helping Harry up to his feet.

"You know?"

"We already have the Stone. We stole it ages ago." Harry told the murderer of his parents, voice hoarse.

"And we'll give it to you under one condition," Hermione added, proud that her voice didn't tremble despite the fear and adrenaline coursing through her. Her deeply ingrained instinct to arm herself against the threat to her safety was making her free hand twitch towards where one of her concealed blades, hidden where she'd easily be able to reach it in a single motion. Her instincts were screaming at her and ten months didn't erase the habits of a lifetime– making her brain realise the slender piece of wood in her hand was just as dangerous as her knives wasn't easy, not when she knew just how deadly a blade was in her hands, when she knew her capabilities with them as well as she knew her own face. She clenched the hand not holding her wand into a fist and forced herself to focus on the Dark wizard, holding her chin up and keeping her fear off her face and out of her voice. "We want a Magical Oath," she said firmly, "we give you the Stone and you won't kill either of us for as long as we might live."

"An interesssting proposssal. But how will I know that you will keep up your ssside of the deal?"

"We'll both take the Oath." She told him, "We'll swear to give you the Stone, you swear not to harm us or kill us or get anyone else to harm or kill us."

Another long pause, and then a whispery sigh-like noise. "Very well. I will agree to your proposssition, but I have a demand of my own. If I swear not to harm or kill either of you, or get anyone elssse to do ssso, then I want your oath that you'll do the sssame to me."

"Deal." She said, instantly.

"Then ssspeak the wordsss, girl," the wraith-like figure ordered.

She cleared her throat, "I, Hermione Jane Granger, swear on my magic that if the recipient swears not to harm or kill me or my companion or get anybody else to do so for as long as we might live, we will hand over the Philosopher's Stone when he demands it and shall neither harm or kill the recipient or get anybody else to do it for us."

Hermione couldn't help her shiver as something made her skin glow pale red for a moment. Beside her, Harry's skin glowed silver.

"I, Lord Voldemort, ssswear on my magic that if the recipientsss hands over the Philosssopher'sss Ssstone when I demand and shall neither harm or kill me, nor get anybody elsssse to do it for them, then I shall neither harm or kill the recipientssss or get anybody elsssse to do it for me, for asss long ass they might live."

The wraith-like form glowed for a moment, a bright, gleaming green and Hermione felt the binding inside her, tying her to her Oath. Harry shuddered beside her, obviously feeling the same thing.

"The Ssstone," the spectre hissed and Hermione pulled it from her pocket and held it out. "Clever girl," the specter sounded amused now, "you had thisss little encounter planned from the beginning."

"Yes," Hermione nodded and steeled her nerves, knowing Voldemort wouldn't react well to what she said next, "Harry and I both did." The spectre froze and she responded by taking several hasty steps backwards, yanking Harry back with her.
"Harry? Harry Potter?" The spectre whispered, voice no longer amused.

"You took a Wizard's Oath, Lord Voldemort. You cannot harm him." She said quietly, "and he can't harm you."

"But the prophecy!" Hissed the spectre.

"Prophecy?" Harry asked, confused looking up at Voldemort for the first time since he'd collapsed in pain, "what prophecy?"

"Why do you think I tried to kill you, boy, all those years ago?" The spectre hissed, "a prophecy was told. 'The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approachess, born to those who thrice defied him, born as the ssseventh month diesss'. There's more, but that's all my ssspy heard before he was dissscovered. Dumbledore isss the only perssson who knowssss the complete prophecy."

"Dumbledore?" Harry looked even paler then before. "He... he wants me to be his weapon. He wants to use me to kill you."

"Well that will no longer happen," Voldemort sounded amused again, much to Hermione's relief. "Now hand over the Ssstone, girl." She nodded mutely and stepped forwards again, holding out her hand. She shuddered as icy skin, still cloaked in shadows, brushed against hers and then the wraith drew back, Stone in his grasp.

"It would be prudent," Voldemort hissed, "for the witnessss to be... removed."

"The centaur?" Harry asked, nervous. "You want us to kill him?" Dark laughter.

"Did I sssuggest that, Harry Potter?"

"Memory charm," Hermione spoke out loud.

"Yesss, that would work." Agreed the wraith, "you are young– do you know the spell?"

"It's obliviate," She replied nervously, "but I don't know much else. I... I'll probably end up wiping his entire mind."

"It isss your choice, girl. Either kill it or wipe it'sss mind." The specter ordered. Hermione took a deep breath and sent out a silent apology to the centaur but she knew she wouldn't regret her decision– she needed to protect Harry and herself and she'd never regret the choices she made to do so.

Pointing her wand at the centaur Hermione spoke firmly and clearly. "Obliviate!" She felt her magic flow through her, through her wand, and then the centaur fully slumped to the forest floor and stopped struggling in his bindings. His eyes became unfocused and glassy and Hermione knew it had worked.

"Good," Voldemort hissed before vanishing in a whirl of black smoke.

Harry fell back to his knees and Hermione was quick to follow. Her hand was trembling from the adrenaline and leftover fear as she reversed the spells binding and silencing the centaur and boarhound. Fang sprinted off yelping and whining while the centaur just lay there. "I think... I think I probably destroyed his mind." She admitted, feeling sorry for the being who had tried to protect them but she stood by her reasons– it was him or them. That wasn't even a choice at all. Harry didn't seem to hear her, his expression lost and horrified.
"He wanted me to be a killer," he croaked and she knew he was referring to Dumbledore. She wrapped her arms around him, hugging him tight.

"Well his plan failed." She spat.

"I read something once. It said that the first victim of war is innocence." Harry whispered to her, wrapping his arms around her and pressing his face into her neck. She could feel the warmth of his breath against her skin as Harry shuddered.

"Then Dumbledore is responsible for the first casualty." She replied, voice cold as ice, as she held Harry tight. "But in a fight whoever lands the first blow isn't important– the only one thing that really matters is whoever lands the last blow. And Harry? It's our move now. We're going to make him pay."

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Severus's POV:

"You lost them in the Forbidden Forest?" Severus bellowed at the half-giant before turning to face Minerva, his eyes alight with pure fury. "What were you thinking, woman?"

Minerva at least had the decency to look ashamed even as she defended herself. "I wanted them to truly learn from their actions!"

"By sending them into the Forbidden Forest?" Severus shook his head in disbelief. "They're children and whoever's killing those unicorns is a monster!"

"We don't know that it's a 'who'." Minerva protested, her voice quivering slightly. He gave her a scathing look.

"We both know exactly just who it is!" He hissed, "and you've just handed the Boy Who Lived to him on a silver platter so he can finish what he started ten years ago!" Enraged and genuinely afraid for his students, Severus spun around away from the sorry pair and stormed towards the oak doors of the castle.

As soon as he was out of sight of the others, he broke into a run, practically sprinting across the castle's grounds. Once he reached the edge of the Forest Severus balanced his wand on his flat palm. "Point me Harry Potter and Hermione Granger!" he ordered and the wand spun several times before stopping, the tip pointing in a northeastern direction.

Fear built up inside through Severus as he navigated his way through the Forest. If either of his snakes had been hurt there would be hell to pay and it would be paid in blood and tears.

Severus then almost stumbled when it struck him that he'd just called Potter one of his snakes and he had to face the shocking realisation that he wanted to protect the boy not because of his oath to Dumbledore but because he actually liked Potter and felt as protective of him as he did all his Slytherins. Potter was one of his snakes and he'd be damned if he let anything happen to that boy and one of the most brilliant witches Hogwarts had ever seen.

Severus found the pair of them in a clearing with a dead unicorn and a barely-stirring centaur. Both his students were limp on the ground and a terrible fear gripped him as eerie green light flashed in his mind. "HARRY! HERMIONE!" he shouted, praying with all his might that they weren't dead; that they hadn't been slaughtered alongside the unicorn due to Minerva's foolishness.
He fell to his knees beside them, the pair slumped together on the forest floor, curled up in each other's arms even like this. Severus let out a sound that was half groan and half sob of relief when his urgent fingers felt the fluttering pulses in their wrists. "Mobilicorpus." He whispered and both his students floated up into the air.

He levitated them back to the castle, crossing paths with Albus and Minerva in the entrance hall.

The grave-faced headmaster went pale. "Is Harry alive?" he asked urgently and Severus was too exhausted both emotionally and physically to yell at the headmaster for not even sparing a thought for Granger.

"Yes." He said dully striding past the headmaster and his deputy and leading the way straight to the Hospital Wing. Poppy gasped in horror as he entered but instantly sprang into work, as efficient and diligent as always, and with a great deal of relief he let the mediwitch take over, levitating both unconscious children into separate beds as he slumped down on the closest chair.

A hand settled on his shoulder and he didn't have to look up to know it was Albus. "You have truly become fond of the boy." The headmaster said sounding pleased.

"Old man, if you do not remove that hand I will remove it for you. With a cutting curse." He muttered venomously and he wasn't sure if he was relieved or disappointed when Albus backed off. A bit of dismemberment would probably have improved his mood.

Meddling fool.

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Harry's POV:

Harry let out a small groan as his eyes fluttered open. His body felt stiff and sore but something warm and familiar was curled up next to him. "Hey 'Mione." He mumbled through a yawn.

"If you ever call me "'Mione" again I will castrate you." Was the tired reply his best friend gave and he could help the small laugh that escaped him as he pushed himself up into a sitting position. Hermione sat up beside him, yawning, and handed him his glasses. Gratefully, he put them on then blinked in surprise.

"We're in the hospital wing?" He asked in confusion. "And we're in the same cot?"

"I had a nightmare." Was Hermione's only explanation.

"Oh." He said, wisely not pressing the issue. "So, um, do we call for Madam Pomphrey?"

"I believe she'll be along shortly." Snape's drawling voice startled him and both he and Hermione turned to see their Head of House sitting across from them and looking exhausted.

"Sir?" Hermione asked worriedly, "Are you okay?" Snape snorted.

"'Are you okay?' asks the girl whose unconscious body I found in the Forbidden Forest along with a dead unicorn and brain-dead centaur."

The corners of Hermione's mouth twitched down slightly and he knew it was because of the confirmation her memory charm had failed. Still, he could see the moment her face smoothed out
as she dismissed any guilt—she'd always prioritise them over anyone else, Harry knew. He also knew it would take him much longer for the sick feeling in his stomach to go away from the thought of what they'd done to the innocent centaur who'd only tried to help them.

And then Harry realised something that distracted him from his guilt entirely—Snape had just said that he was the one who'd found them. Which meant the snarky professor had gone looking for them.

Harry actually felt...touched. He'd never gotten the feeling that Snape liked him. It was nice to know that his professor had cared enough to go find them when they hadn't returned.

"Do you remember anything of what happened—anything at all?" Snape asked looking very serious as he leaned forwards in his seat.

"I remember seeing the unicorn," Harry told the professor, reciting the story he and Hermione had memorized last night before something strange had happened. "We were walking towards it and then this—this thing appeared."

"It looked like a wraith." Hermione added quietly.

"I didn't see much from that point," Harry said, looking down at his hands as if he was ashamed when really he was making sure Snape couldn't read his thoughts. "My scar..." he shuddered because this part was true enough. "It's never done anything like that before. There was this horrible pain like my scar was on fire. And that's all I remember."

"Harry collapsed." Hermione continued their story, her voice still quiet. "It was awful. The wraith was just so still as it faced me with unicorn blood dripping down its front. I pulled out my wand and then it rushed at me. That's when I think I passed out."

Under the blanket, Harry crossed his fingers and desperately hoped that the professor wouldn't question their story. To be fair, most of what they'd said was true— they'd just left out the part where they'd met, chatted to and made a Wizard's Oath with Lord Voldemort before handing over the Philosopher's Stone which they had stolen earlier in the year to him.

Like he said, it was mostly the truth. Mostly.

The bit where they'd passed out hadn't actually been part of the plan, though. They'd expected to be conscious when they were found. Harry wasn't even sure how they'd ended up unconscious on the forest floor and seeing as his last memory was of Hermione going limp in his arms moments before he blacked out, he was quite certain she'd had nothing to do with it.

"Very well. The headmaster may wish to speak with you later, but for now, rest." Snape said in a shockingly gentle voice before standing up. Harry watched him leave then turned to Hermione but before he could say anything, Madam Pomphrey had emerged from her office and was bustling towards them and making indignant squawking sounds.

Harry laid back down and Hermione slumped down beside him, curling into him as he held her tight.

He'd been an excited child at the start of the year. One who, admittedly, had experienced an abusive childhood which had damaged a part of him but he'd still been able totrust. He'd still believed in the best of people. He'd still been an innocent.

But that had all changed.
He might only be eleven and only ten months had passed but Harry felt like he'd aged years. Aged and turned guarded, no longer able to trust the people around him, no longer able to believe they had his best interests at heart. The only person he knew he could rely on one hundred percent was the one lying next to him.

Hermione Jane Granger, his best friend, the only person in the entire world that he loved.

-Voldemort's POV-

Lord Voldemort looked down at the Stone in his/Quirrell's hand. It was a thing of beauty and unimaginable power and by this time next year he would have his own body once more.

But almost as extraordinary as the Stone itself was how he had acquired it. Two first years had done what he could not. And they weren't just any first years: Harry Potter, The Boy Who Lived, the cause of his downfall, the supposed 'Hero of the Light', had aided the wizard who murdered his parents with the process of regaining a corporal form in exchange for an Oath that ensured the protection of both him and his friend.

So yes, that had been surprising, almost amusing even, but Harry Potter had not been the brains behind the plan.

The girl. Hermione Granger.

Hermione Granger had done what not many others could claim. She'd one-upped him. She'd tricked him into making a Wizard's Oath swearing not to harm Harry Potter. Had he known who the boy was he never would have made the Oath but he hadn't even noticed how carefully Hermione Granger had avoided using her friend's name. Not until it was too late and the consequence of harming the boy in any way would cost him a price he would never pay– revenge was not worth the loss of his magic.

Reluctantly, Voldemort had to admit he was impressed.

Equally so by the cold way she had dealt with the centaur, casting a spell years above her age level, a spell she had fully known she couldn't control and would end up leaving the centaur damaged if not brain-dead. He could tell from the set look on her face as she pointed her wand at the creature she had bound and silenced that she was aware of what was going to happen. Yet she did it anyway. She had not even hesitated.

Harry Potter and Hermione Granger were not ordinary first years. He closed his/Quirrell's eyes and replayed the memory of after he had 'left' and the two thought they were on their own before he'd cast Stupefy as he'd heard Severus' approach– it would do none of them any good if it looked like they'd had any part in the state of the centaur.

The first victim of war is innocence, the Boy Who Lived had said.

Then Dumbledore is responsible for the first casualty, Hermione Granger had replied. But in a fight whoever lands the first blow isn't important– the only one thing that really matters is whoever lands the last blow. And Harry? It's our move now. We're going to make him pay.

A smile twisted over his/Quirrell's mouth. Perhaps he could still play this to his advantage after all– they were children playing war but they were going to be powerful one day and he wanted
them on his side, fighting in his ranks.

It wasn't as if they weren't already halfway there.

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Harry's **POV:**

The final two weeks of school passed in a blur. Exams came and went but Harry barely even noticed.

Dumbledore had cornered them for a meeting and he and Hermione had repeated their version of the events which the old man had accepted with a cheery smile and an offering of lemon drops. They had both declined.

The end of year feast was underway with Ravenclaw winning the House Cup and Slytherin coming a close second and all his dorm-mates had gone to celebrate while he'd stayed behind.

Harry felt... he didn't know what to feel. He was **furious** at Dumbledore—hated him in fact, for everything the man had done and hidden. He was **relieved** that he didn't have been hunted down and killed by Voldemort as revenge for his temporary downfall in his future. He was **overjoyed** to actually have someone he loved and who loved him. And he was utterly **miserable** that tomorrow he would have to leave the castle that was his home.

"Harry?" he heard Hermione ask from the entrance of the boy's dorm and he looked up and smiled at her, his heart immediately lightening as he took in the sight of his best friend. Her face was flushed with excitement and her eyes bright as she rushed over to him.

"Hey." He greeted her, genuinely happy.

"I've got something to show you." She told him with an exhilarated smile on her face. Harry couldn't help grinning at her joy.

"Oh yeah?" he asked, mimicking her by raising an eyebrow. Hermione beamed and winked at him then, in a the space of a heartbeat, she'd vanished and in her place was a– "**you can turn into a snake?**" he gasped in shock.

::**Yes:** Hermione replied and Harry's eyes widened further as he realized–

::**You can speak Parseltongue now?::

::**I think so:** Hermione replied, her long, slender form weaving its way towards him ::**the more time I spend in this shape, the more I seem to pick up:** Harry nodded dumbly, only half taking in her words as she slid across to him. Her animagus form was beautiful and elegant, almost a meter long with dark silver-grey colouring. Harry held out his hand and gently touched the top of her head with his fingertips. Her smooth scales felt like silk.

A somewhat evil grin crossed his face as he looked down at her. ::**We're going to have so much fun with this, aren't we?**:: he hissed and Hermione made a strange noise in response that he assumed was a snake's version laughter as she dipped her diamond-shaped head up and down.

::**Oh yes we are::

::
The next morning at eleven a.m. Harry and Hermione boarded the Hogwarts Express along with their Slytherin friends and found a compartment.

Despite the sadness he felt at leaving Hogwarts, Harry enjoyed spending the ride home chatting and laughing with the boys as Hermione rolled her eyes at them and interjected every now and then with a comment of her own though she mostly just read her book. Iago was in a bad mood, spitting and snarling every time someone so much as looked at him with Hermione defending the fleabag by claiming that the tomcat was miserable about having to leave Mrs. Norris behind.

Harry found that himself heavily aware of the notice in his pocket that reminded him he couldn't perform magic over the holidays. He'd asked Hermione how anyone would even know if he did and she'd explained about the Trace and how it monitored the wands of underage witches and wizards. "Of course," Hermione had added at the end of her explanation with a smile as sharp as one of her switchblades and an evil glint in her eyes, "the Dursleys don't have to know that." Harry had responded with a sharp smile of his own, wicked glee rising inside him at the thought of his childhood tormentors cowering before him.

As the train arrived at Platform Nine and Three Quarters Harry had to swallow past the lump in his throat and reach out to squeeze Hermione's hand. She gave him a warm smile and helped lift down his luggage, her own trunk having been shrunk down by one of the Slytherin prefects and stashed in her satchel for safe-keeping.

It took quite a while for them all to get off the platform. A wizened old guard was up by the ticket barrier, letting them go through the gate in twos and threes so they didn't attract attention by all bursting out of a solid wall and alarming the muggles.

"Write to me," Hermione ordered him as they passed through the gateway together.

"Write to me too." He replied and she smiled warmly at him.

"I promise."

Harry let out a heavy sigh as he spotted Uncle Vernon waiting for him and trudged over, Hermione walking beside him with her eyes going cold as she took in his relatives.

"Ready are you?" grunted Uncle Vernon, still purple-faced, still mustached and still looking furious at the nerve of Harry carrying an owl in a cage in a stadium full of ordinary people. Behind him stood Aunt Petunia and Dudley who both looked terrified at the very sight of him. It was a good look on them.

"You must be Harry's relatives." Hermione said in a voice like ice. Her expression had turned dark and wild and, in that moment, Harry thought that his best friend looked dangerous. Dudley made an alarmed squeaking noise and Uncle Vernon cleared his throat.

"In a manner of speaking. Hurry up, boy, we haven't got all day." He turned as if to walk away but suddenly found himself unable to move. Harry remembered Hermione using this same bit of wandless magic on Ron Weasley during their first week at Hogwarts—wandless magic wasn't picked up by the Trace, after all.

"No, you don't have all day." Hermione purred to his Uncle, stalking around so she was standing in front of him again, her dark eyes boring into his piggy ones. "So I'll make this very brief. If you do anything to Harry that I don't like I'm going to know and I'm going to make you regret it. You have
no idea what I'm capable of but I would be oh-so happy to spend several long, long hours teaching you." Harry wasn't sure when she'd pulled out one of her switchblades, but as Hermione stepped even closer to his uncle he saw the flash of silver in her hand as she pressed the edge of the wickedly sharp blade to Vernon's throat. "If you hurt him," she said quietly and Harry had never heard her sound more dangerous, "I will tear your wife and son to pieces before I gut you like the pig you are."

Hermione stepped back, switchblade vanishing as she released his uncle. Vernon's face was white as a ghost and Hermione smiled pleasantly at him. "I'm glad we had this little chat." She said before walking back over to Harry and hugging him tight. ::Have fun. I'm going to miss you:: she hissed.

::I'm going to miss you too:: he hissed back, enjoying the looks on the Dursleys faces as they heard them communicate in the "abnormal" language.

::Oh, and Harry?:: Hermione said as she stepped back from him. ::Don't be a stranger::

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END OF PART ONE: THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE
Chapter IX:

Harry's POV:

Little Whinging was an ordinary town. It wasn't large but it wasn't too small either. It had been deemed perfect by Mr. and Mrs. Dursley when they had first decided to move there several years ago. Normal and tidy with lots of neighbors to spy on and plenty of garden space for their future children to play in. The house of Number 4 Privet Drive couldn't have been more ordinary if it had tried.

The only thing less ordinary about the house was that one of its inhabitants was a Wizard named Harry Potter; Petunia Dursley's nephew. The Dursleys had been forced to care for Harry after his parents had died eleven years ago and despite the fact that Harry spent most of the year at a boarding school in Scotland they thought of him as a burden.

Vernon Dursley could never be mistaken for a nice man. People might think he was benevolent and polite but those who knew him knew better. Harry knew his uncle very well and the longer Harry spent in the man's company the more he hated him.

Usually, Harry liked to pass the time by imagining how fun it would be for him to invite his Wizarding friends over to visit him in his nice, ordinary, normal Muggle household (he'd never dare, of course. Vernon's wrath wouldn't be worth the small moment of amusement but it was nice to dream regardless) but some nights when he was laying awake he found himself daydreaming about what it would be like if the Dursleys somehow ended up in prison, or were killed in a car crash like they had claimed Harry's parents had– and on the really, truly bad days he wondered about what it would be like if he killed them himself.

Harry didn't think he had honestly ever really wished them dead, though. No, he might have imagined them dying and might have even imagined murdering them himself but when push came to shove the closest Harry had always ever seriously wished death on anyone was after the Mirror of Erised incident the previous school year.

That is, it was the closest Harry had ever seriously wished death on anyone until now.

Harry found himself actually thankful he didn't have his wand handy because he thought he might actually kill his Uncle– there was only so much of Vernon's bigoted bullshit and spiteful hate that he could take. Harry just wanted, just needed, one more shove in the right direction and he would be happy to curse the muggle to within an inch of his life. His feet tapped restlessly against the floor as if urging him to go fetch his wand while his right hand twitched, fingers curling uselessly around air. Harry stayed where he was though, silently listening as Uncle Vernon verbally ground him under his shoe.

The beginning of the holidays had been bearable despite the fact he couldn't see Hermione or use magic but they had progressively grown worse when he didn't receive any letters from Hermione. Harry knew that Hermione was fierce, tough as nails and, above all else, a survivor but he also knew that living on the streets was dangerous and he was scared for her.

Another factor that had added to his increasing misery was the fact that Aunt Petunia,
unfortunately, remembered only too well that underage witches and wizards weren't allowed to use magic out of school and Hermione's threat at King's Cross had only held the Dursleys back for so long. Which led to where he was now, with his stupid uncle yelling at him.

"–you no good freak! And don't get me started on your mother!" Pausing for breath, Uncle Vernon opened his mouth to continue but Harry's hand was suddenly pointed at his face. It clenched at the air and he imagined the feel of his wand between his fingers and his palm, the stick of holly heavy and familiar in his hand.

"Don't talk about my mother." He said, his voice quiet but dangerous. Lily Potter would always be a sore point for Harry. His mother and father had both died to protect him but it always hurt more to hear his mother insulted, knowing she was the one who had stood between him and Voldemort, shielding him with her own body.

"Your worthless mother was no better then a cheap who–!" Again, Harry cut him off. Anger rushed through him; a dark anger like black smoke that seeped through him, poisoning his thoughts, feeding his hatred and Harry let it consume him, embraced it as rage turned his vision red.

"Avada Kedavra!" He shouted and Vernon's eyes went wide, his face paling at the 'magical' words as he backed away hurriedly with his hands in front of his face– but that was the only thing that happened. Without a wand, Harry hadn't been able to cast the Killing Curse.

Harry dropped his arm, his fingers still clenched at his side. With wide eyes he looked upon the still living form of his uncle who had now been joined by an equally horrified aunt and cousin.

"I didn't mean... I didn't mean to..." Harry mumbled to himself, his hands shaking as he tried to force out more words through the lump in his throat. He couldn't speak, he could barely breathe: he was that shocked. Why had he tried to use that spell? Why, knowing what it did, had he screamed it out while hoping it would work?

Harry spun away from his loathsome relatives and fled from the house as if Fluffy was chasing him. He ran along Privet Drive and then Wisteria Walk, further and further until at last there was no chance of him seeing Number 4.

Then he collapsed to the ground. His scar had started to throb, not painfully but enough so that he was aware, and Harry pressed one hand to it while his right hand unconsciously grasped a wand that wasn't there as half-formed memories of brilliant green light flashed behind his eyelids accompanied by the sound of chilling laughter.

He stayed out all night, too horrified to go back and face what he had almost done. How could he go back, knowing that when he returned he would be disappointed that the curse hadn't worked? Harry closed his eyes, squeezing the fingers of his right hand into a tight fist to stop himself from practicing the curse.

He desperately wished Hermione were here.

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Hermione's POV:

Being Jane again felt... strange, Hermione couldn't help but think as she slipped through the gap in the barbed wire fence, and approached the old warehouse, shut down due to being labeled as hazardous.
Reaching the locked side entrance, Hermione knocked sharply—three big knocks, two little ones, followed by another two big ones. There a slight scuffling noise and then a scraping noise of wood on wood as the door was pushed to the side. Suspicious blue eyes peered through the gap then widened comically.

"JANE!" Hermione couldn't help but laugh as Sting shoved the door open the rest of the way and yanked her into his arms. "Look at yeh Janey!" He grinned, spinning her around, before placing her back on her feet to take a good long look at her. "Wot happened ta ya? You look like one of 'em now!"

"Believe me, Sting, I'd never ever want to be one of them." Hermione grinned, finding herself slipping back into Jane easily.

"I missed you heaps." Sting said, yanking her into another hug and Hermione relaxed in the embrace of one of the only two people in this world she trusted.

Absently, she wondered how Harry was going. She'd have to visit him soon—she missed him already.

Sting dragged her into the warehouse where a few members of the crowd were hanging about. She could see Hornet, Sledge, Cat, Pike, Jackie and Jill all present, all of them people she got along with.

Street kids tended to band together, joining up into small groups for safety though they didn't stay together all the time. After the previous leader of their "gang" died, a guy who'd gone by Rottweiler, she and Sting stopped spending so much time with the others.

Rottie had been a scary son of a bitch but he had kept the order, enforcing his rules without any mercy for those who broke them—Hermione had seen him break fingers and arms in punishment, never discriminating between boys or girls. Rottie had also protected them from the meaner bands of kids out there—when Lacey, one of the girls working as a prostitute, was assaulted by one of those gangs Rottie had hunted down and slit the throats of every last boy who'd been involved.

Like she said; he'd been a scary son of a bitch. He'd also been the one who'd taught Sting to fight with knives and Sting had then taught her. Rottie had even taught her a few moves himself, ones concentrating on how to fight back against someone bigger than her, especially if they had a knife, but Hermione had avoided him when she could—he'd scared her.

Once Rottie was dead, she and Sting had been warier about associating with the others. Rottie had kept the peace through his violence and without him their safety wasn't as assured. During the colder months though banding together was a means of survival when warmth and shelter became a serious issue. A base would be chosen and set up for winter, one that was safe to use for fires, open enough that the smoke wouldn't kill them and out of the way enough that local police wouldn't spot the light in an abandoned building.

Out of the group in the warehouse, the same group she and Sting most commonly associated with, Pike was the oldest- Hermione guessed he had to be in his early twenties by now- and little Hornet was the youngest, at around eight and a half. Pike had been chosen as the unofficial leader of the handful of street kids after Rottie's death as out of them all he'd been on the streets the longest and was considered the oldest and toughest.

Jackie and Jill, both fifteen, were twins and had been living on the streets for about three years now. Like most street kids, they'd picked up new names after they started interacting with other runaways and homeless people, the twins having picked theirs from an old nursery rhyme.
Hermione didn't know for sure but she suspected from the cigarette burns on their arms and neck that Jackie and Jill had run from an abusive home. It was a common enough story for those who roughed it out on the streets of London, including fourteen-year-old Cat who had a bell-sweet voice, long dark-red hair and sticky strawberry-red lips. She'd earned her nickname from her habit of lounging like a cat in the sun; before that she'd been known as Rose which was the name she still went by when she was pulling tricks.

Hornet had earned her name from the single black braid that reached the small of her back and looked like a hornet's stinger. The young girl had long, twisting scars on her forearms from being pushed out a window by her junkie mother two years ago. She'd been living on the streets for a year and a half. Sledge had been the one to find her, curled up in an alley like a tiny kitten. Sixteen-year-old Sledge was built like a mountain despite the lack of nourishment over the years. He was fiercely protective of those he considered his, Hornet in particular ever since he first found her. He looked incredibly intimidating with a long scar stretching from his eyebrow to his chin, slicing down the middle of his face.

Finally there was Sting with his shaggy blond hair and light blue eyes. Now fifteen years old, he barely resembled the scrawny nine-year-old that had first taken Hermione under his wing, his recent puberty having left him with powerful muscles made lean and dangerous from living on the streets.

There had been others, of course; those who were either dead now or just not around. Some she'd go hunt down, searching their usual haunts, while others Sting would have to pull her aside later and tell her they were gone. That was the way it worked– survival wasn't guaranteed, you had to fight for it and it wasn't a fight everybody won.

As she and Sting entered the factory Hornet let out a delighted squeal. "Jane!" She shrieked jumping to her feet and racing over. Hermione grinned as the small girl wrapped her skinny arms around her– Hornet was the only person aside from Sting and now Harry that she let hug her.

"Hey shortcake." She greeted the dark haired girl and Hornet pouted, sticking out her bottom lip. "I ain' short! I's jus' younger then you!" She defended herself and Hermione smiled as the others laughed. This felt good. This felt like home.

"C'mon," Sting urged, grabbing her hand and pulling her away. She waved as they left, Sting leading them to an old park that was mostly just weeds and a few sickly looking trees.

"I fuckin' missed ya," he told her as they finally stopped, just the two of them alone again. Hermione grinned.

"Believe it or not, I missed you too."

"Are you trying to get me to punch you?" She asked playfully and Sting laughed, holding out his hands. 

"Go ahead 'n try, luv," he grinned. "C'mon, lil bit, give it ya best shot." Hermione laughed too and lunged at him, Sting twisting out of the way with the sort of speed he'd practically beaten into her. Hermione let her brain settle into the familiar pattern of strike, dodge and block that had been her life for so long, ducking his first punch and blocking the follow up. When Sting moved to strike her ribs and she kneed him in the gut and the second he was in reach she jabbed her fingers at his trachea only for him to ram his shoulder into her, knocking her back.
Sting eventually pinned her, pressing a pocketknife to her throat as she tried to catch her breath. "Tha' was too fuckin' easy." He said, glaring down at her.

"F*ck off!" she panted, reaching up to shove the hand with the knife away only for Sting to dig the steel at her throat in deeper. She hissed between her teeth as she felt the sharp sting that meant he'd broken skin and went still.

"Have ya forgotten everythin' I taught ya?" Sting demanded. "When some'un puts a knife ta yeh throat ya break their fuckin' fingers!" Growling under her breath, Hermione lashed out, one hand grabbing the wrist holding the blade to hold it steady as she used her other hand to wedge her fingers under Sting's middle one, pushing her thumb on the joint and yanking the finger back with enough force that he had to let go of the pocketknife or risk getting his finger broken.

Hermione remembered his lesson on teaching her how to get away from someone holding a knife to her throat quite vividly– he'd used a blunt knife for her to practice but her hand had still been cut up something awful when she messed up the grip and had to grab the blade itself to shove it away from her. Sting had yelled at her, made her do it over and over again while she was dripping blood all over the place then poured alcohol on the gash before staunching the blood flow with a rag and using duct tape to both keep pressure on the wound and avoid leaving it open for infection.

Sting had never gone easy on her, not even when she was only six years old and knew nothing about survival. But it was thanks to him that she was still alive when so many others weren't. Every scar she had from his training, every bruise and cut and sprain and even that one time he'd broken her nose, was worth it. Besides, after he broke her nose she'd punched him in the mouth so hard he'd lost a tooth. She'd also cut up her knuckles on his teeth but it had been worth it.

"Again," Sting ordered her, picking up his pocketknife and stowing it back in his sleeve. He smirked at her. "Unless yer scared."

"Shut your fucking mouth," she growled back at him, lashing out with a kick and then twisting her body around when he caught her foot so she could jab out with her elbow.

An hour later they were both covered in bruises, scrapes, cuts and sweat and Sting had her pinned to the ground beneath him, his knees trapping her hands to her back while one hand was fisted in her hair and the other held the pocketknife to her throat.

"You're such a bastard," Hermione groaned and he laughed, releasing her and standing up. Hermione stood too, unable to help her smirk at the sight of the bruise swelling up on his jaw despite the way her body felt like a giant bruise and she was pretty sure her face matched his from when he'd elbowed her brutally in the jaw. The familiar adrenaline was rushing through her body though and the physical exertion paired with the sheer thrill of the fight, of letting her body move in the way it had been trained and conditioned after ten months of being sedentary, had plastered a huge grin on her face that didn't want to leave.

"I missed ya, Janey," Sting muttered, yanking her into another hug. His fingers gripped onto her hard enough to leave fresh bruises and she wrapped her arms around him and squeezed fiercely, digging her nails in like she never had to let go.

The next few weeks passed with Hermione splitting her time between roaming the streets of London with Sting and tracking down old acquaintances. She also made sure to return to the base every now and then to visit Hornet and check in with Sting who had fallen in more with Pike during her absence, something she didn't begrudge him– Pike was heavily involved with street
fights and Sting had always done well in those. Besides, without her there for winter she imagined
Sting had had little choice but to ally with the crowd for survival.

Hermione thought about Harry a lot. He hadn't sent her any letters and she was starting to worry
because without Hedwig she couldn't write back to him. She used a phone booth once to try calling
him but his aunt answered instead so she claimed a wrong number.

Worried, she'd made her way to Diagon Alley where she'd located a post office and sent him a
letter asking if he was alright. When nearly a month had gone by without any response, she'd
started to panic. If she didn't get a reply within the next week she was already planning to go to
Little Whinging herself and either slap Harry silly for worrying her like this or flay his relatives
alive for hurting him.

Her panic reached a crescendo when, two days away from her deadline, a frantic-looking Hedwig
swooped into the old warehouse where she'd been hanging out with Sting, Hornet and the others,
the owl screeching loud enough to wake the dead. A surprised Hermione held her arm out for the
bird to perch, but the beautiful snowy owl wasn't carrying a letter instead she kept screeching and
dug her talons into Hermione's arm and flapped her wings almost as if she was— oh hell, the owl
was trying to *drag* her.

Hermione swore violently in French then Latin then Parselmouth, the latter gaining her some
attention from the others, before springing to her feet. "Wot's th' matter, Jane?" Sting asked,
looking at Hedwig with a great deal of fascination though his face creased in concern at the look of
barely concealed panic on her face.

"I don't know Sting— it's an emergency with that friend I told you about, I don't know what's
happened but I've got to go." She explained hurriedly, slinging her satchel over her shoulder. Iago
leaped down from one of the low rafters where he'd been stalking one of the many rats that roamed
London's streets, landing half on her shoulder, half on her back. Hermione winced as the cat sunk
his claws into her to keep from falling before rearranging him so he was draped over her shoulders.

"You gotta be safe," Hornet ordered and Hermione flashed her a strained smile.

"Will do, shortcake."

The nearest bus stop was a ten-minute run and a panting, red-faced Hermione skidded to a stop by
the sign. Hedwig had been flying above her up ahead and Hermione was very aware of the owl—
and the deep scratches the snowy had left on her arm. She got a disapproving look from one of the
people waiting for the bus but she just shot the lady a dirty look in return before urging Iago to hide
in her satchel.

She shelled out a handful of pounds for the ticket, resigning herself to a few missed meals or some
dumpster diving, and spent the bus ride in a state of nervous suspense, bouncing her knee up and
down in a way that annoyed the person in the seat next to her greatly. After they disembarked,
obody else chose to sit next to her.

The trip took a little over four hours and she had to change buses three times and spend even more
money she really couldn't afford to but eventually she found herself in Little Whinging. Hedwig
swooped down from the sky the moment she stepped off the bus and Hermione followed the
snowy owl in a brisk jog as Hedwig led her to Harry.

The owl steered her to a small park near a train tunnel where Harry was sitting on a bench looking
cold, miserable and pale. Hermione could tell at a glance that her best friend had lost at least four
pounds of weight he couldn't afford to lose and in *just a month*. Her teeth ground together angrily as
her mind went over the worst untraceable Dark curses she could use on the Dursleys and then some that weren't so untraceable but would be highly satisfying.

And then she saw the red rims around his eyes, and her heart nearly broke. "Oh Harry..." She breathed.

A look of complete shock and then intense relief covered Harry's face as he looked up and saw her. He immediately leapt to his feet and ran over and Hermione hugged him tight as he clung to her and started sobbing into her shoulder. She was trembling in fury at the thought of what could have caused this, her mind already racing ahead and making plans as she comforted Harry.

She let him cry until he was out of tears then steered him back over to the bench and sat down, tugging him down after her. As he slumped against her she grabbed his hand and tangled her fingers with his. "Tell me." She said softly and he did.

She was unconcerned with what Harry had almost done and her dismissal of how serious Harry had perceived his actions to be seemed to calm him down significantly. After he finished explaining she stayed silent for a few moments, finalizing the plan in her head before standing up and tugging Harry up with her. "We've got a quick job to do and then you're coming with me." She told him in a voice that left no room for any sort of protest.

And Harry grinned at her, looking absolutely and positively delighted.

Hermione knocked on the front door of No. 4 Privet Drive and gave a cold smile as Vernon Dursley opened it. "You!" He blustered angrily, "I know the truth now! I know that you little freaks can't use magic out of that freak school of yours!"

"Correction," She said with a sugary sweet smile while she fought back her instincts to pounce forwards and claw the fat Muggles eyes out with her bare hands, "we can't use our wands outside of school. The rules don't say anything about using not using magic."

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Vernon tried to step backwards but he was already frozen in place, unable to move. Hermione pulled out a flick-knife and twirled the blade between her fingers, enjoying the look of horror on Vernon's face. "I could do anything to you right now," she said, her voice lowering to a dangerous whisper. "I could cut out your eyes," –as she spoke she traced the point of the blade just under the rim and over the lid of each eye– "and you wouldn't be able to make a sound." She smirked as Vernon started dripping copious amounts of sweat.

"Now, Harry's going to come with me but he's leaving his school stuff here," she told him, her voice soft and poisonous, "and on the first of September we are going to return for it. If anything is missing or damaged in any way then I will burn your house to the ground with you and your pathetic family in it, frozen like you are now and unable to run from the flames. Even if I have to hunt you down, I can and I will. And since you clearly disregarded my previous warning, maybe this will convince you I'm not bluffing."

Vernon's face was crimson and pinched in his fury with sweat rolling down from his forehead. His skin parted easily under the sharpness of her blade as she carved a deliberately agonisingly slow line down his face, starting with slicing through the multiple double chins and then up his cheek to finish under his right eye. Blood leaked steadily from the cut as she'd intentionally made it deep enough to require stitches and soaked into the collar of his shirt. The acrid smell of urine mixed with the coppery tang of fresh spilled blood as Vernon lost control of his bladder and the saltiness of the tears streaming down his cheeks only added to his pain.
"Let that remind you that you've had your first strike." She told him, tracing the point of the knife along the cut that looked roughly like a '1'. "And I only ever give one." Hermione gave him her best wolf smile, hungry and predatory, and tapped the flat of the now bloodstained steel against his bulbous nose. "I think I've made my point clear but we both know you're a slow learner so let me repeat– Harry's things are not to be touched. When we return for them if they are in less than perfect condition I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll burn your house down, little piggy. Blink twice if you understand."

Vernon's eyes, watery and bloodshot, hastily blinked twice and Hermione's wolf smile grew wider as her eyes turned very cold. "This is where you run." She suggested, lifting the flick-knife to her mouth and slowly licking along the bloodied blade as she released the magic holding the man in place. Vernon immediately started screaming, stumbling back into the house as quickly as his large girth could manage and slamming the door shut. Hermione pulled a face as she heard the sound of a deadbolt sliding into place. "Gross," she muttered, spitting out the sweet-coppery fluid and wiping her tongue on her sleeve.

Harry, who had been hiding crouched behind one of the hedges, stood up and looked at her wide-eyed and pale. "You're absolutely right." He said in a shaky voice.

"Of course I am." She said before pausing. "About what this time?"

"You do give the best death threats." Harry said fervently. "You nearly made me wet myself!"

Hermione smirked, remembering both the conversation they'd had in the hospital wing after the troll incident and the look of terror on Vernon's face. "Damn right I do." She said before turning serious.

"Did you get what you needed?" she asked and Harry nodded, holding up a back-pack he hadn't been holding before.

"Snuck in and picked the lock on the cupboard under the stairs like you taught me while you were distracting Uncle Vernon," he confirmed, "I got my wand and the cloak then snuck back out in time to catch the end of your little crazy-psycho speech."

Hermione gave a cold, cold smile. "I cut him because he starved you and while I wouldn't actually kill him for destroying your things if he had hurt you, Harry, if any of them had hurt you, I would burn them all alive."

Harry hugged her then and she felt the fiery heat of her rage, hatred and fear finally start to simmer down and she exhaled slowly. "I love you too." Harry whispered and she squeezed him tight before stepping back.

"Come on," she said, "we need to get out of here in case your pig uncle calls the police. I don't fancy been arrested."

Harry shuddered at the thought and pulled on his backpack. Harry led the way to the bus stop and Hermione made them board the first one that turned up, very conscious of the fact they needed to make a fast get away, and let it take them far, far away from Little Whinging.

Above them, a very proud snowy owl soared through the sky, following them back to the rough streets Hermione called home.
**Voldemort’s POV:**

Lord Voldemort had to admit he was surprised when he felt a burst of pure hatred that wasn't his flicker briefly in his mind. Closing his/Quirrell's eyes and tracing the source of the foreign burst of emotion, he found himself looking at an obese, purple-faced Muggle as a voice he recognized to be Harry Potter's shouted, "Avada Kedavra!"

He'd honestly expected to see a flash of green light but as the boy looked down he saw through Potter's eyes that his wand hand had been empty.

And then Voldemort had been pushed out of Potter's mind, the link between them suddenly closed. He prodded it thoughtfully and deduced that if he had his normal strength he'd be able to push past the barrier that apparently didn't work when Potter was overcome by extreme emotion but he was currently too weak.

With a frustrated sigh, he opened his/Quirrell's eyes and glared at the mirror across from him. The weedy face of his ungrateful servant looked back at him, completely unexceptional except for the glowing crimson eyes. His/Quirrell's mouth curved into a smirk.

He was slowly gaining more and more power, now able to take control of Quirrell's body for a full day without tiring. He fully expected that the process of his rebirth would be completed sooner then he'd originally anticipated and then he'd begin rebuilding his empire to take over Wizarding Britain. And he'd start with enticing Harry Potter and Hermione Granger over to the Dark-- and after the little display he'd just witnessed, he was more confident then ever that it wouldn't take much prompting.

Really, it would barely take a push.

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**Harry's POV:**

Harry couldn't help his anxiety as he followed Hermione who was making her way through the rapidly darkening streets of London with an enviable confidence. In an odd sort of way, she reminded him of an alley cat; scrawny, alert and vicious when provoked. Savage. A survivor.

He decided not to mention that likeness to her out loud-- a stray cat probably wasn't the most flattering thing to compare someone too.

They'd had to take a train and two different buses before Hermione had decided they were close enough to walk and he was now exhausted and nervous despite his absolute trust in her, unable to help his fear of being in an unfamiliar city as night set in.

Hermione wasn't going to abandon him, he reassured himself-- she would never abandon him. The thought easing his panic somewhat, he concentrated fully on following her, pushing his fears about what the darkened streets could hold from his mind.

Watching her threaten his uncle and then carve up his face had been... Harry honestly didn't know how to feel about it. There was a vicious part of him that had been gleeful and darkly satisfied by the sight of the blood pouring down Uncle Vernon's blatantly terrified face as his childhood tormenter had peed his pants. There was also a part of him that felt uneasy; queasy, almost. He'd like to think he was a good person and he was pretty sure good people didn't enjoy watching someone cut up someone else's face. No matter how much they hated that person.
Harry took a deep breath and remembered what Hermione had said after they'd killed Hagrid's baby dragon— he could either feel guilty about what just happened or he could stand by the reasons for which it had happened and move on. Hermione had hurt Uncle Vernon because he'd hurt Harry. If someone hurt Hermione, Harry thought he'd probably be angry enough to cut them too. Hermione had done what she did to his uncle because she wanted to protect him— and that was something he could stand behind. Taking another deep breath, Harry pushed his guilt to the back of his mind where he didn't have to acknowledge it and instead focused on where he was going.

Hermione led him through a gap in a barbed wire fence and over to the old, falling apart warehouse the fence was supposed to keep people out of. She knocked on the side door in a quick pattern, and then the door was pushed open by a grinning, gangly boy, who wrapped his arms around Hermione and spun her around.

Harry knew instinctively that this boy was Sting. "Janey!" the boy cheered, slurring his words, "yer back!"

"And you are working your way towards a truly epic hangover." Hermione replied dryly as Sting placed her back on her feet. "Not your best first impression, Sting, although it's admittedly not your worst either." Hermione gestured for Harry to come closer, reaching out and clasping his hand in hers, tangling their fingers together as she smiled up at him.

And in the space of a heartbeat, all Harry's jealousy and insecurity flooded away. She hadn't looked at Sting like that. Only at him.

"Sting, this is my friend." She said and Harry noticed that she didn't say his name.

"So he's th' one ya went teh fetch?" Sting asked, his blue eyes surprisingly sharp given his state of intoxication as he fixed Harry with an assessing look. Harry tried not to look as nervous as he felt.

"He ran away from his Aunt and Uncle. They're complete and utter bastards." Hermione told the older boy and Sting gave him one last long look then gave a nod of approval.

"In tha' case, kid needs a name." He told Hermione.

"Er, I already have a name," Harry said causing them to both turn and look at him.

"Picking something for us to call you is a tradition mixed with a safety measure," Hermione explained, "if any of us get picked up by the police, it's better that we don't know each other's names." Harry tried to think of some kind of nickname and turned to Sting for some kind of inspiration.

"How did you choose 'sting'?" he asked Sting. To his surprise, Sting scowled at this and Hermione laughed.

"He didn't choose it– it got chosen for him. When he first started living on the streets he tried to be a real hard-arse. He punched Rottie who swore at him and said not to ever do that again because even though he, and I quote 'hits like a girl, it still stings like a bitch'. And thus, 'Sting' was born."

"And you're Janey?" he guessed, remembering what Sting had called her earlier.

"Close," she said, flashing him a smile, "it's Jane. Sting made me choose pretty much straight off the bat when we first met, like he's making you, and my middle name was the first thing that came to mind."

"Er, shall I be James then?" he asked her, "and should I call you Jane?"
"Only call me my other name when we're talking in Parseltongue." She said before giving him a brilliant smile, "and James works fine."

"Aww, Janie an' Jamsie, sittin' inna tree," Sting started singing only to suddenly double over, making an 'oof' sound.

Surprised, Harry looked down at the girl who'd elbowed Sting in the stomach to shut him up. She had black hair she wore in a long braid that came to a pointed end at the small of her back and she was tiny; short and skinny as a matchstick. "Yeh mus' be Jane's frien'." The girl said excitedly, giving him a snaggletooth grin. "Wot's ya name?"

"Ha–er, I mean, James. What's your name?"

"She's shortcake." Hermione answered with a teasing look at the younger girl.

The girl automatically scowled up at Hermione. "I ain't short! An' my name's Hornet." She huffed and Hermione laughed then tugged him forwards in through the doorway.

"Come on, I'll introduce you to the others who are here." She said and he reached out to grab her hand, letting her pull him into the warehouse.

-Severus's POV:

"So what you're telling me," Severus said slowly as he fixed the Headmaster with an entirely blank look, "is that Potter left his home, and subsequently the safety of the blood wards, and you currently have no idea where he is." Albus sighed.

"Unfortunately, yes."

"Well that's just fantastic." Severus snarled.

"I do, however, have an inkling of who the boy may be with." Albus mused, twirling a strand of his long beard around his finger, while Severus looked on in disgust and anger. "He and Miss Granger. They are... 'inseparable', I believe, is the word you used."

"Yes," Severus allowed somewhat reluctantly, "during the entirety of the school year they rarely left each other's side."

"Well, my dear boy, I'd say it's a reasonably safe assumption that wherever our young Mr. Potter is, Miss Granger is also."

"Well that doesn't help," Severus sighed, allowing himself to flop down on one of the chintz seats in the headmaster's office. "I have no idea where the girl lives."

"No idea?" Albus asked puzzled, "weren't you the one sent to introduce her to the magical world?"

"If you'll remember," Severus said dryly, "The girl didn't need much introducing. She asked where Diagon Alley was and about tutelage fees then left. And she met me by the entrance of Hyde Park without either of her parents accompanying her."

"That is troublesome," Albus frowned, "can you locate a copy of the acceptance letter sent to her?"
"Minerva will have it, ask her." Severus said, bored. "And if that's all, then I'll be off."
Accompanying his words with a sneer, he stood and strode out of the Headmaster's office.

He didn't have time for the old man's blathering on– he had a pair of troublesome children to locate.

After passing through the Hogwarts gates, he apparated to the front door of No. 4 Privet Drive under a strong disillusionment charm to ensure that none of the Muggles saw him appear out of thin air. After checking that there were no eyes pointed his way, he let the illusion drop and knocked on the Dursleys front door.

"I-I'm warning you! I'm armed!" Came the quivering voice from behind the door and if Severus wasn't so worried, he'd be amused. But he was worried so with a small burst of magic he blasted the door open.

He was expecting Vernon Dursley, who was currently holding a rifle and pointing it at his chest, to look even more terrified at the sight of him but instead relief briefly flooded the walrus-like man's face before it settled firmly on dislike. "What do you want?" he asked, gruffly. Severus raised an eyebrow as he took in the man's appearance. A livid red line looked like it had been carved into his face, running from one eye, down his cheek and to his chin. Tiny black stitches ran through the entire length of the wound and it looked worryingly... recent.

"I'm here to visit Mr. Potter." Severus drawled, acting as if nothing was out of the ordinary and there wasn't a sense of foreboding building up inside him. "I trust he's available?" Vernon Dursley's face turned an odd shade of purple.

"The boy doesn't want to see you!" He snapped before trying to shut the door which refused to move. Severus raised an eyebrow and swept into the house, shoving the large Muggle to the side with magic.

"V- Vernon? Is it one of them?" A voice warbled from the kitchen. Severus couldn't help the smirk that settled over his face as he rounded the corner to come face-to-face with the woman.

"Petunia, it's certainly been a while."

Petunia let out a shriek, staggering backwards, both hands pressed up against her heart. "Y-you!"
She shrieked, outraged and blatantly afraid.

"M-me!" Severus mocked her. "Where's the boy, Tuney?"

"D-don't call me that!" She hissed at him, reaching behind herself to grab the edge of the bench for support.

"Why not? You've moved onto bigger and better things, have you? Well, certainly bigger..." He let his gaze settle on Vernon, his lip curling, and Petunia flushed angrily.

"What are you doing here, Snape?" she snapped.

"Looking for Lily's son. I believe he has the misfortune of calling this place his residence?"

"Not anymore!" Petunia snapped bristling. She was so easy to provoke it almost wasn't fun, he mused, before focusing on what the vile woman had just said, his eyes narrowing infinitesimally.

"Oh?" He asked in a dangerously silky voice that any of his students could have warned her about.
"He ran away with that horrible little bitch!" Petunia spat, pale-faced and almost trembling with rage and fear.

"And why would he run away? You were tasked with providing the child with a stable home. Surely even you couldn't have mishandled that so appallingly?" His taunting finally got a response from Dursley, who stepped forwards and pointed the rifle right at his chest.

"I will not have you talking to my wife like that under my roof!" he bellowed.

One lazy flick of Severus' wand transfigured the rifle into a bread French stick. "Try not to eat that." He drawled, before striding forwards and seizing the piece of lard's chin, avoiding the stitches as he forced the Muggle to look directly in his eyes. "Legilimens!" He hissed.

Picking through Vernon Dursley's mind was an extremely unpleasant experience and Severus skimmed quickly to the memories he was looking for which were thankfully on the surface of Dursley's mind thanks to their current conversation.

Severus felt himself grow angrier and angrier as he watched Dursley shout abuse at the boy. At Harry. Hot rage flooded him when the pathetic man dared to mention Lily and he was moments away from cursing the Muggle himself as Dursley said– "and don't even get me started on your Mother–" when Harry interrupted him, voice low with fury.

"Do not talk about my Mother."

"Your worthless mother was no better then a cheap who-" Vernon started to say and then something happened that made Severus' blood run cold. The emerald green eyes– Lily's eyes– looking back at him seemed to flash crimson red and then the boy was shouting the Killing Curse.

Severus didn't even know where the boy had learnt of its existence, let alone the incantation, though he suspected through Granger. He truly hadn't realized just how much hatred existed inside the boy towards his relatives, to the point the child genuinely wanted to kill them. If Harry had been holding a wand, Severus had no doubt that Dursley would be dead.

The boy's eyes turned back to Lily's shade of green and he appeared to be horrified, looking down at his hands like he'd never seen them before. He stammered to himself several times and then turned and fled from the house.

Severus pulled himself out of the man's mind, uncaring about the severe migraine he'd just inflicted on the worthless scum. "You are very lucky," he said, his voice cold, "that the boy was not holding his wand. Was that the last time you saw him?"

"Yes," Dursley panted, seething with hatred and resentment.

"Are you telling me the truth? Because I can find out easily if you're lying to me." He threatened and the morbidly obese muggle paled further. Severus ignored Petunia who was sobbing hysterically behind them.

"It was the last time I saw him, but I saw his little bitch friend!" Dursley burst out.

"Indeed?" Severus said smoothly before invading the man's mind again, actually curious to see what Granger had done to cause the muggle to fear her so. He was extremely impressed by Granger's wandless magic though his stomach turned slightly with the knowledge that accidental magic most commonly manifested itself in times of trauma and great need. For Granger to be able to repeat that accidental magic on command she first would have had to experience a situation where her magic had reacted in that way specifically. He didn't even want to think about why she'd
need to freeze someone that desperately and why she'd felt the need to learn how to do it at will—

Severus pushed the dark thought out of his mind, telling himself that he'd deal with it later, and instead continued to watch the memory. He was actually quite amused by what he saw. He could have done without the girl cutting the "piggy" as she'd called Dursley because now he was going to have to perform several tongue-tying curses so Albus would never find out about what she'd just done, but as he pulled back out of Dursley's mind he was appeased by the fact that his star student was there to keep Harry safe.

Harry... when did Potter become Harry? He wondered absently as he flicked his wand first at Petunia who screamed and then at Dursley who was sprawled on the ground, ensuring they wouldn't be able to speak the truth about how Dursley had been injured.

"I would listen to Miss Granger this time if I were you," he told the cowering man, "as I'm sure you're now aware she is fully capable of carrying out her threat. I'll be seeing you both on September 1st. Lovely seeing you Tuney."

With a last sneer in Petunia's direction, Severus turned on the spot, apparating himself to the Malfoy Manor. He needed to talk to Lucius but more then that he needed a stiff drink.
Chapter X:

Harry's POV:

What followed his running away from the Dursleys was undoubtedly the strangest summer of Harry's life.

The weather was mostly warm and Hermione had mastered a wandless cushioning charm, which meant that they could sleep out on a park bench under the stars and be as comfortable as they would be in their four-poster beds back at Hogwarts. When it rained, Hermione would take him to the London Underground and they'd cut across to the edges of the tracks and run along the lines until they found a maintenance tunnel to go down. The London Underground was popular enough with the homeless and Hermione knew of several bolt holes, mostly small maintenance sheds that had been abandoned for years. They were usually padlocked shut but Hermione was an excellent lock-pick and Harry was a pretty good student.

They didn't spend a huge amount of time with Hermione's street friends, instead keeping mostly to each other and occasionally Sting. They'd pawned some of his galleons with a somewhat shady looking man Hermione knew who she called "Magpie" the day after she took him with her back to London which gave them enough money anyway that they didn't go hungry and they could spend their days exploring the city, spending time in public libraries and with Hermione teaching him survival skills.

Hermione had confronted him on the first day– upset– about him not sending any letters to her and a bemused Harry had told her that he hadn't gotten a single one of her letters, and apparently she hadn't gotten a single one of his.

That had pissed Hermione off to the point where Harry was surprised steam hadn't been pouring out of her ears though she quickly calmed down when Harry asked her to teach him how to fight. He came to regret that decision very much though she'd probably have brought it up herself if he hadn't done so first.

Hermione, Harry learned very quickly, was not the sort of teacher who believed in going easy on her pupils. For his first lesson she'd told him that hesitation and half measures would only get him killed and to always keep hitting the other person until they stopped hitting him before ordering him to attack her. Harry had been apprehensive about trying to hurt her but she'd had no patience for that and told him to get his shit together or he'd get them both killed so just hit her already.

Harry did as he was told and, remembering her earlier warning about hesitation and half-measures, did his best to actually punch her, not wanting her to be annoyed at him when she had that scary look in her eyes. She'd easily knocked his fist aside and responded with a punch of her own, one that had him doubled over and gasping for air.

Hermione was vicious in her training, knocking him down over and over as she didn't hesitate to land blows on him– not as hard as she could, of course, but enough for them to hurt like buggery
and knock the breath out of his lungs every time she sent him crashing to the dirt. She taught him as they went along, telling him where to aim and why before demonstrating—on him—just how effective her instructions were. The closest Harry got to landing a proper blow was when he managed to kick her in the hip and she’d responded by slamming him to the ground and holding a switchblade to his throat announcing he needed to learn how to defend himself against knives too.

After their lessons Harry would be bruised, sweaty, winded and often bleeding, but he could already see his improvement and Hermione always smiled proudly at him once she’d finished laughing at him wheezing on the ground.

She’d also taught him how to pick-pocket and shop-lift, getting him to train with her over and over before sending him out to actually try it for real. Harry managed to get caught shop-lifting during his second try and it had been terrifying. A security guard had grabbed him by the back of his of neck and Harry had struggled to get free but he was a skinny twelve-year-old kid and the guard was a big, beefy man who reminded him a bit of Uncle Vernon and Harry had eventually stopped struggling and let himself be locked in an office.

It had been hard to think through the panic, thoughts of being locked in jail or sent back to the Dursleys making him dizzy as he couldn’t even decide which of the two would be worse, but there had been a window in the room and it gave Harry an idea. Grabbing the first heavy object he could find, which was some sort of paperweight that had been on the desk, he’d smashed the glass and wasted no time in scrambling out of the newly formed exit. He’d cut himself up in the process but he’d been free, landing outside with a stumble and then sprinting away as fast as he could until Hermione was suddenly there, hugging him tight as she talked him down from his panic.

Later she’d pulled the glass shards out of his palms and cleaned the cuts with alcohol, declaring none of them were deep enough to need sewing up much to his relief and then kissed his cheek and told him not to expect any mercy from her in their spar the next day just because he was injured. By then Harry had known better then to expect any and he’d been right—Hermione had certainly not pulled any of her punches but at the end of the session she’d said it was time he learned how to use a knives, explaining that bringing a knife into a fight without knowing how to use it would only get him stabbed. She’d taught him the basics using blunt pocketknives, going over how to hold the knife and where he should aim on a person as well as demonstrating how to not let his hand slip when the blade hit resistance.

It wasn’t an easy summer— they ate cheap food that could be bought in bulk, Harry often felt like a giant bruise, he’d nearly been arrested and he’d never been more glad about the existence of public toilets in his life— but it was definitely the best summer of his life. The freedom, the lack of Dursleys and constantly been with Hermione more then made up for those things and Hermione kept them away from the more dangerous side of things, steering them both clear of other street kids and homeless people to avoid fighting and making sure they were in the safer areas of the city when night came.

It was nearing the end of the holidays and September 1st was drawing rapidly nearer when Hedwig brought him his Hogwarts book list. Seeing as no owl seemed to be able to find Hermione, they decided to just get double what was on his list.

"There's a lot of books by this Lockhart bloke," he commented to Hermione who narrowed her eyes.

"I've heard of him. He's supposed to be this absolutely amazing wizard who's defeated a number of dangerous creatures."

"Supposed to be?" Harry asked and she made a dismissive sound.
"If he's done even half of what he says he's done, then I'll snog Weasley."

"Ew," Harry pulled a face and gagged dramatically, "I really did not need that mental image!" Hermione laughed before turning back to the list with a thoughtful look on her face.

"We're going to need some way of getting into Diagon Alley without being recognized," she mused, "I know some glamour charms but none that I can do without a wand."

Harry grimaced at the idea of being discovered– he planned on putting off the inevitable lecture he was going to get from Dumbledore for running off for as long as possible and he also had absolutely no intention of returning to the Dursleys. "Any ideas?" he asked and Hermione gave him a mock-affronted look.

"When do I not have an idea, Harry?"

He just rolled his eyes at her. "Well do you?"

"Of course," she said before giving him that wicked grin that he knew meant they were about to stir up some trouble. "We're going to do this the Muggle way."

The Muggle way, Harry found out, was to use hair-dye and sunglasses to change their appearance. Hermione had also decided to practice using wandless magic to change his hair– just for good measure, she assured him– and he was confident he was going to end up bald. Hermione had flicked him on the nose when he'd voiced his fears.

With a plan in place, Hermione had taken them to the flat of a prostitute she knew. They'd been greeted at the door by a woman with restless, sad eyes who wore thick blue glittery eye makeup, smelt faintly of lavender and gasoline and looked at them with a drowning expression. The woman– "call me Glitter"– had let them use her matchbox-sized bathroom and hair-dye, helping them turn Harry into a brunet and Hermione into a blonde. Glitter had then straightened Hermione's wild curls so her newly-dyed hair hung in a flat curtain around her face and used gel to tame Harry's messy hair, adding hairspray to make sure it stayed that way as well as applying concealer to his forehead to cover up his scar.

Bidding Glitter goodbye, Hermione then took them to a public restroom with a still mostly intact mirror and forced him to sit in front of it so she could follow through on her earlier promise of using the same sort of wandless magic she used to untangle her hair to change the length of his. Harry was understandably nervous about this.

"Honestly," she huffed as he squeezed his eyes tight shut, "you'd think I was about to torture you."

"You aren't?" he muttered under his breath though the consequent whack to his shoulder told him he hadn't been as quiet as he'd thought.

"You are a genius," Harry told Hermione for about the eighth time as he caught sight of his reflection yet again in a shop window. He looked nothing like himself. Through Hermione and Glitter's efforts his unruly hair actually looked neat; it was now light brown in color and long enough to be brushing against his shoulders. The make-up covered up his scar and Hermione had bought him a cheap pair of square-framed glasses as well as taking him to an op-shop to pick clothes that actually fitted him, unlike the hand-me-downs he received from the Dursleys.

Hermione looked equally as unrecognizable. She was wearing a skirt, pretty white sandals with pink flowers on them, a pink coat and her long, straight hair was light blonde. She'd also used the
same glittery eye stuff as Glitter and hair clips shaped like pink butterflies held her bangs out of her eyes.

In other words, she looked nothing like Hermione Granger.

But the crème de la crème of their disguise? Beside them, whistling cheerfully as he walked, was Sting.

"After all," Hermione had said with a sly, clever smile, "people looking for you are going to expect you to either be alone or with me. Nobody's going to be keeping an eye out for a group of three."

Despite their amazing disguises, Harry's stomach still clenched with nerves as they entered the Leakey Cauldron, Sting muttering a few choice words under his breath in amazement after walking into a pub he hadn't been able to see, but Hermione's plan had worked flawlessly.

Looking back, Harry should have realized that with everything going so smoothly, something was just bound to go wrong.

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_Hermione's POV:_

Hermione didn't dare collect her money from the Hogwarts fund having decided not to take the risk of the school somehow being alerted. Instead, Harry had withdrawn enough from his account for both of them.

Despite Sting's constant distraction as the older boy wandered around in wide-eyed in amazement they managed to get their school shopping done relatively quickly. Supplies all bought and shrunk, thanks to the lovely witch in Flourish and Blotts, they stopped at Fortesque's to eat an ice-cream.

Amused, Hermione watched the way Harry's eyes kept moving back to stare at the Quidditch supply shop, the boy almost drooling.

"Oh bloody hell, James, just go!" She sighed, unable to hold it in any longer. Harry jolted in his seat and started blushing.

"I- I don't need--" he started to say but she interrupted him with a stern look.

"James, just go and take a look around. You're going to be Slytherin's seeker, this year-- you might need supplies."

"Yeah, wot Janey said," Sting said eagerly.

"You just want to go look at the brooms." Hermione said amused.

"So?" Sting asked smirking at her and she sighed, shaking her head.

_Boys._

Sting and Harry exchanged a look before saying at the exact same time; _Girls._

Reaching over to give them both a good smack over the head, Hermione then stood up and checked her watch. "Okay, James, Sting, you two go look in the Quidditch shop. I'm going to take a quick... side trip."
Both of them narrowed their eyes suspiciously at her. "And what, exactly, does this 'side trip' entail?" Harry asked suspiciously.

"Just picking up a few books." She said with a light, breezy smile.

"We already went to Flourish and Blotts," Harry pointed out, "and we spent over an hour in there."

"Yes, well, I'm more interested in the books that Flourish and Blotts doesn't supply." Hermione said meaningfully and Harry's eyes widened momentarily in understanding before narrowing again.

"And where exactly are you going to be getting these books from?" he asked rather pointedly. Hermione debated whether or not to be vague or just omit certain truths then decided to be honest.

"Knockturn Alley." She answered. Harry instantly opened his mouth to protest, having heard more than enough from the other Slytherins to know what a sketchy place it was, but Hermione firmly spoke first. "James, this is important. I promise you that I will not take any unnecessary risks. Trust me, okay?" Harry looked at her, his expression torn, before he nodded.

"First sign of trouble, you get the fuck out of there– promise me." He said fiercely and she nodded.

"Stop picking up swearing from Sting. And yes, I promise."

"If it's tha' bad, d'ya need me as backup?" Sting asked and she and Harry both instantly shook their heads.

"They do not like Muggles there." Harry said at the same time as she said, "They'd cut you open and sell your organs as potion ingredients if you tried. Besides," she added as Sting gave her an alarmed look, "I thought you wanted to see the broomsticks."

Sting brightened at that and turned to Harry. "Wot yeh waitin' for, James? Let's go!" Giving her hand a quick squeeze, Harry let Sting drag him towards the Quidditch store his expression quickly brightening the closer he got to the building.

Giving both her boys a fond look, Hermione then steel'd herself for trouble and made her way towards Knockturn Alley, fully aware of the location and proximity of each of the knives she had on her— three switchblades; one in her boot, one up her sleeve and one on her hip, a butterfly knife up her other sleeve and a pocketknife stashed in her side pocket.

She couldn't help but shiver a little as she entered the alley but she held her head high and walked confidently— and quickly— to the bookstore she'd noticed last time in her brief venture down the shady shopping district.

The store was small and smelt vaguely of mould but it was crammed full of books. Peering closely at one of the nearer titles, Hermione literally jumped as she heard a hoarse, throaty voice from behind her, a switchblade drawn in one swift motion and pointed at the shop owner— or at least who she presumed it was the owner— an old woman with a hunched back and greasy, straggly grey hair pulled back in a messy knot. Her robes were somewhat ragged and Hermione got the feeling that there was something not quite... right about the old woman.

"It's not often I get kids in here— especially without their parents." The woman croaked, sharp eyes fixed on the sharp steel of the switchblade.

"Yes, well, I'm not exactly your usual sort of kid," Hermione answered as she relaxed out of the defensive stance she'd fallen into, though she didn't put away her weapon yet. "Besides, my parents
"Ah," the old woman nodded, crooked mouth curling into an amused-looking smile, "and what exactly is it that I can do for you, young Miss?"

"Jane."

"Miss Jane."

"I'd like any books you have on Parselmagic." Hermione said. "I've found my school library to be rather... lacking." The old woman looked even more amused.

"Parselmagic? Now why would you be wanting something like that, little girl?"

"Call it good old fashioned curiosity." Hermione's smile was frostier this time as she let her the switchblade dance between her fingers in a subtle but unmistakable threat and the old woman looked delighted almost, cackling to herself as she shuffled past Hermione and to the back of the shop.

"I may have a book or two, Miss Jane, but they don't come cheap." She warned over her shoulder. Having already expected that, Hermione didn't say anything and just watched.

It took the old woman nearly eight minutes to produce the books. Both were old with cracked leather covers and yellowing pages but Hermione was ready to take whatever it was she could get, curious as to how the magical language worked and what it could do.

"That will be sixteen galleons," the old woman said her eyes gleaming in a predatory sort of way. Relieved by the fact that Harry had inherited such a bloody huge fortune and had seen fit to provide her with a ridiculously huge amount of spending money that actually made her feel dizzy and slightly queasy to think about, she paid the old woman.

Tucking the books in her satchel, Hermione said bid a polite farewell to the shop owner, finally stashing her knife away as she walked out of the thoroughly unpleasant little bookstore and made her way to the pawn shop she'd visited last time.

The owner seemed just as ill-tempered as last time and Hermione wondered whether a requirement for owning a shop in Knockturn Alley was a permanently bad mood and total lack of social skills.

"What do you want?" the man grunted before peering a little closer at her. "Didn't you have brown hair last time, kid?"

"I fancied a change," she smiled blandly back at him. "I'm looking for a bag that can hold more on the inside then the outside. Do you have any?"

"Yep," the man said and rather then hauling his large girth off the chair he muttered a few words under his breath and flicked his wand. An array of different sized bags soared over and landed on the counter before her. "Pick one." The shopkeeper rather unhelpfully directed her.

Hermione let her gaze slide assessingly over each bag before she reached for one of the smaller ones that looked to be made of fake-leather. "How much is this one?"

"Two galleons." Was the grunted reply.

"I'll take it." She decided, thinking the price was probably too steep but not willing to make a fuss.
Glad that she'd finished her shopping in the unpleasant Alley, Hermione exited the shop and started to make her way towards the exit of the Alley which was when a rough-looking man stepped out in front of her, blocking her way. The man had long grey hair, yellow stained teeth and long, ragged nails. His clothes were in terrible condition, like he hadn't washed them in weeks and his feet were bare and Hermione went very still as she saw the hungry look on his face, the way his amber eyes gleamed as they took in her small form.

Hermione was no longer so malnourished that she was just skin and bones but she was still a deceptively delicate-looking slip of a girl, all slender limbs and thin bones in her wrists and eyes too large for her skinny face. What people didn't see realise when they looked at her was that in truth she was all sharp angles and even sharper edges; when they looked at her they didn't see the lean, wiry muscle, the knife scars on her hands and the way she held herself like a fighter, like a predator.

This man, as he looked at her, only saw the willowy, wispy thing she appeared to be and Hermione could see in his eyes that he thought she was prey.

Fiery-hot anger and fear and fury rose up within Hermione as she took in this man, took in the way he was staring at her, at her body. He was looking at her like she was something for him to use and abuse and then discard when he was done; like her only worth was her flesh and the pleasure it could bring him. He was looking at her the way the monster who'd hurt the little girl whose name Hermione couldn't bear to even think had looked at her; his pants had been around his ankles and there'd been a dead child at his feet yet when he turned to see Hermione staring at him in horror he'd looked at her like she was an object to rape and strangle and leave lying in the trash like she was worthless once he was done.

And then the man spoke.

"What's a pretty little thing like you doing all the way down here?" He just about crooned, eyes still feasting hungrily on her. She started to take a step back but an inhuman growl escaped the man and his arm snapped out, hand fastening tightly on her forearm. She made herself go still, adrenaline pumping through her body. "Don't be like that, pretty– I just want to play." The man's eyes suddenly sharpened on her face and he shook his hair out of the way. "Oh hello lovely. I remember you. Was wondering if I'd get to see you again."

The loathsome man's smile was feral now and Hermione pushed the useless fear to the back of her mind and let her icy hatred bring sharp clarity to her thoughts as she made and discarded plans in the space of heartbeats, running through scenarios in her head of how best to escape this situation. She settled for the helpless little girl routine that Lacey had taught her to play so well; a protective smokescreen guaranteed to get anyone to take pity on or, more importantly, underestimate her.

"Wait! Please! Don't hurt me!" She begged tearfully, fear bright in her eyes she cowered before the man, her face the very picture of terror. As she'd anticipated, just as so many policemen and opportunistic men had before him, the man relaxed his grip on her and as Hermione cringed back as if she was curling into herself, her free hand slid to her hip and to the blade hidden there.

"Now, where would you get an idea like that? I wouldn't hurt a pretty little thing like you." The man said as he leered down at her. He reached out with his other hand to touch her face and Hermione moved in one swift, practiced motion, drawing her blade and lashing out to slit the man's throat from ear to ear, careful to avoid the resulting arterial spray.

The man made a choking, gurgling noise as he doubled over and she took advantage of his weakened, distracted state to yank her arm out of his grasp with a disgusted look and she allowed herself a moment to watch with cold eyes and a satisfied heart as the man clutched at his ruined
throat, blood spurting through the gaps of his fingers. Her lip curled as the man keeled forwards, collapsing onto the ground with a meaty thud. Spite curling up inside her she lashed out with her foot, kicking the man in the jaw with enough force to knock his head back, tearing the neck wound open wider as well as causing an audible crack– she hoped it wasn't his neck breaking; that would be too quick.

"I hope you drown in your own blood." She told the downed man coldly before swiftly moving around him and exiting Knockturn Alley. She flicked her switchblade closed, slipping it into one of the pockets of her pink coat and checked to make sure the blood splatter on her white sandals wasn't too glaringly obvious. Smoothing down her skirt and tucking her long blond hair behind her ears, she put a sweet smile on her face and skipped lightly along the cobbled path of Diagon Alley, the very image of childhood innocence.

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Severus's POV:

Severus had seen a lot in his life– so much that very few things fascinated him anymore. Potions was one of those things, with limitless possibilities for discovery and improvement if one tried hard enough and was dedicated enough, and to those who had that spark of intuition and creativity there was very little to keep them from reaching the stars.

Metaphorically, of course.

Which was why, when he wasn't looking abso-fucking-lutely everywhere for his two sneaky, runaway snakes he'd spent his time over the summer holidays brewing potions in the upstairs room of an old "friend's" Apothecary. Compared to the school term, Severus was fairly certain this was what heaven looked like- even with the grimy window offering an even grimier view of Knockturn Alley.

He'd been about to start on a new batch of Draught of Peace when he noticed the child on the street below, a small wisp of girl with long, blond hair wearing a pink muggle jacket, a white skirt and flowery sandals. She had emerged from the bookstore owned by a hag a few moments earlier and proceeded to walk lightly up the street and into Jiggers' Knacks Pawn Shop as if she hadn't a care in the world.

Stupid, idiotic, dunderheaded children, Severus cursed to himself, unable to help the frustrated groan that escaped him. Usually there weren't any kids in Knockturn Alley and when there were, they were most definitely guarded closely by their parents– and for good reason.

Severus groaned again and placed down the stirring rod so he could go save the silly, little girl.

He was just exiting the Apothecary when he heard a familiar voice calling out his name. "Severus!"

Severus quirked an eyebrow as Lucius Malfoy stepped out of Borgin and Burkes. "Lucius."

"I could have sworn I just saw a child go walking by, old friend." Lucius commented.

"I know. I was going to give her directions." He replied shortly. "Hopefully before she runs into Greyback or one of his pack." Lucius nodded, a sneer twisting his aristocratic face.

"She was dressed like a Muggle."
"I'm aware of that." Severus said dryly.

"Are you certain you shouldn't just leave her to the wolves?"

"I'm certain. Granted, I might let her get knocked around for a bit so she learns her lesson not to come down here again." He grumbled, quirking an eyebrow questioningly when Lucius fell into step beside him.

"I do enjoy a little sport every now and again." Lucius waved his hand airily, cane clicking on the cobbled stones in pace with each carefully measured step. "Though it does raise questions when a Professor is willing to let a potential student come to harm." He teased.

"The hot stove teaches best," Severus quipped, prompting an amused chuckle from one of his oldest friends. They rounded the corner together, easily catching sight of the petite blonde child stepping out of Jigger's Knacks Pawn Shop with her hands swinging lightly by her sides and a satchel slung carelessly over her shoulder. Severus frowned– there was something oddly... familiar about the image.

The small girl had barely taken five steps further down the street when an unfortunately familiar man stepped out in front of her, causing her to come to an abrupt halt. "What's a pretty little thing like you doing all the way down here?" Greyback's voice carried easily down the alley, the werewolf practically growling when the child immediately started to back away. Quick as lightning, Greyback had a hold of one of her arms. Standing before the werewolf the child looked like a doll, her tiny porcelain arm so fragile looking in his thick, dirty hand. "Don't be like that, pretty– I just want to play."

Greyback's smile suddenly turned feral, and he shook his grey mane out of his face. "Oh hello lovely. I remember you. Was wondering if I'd get to see you again."

"Wait! Please! Don't hurt me!" Severus quickened his pace when the fearful little girl cowered and started pleading, her voice thick with tears– Greyback was going to eat the stupid child for dinner. "Now where would you get an idea like that? I wouldn't hurt a pretty little thing like you." Crooned the werewolf, the hungry gleam in his eyes telling a very different story as he loosened his grip on the doll-like child curling into herself in her terror, reaching out with a hand to touch her face.

The petite girl struck quickly and with a vengeance– the second the grip on her faltered her free hand shot out. There was a flash of silver and then Greyback was choking and gurgling, a deep wound gaping along his throat. The girl avoided the arterial spray with an ease that spoke of prior experience and ripped her arm free, swiftly moving back. Severus expected her to turn and run, but instead she stood there, watching as Greyback fell to his knees, blood spurting from his neck at an alarming pace.

As Greyback buckled forward onto the ground the girl reared back and kicked the werewolf in the chin– hard– and both Severus and Lucius winced automatically as the action tore the gaping wound slitting Greyback's throat from ear to ear even wider, the blood starting to gush at an even more alarming rate as Greyback gurgled.

"I hope you drown in your own blood." The petite blonde with butterflies clips in her hair said in a cold voice that was much too calm for what had just happened. It was also very familiar.

Severus watched, stunned, as the girl proceeded to step around Greyback's weakly stirring form and continue walking to Diagon Alley like nothing had happened. It was just as she turned out of sight that it finally clicked.
"That was well-done," Lucius commented, sounding reluctantly impressed. "Very well-played. I do believe that child will soon be one of your Slytherins."

"Actually, she already is." Severus said in a strangled voice. "That, my friend, was Miss Hermione Granger."

Lucius raised a surprised brow. "The Hermione Granger? The halfblood girl that Potter's inseparable from? Draco's told me about her– he seems fond of the girl." Lucius then chuckled. "That was extremely vicious– and there was no panicking or hesitation, just cold calculation. She must be quite the Slytherin."

Severus glanced back at Greyback– the werewolf was unconscious and lying in a large pool of his own blood. "Indeed." he agreed. "I'm going to follow her and hope she leads me to Ha– the idiotic Potter brat," he amended as he silently cursed his slip of the tongue. "Would you like to accompany me?"

"Certainly. I welcome extra entertainment." Lucius said, his grey eyes glittering with interest.

Severus half jogged down Knockturn Alley with Lucius a few steps behind him not wanting to lose Granger. He then slowed his pace as he entered Diagon Alley, subtly scanning the crowds for a pink coat and long blonde hair.

He caught sight of Granger standing in front of Gringotts looking bored and not at all like she'd just probably killed a man. She was staring further up the street as if waiting for someone and he shifted closer as Lucius cast an eavesdropping charm on the girl. Granger immediately tensed, hand moving subtly to her pocket as she scanned the crowd with sharp eyes.

"Impressive," Lucius noted. "I didn't think she'd sense my charm."

"If something appears to be either impressive or improbable then it can be guaranteed Miss Granger will accomplish it." Severus said dryly.

They both stopped talking when a pair of boys exited the bank and approached her, one of them older with shaggy sandy-blond hair while the other boy had brown hair that was long enough to brush against his shoulders.

"Didja get ya stuff?" Asked the older boy. He was quite obviously a Muggle and Severus muttered a silent 'thank you' that Granger had had the sense not to let him accompany her to Knockturn; that would have been a *fucking disaster.*

"It went fine. I found those books I was searching for as well as this bag. It's quite brilliant– there's an unlimited amount of space inside it to store things." Granger pulled a leather bag out of her satchel to show the two boys.

"That's awesome!" Said the younger boy. Severus frowned, concentrating on the brunet for a moment before a smirk crossed his face. He had no idea how the boy had managed to grow his hair that long without magic but that was definitely Harry Potter– he'd recognize those green eyes, *Lily's* eyes, anywhere. Severus took a moment to bask in his victory before tuning back into the conversation.

"Someone tried to grab me, annoyingly enough. I'm quite glad that you weren't with me– especially you, Sting. Remember what I said before about them chopping you up for potion ingredients? Turns out that was a complete understatement."

"C'mon! Wot's not ter like 'bout us Muggle people?" The older boy– Sting she had called him–
protested playfully, tugging on a long piece of blonde hair. Severus snorted quietly even as he noted with a touch of shock how comfortable Granger seemed with the boy's touch— he'd never seen her like that with anyone but Harry.

"Muggle people?" Lucius looked amused as well.

"Do you mean Muggles in specific or just you?" Granger asked dryly.

"Cheeky bitch," Sting scowled as Harry laughed before his-- Lily's-- eyes turned serious again.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Oh I gave him the helpless, scared little girl routine." Granger said with a light shrug of her thin shoulders. "You know-- 'oh please don't hurt me, please mister, I'm so afraid'." She affected the same sweet, pleading voice she'd begged Greyback with, thick with tears and fear.

"Lacey taught ya tha' one, righ'? 'S' a classic– works ev'ry time." Sting snickered but Harry looked concerned and kept pushing.

"You've got blood on your sleeve, Jane."

"Already?" Granger looked dismayed, "I just got this! Urgh, blood never comes out." The Muggle boy laughed again but Harry looked even more concerned.

"Jane," he said and Severus watched as Granger visibly softened and gave Harry a sad sort of smile.

"It's not the first time someone's tried to grab me. I'm fine, I promise." She said gently. "And he's not going to be bothering anyone again."

Severus gritted his teeth because being attacked like Granger had been today shouldn't be something the child was so used to happening to her that she could just shrug it off like nothing had happened. It made him feel sick to think of what sort of living situation she must be in, to be in that kind of danger.

"What if he survives and reports you to the magic police?" Harry asked anxiously and Severus was once again struck uneasy, this time by the ease in which the boy tossed around the idea of Granger having just killed someone. Granger smirked slightly at Harry, her voice teasing as she answered him.

"Do you really think that pervert would just walk into the Ministry of Magic and turn me in? I can see it now; he goes up to an Auror– the magic police– and tells them 'so I just attacked a little girl in a dark alley and I was going to fuck her raw but she slit my throat like the pig I am and I'd like to press charges. Will you kindly take care of it?' Is that about how it would go?"

"Probably," Harry admitted. "Well, except for the bit where he refers to himself as a pig." He added 'helpfully'. Granger shook her head and sighed.

"Oh why do I bother?"

Severus was thrown by the sarcastic narrative. Truthfully, despite Granger's hardness and unspecified past traumas he hadn't really expected the girl to fully understand Greyback's intentions, but 'fuck her raw' left very little to the imagination, making it explicitly clear that the girl fully understood what she'd just avoided. He needed to learn to stop underestimating the girl. And he really needed to stop thinking about those other men who'd tried to grab her so they could 'fuck
her raw’. Actually, he needed to stop thinking about the absolutely horrifying, sickening possibility that Granger's past trauma involved her being sexually assaulted altogether.

"Didja get anyfing fun in Sketchy Alley?" The Muggle boy asked conversationally.

"What's wrong with the books I got? They're really rare--" Granger started protesting but the boy interrupted her.

"Fucking shit, Janey. Yer such a fuckin' nerd."

"Well we can't all be illiterate thugs!" Granger protested playfully and Severus was reminded of the curiosity of the Muggle boy and Harry both calling her 'Jane'. He also recalled Granger's signature on the reply she'd sent back to Hogwarts a year ago-- H. Jane Granger, she'd signed it. Yet another mystery which was just what he needed in his life.

Severus then had to bite his lip to keep from chuckling when the Muggle boy glanced around, scanning the crowd the same way Granger often did, and his eyes suddenly landed on Lucius.

"Oi, check out blondie! I think tha's th' prettiest man I ever saw!" The grip Lucius had on his cane tightened noticeably and Severus hastily cast a disillusionment charm on himself so that Harry or Granger didn't see and recognize him. That wouldn't do– not when he still needed to find out where they were staying.

Harry gave Lucius a thoughtful look. "Does he remind you of--?"

"Draco?" Granger interrupted him, "he should. That's Lucius Malfoy; Draco's father, James." She added, and Harry blinked while Severus found himself immediately enraged, scowling furiously.

James. She'd just called Harry James. Forcing himself to think rationally before sinking into his rage, Severus went over what he'd just learned in his head. 'Sting' was obviously a nickname. Hermione Granger was being referred to by 'Jane'– her middle name. Harry's choice of the name 'James' was in all probability the boy copying Granger and using his middle name as his... his code name?

"We've spent enough time here," Granger said briskly, "we should get going if we want to get back before it's dark."

"Or we could catch us a cab," Sting grinned, looking unusually excited at the prospect. "Now tha' we got some actual money an' shit."

"Is that what you were doing back in the bank?" Granger asked curiously and Harry blushed.

"I've got this pile of gold I'll never need and I-- I wanted to-- to help out Sting and Glitter and the others." He mumbled. Sting clapped Harry on the back.

"Gotta luv 'is bleedin' heart," he grinned. "Now how 'bout we go an' catch ourselves tha' cab, yeah?"

"It's barely an hour's walk back," Granger said sharply, "we don't need a bloody cab!"

"Bu' a cab'll be quicker," Sting complained.

"This is why Pike will put someone else in charge of the money when James and I leave." Granger informed the boy. "Maybe Cat– she's good with math."
"Bu' she's just a kid," Sting protested.

"She's fourteen, Sting, and she's been working street corners for around a year and a half now. She's hardly a child." Granger said like there was nothing wrong with what she'd just said when it was actually horrifying. What kind of living environment had the poor child grown up in to consider a fourteen year old prostituting herself as *normal*?

"Come on, you two," Harry interrupted them sounding amused, "cab or not we do need to get going before it gets dark." Sting and Granger looked unblinking at each other until Sting let out a loud, theatrical groan.

"Fine!" He conceded to defeat with poor grace, throwing his arms up in the air, "have yer way, ya Majesty!" Granger looked triumphant.

"Let's get going, then."

Severus, dropping the disillusion once the three were a safe distance away, started following them as Lucius kept pace beside him looking entertained.

The three children walked into the Leakey Cauldron and he followed only to stop short. He couldn't see them anywhere. He blinked in shock as Lucius voiced his thoughts. "Where in Salazar's name did they just disappear?" his old friend asked, raising a slim eyebrow and looking surprised. Severus ground his teeth together.

"They can't be far." He said grimly as he prepared to find the little brats and wring their necks when he did.

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*Harry's POV:*

Harry watched Snape's expression turn from puzzled to annoyed to downright pissed in less then five seconds. He snickered softly and beside him he could see Hermione bite back her own smile. Sting looked more bored then anything, obviously not appreciating have to crouch down in the corner of the small court yard with the three of them packed tighter then sardines so they could all hide under the Invisibility Cloak.

"Good spotting." Hermione murmured to the older boy who gave her a cocky grin.

"Us Muggle people do 'ave our uses, ya know." Harry had to bite his tongue to stop from cracking up; both from the smug look on the older boy's face and the thought that a Muggle had just outwitted Snape.

Turns out that Sting and Hermione had worked out a system for when they were robbing people on the streets. Different gestures meant different things and Sting had given Hermione the sign that he thought they might have been followed.

And, as it turned out, Sting had been right. The moment they'd stepped into the small courtyard outside the Leakey Cauldron Hermione had thrown the Invisibility Cloak over them while Sting clapped a hand over Harry's mouth before he could say anything and pulled him backwards. "We got ourselves a shadow." He'd whispered and Harry had been puzzled for a few seconds then downright shocked when he saw Snape stride through the entrance, the professor obviously on a mission with the elder Malfoy following beside him looking much more relaxed.
"How did you know?" he whispered and Sting grinned.

"I saw 'im make 'imself go invisible when I pointed out blondie. When blondie started followin' us, I took a guess."

"Sting has good instincts," Hermione murmured, smirking as she watched Snape give a frustrated sound and turn to talk to Lucius in a low voice. Lucius looked more amused than anything, something that, by the looks of it, was only adding to Snape's ire.

"How long do you think we're going to have to wait here?" Harry wondered aloud.

"Make yourself comfortable, James. We're going to be here for at least an hour." Hermione said dryly before pulling one of the books she got from Knockturn Alley out of her satchel. Harry looked at the writing and his eyes widened in surprise.

"That's Parselscript!"

"Brilliant deduction," Hermione said without even looking up from the text. "Why do you think I had to go into Knockturn to get it?"

"Good point." Harry sighed before leaning back slightly to take the weight of the balls of his feet and to put him into a better position to read over Hermione's shoulder. Sting muttered something under his breath about 'fucking nerds' and Harry bit back a smile.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Sadly, the average age of female children going into prostitution is twelve to fourteen years old and a majority of them are either homeless or runaways or– which is even more horrifying, in a way– forced by their parents in trade for rent, drugs, money, etc. I'm NOT saying the average age of all women going into prostitution is twelve to fourteen– that's closer to nineteen/twenty. I'm talking specifically about CHILDREN who get involved in prostitution. Underage prostitution is a very real and very horrifying thing and it happens everywhere, not just in overseas countries that you hear about on the news.
Chapter XI:

Harry's POV:

All too soon September 1st had rolled around and Harry and Hermione bid Sting, Hornet, Glitter and the others all farewell before getting up at an ungodly hour to make the journey to Little Whinging. Harry was sad about the summer being over, something he'd never thought was possible, but at the same time he was excited about heading back to Hogwarts.

They reached Privet Drive at around nine in the morning and Hermione donned the Invisibility Cloak before they walked up to the front door. They'd decided Hermione appearing out of nowhere would give the biggest shock factor should the Dursleys have decided to make things difficult.

Taking a slow breath, Harry knocked on the door and prepared himself for the shouting only to take several hasty steps back when it wasn't Uncle Vernon or Aunt Petunia or even Dudley who opened the door.

"P-professor?" he stammered. Snape's lips curled into a somewhat sardonic smile.

"Mr. Potter. Why don't you come in? You too, Miss Granger." Behind him, Hermione shimmered into existence as she pulled off the invisibility cloak. Her face was the picture of politeness as she stared up at their Head of House.

"Certainly, sir." She said prodding Harry's back. Nervously, Harry stumbled slightly before walking into the house.

"Living room." Snape ordered and Harry obeyed in somewhat of a daze. Snape here, in Privet Drive, was... unbelievably bizarre. Had he finally lost it? He wondered.

He rounded the corner and stopped suddenly, Hermione almost crashing into him. The three Dursleys were sitting on the sofa, their faces terrified. His school trunk was neatly laid out in the middle of the floor and Hedwig's cage was sitting next to it. "Sit down, Mr. Potter, Miss Granger." Snape said in a voice that expected to be obeyed.

Harry hastily walked over to the nearest couch and sat down, praying he wasn't in too much trouble. Hermione sat next to him, tucking her legs up under her chin and leaning into him, tangling one of her hands with his.

::Remember Harry, innocent until proven guilty:: she hissed quietly, just loud enough for him to hear ::don't tell them anything:: He nodded and worried his lower lip with his teeth as he waited anxiously for what was going to happen next.

"So, Tuney, I believe you and your pathetic excuse for a family owe Mr. Potter here something." Snape said in that dangerous, sibilant voice of his. It took Harry a moment to figure out that when Snape said "Tuney" he was referring to Aunt Petunia.

Petunia glared at Snape, her hands clenched into fists at her sides. "I'll never know what she saw in you, Snape!" she spat angrily and Snape just raised an eyebrow.
"Not quite. Try again." He drawled, tapping his wand against his thigh in a somewhat threatening manner. Petunia took several rapid deep breaths before turning to Harry with a look of absolute loathing on her face.

"We're very sorry for the way we treated you earlier this holidays," she said, her voice stiff, "and we're happy to have you back here next summer." Harry wondered whether he should make the most of this rare opportunity but instead he just nodded.

"Now that that's sorted, Mr. Potter collect your belongings. Miss Granger, I trust you have yours with you?" Snape raised an eyebrow seeing her carrying only a satchel.

"Everything's in here, sir." Hermione said, her tone even and a polite smile still in place. A smile that curved into something much less polite and much more wolf-like as she met Uncle Vernon's eyes. The scar on his uncle's face was half hidden among the fat folds, a livid line of shiny pink marking his first and only strike. Harry bit back an inappropriate smile as his uncle shrank away from his best friend and looked back at Snape who was sneering.

"Then I believe it is time for us leave this atrocity Tuney has the misfortune of calling a home along with her equally unfortunate family." Snape shot his furious, flushing aunt a mocking sneer then turned on his heel and marched off towards the– er... kitchen?– his robes billowing out behind him. Harry exchanged a wary look with Hermione then grabbed the handle of his trunk.

Hermione picked up Hedwig's cage, and her gaze flicked over to the Dursleys. "See you next summer." She told them in a mockingly sweet voice that made Uncle Vernon shudder before following their Head of House. Biting back another inappropriate grin, Harry followed her without even sparing a glance to his relatives.

Once he entered the kitchen, Snape flicked his wand at Harry's trunk and it quickly shrank to the size of a matchbox. "Put that in your pocket." He ordered and Harry did as he was told, Snape repeating the spell on the birdcage which Hermione slipped into her satchel. Harry then watched cautiously as Snape's sharp gaze swept around the kitchen before settling on one of Petunia's favorite vases, his dark eyes lighting up with a sort of gleeful malice. "Portus." His professor cast and the vase glowed bright blue.

"Oh hell, your bitch-aunt is going to be so pissed, Harry." Hermione said, wickedly amused. He turned to her for explanation at the same time as Snape drawled,

"You're quite fortunate, Miss Granger, that term hasn't started yet or I'd be forced to take points off my own House for your vulgar language." The professor's tone was admonishing but he was smirking back at Hermione, obviously agreeing with what she'd just said.

"Er– why is Aunt Petunia going to be mad?" Harry asked a bit timidly, feeling out of the loop.

"You'll see." Hermione grinned and he narrowed his eyes at her.

"I remember what happened the last time you said that." He said suspiciously. "I had to hide the fact I'd grown a tail from my dorm-mates for nearly a week!" Hermione's face as she looked back at him was one of picture perfect innocence.

"I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about, Harry dear."

"Children," Snape interrupted them and Harry flushed slightly though he was relieved to see that his Head of House looked more amused then anything. "I don't have all day. Now touch the vase." Harry swallowed nervously but held out his hand to touch his finger against the still glowing vase.
Hermione did the same, her eyes shining with that gleam they got when she was about to experience or attempt some new magic. "Three, two, one–" Harry let out a yelp as an incredibly unpleasant sensation of a hook behind his navel jerked him up and then there was light and colors and– and– and– and he was toppling onto the ground, landing face-down in an ungraceful heap.

"Oww," he moaned, turning his body so he was lying on his back. His best friend smirked down at him, standing fully balanced with not a hair out of place. Next to her, a glitter of amusement in those dark, dark eyes, Snape was also looking down at him with a raised eyebrow. Harry managed to notice through his dizziness that they'd landed beside the gargoyle guarding Dumbledore's office.

"No time for laying about, Mr. Potter," Snape drawled, "the Headmaster wishes to have a word with you."

Instantly, Hermione tensed and turned to face Snape. "I'm going with him." Her voice left no room for argument.

"The Headmaster will have heard our arrival and he wishes to see you both... privately. Mr. Potter first." Snape appeared to be choosing his words deliberately and Hermione's eyes narrowed as she picked up whatever subtle message Snape seemed to be trying to get across.

"Can I say goodbye to Harry then, sir?" she asked, sugary sweet. Snape gave her an approving nod and stepped back, turning away. Instantly, Hermione was helping him get to his feet and then her arms were wrapped around him as if she was hugging him and her lips were pressed against his ear.

::Do not look him in the eye, tell him it doesn't matter where you spent the summer and say we met this morning as per an arrangement we made on the train and decided to go to your Aunt's house to pick up your things together:: she hissed so quietly that even with her mouth right next to his ear he could only just make out her words.

"Wh–" he started to ask but she interrupted him by digging her fingernails into his ribs, over one of the bruises she'd left during their sparring.

::Dumbledore is listening. He has eavesdropping spells in place:: She hissed at him almost noiselessly. He nodded.

"Alright. I'll see you after." He said stepping back and giving her what he hoped was a convincing smile. She smiled back but her eyes were like shards of glass and she was doing that smile that showed all her teeth. Even though Harry knew her anger wasn't directed at him he was still intimidated by that look.

She was scary– brilliant, but scary.

"Wait here, Miss Granger." Snape told Hermione and she nodded stiffly, eyes sharp enough to cut. "Follow me, Mr. Potter."

Harry numbly followed after his Head of House, up the revolving staircase and then into the office that Dumbledore lorded over. It took a lot of willpower to keep the loathing he felt for the Headmaster off his face and as the old man beamed at him that loathing started growing, hatred twisting up alongside it. Carefully, Harry fixed his gaze so it was directed at the wall beside the manipulative bastard.

"Harry, you gave us all quite a scare!" the Headmaster exclaimed, shaking his head like Harry was some kind of wayward child. "My dear boy, I must ask that you never leave the care of your
relatives again when not at Hogwarts. It is only in your home that the Blood Wards can protect you."

Harry didn't say anything, still carefully not making eye contact. Dumbledore's twinkling blue eyes narrowed. "Where were you this summer, Harry?" he asked, his voice a lot sterner now.

"It doesn't matter, sir." He said flatly.

"It is very important that I know, Harry. You had a lot of people very worried. Now, were you with Miss Granger?"

"No, sir."

"Is there a reason why you won't look at me, Harry?" Dumbledore asked "gently" and Harry stiffened further.

"No, sir." He bit out.

"Then you won't mind repeating your answer while looking me in the eye?" Dumbledore pressed and a brief flare of panic caused him to sharply inhale– something that the Headmaster picked up on. "Look me in the eye, Mr. Potter." It was no longer a request: it was an order.

Seeing no way around it, Harry tried to remember everything Hermione had taught him about Occlumency and warily looked up into the Headmaster's twinkling blue eyes. Immediately he felt a pressure in his head and he sucked in another sharp breath and tried to clear away his emotions. His meager barriers held up for around five seconds before collapsing.

Pure panic overtook Harry in that moment as his mind was suddenly free for the Headmaster to plunder– and then something bizarre happened. It felt like something moved in his mind and then Dumbledore was being forced out of his head, new Occlumency barriers standing tall and strong in his mind. Impenetrable.

What?

Shocked, Harry stumbled back slightly and blinked several times. Then an unbidden smile crossed his face and he looked back up, meeting the Headmaster's gaze this time with confidence. "I believe you wanted me to say 'no, sir'." He said in a confident voice. "Is there anything else?"

Dumbledore's face was clear of all emotion as the old man nodded at him. "You may go, Harry. Please send up Miss Granger." Harry didn't even nod, just turned and walked back down the revolving staircase as quickly as he could without appearing like he was running off. What had happened? He wondered. Where had those Occlumency barriers come from?

Seeing Hermione's worried look he gave a quick nod and then hugged her so he could whisper his own message. "He tried reading my mind but something strange happened and he couldn't. I'll tell you about it later." Hermione nodded wordlessly then smiled. It was a dark smile that screamed of bloodlust and revenge and as she made her way up the spiral staircase on silent feet he could see murder in the lines of her face.

So brilliant but so, so scary.

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Voldemort's POV:

Voldemort let out a low hiss as Potter's panic flooded through the back of his mind, half drowning him. Sweet Salazar, what was the boy doing? He wondered trying and failing to convince himself that this occurrence displeased him when in fact the opposite was true. Using the link between them was one of his favorite pastimes these days, seeing as he had absolutely nothing else to do while he was creating his new body and all the while getting flashes of just how utterly and unbearably happy Potter had been.

He waited patiently as Potter's panic grew and grew until the link opened fully and he was in Potter's mind. The second he was in there, though, he knew something was very, very wrong. There was a foreign presence in Potter's mind— and an unwelcome one at that.

Another low hiss escaped his lips, this one furious as Voldemort pushed the invading presence out of Potter's head and built new Occlumency shields in the boy's mind, strong ones that could withstand any Legilimency attack.

It was just before he was pushed back out of Potter's mind that he got a look at the invading Legilimens. He started laughing as he was pushed back into his/Quirrell's own body, genuinely amused by what he'd seen.

He thought that persuading Potter would be a challenge, the boy had so many more morals then Hermione Granger and seemed to depend on her to commit any Darker acts, but the Headmaster was just making this all too easy for him.

Trying to invade Potter's mind like that— would the old man never learn? Harry Potter was His now. Harry Potter's mind, his thoughts, his memories, they all belonged to Lord Voldemort; unknowingly signed over to him by the boy himself the moment he and Hermione's Granger handed over the Stone. Voldemort knew, had known as soon as he'd made that Oath, that he would never be able to them go.

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Severus's POV:

"You just made a serious miscalculation there, Albus." Severus' voice was cold as he addressed the Headmaster.

"I needed to know Severus," Albus shook his head, "but that... I have never encountered that before." Curiosity getting the better of him, Severus arched an eyebrow.

"Well, old man? Are you going to get around to actually telling the class?" he asked sarcastically.

"He tried putting up barriers but they were of no consequence and I was inside his mind but then... he pushed me out and the barriers he put up– I could not break them," Albus shook his head in disbelief. "It should not be possible."

"Miss Granger is quite the student," Severus drawled, "I'd not be surprised if she had something to do with it."

"I think I'll take that as a compliment, sir." Granger spoke from behind him, sounding amused. He swore internally, wondering how in the seven hells she'd managed to sneak up on him.
Granger had a smirk on her face like she knew exactly the sort of reaction she had just caused in him and he tried to scowl but it came out a lot more like a proud smirk. She was good, his little star Slytherin.

"I hope this doesn't take too long, sir." Granger said, except she was suddenly using the sweet little girl voice she had with Greyback and it felt like in the space of a blink the hard-eyed, coldly furious Hermione Granger had vanished and been replaced by a delicate little girl with long, curly hair, big innocent doe eyes and a childish earnestness on her face. "You see," she said, sweet sincerity in her voice as she looked up at Dumbledore with shy eyes, "Harry says he suddenly came down with a headache so I told him if I take too long he should go to the Hospital Wing and lay down. And because the headache was so sudden and out of the blue I told him and Harry agreed that he should ask Madam Pomphrey to take a look at him and figure out if there's a specific cause."

Perfect innocence on that deceptively young, sweet face. Hermione Granger was undeniably brilliant and she was running the Headmaster's face in it, taunting him by doing absolutely nothing.

Severus had to fight the urge to laugh at the position Granger had just backed Albus into. Madam Pomphrey would be able to tell in a heartbeat that someone had forced their way into Harry's mind and she'd be absolutely furious at Albus. Add to that the fact it was technically not legal and that Harry could press charges if he so wished, a fact Miss Granger seemed fully aware of...

Brilliant. Just brilliant. She was a delight.

"Well with Harry's best interests at heart, let's make this quick." Albus smiled down at the now second year student as they all pretended they weren't fully aware of the fact that the thirteen-year-old child had just completely outmaneuvered him.

"You have questions?" Granger asked, shedding the innocent child act, face as cold as her voice as she arched an eyebrow and curled her lip. The urge to laugh almost doubled in intensity as Severus watched his student pull off a move he recognized as his own. And she did a good job of it too.

"Was Harry with you this summer?"

"No, sir."

"Did you see him at all this summer?"

"No, sir."

"Did you write to him at all this summer?"

"No, sir."

"How did you come to be together this morning?"

"Pre-arranged meeting at the end of last year, sir." Granger answered with perfect poise and control. "Is that all?"

"Miss Granger," Albus began, his face stern, before he stopped as Granger took an exaggerated look at her bare wrist as if she was checking the time on a watch. "You may go, Miss Granger." The Headmaster's voice was not friendly and neither was Granger's smile as she turned and left.

Severus bit back a sigh. She was undeniably a delight but she did make his life difficult.
Hermione's POV:

"So, how did it go?" Harry asked once they were in the Slytherin Common Room, well out of the way of any of the headmaster's eavesdropping charms.

"I found it quite satisfying," Hermione answered with a smirk, "I got the rare pleasure of blackmailing our illustrious headmaster. Basically I said that he had to let me go back to you or I'd get him pulled up on charges for invading the mind of a minor under his care. But enough about that for now, we can gloat later– you said something strange happened?"

"Yeah," Harry said with a frown, "the headmaster pushed past my Occlumency walls easily and I was panicking and then suddenly it felt like there was something... something else in my head and it forced Dumbledore out and there were suddenly these really, really strong Occlumency barriers in my head that didn't fall until a few minutes after I left his office."

Hermione tilted her head and frowned as examined Harry, noticing how he kept rubbing his scar. "Does your head hurt?" she asked him and he paused his movements.

"It's not my head, it's my scar... but it doesn't hurt it just feels kind of strange." He said.

"Your scar links you to Voldemort– do you think that he could have been that foreign presence in your mind?" She asked in alarm and Harry gave a sort of half shudder.

"God, I hope not. That's just... creepy."

"I agree," she said before pausing. "Though if it was him he did just save you– and all our secrets."

"But does that mean he can read my mind and stuff?" Harry asked anxiously.

"I don't know," Hermione murmured, thinking hard. "Whatever link it is between the both of you seems to be two way– you can sense when he's near and it's likely that he can slip into your mind. Do you think you could try getting into his?"

"Getting inside Voldemort's head is a very scary idea," Harry shuddered, "but... I could try, I guess? How would I do it, anyway?"

"I'll do some--"

"Research," Harry finished her sentence for her, a grin on his face. She rolled her eyes at him.

"Immature much?" She sniped and he just laughed and slung an arm around her shoulder.

"Just a little bit."

Seeing as they had a few hours before the rest of the student body arrived, Hermione made the most out of the time by unpacking everything, letting Iago go off to find Mrs. Norris, the love of his life, and then settled down on one of the leather armchairs with one of the Parseltongue books.

The book was full of bizarre and interesting facts, like how wards created and spells cast in Parseltongue could only be undone by those who could speak Parseltongue and how there were certain spells that were strengthened when cast in the snake tongue but other spells that were weakened or made downright ineffective.
Harry laid down on the couch with his head on her lap, dozing. ::Lazy:: she hissed and he snickered, not even bothering to open his eyes.

"What sort of mischief do you think we should get up to this year?" he wondered aloud.

"None, I hope." Drawled Snape as he stepped through the enchanted wall that led to the Slytherin Common Room. Hermione had to laugh at deer in headlight's look on Harry's face as his eyes flew open in horror.

"I'll do my best to keep him in line, sir." She told the professor, running her fingers through Harry's wayward hair. He'd decided he liked it longer and had kept his nearly long enough to brush against the collar of his school shirt.

"A difficult task but I suppose you are one of my more gifted students." Snape allowed.

"Was there anything you wanted to address with us, professor?" she asked, her mouth twitching into a smile.

"The headmaster has requested that I push you for details pertaining to your whereabouts this holidays. Naturally, I shall tell him I was unsuccessful in my endeavor which leads to the second reason I'm here." Snape paused for a moment which piqued her curiosity. "The headmaster doesn't wish to alarm you with the details but I feel that you should be forewarned." He said slowly.

"Forewarned is forearmed." Hermione murmured, her eyes sharp as they met the professor's.

"Mr. Potter, Miss Granger... the Dark Lord is not as vanquished as most believe," Snape appeared to be choosing his words carefully, "I agree that the headmaster should have approached the matter differently but the fact is his rash, foolish actions were based on his fear for your safety, especially with the signs pointing towards the idea that the Dark Lord may be growing in strength."

Hermione was honestly surprised that Snape had chosen to share as much as he had with them as she'd expected the headmaster to avoid telling Harry anything until the last possible minute if what she'd heard of the prophecy so far was anything to go by.

"Could you find us, Professor Snape?" Harry spoke up, surprising her slightly as he usually let her do the talking when it came to situations like this. "Could Dumbledore or anyone else find us?"

"While you were in the Muggle world, no." Snape answered slowly.

"Then what makes you think that Vol-- You Know Who or any of his followers could have found us? After all, everyone says that Dumbledore is even more powerful then the Dark Lord." Harry pointed out and Hermione couldn't help her surge of pride-- Harry really was growing up to be quite the Slytherin!

Snape's mouth quirked into a smile at that. "Indeed. Mr. Potter, Miss Granger; the welcome back feast will be starting in just under an hour. I expect to see you both there."

"Of course, sir." Hermione smiled as she watched Snape leave. Once the professor had gone, she looked down at Harry and ruffled his hair affectionately. ::look at you, all grown up!:: she teased and he rolled his eyes.

"Har, har, har."
"Why weren't you guys on the train?" Draco demanded, as he sat across from them, at the Slytherin table. The hall was filling up and everyone was talking and shouting and laughing excitedly. Hermione smirked at their friend's indignant expression while Harry full on laughed.

"Yes, we missed you too." Harry told the blonde who scowled even harder, crossing his arms.

"Ignore the princess," Blaise rolled his eyes at Draco before smiling across at them, "did you two enjoy your summer?"

"It was brilliant," Harry said instantly and she smiled back at Blaise as she agreed with Harry.

"One of my best."

"Let me guess, you spent the whole time together?" Theo asked dryly.

"We just finished explaining to our illustrious headmaster how that wasn't the case at all." Hermione said with a sweet smile.

"So basically you barely left each other's side." Blaise summed up and Hermione smirked at him but didn't confirm it.

"What about you guys? How did your summers go?" Harry asked and Hermione listened to the three other boys all talk about what they'd done over the holidays, fully aware of the blue eyes boring into the side of her skull. "He's staring at us, isn't he?" Harry murmured quietly to her.

"Oh, yes." She snorted.

Eventually McGonagall led in a line of nervous looking first years and Hermione watched mostly disinterested– that was, until her gaze settled on a pale girl with long, dirty blonde hair and a dreamy look on her face.

"Hm," she mused, head tilted slightly as she watched "Lovegood, Luna" drift towards the hat while humming softly and appearing to be completely unaware of the sea of students watching her.

"D'you think she's a, you know, a kindred spirit?" Harry asked, softly, examining Luna.

"I don't think so," Hermione said, quietly, "not yet, anyway, but she's halfway there." As the hat shouted 'RAVENCLAW', Hermione felt a wave of disappointment flow through her. "Pity," she sighed. If the girl had been a Slytherin she'd have been able to observe her more closely.

The rest of the sorting passed quickly with Hermione scowling at the latest Weasley was sorted into Gryffindor, this one a girl. Her ire only grew as "Weasley, Ginevra" looked over at Harry with pink cheeks, a look in her eyes that Hermione recognized only too well– the stupid little girl had a crush on Harry.

She could already tell what an annoyance that was going to be. Weasleys.
Chapter XII:

Harry's POV:

The morning after the Welcome Feast, Harry rose early like he always did and met a fully dressed Hermione who was waiting, somewhat impatiently, for him in the Common Room. "You're late." She informed him.

"And yet I'm still here before pretty much every other student in Slytherin." He reminded her and she sighed noisily even as a fond smile tugged at the corners of her mouth.

Together they made their way to the Great Hall where the four long House tables were already laden with tureens of porridge, plates of kippers, mountains of toast and dishes of eggs and bacon. Harry buttered himself up some toast, knowing that his stomach would need time to adjust to the rich foods provided by Hogwarts, and Hermione propped open a copy of 'Curses and Countercurses: When To Use Them' against a milk jug.

"That wasn't on the booklist." He noted and she pulled a face. "It's not like we're going to learn anything from the crap Lockhart assigned us." Harry nodded in agreement at the same time as Snape approached them.

"Mr. Potter, Miss Granger," he said and two of the schedules from the pile levitating behind him shot out and landed in front of their respective owners.

"Thank you, sir." Hermione smiled and Harry echoed her words. Snape nodded and started to walk away before pausing and looking back.

"I advise keeping your voice down in the future, Miss Granger. Not everyone will support your opinions as wholeheartedly as I do... at least not right away." Their Head of House said smoothly before continuing on his way.

"See, he thinks Lockhart's a fraud too." Hermione pointed out. Harry rolled his eyes and finished off his toast before looking at his schedule.

"We've got double Transfiguration first, then Herbology, then-- oh no," he groaned, "Double DADA with the Gryffindors." Hermione pulled a face.

"I swear, this year I'm not taking any of their crap. One stupid comment from Weasley and his parents will have two daughters not one." She muttered.

"I saw the Weasley girl during the sorting- Genevieve, right?" he recalled from the night before.

"Ginevra." Hermione said her expression rapidly darkening. Harry thought about asking what the Weasley girl had done already to piss off his best friend without even speaking to her then decided against it.

"If we get to Transfiguration early we can make sure we're seated away from the front." He suggested instead and Hermione nodded, standing up and stashing her book back into her satchel which was hitched, as always, over her shoulder.
Transfiguration was okay. McGonagall and Hermione still appeared to absolutely loathe each other but the Deputy Headmistress was forced to reluctantly award Slytherin five points when Hermione transfigured her beetle into a button on her first try.

Personally, Harry was pleased to find he was the third in the class to accomplish it as he'd never had Hermione's natural skill at the subject– after all, Hermione was most probably the youngest Animagus in history!

Herbology was interesting enough as they were introduced to a species of plant called Mandrakes. Harry found them really quite fascinating, screaming baby-shaped plants whose cries were fatal to anyone who heard them. He wondered morbidly if he could steal one to take home to the Dursleys...

They ate lunch with the boys then went outside into the overcast courtyard where Hermione helped Draco and Blaise practice their Transfiguration, as at the end of the lesson Draco's button still had six wiggling legs and Blaise's stubbornly kept its antennae, while Harry and Theo talked about Quidditch.

It was near the end of lunch that Harry became aware that he was being closely watched. Looking up, he saw a small, mousey-haired boy staring at him as though transfixed. The boy had a Gryffindor tie on and was clutching what looked like an ordinary Muggle camera. The moment Harry looked at him he went bright red.

"H-hi Harry, I'm– I'm Colin Creevey," he said, somewhat breathlessly, taking a tentative step forward. "I- d'you think– would it be all right- if– can I have a picture?" he asked, raising the camera hopefully.

"A picture?" Harry repeated dumbly.

"So I can prove I've met you," said Colin Creevey eagerly, edging further forward. "I know all about you. Everyone's told me. About how you survived when You-Know-Who tried to kill you and how he disappeared and everything and how you've still got a lightning scar on your forehead and a boy in my dormitory said if I develop the film in the right potion then the pictures'll move." Colin drew a great shuddering breath of excitement and opened his mouth as if to continue, but Hermione interrupted.

"Actually– Colin, was it?" As Colin nodded, she gave a sharp-edged smile and continued, "I think you should get lost– right now– before my patience runs out and I turn that camera into a spider." Her voice grew more and more menacing until Colin gave a scared squeak and turned and ran.

"That was a bit mean," Harry noted, though he was smiling slightly. Hermione shrugged.

"Speaking of stupid Gryffindors, we've got DADA next." Hermione said with a scowl, "which means we're going to have to not only deal with two hours of listening to an incompetent fraud droning on about himself but also have to put up with Weasley and his moronic friends. And I'd so enjoyed not having to listen to his pathetic whining."

Harry and the boys laughed at the expression on Hermione's face as they stood up and made their way towards their final lesson for the day. Choosing seats at the back of the classroom, Harry
pulled out all his course books and piled them up on the corner of his desk. Beside him, Hermione refused to even take Lockhart's books out of her satchel— in fact, Harry was pretty sure she hadn't even brought them to the class. Instead she was getting started on the two foot long Transfiguration essay McGonagall had assigned them.

Theo let out a sound of amusement as he looked across at her. "I never thought I'd see the day where Hermione didn't give her hundred percent in a class." He teased and Hermione shot him a glare that just amused him further.

After the rest of the class had arrived, Ron Weasley shooting his customary glare in Harry's direction, Lockhart cleared his throat loudly several times and silence eventually fell. Hermione didn't even look up from her essay, her quill scratching noisily across the parchment. Harry tried not to laugh.

At the front of the room, Lockhart had reached forward and picked up Neville Longbottom's copy of 'Travels with Trolls', in order to hold it up to show his own winking portrait on the front. "Me," he said, pointing at it and winking as well. "Gilderoy Lockhart, Order of Merlin Third Class, Honorary Member of the Dark Force Defense League and five-time winner of Witch Weekly's Most-Charming-Smile-Award— but I don't talk about that."

"Could have fooled me," Hermione muttered without even looking up. All those in hearing range had to choke back a laugh.

"After all," Lockhart continued on, "I didn't get rid of the Bandon Banshee by smiling at her!" He paused, obviously waiting for them to laugh and a few people just smiled weakly. "I see you've all bought a complete set of my books—well done. I thought we'd start today with a little quiz. Nothing to worry about; just to check how well you've read them, how much you've taken in—"

He sent the test papers floating down the middle of the aisle and once everyone had one he gave them a big smile and said, "You have thirty minutes— start— now!"

Harry looked down at his paper and read:

1. What is Gilderoy Lockhart's favorite color?

2. What is Gilderoy Lockhart's secret ambition?

3. What, in your opinion, is Gilderoy Lockhart's greatest achievement to date?

On and on it went, over three sides of paper, right down to:

54. When is Gilderoy Lockhart's birthday, and what would his idea gift be?

"Is this a joke?" He asked incredulously.

"I'm starting to think Hermione's right." Theo groaned, "the idiot is... Merlin, he's something else entirely!"

"You're only just starting to think I'm right?" Hermione asked, looking up from her halfway done essay to give Theo her own incredulous look. "How long have you known me again?"

"Point taken." Theo nodded, "are you actually going to do it?"

"Of course not. I'm not wasting my time on something as ridiculous as that." Hermione said disdainfully before returning to her essay. Harry traded a look with Theo before pulling out a piece
of parchment and a quill.

"Hangman?" he suggested. A moment's pause, then--

"I dibs going first."

Half an hour later, Lockhart collected the papers and rifled through them in front of the class. "Tut, tut-- hardly any of you remembered that my favorite color is lilac. I say so in 'Year with the Yeti'. And a few of you need to read 'Wanderings with Werewolves' more carefully-- I clearly state in chapter twelve that my ideal birthday girl would be harmony between all magic and non-magic people--though I wouldn't say no to a large bottle of Odgen's Old Firewhiskey!"

He gave them another roguish wink and the class seemed split in two with the boys all either shaking in silent laughter or staring at Lockhart with expressions of disbelief on their faces and most of the girls listening with rapt attention with only a handful of Slytherin girls who seemed in complete agreement with Hermione.

"Oh dear," Lockhart clicked his tongue and looked most disapproving as he reached their test papers, "some of you don't appear to have read my books at all! You haven't managed to fill in any of the answers!"

"Oh I'd dreadfully sorry, sir," Hermione said, a sardonic smile on her face that Snape himself would be proud of, "but my sense of self-preservation just would not allow me to even touch any of your books lest I die of absolute and utter boredom."

There was dead silence for a moment and then half the class cracked up, no longer able to keep their laughter silent. Harry's eyes were watering he was laughing so hard and Lockhart's expression was most put out.

"I think," he said, speaking over the laughter, "that you'll change your mind most quickly after this! It is my job to arm you against the foulest creatures known to wizardkind! You may find yourselves facing your worst fears in this room. Know only that no harm can befall you whilst I am here."

"I highly doubt that," Hermione scoffed, and Lockhart continued his little speech, pretending not to hear her.

"All I ask is that you remain calm." He said, gravely as he bent down behind his desk and lifted a large, covered cage onto it. In spite of himself, Harry leaned around his pile of books for a better look at the cage. Lockhart placed a hand on the cover. "I must ask you not to scream," he said in a low voice, "it might provoke them."

As the whole class, barring Hermione who still looked scathing, held its breath Lockhart whipped off the cover. "Yes," he said dramatically, "freshly caught Cornish pixies!"

"Well they're not dangerous," Weasley scoffed from the front row and Harry, for once, had to agree with him. The thought of that didn't sit well in his stomach.

"Don't be so sure!" said Lockhart, wagging a finger annoyingly at Weasley. "Devilish tricky little blighters they can be!" Harry surveyed the electric blue, eight inch pixies with an amused look. They sounded like a load of budgies with their high-pitched squeaking and the moment the cover had been removed they had started jabbering and rocketing around, rattling the bars and making bizarre faces at the people nearest them. "Right, then," Lockhart said loudly, "let's see what you make of them now!" And he opened the cage.
Pandemonium ensued.

The pixies shot every direction like rockets, proceeding to wreck the classroom more effectively than a rampaging rhino. They grabbed ink bottles and sprayed the class with them, shredded books and papers, tore pictures from the walls, upended the waste basket, grabbed bags and books and threw them at the windows, smashing them and showering the back row with broken glass. Harry and Theo only narrowly avoided the glass due to a quick wand movement by Hermione that created a shield above them that the glass bounced off. The tables on either side of them weren’t as lucky.

Within minutes, half the class was hiding under their desks and one of the Gryffindors, Neville Longbottom, had been hung from the iron chandelier in the ceiling by the back of his collar.

"Any advice, sir?" Draco yelled out, batting away the bloody blighters that kept coming at him with a copy of 'Voyages with Vampires'.

"Of course!" Lockhart said, rolling up his sleeves and brandishing his wand. "Peskipiksi Pesternomi!" He bellowed.

It had absolutely no effect and one of the pixies seized his wand and threw it out of the window. Lockhart gulped and dived under his own desk, narrowly avoiding being squashed by Longbottom who fell a second later as the chandelier gave way.

The bell rang and there was a mad rush toward the exit. In the relative calm that followed, Lockhart straightened up and caught sight of the handful of Slytherins, including Harry and Hermione, who were almost at the door and said, "Well, I'll ask you there to just nip the rest of them back into their cage." He then swept past them and shut the door quickly behind him.

"Can you believe him?" Draco spluttered incredulously. Hermione's face was dark with annoyance as she pointed her wand at one of the nearest pixies.

"Incendio!" She spat and its screams as it burst into flames were enough to attract the attention of the rest of the pixies. "Get out!" she shouted at them, making a gesture at the window, "get out now or I'll burn you too!"

The pixies might not speak English but Hermione's gestures were quite clear and they all started swarming for the windows, fighting to get out as quickly as they could.

"Brutal," Blaise noted, nudging the corpse of the pixie she'd burned with the toe of his shoe. Theo and Draco looked impressed.

"But effective." Hermione shrugged before glancing down at the tiny blackened body and vanishing it with a murmured word and a flick of her wand. "Shall we get going?"

"Definitely." Harry agreed, with a slight shudder as he glanced at the torn off cover of 'Gadding with Ghouls' where a beaming Lockhart was waving merrily at him.

Harry's mood brightened though by the time he'd reached the Slytherin Common Room and saw the notice pinned up on the board.

"Quidditch tryouts?" Draco also perked up beside him, looking excited. "They're scheduled for Friday afternoon! Are you trying out, Harry?" he asked, turning to face him.

Harry scratched behind his ear. "I– I was thinking about it."
"Nonsense," Hermione said in a brisk voice, "there's no thinking about it— he is trying out and he is going to get the Seeker position." Harry blushed at her words and Hermione rolled her eyes. "Honestly, Harry dear, your lack of self-confidence while not surprising is utterly appalling."

"Why is it not surprising?" He asked. Hermione pulled a face.

"One word," she said darkly. "Dursleys. Now hurry up and put your name down so we can go to the library and finish the Transfiguration essay the old crone set us."

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The next week passed at an unbearably slow pace. Harry spent a lot of time dodging out of sight whenever he saw Gilderoy Lockhart coming down a corridor. He also had to deal with the fascination that Colin Creevey had with him— and Creevey wasn't the only one.

Much to Harry's bemusement, the littlest Weasley— Ginevra— seemed to be quite enamored by him. She and Creevey seemed to have memorized his schedule and nothing seemed to give them greater pleasure then trailing after him, watching moon-eyed from a distance. Draco, Blaise and Theo's sniggering was becoming unbearable and Hermione looked more and more pissed off with each incident.

When classes on Friday afternoon finally ended, though, Harry forgot about his annoyance because it was finally time for Quidditch Tryouts.

He joined a group of Slytherins on the edge of the Quidditch Pitch, holding his broom— the one he and Hermione had "acquired" while stealing the Philosopher's Stone— tight and trying to ignore his sweating hands inside the new gloves he'd bought from the Quidditch supply shop in Diagon Alley. Beside him, Draco was holding his highly polished, brand new broom, fine sets of gold lettering spelling the words *Nimbus Two Thousand and One* running up the glossy sides.

Harry listened nervously as Marcus Flint, the Slytherin Quidditch Captain, gave an introduction before splitting them off into groups. "How nervous are you?" Draco whispered, looking anxious.

"I think I might throw up." Harry whispered back.

But the nerves he was feeling, the panic, the anxiety, it all seemed to just flow away as he mounted his broomstick and kicked at the ground, soaring up into the air. Flint put them through a series of training exercises, picking people off one by one and whittling them down until there were only three people left trying out for the Seeker position— Harry, Draco and Terrence Higgs, last year's Seeker.

"No hard feelings, right?" Harry asked Draco nervously.

"Definitely not," Draco assured him and Harry hoped that the blonde would keep his word if Harry did win.

"Okay, this is the final test," Flint barked, holding a small golden ball with wings fluttering lazily on either side— the golden snitch. "I'm looking for three things— skill, technique and aptitude. Even if you're the one who catches the snitch, I'm not guaranteeing you a place on the team."

They all nodded, Harry and Draco looking much more nervous then the relaxed, easy-going Higgs. "Go on the whistle," Flint ordered as he released the snitch. Harry tried to keep his eyes fixed on the golden ball but it quickly vanished. The piercing blast of the whistle nearly made him flinch but he kicked off the ground, flying up into the air.
Hermione's POV:

Hermione watched as Harry circled the pitch like she'd seen Seekers do during Quidditch matches, his head turning from side to side as he scanned around for the small golden ball. He looked nervous but determined and, hands safely hidden in her pockets, Hermione crossed her fingers. "Come on, Harry, come on," she murmured.

For almost ten agonizing minutes, the three wannabe Seekers circled the pitch until Harry suddenly leaned forwards, pointing his broom handle down and diving towards the ground. She bit back the horrified gasp that wanted to escape her as Harry stretched out his hand and caught the madly fluttering small golden ball only a few feet from the ground, just in time for him to pull his broom straight before toppling gently onto the grass.

Theo and Blaise were whistling loudly while Flint was grinned broadly. He strode over and pulled Harry to his feet, giving him a hardy clap on the back. "Excellent job, Potter." He said, "You're going to make a fine Seeker."

Hermione watched with pride as Flint discussed details with Harry before letting him go and Harry walked over to her. "I – I can't believe it." He mumbled and she sighed, rolling her eyes.

"What's the golden rule, Harry?"

"Hermione is always right." Draco, Blaise and Theo chorused from behind them.

"Exactly." Hermione grinned and Harry gave a weak smile.

"That was amazing, mate." Draco said, slinging an arm over Harry's shoulders, his eyes wide. "I thought you were going to break your neck! Slytherin is definitely going to be winning the Quidditch Cup this year!"

Hermione was pleased that Draco didn't seem to be harboring any ill feelings towards Harry's victory over him– instead, the blonde looked impressed. And she didn't blame him; she's almost had a heart attack watching Harry dive like that.

"First practice is tomorrow morning so you better get to sleep early." She told her best friend.

"Yes, mother." Harry replied cheekily and she reached over to cuff him behind the ears.

"Arse," she grumbled and they all laughed.

The next morning rolled around, and Hermione found herself walking with the Slytherin team over to the Quidditch pitch to watch Harry's first training session, holding an apple in her hand and a book tucked under her arm. Iago and Mrs. Norris had decided to join her with Iago strolling on the ground while Mrs. Norris had draped herself over Hermione's shoulders and Hermione had the sneaking suspicion that Mrs. Norris's recent laziness and weight gain wasn't the result of the two cats figuring out how to get into the school kitchens.

As they reached the edge of the pitch, Hermione couldn't help but smirk slightly in wicked expectation as she saw that the Gryffindor Quidditch team had decided that they wanted to practice
this morning too— pity for them that Professor Snape had written a note.

A burly fifth year Gryffindor flew towards the ground, landing hard and staggering slightly. Hermione felt her lip twist into a sneer— this boy, Oliver Wood, was the same one she'd temporarily blinded last year after he'd cursed Harry. He also happened to be the captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch team.

"Flint!" he bellowed, "this is our practice time! We got up specially! You can clear off now!"

Marcus smirked

"Plenty of room for all of us, Wood." He replied.

The Gryffindor Chasers had landed and stood slightly behind their Captain who was positively spitting with rage. "But I booked the field! I booked it!" he shouted.

"Ah," said Flint, "But I've got a specially signed note here from Professor Snape. 'I, Professor S. Snape, give the Slytherin team permission to practice today on the Quidditch field, owing to the need to train their new Seeker.'"

"You've got a new Seeker? Where?" Wood demanded. Harry looked nervous as the Slytherin team parted to reveal them standing there, Harry clutching his broom in his hand.

"Potter." Sneered Wood.

"Wood." Harry returned and Hermione smirked.

"What are you looking so happy about?" Wood snarled at her.

"Just picturing what's going to happen next Quidditch match. I'm sure you've heard about James Potter's incredible talent— and according to Madam Hooch, Harry's a natural. She said she wouldn't be surprised if Harry wound up even better then his father, who was one of the finest Quidditch players the school's ever seen."

Actually, Madam Hooch had said none of this but Wood's face had paled dramatically at her words. "Worried?" She smiled at him, long and slow. "You should be." Wood's face went from white to flushed with fury.

"Shut up, bitch!" He spat at her.

"What did you just call me?" Hermione asked in a low, dangerous voice.

"I called you a bitch. What are you going do? Go running to mummy?" Wood taunted. Hermione went ice-cold with fury.

"My mummy's dead, Wood." She said coldly, ice in her eyes. Wood's eyes widened as he realized he'd just crossed a line, even as Harry whipped out his wand and pointed it at the Gryffindor Captain.

With one shouted word and a loud bang that echoed around the stadium, Wood's front teeth were suddenly growing at an alarming rate, already nearly reaching his chin as the force of the spell sending the fifth year reeling backward onto the grass. The Slytherin team had burst into laughter, even as the Gryffindor's crowded their fallen captain.

"Oliver? Are you alright?" One of the chasers gasped and Wood tried to speak except his oversized teeth got in the way.
"We'll get you for this!" One of the Weasley twins shouted as they both pulled Wood up by the arms and supported him out of the stadium and back up to the castle, the rest of the Gryffindor team not far behind.

"Alright, enough fun," ordered Flint, "Everyone get on your brooms. Practice starts now!"

After watching Harry's Quidditch practice, Hermione spent most of the day with Harry, the pair of them finishing any homework they had due then practicing their Occlumency and a few new nasty spells that they were both itching to try out on Wood.

After dinner, they both returned to the Common Room and socialised with the other Slytherin second years, Hermione teaching Daphne, Tracey and the boys how to play poker and then thoroughly trouncing them.

It was nearly midnight and she was thinking about heading up to bed when she heard it. :: Come... come to me... Let me rip you... Let me tear you... Let me kill you...:: It was a voice, a voice to chill the bone marrow, a voice of breathtaking, ice-cold venom. Hermione basically leapt to her feet while a wide-eyed Harry jerked up into a sitting position from where he was lying on the couch, sniggering as Draco pushed yet another pile of coins towards Hermione.

"Did you hear that?" she asked urgently.

"Hear what?" Blaise asked as he placed his hand of cards facedown on the table.

"Yes," Harry replied, ignoring the curious looks they were getting from the other Slytherins. Hermione grabbed his arm and basically dragged him out of the Slytherin Common Room, pulling the Invisibility Cloak out of her satchel as they went so the instant they were out in the corridor, away from the stares from Blaise, Draco, Theo, Daphne and Tracey, she threw it over them.

"It was in Parseltongue." She whispered.

"Which way did it go?" Harry whispered back.

"I don't know," she replied, frustrated. They both strained their hearing but they couldn't hear anything else.

"What do you think it was?" Harry asked, his voice hushed as they stood there looking at each other. Hermione thought for a moment before answering, letting profanity slip into her speech.

"I think it was a fucking huge snake."
October arrived without any reappearances of the mysterious snake's voice and it was spreading a damp chill over the grounds and into the castle. It rained for days on end, the lake froze, the flowerbeds turned into muddy streams and Hagrid's pumpkins swelled to the size of garden sheds. Students were wandering around smoking at the ears from consuming Madam Pomfrey’s Pepper-Up Potions and Hermione found great amusement in Harry's annoyance about the fact that Marcus Flint still held regular training sessions, come wind, rain, storms and snow.

By the time October 31st arrived, the rest of the school was happily anticipating their Halloween feast; the Great Hall had been decorated with live bats, Hagrid's vast pumpkins had been carved into lanterns large enough for three men to sit in and there were rumours that Dumbledore had booked a troupe of dancing skeletons for entertainment.

At seven o'clock, she and Harry made their way down to the packed Great Hall which was glittering invitingly with gold plates and candles, Iago draped over her shoulders as the tomcat usually was during mealtimes– he enjoyed the food at Hogwarts even more then she did. Hermione had asked Harry if he really wanted to attend a celebratory feast that was held on what also happened to be the day his parents had died and Harry had said he did, looking stubborn as all hell, so she had dropped the subject and hadn't asked him again.

The feast turned out to be everything it had promised to be but Hermione struggled to enjoy herself as she watched Harry's expression grow more and more morose. They'd only been there about an hour before she decided that enough was enough.

"Let's go." She told him and Harry gave her a weak smile.

"Remember that time when you thanked me for knowing what you needed, even though you told me that you were too stubborn to admit it yourself?"

"I do," she said as they stood up and made their way towards the exit.

"Thank you for knowing what I needed even though I said I didn't, Hermione." Harry whispered to her. She just reached out to clasp onto his hand, tangling their fingers together and squeezing gently.

They were in the entrance hall and heading in the direction of the dungeons when they heard it.

:::...Rip... tear...kill...::: It was the same voice, the same cold, murderous voice, the voice of the 'fucking huge snake'.

"Which direction is it coming from?" Harry asked, looking a bit pale.

:::...kill... time to kill...:::

"Upward– it's moving upward." She said, after a moment.

"Come on," Harry urged, "let's find it." They took off, sprinting up the marble staircase to the first
floor. Hermione strained her ears– distantly, from the floor above and growing fainter still, she could still hear the voice.

"...I smell blood... I SMELL BLOOD!"

"I think it's going to kill someone!" Harry said, giving her an alarmed look. Hermione's lips tightened into a thin line, not keen on the idea of running into danger, but she let Harry drag her up the next flight of stairs, taking the steps three at a time. She tried to listen over the sound of their footsteps as they hurtled around the whole of the second floor, Harry not stopping until they turned a corner into the last, deserted passage.

"Look!" He gasped, pointing down the corridor.

Something was shining on the wall ahead. They both approached it cautiously, squinting through the darkness. Foot-high words had been daubed on the wall between two windows, shimmering in the light cast by the flaming torches.

THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS HAS BEEN OPENED

ENEMY OF THE HEIR, BEWARE.

As they edged closer, Harry almost slipped, almost pulling her down after him– there was a large puddle of water on the floor and Hermione only just managed to keep them both standing. He flashed her a quick smile of thanks before they inched toward the message, their eyes fixed on a dark shadow hanging beneath it. Hermione was certain that Harry figured out what it was at the same time as she did as he let out a horrified gasp at the same time as she let out an inarticulate sound of pure fury.

Mrs. Norris was hanging by her tail from the torch bracket. She was stiff as a board, her eyes wide and staring.

"NO!" Hermione snarled, rage and fear warring inside her as she let go of Harry's hand and sprinted forwards. Iago let out a terrible yowl launching himself off her shoulders, dashing ahead.

She barely heard the rumble, as though of distant thunder, that told them that the feast had just ended. She barely heard the hundreds of feet climbing the stairs and the loud, happy talk of well-fed people. She barely even noticed as the noise died suddenly when the people in front spotted the hanging cat.

"No-no-no-no-no," Hermione breathed, reaching out to touch Mrs. Norris.

The cat felt as cold as ice.

Someone shouted through the quiet. "Enemies of the Heir, beware! You'll be next Mudbloods!" Hermione turned for a split second to see who had spoken. Draco had pushed to the front of the crowd, grinning at the sight of the hanging, immobile cat. His grin quickly faded when he saw her face, pale with fury and murder in her eyes, and the cat at her feet. Everyone knew about Hermione Granger's odd relationship with the caretaker and his cat.

And everyone knew just what Hermione Granger was capable of when she was angry.

"What's going on here? What's going on?" Attracted, no doubt, by Malfoy's shout, Hermione watched Argus come shouldering his way through the crowd. The caretaker's eyes met hers, then moved past and saw Mrs. Norris. His expression turned horrified.
"My cat! My cat! What's happened to Mrs. Norris?" he shrieked. He charged the rest of the way, dropping to his knees beside where Mrs. Norris was hanging. Hermione grabbed the caretaker's arm, holding it tight, fiercely holding back her tears.

Hermione had killed before. She had killed more then once. She was used to death, numbed to it. Mostly because there were so few things alive that she cared for.

Mrs. Norris happened to be one of them.

Mrs. Norris, the sweet-natured feline who Iago, the tomcat who'd been Hermione's constant companion for so many years, had chosen as his mate and was pregnant with his kittens.

Dumbledore had arrived on the scene, followed by a number of other teachers. In seconds he had swept past Harry and reached over Argus and Hermione to detach Mrs. Norris from the torch bracket. "Come with me, Argus. You too, Mr. Potter, Miss Granger."

Hermione nodded, eyes glued to the skeletal grey cat whose stomach had started to swell. Argus was as pale as she was, his eyes already red and swollen. Hermione felt almost eerily blank as she followed the headmaster, Harry looking sick and horrified at her side.

They entered the nearest teacher's office– Lockhart's– and Dumbledore laid Mrs. Norris on the polished surface of the fraud's desk and began to examine her, the tip of his long, crooked nose barely an inch from Mrs. Norris's fur. Professor McGonagall was bent almost as close, her eyes narrowed. Snape loomed behind them half in shadow, his face unreadable.

And bloody useless Lockhart was hovering around all of them, making ridiculous suggestions and boasts which Hermione tuned out. Argus was slumped in a chair by the desk, unable to look at Mrs. Norris, his face in his hands as he let out dry, racking sobs, Iago winding his way around the caretaker's ankles and rubbing his scarred, whiskered cheek against his leg. Hermione felt cold.

At last Dumbledore straightened up. "She's not dead, Argus." He said, softly.

"Not dead?" choked Argus, looking through his fingers at Mrs. Norris. "But why's she all– all stiff and frozen?"

"She has been petrified. But how, I cannot say..." Dumbledore then turned to her and Harry. "Miss Granger, Mr. Potter, can I ask how you two managed to find yourselves where you did?"

That's when she snapped, the cold blankness thawed by the wave of fiery, burning emotion as her thin control was shattered to pieces. Hermione knew that she wasn't "right", that her moral compass was skewed beyond repair; she knew that most people couldn't carve into someone's face or slit a man's throat and walk away like nothing happened, that the wrong wires in her brain were crossed, the bits of her that had cracked and broken with each new trauma she'd suffered not quite fitting back together. She logically knew all this but it didn't change the fact she struggled to care about people she had no vested interest in– she just didn't see the point in caring about them or see why she should. They didn't matter; they weren't hers.

Mrs. Norris, however, was one of those rare few she did care about– Mrs. Norris was hers and someone had done this to the cat, to something that belonged to her, they had dared hurt something under her protection and Hermione was furious.

And she'd always liked animals so much more then humans– they weren't needlessly cruel like people were. They didn't kill for the sake of killing, didn't cause pain for the sake of their own enjoyment. They were innocent.
Mrs. Norris was hers and she was innocent and Hermione was going to tear the person who'd done this to her into pieces.

"I would never hurt Mrs. Norris!" Hermione snarled at the Headmaster, her rage and hatred a vicious, red-hot thing inside her. "She's mine! She's mine and whoever did this to her is going to pay!"

"Can you explain your presence where you were?" Dumbledore's voice was sharper now.

"If I might speak, Headmaster," said Snape from the shadows, "Mr. Potter and Miss Granger simply appear to have been at the wrong place at the wrong time. No second year could have performed this sort of Dark magic."

"Be that as it may, they have yet to answer my question." Dumbledore said, looking stern. Hermione inhaled sharply and then slowly exhaled, pulling herself together and sliding all her masks back into place, furious with herself for the momentary loss of control.

"We left the feast about a fifteen minutes ago. The people on our table can vouch for us. We decided to make the most of the time before curfew to just walk around, talk about things, about memories..." she let her voice trail off and she turned to Harry, her face now the perfect picture of a concerned friend.

Harry, whose acting skills had either improved in leaps and bounds or he was genuinely feeling emotional, gave her a shaky smile back, reaching forwards to clasp her hands in his, squeezing gently. She squeezed back so hard her knuckles went white and she had to be hurting him, but Harry didn't even flinch, just let her use him to anchor herself.

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Severus's POV:

Severus watched, sharp-eyed, as Granger put on one hell of a performance. She appeared to be the perfect friend, kind, caring and compassionate. Except everything she'd just said was complete and utter crap.

Well, maybe not all of it, but the bit where they'd walked around to talk about their feelings and memories? A lie.

If her shock and horror at the state of Mrs. Norris hadn't been so genuine, as evidenced by her sheer, possessive rage during her momentary loss of control, he'd have assumed that she'd had some part in this.

As it was, he still wasn't entirely certain that she'd had nothing to do with the opening of the Chamber and that Mrs. Norris's petrification hadn't just been a complete accident, the old caretaker's cat having been in the wrong place at the wrong time...

Except for that burning, raging hatred in her eyes as she'd promised to make whoever had done this pay— that had been very, very real. Maybe she really did have nothing to do with this— even if she and Harry weren't telling the whole truth.

"If you've finished interrogating my students, then I ask that you let them return to their dormitories." He said acidly, levelling both Albus and Minerva with a glare and not even bothering to look in Gilderoy's direction. Granger was completely accurate in her description of the man—
Gilderoy was a fraud and Severus had planned on taking great pleasure in exposing the real story behind the man's claims.

Except now this had come up.

The Chamber of Secrets... it was a legend that every Slytherin had heard. A legend that was whispered about, worshipped almost and believed in whole-heartedly from the safety of their Common Room.

And it had been opened once before.

The exact dates were hidden but from father to son, mother to daughter, the Pureblood lines had passed down what knowledge they had, that around half a century ago someone had opened the Chamber and a Muggleborn had died.

And somehow, someway, it had been opened again.

And of course it had to be when The-Boy-Who-Lived was attending Hogwarts with his Muggleborn best friend– Severus really hoped this wouldn't end up exposing Granger’s lie about her blood status, because that would be an utter disaster.

Merlin, he should just *Avada* himself right now– it had to be quicker then the slow death the stress was going to give him.

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*Hermione's POV:*

"Hermione, I'm sor--" Draco started to apologize as she and Harry entered the Slytherin Common Room.

"I'm not angry at you," Hermione interrupted the apologetic boy, her face wiped clean of all emotions barring the muted, possessive fury evident in her eyes, "and I don't give a damn that the Chamber is open."

Draco looked relieved that her rage wasn't directed at him. "So do you think this is it? Do you think this is the real deal? The Chamber of Secrets has really been opened?" he asked, eagerly. Nearly the whole Common Room turned to face in Harry and Hermione's direction, obviously interested in their answer.

"This is the real thing." Harry told Draco and the rest of the listening students, "there were no students on the corridor. None except us."

"What were you two doing there, anyway?" One of the fifth-years asked.

"That's none of your business." Hermione said coldly before turning to Harry. "Let's talk in the morning." She said and he nodded at her. Hermione turned and made her way up to her dorm, the crowd of students parting for her to let her through, none of them keen on getting in her way.

Iago was already curled up on her bed looking absolutely miserable and Hermione pulled the mangy tomcat into her arms and cradled him gently.

As she sat with her cat in her arms, she finally calmed down enough for her mind to start analyzing
all the information and evidence she possessed. She knew that, according to legend, the Chamber of Secrets was built by Salazar Slytherin himself and was said to contain his monster. Salazar was famous for his ability to talk to snakes. Combining that with the voice of the "fucking huge snake" she and Harry had heard, she felt she could state with reasonable confidence that Slytherin's monster was a breed of massive serpent that could somehow petrify living creatures. Salazar had been a proud man and Hermione didn't think he would settle for anything but the best, for the most impressive serpent there was, so the answer seemed fairly obvious. Chances were the monster in the Chamber was the King of Serpents itself— a Basilisk.

Of course, a Basilisk's gaze was supposed to kill... but the corridor had been flooded, hadn't it? If the monster in the Chamber really was a Basilisk, and the more she thought about it the more sure Hermione was with the conclusion she'd reached based on the evidence available, then it was possible that Mrs. Norris had only seen the reflection of the King of Serpent's deadly gaze.

A Basilisk. For once, Hermione actually hoped she was wrong. She just didn't think she was.

Hermione slept restlessly that night, tossing backwards and forwards, and by five in the morning she'd given up on trying to get any more sleep and made her way down to the common room where she made herself comfortable on one of the leather couches, the Parseltongue book she'd bought in Knockturn Alley propped open on her lap and flicked through it until she found what she was looking for— information on Basilisks.

Known as the King of Serpents, the Basilisk is the most deadly of all snakes— magical or muggle. The venom in its fangs is fatal, its gaze murderously- even the reflection petrifying its victims, leaving them unable to run from its fearsome jaws. They live hundreds of years, growing to gigantic size, and are difficult to train. Its theorized that the basilisk imprints on the first Speaker it comes across, in most cases the one who hatches it, and from then will only obey that of the Speaker's line. If one wishes to hatch a basilisk, they will need—

Harry was one of the first to emerge from the staircase to the boy's dormitories, and he made a beeline straight over to her. "Hermione, what's the Chamber of Secrets?" was the first thing he said.

"Good morning to you too," she snapped before taking a calming breath. "I apologize, that was uncalled for. I didn't sleep well last night. The Chamber of Secrets is a legendary hidden chamber that Salazar Slytherin built into the castle, which none of the other founders knew anything about. Slytherin was... choosy about who he thought should be able to learn and practice magic— he didn't include Muggleborns within that number. A rift grew between him and the other founders and Slytherin left the school. But before he did, he apparently sealed his secret chamber so that only his own true heir would be able to open the chamber and unleash the horror within, the beast which would purge the school of all who were unworthy to study magic."

"And none of the teachers have ever managed to find this thing?" Harry asked, his tone incredulous. "It's not something they can exactly just ignore, right?"

"Most people think that the Chamber doesn't exist, that it's just a tale told to frighten the gullible." She explained, "Only a select few actually believe it to be real, a large number of which consists of Pureblood Slytherins who would be more then happy for the monster to do its job and cleanse the school."

"Huh." Harry was silent for a moment before he asked his next question. "The 'horror within' the Chamber— what is it?"
"It's been theorized to be some sort of monster that the heir of Slytherin alone can control." She told Harry.

"Any ideas?" he asked her hopefully. Wordlessly, she pointed to the page in front of her. Harry's eyes darted over the page, confused for a brief second before comprehension dawned over him.

"You think it's a Basilisk?" he asked, sounding excited.

"Yes." She answered.

"But why isn't Mrs. Norris..." Harry trailed off, obviously trying and failing to think of a delicate way to phrase his question.

"Dead?" Hermione said, taking pity on him, and he nodded, sheepishly. "I think she only saw the reflection. The corridor was flooded so she could have only seen its eyes in the reflection from the puddles on the ground."

"Do we... do we tell anyone?" Harry asked, hesitantly. Hermione sighed and shut the book.

"It won't help them un-petrify Mrs. Norris," she said, "and not only will we be questioned for our knowledge but it also puts us directly in the heir's crosshairs. I'm not willing to endanger our lives for the sake of a handful of Muggleborns I don't even know."

::But you're a Muggleborn:: Harry hissed quietly, the change in language a countermeasure to make sure no one could overhear him— they didn't know if the other Slytherins had eavesdropping or surveillance charms active in the common room and the knowledge of Hermione's blood status becoming public was even more dangerous now that they were being actively hunted.

::And nobody but you knows that:: Hermione hissed back. ::Weasley tries to spread rumors but no one believes him. I am safe from the heir::

"So you really don't care if someone... dies?" Harry asked her, speaking in English again. Hermione closed her eyes and tried to find a way to word this.

"Harry, I stopped believing in the fairness of this world a long time ago. I stopped trying to save everyone and concentrated just on the people I care about. I'm not going to risk our lives to save some students I don't even know." She answered after a short pause, opening her eyes so her steady gaze meeting Harry's emerald ones. "That's my decision and I stand behind my reasons. Can you accept that?"

"I can." Harry said, after a long pause, "I understand it and... I'll stand by your reasons too. I'll always on your side, Hermione." He said earnestly and she smiled, a tired smile.

"Then let's go get some breakfast and prepare to be the subject of stares and whispers for the next week or two."

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*Harry's POV:*

Hermione had been right. The next few weeks passed slowly, with the school able to talk about little else then the attack on Mrs. Norris. Whenever people caught Harry alone, they tried to get him to stop and talk to them but everyone knew better then to approach him when Hermione was
by his side and Harry very much doubted anyone was stupid enough to approach Hermione when she was on her own.

The Ravenclaws, Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors all seemed suspicious of them, with Ron Weasley, Seamus Finnegan and Dean Thomas the worst out of the lot; the three of them glaring at him and Hermione whenever they crossed paths, calling things out after them and stopping and whispering to each other. Harry had a sinking sort of feeling that they were planning something and by Hermione's scowls he guessed that she thought the same.

He and Hermione had gone over who it could be more times then he could count but they'd never managed to reach a plausible answer. The only real hint they had to the heir's identity was that whoever it was must be able to speak Parseltongue because only a Parselmouth would be able to control a Basilisk. Whoever it was also had to be a descendant of Slytherin but the last known descendant of Slytherin was Voldemort and they both agreed that there was no reason for him to be sneaking in and out of the school just for the sake of setting a Basilisk on a bunch of school-age muggleborns.

Hermione had increased the frequency of their sparring, which left Harry bruised all over though they were careful not to hit each other in the face as that could raise some awkward questions, as well as the Occlumency lessons which Harry thought he'd improved in– keeping his mind safe from Dumbledore had had him become a very keen, very dedicated student. She'd also started helping him figure out how to take advantage of the mental link he had with Voldemort and Harry could now identify exactly where it was located– right behind his scar– and if he concentrated on it he found he could sense brief flickers of Voldemort's emotions but he tried not too, as Voldemort's head wasn't exactly a place he wanted to ever go.

The sparring and Occlumency lessons paired with Quidditch training, classes and homework was exhausting, though, and the constant staring and whispering and the lack of progress in trying to solve the mystery of who the Heir of Slytherin could be was frustrating as hell, and Harry found that the Quidditch match against Gryffindor seemed to be the only good thing on the horizon.

-Hermione's POV: -

The day of Harry's first Quidditch game was cold and Hermione rugged up warm as she followed the team down to the pitch. Harry was clutching his broom so tight his knuckles were white. She'd basically had to force-feed him a piece of toast.

Kissing his cheek, she wished him luck and made her way into the stadium, finding seats with the other Slytherin second years. "You look almost as nervous as Harry." Draco snickered. She glowered at him, her hands bunched into fists in her lap.

"Shut up Draco."

"Yeah, shut up Draco." Snorted Blaise.

"No seriously, shut up– the game's about to start!" She snapped, and the boys obediently stopped talking, knowing better then to cross her when she was in this sort of mood. Daphne and Tracey just exchanged amused, knowing looks that Hermione felt she should probably be annoyed by but wasn't sure why.

"Shut up Draco."

"Yeah, shut up Draco."

"No seriously, shut up– the game's about to start!" She snapped, and the boys obediently stopped talking, knowing better then to cross her when she was in this sort of mood. Daphne and Tracey just exchanged amused, knowing looks that Hermione felt she should probably be annoyed by but wasn't sure why.
Madam Hooch let out a piercing whistle and the two teams kicked off the ground. Hermione watched anxiously as Harry flew up into the air and started circling the stadium.

The boys had a great time poking fun at her as she jumped every time a bludger went near Harry and he did a three-sixty roll to avoid it and then did a loop-the-loop to celebrate Slytherin scoring and pretty much every time her best friend did anything even relatively risky.

She was literally about to curse them when Harry suddenly dived, broom zooming towards the ground. "No-no-no-no-no!" She moaned under her breath as she watched the Gryffindor Seeker fly after him. Harry's hand reached out and he grabbed the tiny golden ball known as the stitch, then she literally had to swallow a scream as he just managed to pull out of his dive in time, still tumbling of his broom but at least not plowing into the ground head first.

The Slytherins all stood up and cheered as Harry weakly sat up and waved the snitch in the air and she slumped back in her seat feeling drained.

She was never watching another one of Harry's Quidditch games again.

She didn't think her heart could take it.

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It was around a fortnight after the Quidditch match that the dull monotony the days had taken on was disrupted by notices pinned up on the noticeboard in the Entrance Hall.

"They're starting a dueling club?" Harry said excitedly from beside her. "Brilliant!"

"Wicked," Theo grinned, obviously agreeing with Harry's assessment whole-heartedly. Hermione tilted her head, eyeing the notice thoughtfully.

"It could be useful." She said.

"You reckon Slytherin's monster can duel?" Ron Weasley asked Dean Thomas from their positions closer to the board.

"If that's case, Weasley, then you should start picking out your headstone." Theo snickered and Weasley and Thomas shot the three Slytherins a glare before hurrying off, muttering quietly to each other. Hermione glared after them.

At eight o'clock, Hermione and Harry, along with Draco, Blaise and Theo, returned to the Great Hall where the long dining tables had vanished and been replaced by a golden stage, lit by thousands of candles floating overhead.

Most of the school was present, all carrying wands and looking enthusiastic. Hermione couldn't deny her own stirring excitement– that was until Gilderoy Lockhart strutted onto the stage and she started scowling thunderously instead.

"At least Snape's there too." Harry said glumly from beside her.

"Professor Snape," she corrected him absentely, even as she nodded her agreement. Snape, who was stalking behind Lockhart, looked positively murderous.

The group of Slytherin second years listened with great displeasure as Lockhart went on and on for a few minutes and Hermione was about to leave when Snape blasted Lockhart backwards off the stage into a wall, sending him sprawling down onto the floor. The Slytherins and indeed a good
many of students from other Houses, all equally as fed up with the incompetent Lockhart, couldn't resist cheering as loud as they could with much foot stomping and whistling. Hermione joined in, sending multi-colored sparks into the air.

Snape had never been as popular with the student body as he was in that moment.

Lockhart clumsily tried to talk his way out of his rather undignified defeat before quickly splitting them up into pairs to practice. Hermione moved to partner with Harry when Snape reached Ron Weasley, a few meters to their left, and drawled loudly, "Time to split up the dream team, I think," as he sneered at Weasley and his buddies, "Thomas, you can partner with Mr. Nott, Finnegan, with Miss Granger and Mr. Potter, lets see if Weasley can put up a halfway decent fight."

Torn between amusement at the plight of the Gryffindors and annoyance at being split up from Harry, Hermione stalked over to Finnegan who was admittedly looking a touch green around the gills.

"Face your partners!" called Lockhart, back on the platform, "and bow!" With a mockingly theatrical hand gesture, Hermione gracefully bowed to a flushing Finnegan, who jerked his head. "Wands at the ready!" shouted Lockhart, "When I count to three, cast your charms to disarm your opponent– only to disarm them, we don't want any accidents! One... two... three!"

Finnegan, to Hermione amusement, had already started on two, but she easily sidestepped the spell and sent one back of her own, a nifty curse Tracey had taught her, Harry and Daphne last year in one of their study sessions– that girl's knowledge of the more shady curses out there was suspicious in the best of ways. Finnegan immediately let out a yell of pain, dropping his wand as he moved both hands to his face as blood starting to gush from his nose.

Lockhart was yelling some shit about disarming only and screaming for everyone to stop but nobody listened, of course. Hermione smirked at Finnegan who was actually tearing up and was disappointed when Snape took over and shouted, "Finite Incantatem!" Finnegan let out a relieved gasp as his nose stopped bleeding, though anger crossed his face as he snatched his wand up off the ground

"You evil little bi–"

"Silencio!" She snapped, having no patience for listening to his drivel, and Finnegan was rendered silent.

"I think," said Lockhart from the stage, "I'd better teach you how to block unfriendly spells. Let's have a volunteer pair– Longbottom and Finch-Fletchley, how about you?"

"A bad idea, Professor Lockhart," said Snape, gliding over to the incompetent blonde ponce with a smirk on his face, "Longbottom causes devastation with even the simplest of spells. We'll be sending what's left of Finch-Fletchley up to the hospital wing in a matchbox. How about Potter and Weasley?"

Hermione coughed back a laugh as Harry sent her an annoyed look. "You could be a bit more sympathetic." He muttered as she, along with the rest of the crowd, backed away to give the two of them room.

"Good luck." She replied with a wink, saluting him.

"Three– two– one– go!" shouted Lockhart. Harry cast first, sending a stinging hex Weasley's way, but by some miracle the red head managed to leap out of the way.
"Let's see how you do against a real snake!" Weasley yelled at him before bellowing, "Serpensorcia!" The end of his wand exploded and Hermione watched, eyebrow raised, as a long black snake shot out of it and fell heavily onto the floor between them.

::Who dares summon me?:. The snake hissed angrily, raising its body up ready to strike.

"Allow me!" shouted Lockhart, as the crowd screamed and backed away, bar a small handful of Slytherins, including Hermione. He brandished his wand and there was a loud bang; the snake, instead of vanishing, flew ten feet into the air and fell back to the floor with a loud smack.

::I WILL KILL YOU!:: it hissed furiously, slithering straight towards Harry with its fangs exposed, ready to strike.

Hermione raised her wand, ready to vanish it, when Harry did the stupidest thing he possibly could in that moment. ::STOP!: he ordered and the snake immediately slumped to the floor, docile as a thick black garden hose.

"Fuck." Hermione muttered as the attention of the whole Hall was now focused on Harry, shocked gasps and whispers erupting all over the room.

Harry, blind to what was happening around him, kept hissing. ::Face the fool who summoned you:: he ordered the snake who whipped its body around and bared its fangs at Weasley. ::Now attack him but do not kill him::

Hermione at least had to appreciate the high-pitched scream Weasley gave as the snake darted towards him, fast as lightning. Harry might have just fucked up– majorly– but at least it was momentarily entertaining. To her disappointment, before the snake reached Weasley, Snape stepped forwards and waved his wand, vanishing the snake in a puff of black smoke.

"Well?" Harry asked Weasley loudly, "How do you think I went?"

"You– you're– a Parselmouth!" The red head accused, face white as bone, eyes wide as galleons. He pointed at Harry with a trembling hand. "You're the Heir of Slytherin!"

"I'm going to fucking kill him," Hermione hissed as the Hall erupted into even louder ominous sounding whispers.

"Did you know Harry was a Parselmouth?" Draco muttered, his eyes wide in shock.

"Of course I knew," she replied before striding forwards and seizing a handful of Harry's robes. "We need to get out of here– now." She ordered him. He gave her a confused look but allowed her to drag him from the Hall. Yanking them into a hidden alcove, she threw up a quick silencing charm and then started yelling at him.

"Harry James Potter you bloody idiot!" she shouted, "You complete and utter moron! What the fuck were you thinking? Of all the fucking, stupid, thick-headed, idiotic things to do! You utter--"

"I'm sorry!" Harry said, raising both his hands up in a surrender gesture, eyes wide with panic. "I honestly didn't mean to– it was just instinct!"

"Your instinct should have been to Banish it," she seethed, "we're re-starting the offensive and defensive magic lessons!"

"On top of the Occlumency and sparring?" Harry sounded dismayed and Hermione slumped against the wall of the alcove, suddenly feeling very drained.
"Harry, you don't get it," she said, feeling a bit like she was going to cry. "Speaking to snakes is what Salazar Slytherin was famous for, I've told you that! Everyone's going to think you're his great-great-great-great-grandson now- which means they're going to think you're the bloody Heir of Slytherin! That you've opened the Chamber!"

"Oh," Harry said, paling slightly, "that's not going to be good."

"No fucking shit!" She moaned, "oh Harry, you're going to have to be so careful– especially if the basilisk attacks again because people are going to blame you and they could attack you! Panicking people do dumb-arse things... and fuck, you could be arrested!"

Harry's face was even paler now and he slid down the wall, sitting heavily on the ground. "What am I going to do?" He whispered.

"Train." Hermione answered grimly, "and don't ever wander off alone. Make sure you when you're out of the Slytherin Dungeons you're accompanied by a minimum of two other people."

"Shit, this is going to be bad, isn't it?" He said, looking up at her with tired green eyes.

"Yeah," she told him heavily, "it is. But I'll be with you every step of the way."
Chapter XIV:

_Hermione's POV:_

"Why didn't you tell us you were a Parselmouth?" Was the first thing Draco demanded when they entered the Common Room. All other conversations went silent as the other Slytherins waited to hear what Harry would say.

"I didn't want word getting back to Dumbledore," Harry replied and Hermione felt a stab of pride—Harry's grasp of Slytherin politics and cunning had improved so much since the start of last year and she hadn't had to coach him at all for his answer.

"So are you the Heir?" One of the sixth years, Adrian Pucey, asked.

"I'm not," Harry said, shaking his head, "honest. I'd never even heard of the Chamber of Secrets until Hermione and I found Mrs. Norris and that writing."

"Can you say something in Parselmouth?" This was Blaise, the Italian's jewel-bright eyes gleaming with interest. Harry looked towards her and she shrugged.

"Why not?" She said and Harry's lips tugged into a smile.

::Wonder what they'd think if they knew a Muggleborn could speak Parseltongue?:: he hissed to her and Hermione had to bite back a snort of laughter.

"That's awesome!" Breathed Theo, looking truly awed, "what did you say?"

"That Dumbledore's a moron." Harry shrugged, a grin spreading across his mouth. Theo laughed and Hermione rolled her eyes.

"I've got homework to do. Don't you dare leave the common room at any time unless there are at least two others with you," She reminded, before squeezing Harry's hand in a farewell gesture and making her way up to her dormitory. Sitting down on her bed, she closed the hangings and cast a quick silencing charm before copying Weasley's spell from earlier. "Serpensortia!"

Like Weasley's had, the tip of her wand appeared to explode and a heavy black snake fell onto her bed. It raised its head and tilted it to the side, fixing its wide, unblinking stare on her as its tongue flickering out to taste the air. ::Where is the enemy?:: it hissed, sounding confused.

::There is no enemy:: Hermione hissed back. ::I wanted to test something::

::A Speaker?:: the snake sounded surprised. ::I thought they were things of legend::

::Do you have a name::

::I am Sssthsaa:: the snake told her and Hermione nodded before realising the snake—Sssthsaa—wouldn't be able to appreciate the gesture.

::I was wondering what you could do, Sssthsaa:: she asked the snake.
Anything Mistress wants: answered Sssthssa and Hermione smiled, somewhat wickedly. She believed the saying went something along the lines of 'an ace up her sleeve'. This spell had the potential to be very convenient.

It was nice to meet you, Sssthssa: she told the snake before gently tapping the large black serpent with her wand, causing it to disappear in a small cloud of black smoke.

The next step was researching how to conjure up smaller, more discrete, breeds of snakes—preferably venomous ones.

By the next morning the snow that had begun in the night had turned into a blizzard so thick that the last Herbology lesson of the term was cancelled. Hermione took the time to with Harry to revise the defensive and offensive magic they'd taught themselves the year before, as well as some nasty curses that Tracey had suggested that would take down anyone who tried attacking with great prejudice.

Afterwards, they went to the library to start on their holiday homework. Draco had invited them to spend the Christmas holidays at Malfoy Manor and, after a long discussion, she and Harry had agreed. She knew Harry was excited by their plans—Draco had told them before that he had his own Quidditch pitch—but Hermione wasn't quite as delighted seeing as the Malfoys held a Yuletide Gala every year. She'd never been to a Gala before and she certainly hadn't planned to do so anytime soon, but Draco had already said they were invited and if they were actually staying with the Malfoys then they had no excuse to miss it.

Hermione and Harry were heading back from the library down to the dungeons when they found themselves face to face with the basilisk's latest victims. Hermione froze and Harry sucked in a quick breath at the sight Finch-Fletchley, a Hufflepuff second year, lying on the floor all rigid and cold with a look of shock frozen on his face as his eyes staring blankly at the ceiling. And that wasn't all—next to him was another figure and it was one of the strangest things Hermione had seen. The Gryffindor ghost, Nick-something, was no longer pearly white and transparent, rather he was black and smoky, floating immobile and horizontal, six inches off the ground. His head was half off and his face wore an expression of shock identical to Finch-Fletchley's.

"We need to get out of here," she said urgently, turning to Harry, "we need to get out of here now!" But before they could run, a door right next to them opened with a bang and Peeves came shooting out. The poltergeist opened his mouth, no doubt to make some sort of mocking remark, when he caught sight of the two petrified bodies. The poltergeist opened his mouth, no doubt to make some sort of mocking remark, when he caught sight of the two petrified bodies.

"ATTACK! ATTACK! ANOTHER ATTACK! NO MORTAL OR GHOST IS SAFE! RUN FOR YOUR LIVES! AiTTAAAACK!" He shrieked, at the top of his lungs.

"I'm going to fucking kill him," Hermione snarled as crash—crash—crash: door after door flew open along the corridor and people flooded out. For several long minutes, there was a scene of such confusion that Finch-Fletchley was in danger of being squashed and people kept standing in the Gryffindor ghost. Hermione found herself pinned helplessly to the wall, Harry by her side, as the teachers shouted for quiet.

"Caught in the act!" one of the Hufflepuff second years yelled dramatically, pointing at Harry, and Hermione snarled.

"Fuck off you little piece of—!"
"Language, Miss Granger!" snapped McGonagall, using her wand to set off a loud bang to restore silence. "That will be five points from Slytherin!" The stern professor then turned to the Hufflepuff and gave him a sharp look. "That will do, Macmillan!"

Hermione linked arms protectively with Harry, a fierce look on her face as McGonagall ordered the students back to their classes and together they watched the teachers bend over Finch-Fletchley and 'Nearly Headless Nick', as she'd heard someone call the ghost.

The petrified second year was levitated up to the hospital wing by Flitwick, and one of the other teachers conjured a large fan out of thin air to waft the ghost up the stairs. This left them with McGonagall.

"This way, Potter, Granger," the Deputy Headmistress said.

"We didn't do this." Hermione said, voice tight.

"This is out of my hands, Granger!" Snapped the deputy headmistress and Hermione suppressed a groan as she and Harry found themselves, once again, being marched to the Headmaster's office.

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*Harry's POV:*

Harry chewed his lip nervously as he stepped on the revolving staircase. Hermione looked stony-faced beside him and McGonagall's lips were pressed into a thin line.

Dumbledore was already standing in the office waiting for them, giving Harry an unpleasant sense of déjà vu of the first day of term. He turned to Hermione and she leaned over and whispered in his ear, "use the mind-link if you have to."

"That's enough, Miss Granger!" McGonagall barked and Hermione straightened again and glared at the woman. Harry swallowed nervously and turned his attention inward, trying to focus on the slight pressure behind his scar. Focusing on it as hard as he could, he pushed a thought to it.

'Voldemort? Can you hear me?'

For a moment there was nothing and Harry was starting to feel very stupid when his scar burned suddenly and a disembodied but familiar, voice spoke inside his head: 'Potter, this is a surprise. I didn't realize you knew how to manipulate our... link."

'I, well, I kind of didn't. Hermione taught me how' Harry admitted. Low laughter echoing in his head– Voldemort was amused. Harry tried not to feel too horrified.

'Why did you contact me, Harry?' Harry didn't miss the change from his surname to his first name but decided to freak out about that later– he might have a truce with Voldemort but he didn't exactly plan on befriending the Dark wizard considering the fact he'd murdered Harry's parents and try to murder him too.

'I think Dumbledore might try to read my mind. Can you protect it again?' Harry asked tentatively. He then blinked as Voldemort's emotions flashed briefly through the link– anger, hatred and something else, something he didn't recognise.

'Dumbledore will not touch your mind.' Voldemort's voice was dark now. 'You'll feel the link grow
stronger—don't break it or I'll be pushed out.' Harry swallowed nervously as he felt the same foreign presence enter his mind as last time. He could immediately feel what Voldemort had referred to and he had to focus to keep his mind from lashing out at the presence, from snapping the thread connecting their minds.

"Mr. Potter!" Harry jumped slightly at the sound of McGonagall's irate voice, "are you even listening?"

"Er, yeah." He nodded, "professor." He quickly added. Hermione glanced at him her face questioning and he nodded slightly to confirm it had worked. 'She's a clever girl,' mused Voldemort in his mind, 'what is all this about anyway?'

'They think I might be the Heir of Slytherin.' Harry almost missed the headmaster's question over the sound of the laughter in his head.

'You? The Heir of Slytherin? The fool really is going senile in his old age.'

"Mr. Potter," Dumbledore said gravely, "I must ask you, is there anything you wish to tell me? Anything at all?"

"No sir." He said, looking up and meeting the twinkling blue gaze of the headmaster with as much confidence as he could. He was unsurprised to feel something brushing against the Occlumency shields in his mind and he was glad that Voldemort's shields stayed strong as the probing force grew in strength.

'Of course they'll stay strong!' Voldemort sounded insulted.

"If you've finished breaking the law, Headmaster, Harry and I have packing to do." Hermione spoke sharply. The headmaster turned his gaze to her. Hermione glared. "If you so much as try to invade my mind, I will have you hauled in front of the Wizengamot!" she snapped.

"Miss Granger! You do not talk to teachers that way!" McGonagall said furiously, apparently unable to keep quiet any longer. "It is unacceptable! Twenty points from Slytherin!"

"You think I care about points?" Hermione demanded, "Why would I give a damn about something as inconsequential as the House Cup when someone is trying to set my best friend up for attempted murder?" She fixed her icy glare first on McGonagall and then on Dumbledore. "If you don't do something to stop the rumours and Harry gets attacked then his blood will be on your hands!"

Harry actually had to fight to keep his cheeks from turning pink at Hermione's fierce protectiveness. He wasn't sure if someone was trying to set him up or not, but if Hermione got the headmaster or McGonagall to say something to the students then maybe he could ease up on the whole having to be escorted everywhere thing.

"You may both go." Dumbledore said, his voice sounding disappointed. Hermione gave the room one last narrow look before turning and sweeping towards the stairs in a rather Snape-like manner. Harry hurried after her feeling relieved.

"Is he still there?" Hermione asked, slowing down slightly so he could catch up and walk beside her.

"Uh, yeah." Harry nodded.

"Can you ask him if he has any idea who's behind all this? I want to give them a good piece of my
mind." She snapped. "And then I'm going to curse the spit out of them and tell them to either get their act together and do it right or to just fuck off before they get you killed!"

'Um, did you hear that?' Harry asked Voldemort.

'I did.'

'And are you going to answer?'

'I don't know which student is opening the Chamber and I do not care. I have more important things to be getting on with. I bid you farewell, Harry Potter.'

Before Harry could say anything else, Voldemort slithered out of his mind, causing his scar to burn again for a brief moment as the link broke. "Ow." He grumbled, clapping a hand over it.

"You okay?" Hermione asked and he nodded.

"Yeah. He just left."

"Did he know anything?"

"No," he sighed, "he told me he didn't know which student was opening the Chamber. I think he was being honest too. I mean, he is kind of evil but he doesn't have a reason to lie to us."

"Shit," Hermione muttered, before shaking her head, causing her curls to bounce slightly with the movement. "We should go pack. The train's leaving early tomorrow."

"Yeah," Harry agreed.

The Slytherin Common Room was abuzz with conversation when they walked in, students of every year grouping together to share information and trade theories. Harry had to say over and over again that no, he was not the Heir, before he managed to escape to his dormitory and he knew that this time nobody except Hermione and maybe Blaise, who didn't seem excited so much as entertained by it all, believed him.

Among the other three Houses there had practically been a stampede to book seats on the Hogwarts Express and Harry was glad that they were travelling to Malfoy Manor via Portkey– the same bizarre device Snape had used to transport them from the Dursley's kitchen to outside Dumbledore's office.

Draco's owl had delivered the Portkey at breakfast, which Harry had spent studiously ignoring the panic of the other students and the whispers and glares being sent his way. Hermione's expression was eerily blank, a sure sign that she was planning something that had the potential to be quite... fatal.

"Honestly," Draco complained as they walked back down from the Great Hall to the dungeons, "everyone's acting ridiculous– only the Mudbloods need to be afraid. Maybe we'll get lucky and none of them will turn up next term." Seeming buoyed by that idea, Draco was in an excellent mood as Hermione joined him and Harry in the boy's dormitory where the blond had set up the Portkey. "Are you ready?" he asked, expectantly.

Harry tightened his grip on his trunk. "As I'll ever be."

"Three– two– one," Harry shuddered through the unpleasant experience of travelling by Portkey and was relieved when they arrived in a large, open room.
Harry, of course, had landed sprawled out across the floor once again, and he quickly scrambled back to his feet, with pink cheeks and a sheepish smile. Both Hermione and Draco looked impeccable, not a hair out of place, and Draco was smiling at the regal looking couple standing across ways. "Mother, father." He said, somewhat formally.

Narcissa Malfoy had the same haughty, disdainful look on her face that all Purebloods seemed to have perfected but Harry could see her eyes warm with love as Draco spoke. Her clothing looked to be made of high quality silk, her skin was smooth and blemish free and her ice-blondie hair was pinned up in an artful braid. Elegant. That word pretty much summed up the Lady Malfoy perfectly.

Harry turned from Narcissa Malfoy to look at Draco's father. The only time he'd seen Lucius Malfoy before was when Lucius had accompanied Snape during his attempt to follow them that day in Diagon Alley. Lucius had seemed amused then but right now he wore a cold, closed off expression. His hair was long and pulled back into a low ponytail. He, like his wife, wore an expensive silk robe of the highest quality. In his hand he held a cane.

His eyes, the same color as Draco's, pierced Harry's but Harry held his ground. Lucius then turned his eyes to Hermione who had her own mask of indifference in place, meeting his eyes with a bored, assessing look of her own. The elder Malfoy dipped his chin slightly and the tension in the room seemed to melt away.

It seemed that Harry and Hermione had passed some kind of test and the atmosphere relaxed accordingly. "Mr. Potter, Miss Granger. I fear I was at a disadvantage the last time we crossed path," Lucius said, with a slight smile. "You and your... friend managed to evade Severus and myself quite skilfully in Diagon Alley."

Draco spun to face them, a pout on his face. "You never told me about that!" He accused.

"Draco, love, don't whine. It's unbecoming." Scolded Narcissa, before turning to smile warmly at him and Hermione. The smile transformed her face completely, making her seem even lovelier then before. "It really is a pleasure to finally meet you both in person." She said sincerely. "Draco has told us so much about you."

"Only good things I hope, Lady Malfoy." Hermione smiled back and Narcissa laughed.

"Call me Narcissa, love. And don't worry-- he didn't include anything too scandalous." Harry turned to glare at Draco who had suddenly found something very interesting on the ceiling.

"Why don't you go see if your rooms are to your liking," suggested Narcissa, "and then we can meet in the Dining Room for lunch."

"That sounds lovely, Narcissa." Hermione agreed.

"Dobby!" Narcissa called out and Harry blinked in surprise at the sight of the little creature that had appeared before them with a popping sound. It had large, bat-like ears and bulging green eyes the size of tennis balls and was wearing what looked like an old pillowcase, with rips for arm and leg holes. The creature bowed so low that the end of its long thin nose touched the carpet. "How can Dobby serve Masters and Mistresses?" The creature-- Dobby-- said in a high-pitched voice.

"Take our guests and Draco's luggage to their rooms." Instructed Narcissa and Dobby bowed again before scampering over to the trunks and disappearing, along with the luggage, with another small pop.
"House elf," Hermione told him, her eyes glinting in amusement and Harry quickly schooled his expression so he didn't look so... clueless. Narcissa and Lucius seemed more amused then anything else, though, and Draco grabbed his and Hermione's hands and dragged them out of the room, leading the way through the large, sweeping manor.

"This is your room, Harry," he eventually announced, stopping in front of one of the many doorways and opening it with a flourish. Harry's trunk was already sitting at the foot of the large mahogany bed with its royal blue awnings. The lavishly decorated room was done in tasteful shades of silver and royal blue, with everything from a desk, to a full-length mirror, a walk in wardrobe and an adjoining bathroom.

"Wow," Harry breathed and Draco looked both pleased and proud.

"Your room's just over here, Hermione," he said, leading Hermione across the wide, sweeping corridor to another door. Harry wandered into his room, examining it fully. He thought it looked like the sort of bedroom that belonged to a king or a queen, like something out of a story book.

"Ready for lunch, Harry?" Hermione asked from the doorway, jolting him out of his thoughts. Nodding, he followed the other two down a winding staircase and through two more extravagantly done-up rooms before they reached what appeared to be a very grand dining room.

Narcissa and Lucius were already seated side by side on the far side of the table and Harry took one of the seats opposite them, Draco and Hermione sitting on either side of him.

When lunch was finished and Narcissa started up a conversation, Harry was expecting the Malfoys to start questioning him about the events currently taking place in Hogwarts but instead they asked him and Hermione about their classes and their favourite subjects and what they thought of Hogwarts so far. Harry thought Draco was lucky to have such amazing parents– especially when Narcissa gave him a delighted smile when Draco told her about how Harry caught the snitch in his first ever Quidditch game, winning the match for Slytherin. She'd also given his shoulder a gentle squeeze later on, when they were all leaving the room and Harry didn't think he'd ever been shown that sort of affection from an adult before– not since he was a baby, anyway. Harry went to bed that night feeling warm and happy.

The next few days passed in a pleasant blur of Quidditch, fine dining, horseback riding and, in Hermione's case, reading– the Malfoys had a vast library that had Hermione almost drooling when she first caught sight of it. They'd even spent a day in Diagon Alley, Hermione not protesting when he paid for everything as they shopped for presents for their friends and bought dress-robes to wear to the fast approaching Yuletide Gala. Apparently 'Yule' was what witches and wizards traditionally celebrated instead of Christmas, which was the muggle version of the holidays. Harry wondered why Hogwarts celebrated Christmas then but Hermione told him she wasn't sure and Draco just shrugged.

Christmas– or Yule– morning dawned cold and white and Harry was woken early by an excited Draco who dragged both him and Hermione into the Living Room where three truly enormous stacks of presents were neatly arranged, before dashing back out again.

"What on earth?" Hermione mumbled, blinking in wide-eyed amazement at the gifts, "are they all–?"

"Ours? I– I think so." Harry answered her unspoken question with bemusement. "But who sent them all?"

"Who do you think?" Draco said as he entered the room, this time followed by his amused, sleepy
Looking parents. "The other Slytherins, of course. They all think you're the Heir, Harry, so they want to get in good with you. And everyone knows that you and Hermione are inseparable."

Harry glanced over at Narcissa and Lucius when Draco mentioned the 'Heir' but neither Malfoy gave any reaction. "Well? Can we start?" Draco demanded and Lucius rolled his eyes at his son.

"It's like you're four years old again." He said dryly, but Narcissa just laughed.

"Go ahead, loves."

Apart from the toothpick the Dursleys had sent, his presents were all amazing. Slytherin students, some who he'd never even talked to before, had sent him expensive chocolates, rare books, luxury quills and designer Quidditch gear. Hagrid had sent him a large tin of treacle fudge; Hermione had given him a book called *Quidditch Through The Ages*; Tracey had sent him a very questionable book about Dark curses that made Hermione's eyes gleam; Daphne's gift was a set of silver cufflinks with tiny emeralds on them arranged in a 'H'; Theo had bought him a new pair of silk-lined dragon hide gloves, as Harry had complained that his chaffed and Blaise had given him the same Italian chocolate as he had last year, this time along with a bottle that Harry was suspicious contained Firewhiskey– the wizarding alcoholic drink of choice.

But it was the present Draco bought him that Harry loved most of all. When he'd unwrapped it he'd gasped and raised disbelieving eyes to the Malfoy heir. "Is this–?"

"A *Nimbus Two Thousand and One*? Why yes it is." The blond smirked.

"Draco," scolded Narcissa, "Don't be so crass!" As Draco ducked his head Harry ran his hands reverently along the smooth wood. This... this was a thing of beauty.

"Thank you," he told Draco, having to swallow past the lump in his throat and blink back the moisture in his eyes. He then turned to Narcissa and Lucius and added, "really– thank you so much!" Narcissa smiled fondly at him.

"It was our pleasure, Harry dear." She said and she sounded like it really was.

After a glorious breakfast, the caterers and chefs arrived and Narcissa kicked them all out so she could prepare the Manor for the Yuletide Gala. Harry spent the morning flying with Draco while Hermione curled up with a pile of her new books. Lunch was served outside, under a marquee, and Harry enjoyed it thoroughly.

When the evening drew nearer, Harry, Hermione and Draco returned to their rooms where they prepared for the Gala. Harry was uncomfortably tugging at the neck of his dress-robes, black velvet lined with deep, emerald green silk when Hermione entered his room. He gasped.

The thin, scrawny street rat he knew and loved had transformed into a delicate, doe-eyed princess. Her frilly dress-robes were the same emerald green colour as the lining of his robes with a matching black velvet sash that looped around her waist and tied at the back in a large bow. Her wild curls fell in perfect ringlets to her elbows and a black velvet bow had been pinned to the top of her head. With her soft skin, rosy cheeks and pink lips she looked positively cherubic; the picture of childhood innocence.

"If you dare laugh I will fuck you up." She warned him, her words very much at odds with her sweet little girl appearance, and Harry had to grin.

"You look like a pretty princess." He said and Hermione let out a small whimper.
"I know. God help me."

By the time they entered the ballroom, the large space was already half-filled with important people dressed in the fanciest robes Harry had ever seen. "That's the Minister of Magic," Hermione whispered in his ear sounding surprised as she nodded towards a short, bumbling figure dressed in lime green and deep purple robes.

"He looks kind of..." Harry trailed off, trying to think of the right word.

"Stupid?" Hermione suggested and he snorted.

"Basically."

"Can't believe we have to rely on idiots like that to run our society." Hermione sighed and a familiar voice chuckled behind them.

"Astute as always, Miss Granger." The two spun around to where Snape, donned in his usual black robes albeit ones that looked heavier and more expensive then the ones he normally wore, was standing behind them with an amused expression on his face.

"It's good to see you, sir." Hermione smiled brightly up at the snarky professor.

"Um, you look nice tonight." Harry said, not quite sure what else to say. "Sir." He quickly tacked onto the end of his statement feeling his cheeks heat up. Snape just looked even more amused.

"Thank you, Mr. Potter, Miss Granger. I do hope you both enjoy your evening."

"Ah Severus!" Lucius approached them, a smile on his face. "How are you, old friend?"

Harry and Hermione moved away as Snape replied in a familiar, snarky way that spoke of long years of friendship with the elder Malfoy. As they made their way across the room, they were stopped more then a dozen times with introductions from an assortment of different people, both Lords and Ladies and Ministry officials– it seemed that everyone here was eager to shake hands with the Boy-Who-Lived.

Finally Draco saved them, appearing out of nowhere and dragging them to the side of the room where he and a number of their other schoolmates were hiding, including Millicent Bulstrode, Pansy Parkinson, Blaise, Theo, Tracey, Daphne and Daphne's younger sister Astoria who had started Hogwarts this year, along with a pair of twins Harry didn't know other then recognising they were also in Slytherin and were introduced to him as Flora and Hestia Carrow.

"Granger," Pansy Parkinson nodded to Hermione, "you don't look awful."

"Why thank you Parkinson," Hermione responded dryly, "you don't look half bad yourself."

They chatted amongst themselves for a while before Narcissa appeared and shooed them away from the wall with orders to either dance or mingle. Hermione chose dancing and forced him to do it with her which resulted in a bit of awkward swaying and toe stomping as they tried to copy the movements of those surrounding them. "Pretend we're sparring and don't be so afraid to touch me," Hermione said sounding exasperated as she forced his hands onto her hips. "Half measures, remember?"

"I don't think not being able to dance will get us killed," Harry protested.

"I've had your head trapped between my thighs during our spars, Harry. You can put your hands on
my hips.” Hermione said with a roll of her eyes and Harry blushed but did as she said, finding that it was easier when he thought of it like that.

It was nearing midnight when his scar prickled and Harry frowned, reaching up to rub it. "What is it?" Hermione asked instantly, sharp as always.

"Scar feels funny." He told her. The familiar thoughtful look crossed his best friend's face and he was waiting to hear her start sharing her latest theory when the prickling increased to an odd sort of throbbing that wasn't unpleasant just strange and a long fingered hand closed on his shoulder.

Harry stiffened and turned around slowly. The man standing before him was one he'd never seen before yet Harry felt an odd sense of familiarity with. He was tall, in his early thirties maybe, and had light brown hair and brown eyes.

"Harry Potter... it's been a while." The stranger greeted him, with a nod. "Miss Granger, you're looking lovely." The stranger added, voice smooth. Harry was about to ask who the hell the man was when those eyes met his and the throbbing in his scar increased tenfold. With widening eyes, Harry came to the conclusion that he was currently looking straight at Lord Voldemort.

Harry had to clear his throat before addressing the man. "What should we call you?" He asked nervously, taking a step back so Voldemort's hand fell off his shoulder. Beside him, Hermione also seemed to have connected the dots and her grip on his hand tightened to the extent Harry could feel his bones grinding together.

"Marcus Culpepper, for now." The Dark Lord said, with a dismissive wave of his hand, 'I'm here as the guest of one of Lucius' many... business associates.'

"Is that your new body?" Harry couldn't help but ask curiously. Voldemort chuckled and shook his head.

"This is Quirrell's body under Polyjuice. There is, unfortunately, a very specific ritual involved in restoring my body."

"Huh." Harry said, somewhat unintelligently. "So, er, why are you here?"

"I wasn't aware I had to run my actions past you, Harry." Voldemort didn't seem annoyed, just amused.

"You seem more sane then last time," Harry said before he could stop himself and Hermione gave a soft groan from beside him.

"I'm glad you think so." Voldemort drawled looking like he was trying not to roll his eyes. He started to stride away, dismissing them both with a nod, before pausing and turning back. "If you ever require my assistance again, Mr. Potter, then I will require a debt in return." Voldemort said, and then he disappeared into the crowd.

"Who was that?" Harry jumped, spinning around to face the Malfoy heir.

"Dammit, Draco!" he complained, "You just gave me a heart attack!" Hermione scowled alongside him at the blonde.

"Very funny, Harry," Draco rolled his eyes, though his expression was curious, "but seriously- who was that? Why are you both so jumpy?"

"We just ran into an old acquaintance." Hermione said, stiffly. And that was the last they spoke of...
Voldemort for the rest of the evening.

The last week of the holidays seemed to pass far too quickly and before he really knew it Harry was saying goodbye to Narcissa and Lucius as it was time for Hermione, Draco and him to return to Hogwarts as classes started once more.
Part Two: The Chamber of Secrets - Chapter XV

Chapter XV:

Hermione's POV:

Draco strolled into the Common Room and made his way over to where they were seated, Greg and Vince trailing after him as per usual. "Wait here," Draco gestured to his 'bodyguards' as she and Harry often called them-- well, that or the living examples of the dangers of inbreeding-- to sit down on the empty seats across from where Hermione and Harry were reading in front of the fireplace, Hermione curled into Harry's side as he ran a hand absently through her hair, winding the curls around his fingers. "I'll go and get it," Draco said sounding gleeful, "my father's just sent it to me!"

Hermione observed Vince and Greg as they sat down looking uncomfortable. "You two okay?" Harry asked in concern and both boys hastily nodded. Hermione frowned at the strange behaviour but before she could say anything Draco had returned, holding what looked like a newspaper clipping.

"Listen to this," he cleared his throat, "'Inquiry At The Ministry Of Magic. Arthur Weasley, Head of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office, was today fined fifty galleons for bewitching a Muggle car. Lucius Malfoy called today for Mr. Weasley's resignation. 'Weasley has brought the Ministry into disrepute,' Lord Malfoy told our reporter. 'He is clearly unfit to draw up our laws and his ridiculous Muggle Protection Act should be scrapped immediately'. Mr. Weasley was unavailable for comment, although his wife told reporters to clear off or she'd set the family ghoul on them.'"

Hermione let out an amused snort but neither of Draco's goons laughed. "Well?" said Draco impatiently. "Don't you think it's funny?" Greg gave a bleak chuckle.

Hermione and Harry exchanged looks, both puzzled by the behaviour of Draco's goons, but Draco continued on, seemingly oblivious to it. "Arthur Weasley loves Muggles so much he should snap his wand in half and go join them," Draco said scornfully. "You'd never know the Weasleys were Purebloods, the way they behave."

"Is something wrong, Vince?" Harry asked worriedly as Vince's face seemed to contort. "Stomachache." he grunted.

"Well go up to the hospital wing and give the mudblood a kick from me," said Draco with a snicker. "You know, I'm surprised the Daily Prophet hasn't reported all these attacks yet," he went on thoughtfully, "I suppose Dumbledore's trying to hush it all up. He'll be sacked if it doesn't stop soon. Father's always said Dumbledore's the worst thing that's ever happened to this place."

"The sooner the old bastard kicks the bucket the better." Hermione said, lip curling in disgust.

"Any half decent headmaster would never let any Mudblood trash in." Draco scowled. "It's a good thing the Heir's actually doing something about it. It's a disgrace-- this place is really going to the dogs. I just wish we knew who it was-- we could help them!"

Vince's jaw dropped and Greg, with much more coherency then usual, asked, "You must have some idea who's behind it all..."
"You know I haven't, Greg! How many times to I have to tell you!" Draco snapped, "and Father won't tell me anything about the last time the Chamber was opened either. Of course, it was fifty years ago so it was before his time, but he knows all about it and he says that it was all kept quiet and it'll look suspicious if I know too much about it. But I know one thing– last time the Chamber of Secrets opened a Mudblood died! So I bet it's a matter of time before one of them's killed this time."

"What the hell's the matter with those two?" Harry muttered to her under his breath, nodding at Vince who was clenching his giant fists. Greg shot Vince what almost looked like a warning look and said, "D'you know if the person who opened the Chamber last time was caught?"

"Oh, yeah... they were expelled. They're probably still in Azkaban." Draco said dismissively then shifted restlessly in his chair. "Father says to keep my head down and let the Heir of Slytherin get on with it. He says the school needs ridding of all the Mudblood filth, but not to get mixed up in it. Of course, he's got a lot on his plate at the moment. You know the Ministry of Magic raided our manor last week?"

"Are your parents alright?" Harry asked, immediately concerned. Draco nodded.

"Nobody found anything, of course. Father's got some very valuable Dark Arts stuff but we've got our own secret chamber under the drawing-room floor--"

"Ho!" Said Vince and Draco looked at him weirdly. So did Greg, Hermione and Harry. Hermione's eyes narrowed as Vince blushed and she stood abruptly, drawing out her wand as she watched Vince's hair start turning red and his nose slowly beginning lengthen. Harry stood too, pulling out his wand out as 'Greg' and 'Vince' both jumped to their feet.

"Medicine for my stomach," 'Vince' grunted and without further ado he and 'Greg' started to sprint the length of the Common Room.

"Impedimenta!" Hermione spat, springing after them.

"What are you doing?" Draco yelled as Harry mirrored her actions, shouting;

"Petrificus Totalus!"

'Greg' dived out of the way causing the jet of light to narrowly missing him and as 'Vince' pulled the door to the Common Room open, Hermione got a good look at his face– except it wasn't Vince's face looking back at her now, it was a familiar face that was covered in freckles and had a head of bright red hair.

"Weasley!" She hissed, slashing her wand forwards. The silver jet of light missed by an inch as Fred or George Weasley– she couldn't tell– yanked Ron out of the way and they disappeared out of the Slytherin common room.

"What the hell was that?" Harry demanded, coming to a panting stop beside her.

"My guess? Polyjuice Potion." She said, grimly.

"But why?" Harry asked, bewildered.

"I think," she said slowly, "they were trying to figure out if any of us were the Heir of Slytherin."

"Oh." Harry's eyes widened in comprehension. "Oh!"
"Do we go tell Snape?" Draco asked, having hurried over, his cheeks tinged pink.

"You need to go owl your father about your hidden drawing room," Hermione said briskly and Draco paled, nodding hurriedly. "Harry, you go find two older Slytherins to accompany you and go tell Professor Snape what happened."

"You're not coming with me?" Harry asked her.

"Oh no," she gave both boys a malicious smile as she flicked her wand at one of the shoes Ron Weasley had been wearing, the huge boot having fallen off his significantly smaller foot as he ran out of the common room. It soared into her hand and as she caught it her smile widened. "I've got something to do."

Hidden under the Invisibility Cloak, Hermione made her way alone up towards where she was fairly certain the Gryffindor Tower entrance was located, though she couldn't be sure. Stepping into an alcove, she put up a silencing charm. "Serpensortia Austrelaps Labialis," she whispered and a snake, about three feet long with copper colored scales, flew out of the end of her wand. Its head swayed dizzily from side to side as the serpent tried to figure out where it was. "I have a job for you::" Hermione hissed to it, crouching down to lift snake up into her hands.

It coiled around her arm, looking up at her with wide, unblinking eyes. "Whatever the Mistress desires::" Hermione smiled down at the copperhead snake.

The copperhead's venom was only moderately toxic but they delivered a substantial quantity of venom in the bite, and if left untreated could easily kill a healthy adult male. Unfortunately, Madam Pomfrey should easily be able to heal anyone bitten but the venom was agonizing and caused sweating, salivating, vomiting, nausea, blurred vision and mass numbness which would hopefully leave the snake's victims laid up for a few weeks.

::I need you to find the boy that smells of this and his hatch-mates:: She told the snake, holding up the shoe. ::I need you to bite them but not kill them::

::Yes speaker:: hissed the snake, its forked tongue flicking out to taste the scent.

::Happy hunting:: Hermione hissed, crouching back down and the snake's head bobbed up and down as it uncoiled from her wrist, slithering down to the ground then disappearing into the shadows of the corridor. Hermione gave a satisfied smile– the Weasleys wouldn't be breaking into the Slytherin common room again any time soon.

When Ron, Fred, George, Percy and Ginevra Weasley all initially disappeared to the Hospital Wing, there were a flurry of rumors about their disappearances with everyone assuming they'd been attacked. When Draco asked Hermione what she'd done she'd just smirked at him– her conjured snake had been very thorough.

All too soon the Weasleys had left the Hospital Wing and Ron Weasley had resumed his stalking of Harry, who he (and his brothers) fully blamed for their stay in the Hospital Wing. By now the sun had begun to shine weakly on Hogwarts once more. There had been no more attacks and the mandrakes were almost ready for cutting and stewing, which left the overall mood inside the Castle much more hopeful– except for the Slytherins who kept giving Harry 'hints' about when would be good times for the Heir to attack.

The months passed in a relatively peaceful manner, the only hiccup being the absolute and utter horror that had been February the fourteenth. Bloody Lockhart had covered the walls of the great hall with large, lurid pink flowers with heart-shaped confetti falling from the ceiling and managed
to get a dozen dwarves wearing gold wings and carrying harps to roam around the school delivering Valentines. One of the dwarves had tried delivering a Valentine to Harry but Hermione had set its harp on fire before it got any further then 'His eyes are as green as a-'. A relieved Harry had sworn he was indebted to her forever. Hermione was inclined to agree.

The Easter holidays came and went with the second-years been given something new to think about– the time had come to choose their subjects for the third year, a matter which Hermione took quite seriously. "It could affect our whole future," she told Harry as she examined the lists of new subjects. She ended up choosing Arithmancy, Study of Ancient Runes, Care of Magical Creatures and Divination. Beside her, Harry had pretended to deliberate for a few minutes before just copying down what she'd chosen. She'd rolled her eyes but hadn't been bothered, pleased that they'd be in the same classes.

It wasn't until the day of the next Quidditch match– Hufflepuff against Gryffindor; Hermione was hoping the 'Puffs flattened Gryffindor– that excitement once again stirred the school.

They'd woken up to brilliant sunshine and a light, refreshing breeze and Hermione had reluctantly agreed to attend the match with Harry. It was as they both left the Great Hall, ready to head down to the pitch, that they heard it.

::Kill this time... let me rip... tear...::

Hermione traded looks with Harry who nodded slightly. "It's none of our business." She murmured to him and he hesitated and then nodded, his expression grim but determined.

"We better make sure we're in a public place then," He said and she agreed. By the time the announcement came that the basilisk had claimed another victim, she and Harry had been sitting with their fellow second years for the last twenty minutes. McGonagall had come half-marching, half-running across the pitch, carrying an enormous purple megaphone and Hermione knew at once that the basilisk had claimed another victim– she just didn't know whether it had been fatal or not. She didn't particularly care either, though she'd prefer it if the school didn't have to be closed down. Then again, she'd heard good things about Beauxbatons– she'd just have to figure out how she and Harry were supposed to get there.

"This match as been cancelled!" McGonagall addressed the packed stadium. "All students are to make their way back to the House common rooms where their Heads of Houses will give them further information!"

"Well, let's get going." Hermione said as she stood up. Theo narrowed his eyes at her.

"You don't seem that surprised," he accused, "and neither does Harry."

"Bloody hell, really?" Hermione sighed, "We've been right next to you the whole time." Theo conceded to that point and nothing more was said.

In the Common Room, Draco rushed over to them. "Have you heard the rumours?" he demanded before continuing to speak before any of them could actually answer him. "Somebody actually died!"

Before Hermione or Harry could reply to Draco's announcement in any way, a blank-faced Snape swept into the Common Room.

"Silence!" He ordered and the room immediately went quiet. "In light of the recent attacks, new rules have been put into place. All students will return to their House Common Rooms by six
o'clock in the evening. No student is to leave the dormitories after that time. You will be escorted to each lesson by a teacher. No student is to use the bathroom unaccompanied by a teacher. All further Quidditch training and matches are to be postponed. There will be no more evening activities."

Snape paused then and his lip curled slightly. "The Headmaster has told me to advise you all that it is likely that the school will be closed unless the culprit behind these attacks is caught. I have been ordered to urge anyone who thinks they might know anything about them to step forward."

Hermione wasn't surprised when no one did and it was Draco who asked the question on everybody's mind. "Is it true someone died, professor?"

"Yes. A Ravenclaw seventh year, Penelope Clearwater." Snape said quietly before he turned and exited the Common Room.

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Severus's POV:

Severus had to admit that the look on Granger's face had disturbed him when he'd announced the death of Penelope Clearwater. Nothing. She'd shown absolutely no emotion. And it had struck him, right then, that Granger simply hadn't cared.

It was a chilling notion.

Seeing her at the Malfoy's Yuletide Gala had surprised him— not her presence, he'd known she would be in attendance, but the manner in which she'd interacted with the other attendees; in every appearance, she'd acted like she'd been raised in the privileged, Pureblood lifestyle. She'd played the crowd like she'd trained for it, greeting all the important guests and chatting with them ever-so-sweetly, Harry a constant presence at her side. Only one interaction had puzzled him, an interaction she and Harry had shared with a tall, light-haired man that Lucius had originally dismissed as a guest of one of this business associates.

Granger and Harry had recognized the man, of that he was certain. And Hermione had actually looked... well, not quite afraid, but what was likely one of the closest things to it the girl would allow to show.

Severus bit back a groan as he slumped in his office chair. Thinking about Granger tended to give him a headache. She was a contradiction; the muggleborn Slytherin who appeared as comfortable mingling with Pureblood nobles and Ministry officials as she did navigating her way around muggle London.

He could never really peg down what the girl's aim was, only that she seemed to adore Harry and appeared willing to do absolutely anything to protect him.

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Harry's POV:

Summer was creeping around the grounds and, to Harry's great surprise and delight, Dumbledore had been ordered to leave Hogwarts. With the death of the Ravenclaw and Dumbledore's
suspension, fear had spread through Hogwarts as Harry had never seen it before. Outside of Slytherin house there was barely a face to be seen that didn't look worried and tense and any laughter that rang through the corridors sounded shrill and unnatural.

Classes were growing in intensity which Hermione seemed to adjust well to about but were starting to tire him out. And the animosity from the other Houses towards the Slytherins had risen to a worrying levels. It seemed the other three Houses had banded together to try and curse the Slytherins whenever the chance arose– which, thankfully, wasn't often, not with everyone being escorted everywhere by teachers. More then once, though, Hermione had had points deducted for cursing her attackers back in a vicious fashion and despite the amusement it brought the points loss wasn't good for their chances at winning the House Cup– not that Hermione actually cared about that.

Harry thought he should probably feel guilty about withholding what he knew about the Basilisk, especially after the death of that girl, but the last thing he wanted was for their Heir to come after him or Hermione in retaliation so even though he felt bad for Penelope Clearwater he didn't regret his decision.

When McGonagall had announced that exams were still on, Hermione was the only one who seemed to be even remotely pleased. Much to his, Draco's, Blaise's and Theo's dismay, she was forcing them to study with her, Tracey and Daphne and, just like with their sparring, Hermione didn't believe in showing mercy.

Then three days before exams, McGonagall made an announcement during breakfast. "I have good news!" she said, causing the Great Hall to erupted into loud shouts.

"Dumbledore's coming back!" several people yelled joyfully.

"You've caught the Heir of Slytherin!"

"Quidditch matches are back on!"

Beside him, Hermione rolled her eyes and continued eating her breakfast and Harry tried not to laugh as the McGonagall waited for the Hall to quite down. Once the hubbub had subsided, she spoke again. "Professor Sprout has informed me that the mandrakes are ready for cutting at last. Tonight, we will be able to revive those people who have been petrified. I need hardly remind you all that one of them may well be able to tell us who, or what, attacked them. I am hopeful that this dreadful year will end with our catching the culprit."

There was an explosion of cheering and Harry wasn't surprised that the Gryffindor table was the loudest, shouting and stomping their feet. "Honestly," Hermione muttered to him under her breath, "none of them would have seen the Heir. All they'll be able to tell us is they saw a pair of big, golden eyes and don't remember anything else."

"True." He nodded before putting it from his mind and concentrating back on his breakfast.

They were in Charms when it happened. McGonagall's voice, magically amplified, echoed around the castle. "All students are gather immediately in the Great Hall!"

"Really?" Hermione complained, looking put out. "The Heir couldn't have waited until after exams were over?" Harry rolled his eyes and grabbed her hand to pull her along as everyone poured out into the corridors and made their way to the Great Hall, talking excitedly and anxiously among themselves as they all listened for gossip and rumors.
Said gossip and rumors came in the form of a Ravenclaw third year. "There's more writing on the wall!" He shouted, "right under the first message! It says 'her skeleton will lie in the Chamber for ever'!"

"Who?" Several people called out and a pale-faced Gryffindor first year spoke up in a fearful voice.

"Nobody's seen Ginny Weasley since first period."

There was silence and then it was like an explosion. "YOU KILLED MY SISTER!" Shouted Ron Weasley at the top of his voice, lunging across at him. Harry tried to whip his wand out in front of him, but Weasley's fist punched him in the face– hard– before he could cast anything. Weasley might have had surprise on his side, but Harry had been sparring with Hermione for nearly a year and he managed to throw Weasley off him, only for one of the twins to join in. The twins weren't the Gryffindor Quidditch team's Beaters for nothing and despite the fact Harry had skill on his side, against two opponents who were both bigger then him he started to struggle keeping his own.

The Hall was filled with shouting and screaming as Harry punched, kicked and jabbed as hard as he could, fighting the furious redheads. Hermione seemed to be in some kind of scuffle beside him and he saw, through swollen eyes, that she was duelling the Weasley twin who hadn't joined Weasley's attempt to pound his face in.

"What are you doing?" Shrieked a teacher, "Get off him! Get off him now!"

A blow to his face had Harry stumble, stunned, which was enough for one of the Weasleys to tackle him to the ground. His head was slammed into the floor with a sickening crack and Harry moaned in agony as his vision blurred. His mind felt foggy and disjointed, unable to concentrate. Everywhere hurt, everywhere hurt so much, he just wanted it to stop, to please-please-please stop. This felt worse then sparring with Hermione, worse then the beatings Dudley and his gang had given him, worse then the time a drunk Vernon had pummelled him before locking him in his cupboard.

His head lolled to the side and he briefly noticed, through his hazy vision, that the floor next to him looked very red.

And then Harry passed out.

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Severus's VO:

Severus wanted to murder those Weasley boys– or, at the very least, have them expelled and their wands snapped but instead their unforgivable behavior had been excused because they'd just learned their sister had died.

That didn't give them the excuse to beat one of his students half to death, he'd argued, but the little shits had gotten away with nothing more then a slap on the wrist (only fifty points from Gryffindor each and a month of detentions for almost killing his student!).

Granger had looked murderous. Beyond murderous. The Weasley twin she'd been duelling was currently unconscious in the hospital wing and he wasn't exactly sure which curse the girl had used on the boy– Poppy wasn't sure either– but George Weasley's orifices seemed to be leaking some
kind of tar-like substance and the boy had yet to awaken.

Granger... she hadn't left Harry's side, not once. McGonagall had tried to get her to return to the Slytherin Common Room but one vicious glare from the girl had had the Deputy Headmistress backing off and leaving her alone and as soon as Poppy had healed Harry to the best of her abilities and confirmed he was in no danger Granger had yanked the curtains around Harry's bed shut in a way that screamed 'Do Not Disturb' (actually, it was probably closer to 'FUCK OFF') to everyone else in the room.

Severus had wanted to join her, to escape the idiocy and hypocrisy that surrounded him and examine Harry himself, but Poppy needed his help to figure out exactly what Granger had cursed the Weasley boy with.

Granger had refused to tell them.

He didn't blame her— in fact, he bloody commended her.

And if Poppy noticed his... lacklustre efforts in reversing the curse, well, the mediwitch certainly didn't say anything which wasn't surprising considering she'd been the one who'd had to heal Harry.
Hermione's POV:

Hermione let out an inarticulate sound of pure rage as she looked down at Harry's limp form. If she'd been murderously angry when Mrs. Norris had been attacked now she was ready to paint the walls of Hogwarts red with the blood of all its occupants. She would make those who'd hurt Harry pay and she'd gladly tear down the whole world to do so.

But first whoever was setting the Basilisk on muggleborns had to be stopped; she couldn't allow them to continue, not when students attacked Harry because they thought he was the Heir. Under no circumstances could she let something like this happen ever again.

Hatred and bloodlust turned her vision red as she looked down at Harry's beaten form, at what Ron and Fred Weasley had just done to him. As she reached out to gently brush her fingertips against his poor battered face she felt a plan slowly begin to form. She cast a quick silencing charm around the cot and, using her thumbs, she gently pulled up the lids of Harry's eyes so she could stare into the unfocused emerald-green irises. "Leglimens!" She whispered.

It was the first time she'd ever cast the spell. It felt odd at first, like she was zooming through a tunnel, and then she was floating, floating, strands of memories flowing by...

Focus! She thought, sharply, as she refused to let herself get swept up in the stream of Harry's subconscious mind, instead searching for an anomaly. It wasn't hard to spot; a heavy, dark inky blur so different to the innate brightness of Harry's mind. Hermione targeted it, pushed against it the same way she'd read about pushing against Occlumency walls, until suddenly she was falling—and then she was surrounded by thick, inky black tendrils that were wrapping around her, trapping her in place and tightening. Hermione started to panic because she was struggling but she had no limbs, no physicality. She was shapeless, formless; trying to shout out of a non-existent mouth as she attempted to stop herself from being crushed at the same time as she tried to keep herself from dispersing into nothingness.

And then suddenly the tendrils suddenly weren't so much as crushing her as they were holding her together. 'The Mind Arts are not something to dabble in without an experienced instructor' a familiar voice seemed to echo, except she didn't have ears so how could she hear it? 'Calm yourself' the voice ordered and Hermione desperately focused on the words, on the sounds, letting them anchor her to herself. She wasn't sure how long it took for her to be able to think clearly once more but the owner of the voice seemed to be waiting patiently.

Which actually surprised her a bit when she remembered just whose mind it was she'd visited. 'Thank you' she'd said? thought? because that had been one of the most terrifying experiences of her life and she was very aware of the fact that if her consciousness had fallen apart, her body would have been left brain dead as who she was disappeared entirely—there was a reason why precious few witches and wizards learned Leglimency; it was dangerous magic.
"That was a very stupid thing to do." Voldemort spoke out loud this time but Hermione could hear every word.

'I know' she replied, 'I'm sorry-- I was desperate'

"So desperate you risked losing yourself completely?" Voldemort asked.

'I didn't realise it would be that... bad" Hermione admitted, trying not to remember the horrid feeling of nothing anchoring her together, the eerie feeling of being formless.

"Children." Voldemort said, sounding a lot like an exasperated Professor Snape. "Speak, Miss Granger, before I run out of patience."

'I need a favor.' Hermione told him.

"A favor, you say? And what will I get in return?" He sounded amused now.

'What do you want?' She asked, not sure what Voldemort could possibly want from her but knowing it was unlikely to be anything good.

'I'll decide that at a later date, Miss Granger." Voldemort decided, which was possibly the worst answer he could have given her. "Do we have a deal?"

It was a risk, it was a huge risk, but Harry was public enemy number one and people were calling for his expulsion. This beating had almost killed him and there was no guarantee it would be the last. Harry could even be arrested and taken from her--

'Yes.'

"What do you need, child?" Voldemort asked.

'I need you to get me into the Chamber of Secrets. I know you can do it.'

For a moment, silence, and then Hermione felt herself being pushed back; hurtling out of Voldemort's mind, then out of Harry's mind and then she was opening her eyes and she couldn't help but remember the horrid feeling of nothing anchoring her together, the eerie feeling of being formless. Despite her relief at being in her body once more, she couldn't help but wonder what had just happened. Did Voldemort decide not to go through with their deal?

And then Harry was opening his eyes, except instead of the familiar green his irises were a gleaming, crimson red. "Voldemort," she whispered and Harry's mouth twisted into a smirk she knew could never belong to him.

"You're a brave girl speaking my name," and it was Harry's voice but nothing like she'd heard it sound before-- silky and sibilant and so cold. "Brave," Voldemort said with Harry's mouth, "or perhaps foolish." Harry's/Voldemort's expression then darkened. "The boy is injured."

"The Weasleys." Hermione said, hands suddenly itching to pull out one of her knives so she could start flaying the family of redheads alive. Voldemort looked very displeased and the expression was alien on Harry's features.

"I'll leave the boy's mind once I have shown you the Chamber." He said and Hermione nodded then frowned slightly.

"Is it normal, to be able to possess someone so easily?" She asked, uncomfortable with the thought.
"The link we share appears to make possession almost disturbingly easy. Especially while the boy has retreated into his subconscious." Voldemort said, sounding dismissive of the fact. Hermione took a deep breath and nodded.

"Okay. So... why do you need to be here?" Voldemort arched an eyebrow.

"To get into the Chamber, one must be able to speak Parseltongue, Miss Granger." He said and Hermione gave him her sweetest smile.

::I assure you, that won't be a problem::: The look of shock on Voldemort's face was almost enough to make her laugh despite the anger-rage-hatred that was still clouding her mind.

::How?: Voldemort demanded, also in Parseltongue.

::My animagus is a snake. Over the summer holidays I spent enough time in the form that I picked up Parseltongue::: Hermione explained, deciding to go with honesty.

"You are an animagus? Already?" Voldemort asked, sounding startled as he switched back to English.

"It coincided nicely with my Occlumency studies." She replied. Voldemort's lips curled into a smile that wasn't cold or cruel, but rather contained a hint of respect.

"You are quite an unusual twelve-year-old, Miss Granger."

"Thirteen, actually. And I'm taking that as a compliment, just so you know." She said with another insincere sweet smile. Voldemort chuckled and the sound was surprisingly pleasant.

"It was intended as such. Now I believe we have work to do, though I must ask just why it is so important that you find the Chamber of Secrets?" He asked.

"Because Harry's being blamed for the attacks and now the stupid little Weasley girl's managed to get herself killed and taken down into the bloody Chamber so fucking Ron Weasley and his shit-head brothers attacked Harry, beating him half to death!" Hermione said with a smile that showed all her teeth. "I plan on having a very pleasant conversation with the Heir requesting they cease the attacks until Harry and I have graduated. If they're not inclined to stop the attacks then I'm going to have a much less pleasant conversation with them that will include a number of death threats. Should they still be reluctant then I'm going to introduce them to my very, very sharp collection of knives."

"Very well," Voldemort said, sounding thoughtful as his red eyes met hers and she kept her chin high and fiercely stared right back. "I shall show you to the Chamber."

Getting out of the hospital wing was surprisingly easy. Voldemort, using Harry's wand, simply cast Disillusionment charms on them both and they simply walked right out.

The school seemed almost eerily empty with all the students sequestered in the Great Hall and they didn't even come across a single ghost as Voldemort led them to Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, of all places. Hermione followed on silent footsteps as he crossed over to what at first appeared to be an ordinary sink. She was confused for a moment but then Voldemort hissed ::Open up!:: and the tap of the sink glowed with a brilliant white light and began to spin. The sink then sank right out of sight leaving a pipe exposed; a pipe wide enough for a grown man to squeeze through.

"That's disgusting." Hermione muttered, eyeing the slimy looking pipe with revulsion.
"Indeed." Voldemort replied, smoothly. "Lady's first." He added with an elegant hand gesture towards what was, apparently, the entrance to Salazar Slytherin's legendary Chamber of Secrets. In a girl's loo. She really hoped that the room had been used as something different a thousand years ago because a secret chamber in a girl's loo was suspiciously close to 'pervert' territory.

"The basilisk isn't going to kill me when I go down there, is it?" She asked Voldemort, deciding not to consider the fact the founder of her House was possibly a pedophile.

"You figured out the horror within the Chamber, did you?" Voldemort asked, red eyes gleaming with a sharp interest she didn't think boded well for her.

"After Mrs. Norris– the caretaker's cat– was petrified." She told him, "Harry and I heard it talking in the walls and I puzzled it out from there."

"Indeed." Voldemort gave her another thoughtful look then said, "the basilisk will only come when called. You are safe to go down." Hermione nodded and took a deep breath before lowering herself slowly into the pipe and let go.

It was like rushing down an endless, slimy, dark slide. She could see pipes branching off in all directions but none as large as the one she was in, which twisted and turned, sloping steeply downwards, until she knew she was lower in the school then even the dungeons, miles and miles under even the deepest dungeon. The feeling of falling was almost as bad as when she'd used Legilimency and the panic building up inside her was nearly enough to make her throw up. She couldn't feel her hands, couldn't feel her face, she couldn't even breathe–

And then the pipe leveled out and she shot out of the end with a wet thud, landing on the damp floor of a dark stone tunnel, large enough to stand in. For several long moments she laid there trembling, ragged breaths being torn from her lungs, but the sound of Voldemort's approach had her stumbling to her feet and shoving away the threatening panic attack as she dug her nails into her palms to keep her hands from trembling.

The dark, enclosed tunnel was barely an improvement to falling– memories of a pitch-black room she couldn't escape made cold nausea swell up inside her and she almost choked on her instinctive fear. But this was a phobia she'd beaten down over and over from the sheer necessity of it; she'd trained herself to be able to think past the fear that threatened to suffocate her, to force it down until she was left light-headed but able to breathe, able to think, and she wouldn't let her body or her mind betray her in front of the Dark wizard.

When Voldemort slid out of the pipe he landed on his feet with apparent ease despite his borrowed body– practice, she guessed. There was a look of distaste on his face as he looked down at his slimy robes and Hermione realised that in her panic she hadn't even noticed the muck clinging to her. "Evanesco," Voldemort muttered, vanishing the slime from his robes with a wave of his hand. He then flicked a hand in her direction and the gunk vanished from her robes too. Hermione nodded at him in thanks, not wanting to talk until she was sure her voice wouldn't tremble.

Looking around them, the tunnel was so dark Hermione could only see a small distance ahead. "This way," Voldemort ordered, casting a lumos then starting to lead the way along one of the tunnels. She followed after him, taking care to not make a sound as she walked, slipping quietly through the looming shadows the way she'd been taught. Her heart nearly stopped when they rounded a bend and she caught sight of something massive and curved, lying right across the tunnel.

Her sharp inhale gave away her fear to Voldemort who paused and looked back at her, amusement on his face. "It's only the shed skin." He said.
"How silly of me to be concerned by the over twenty foot long shed snake skin." She replied with a smile that showed all her teeth. Voldemort didn't say anything but the corners of his mouth twitched as he turned back around and continued on.

They walked until they reached the end of a very long, dimly lit Chamber where towering stone pillars entwined with carved serpents rose to support a ceiling lost in darkness, casting long black shadows through the odd, greenish gloom that filled the place.

The final pillar, however was different– a giant figure had been carved into it, one of an ancient and noble looking man with a long, thin beard that fell nearly to his feet. And laying at the feet of the effigy of Salazar Slytherin was a small, black-robed figure with flaming red hair.

Hermione walked over and examined the girl curiously. Ginevra Weasley's face was clammy and white as marble but her eyes were closed which meant she wasn't Petrified.

"She won't wake," said a soft voice and Hermione turned sharply towards the sound and saw a tall, dark-haired boy leaning against the nearest pillar and watching her. He was older then her, sixteen or seventeen she guessed, and strangely blurred around the edges almost as if she was looking at him through a misted window. Hermione slid the hand not holding her wand over to her hip where she could feel the comforting weight of a switchblade. Smiling her 'wolf-smile' as Harry called it, as she started moving towards the unfamiliar teenager, her eyes not leaving his for a moment as she held herself in a loose fighter's stance ready to react to the first sign of movement. The strange boy's eyes sharpened in interest and she didn't miss the hand holding his wand– or the Weasley girl's, she wasn't sure– twitch slightly.

And then Voldemort stepped forwards from where he'd been lurking further back. "Hello Tom." He greeted the teenager. "Are you enjoying yourself?"

The handsome boy reacted swiftly, wand up and aimed at Voldemort in a single motion. Hermione reacted just as fast, using the distraction to close the distance between them and shove the edge of her blade threateningly against the vulnerable flesh of his stomach, pressing down hard enough for the sharpened steel to draw blood. "Drop the wand or I'll gut you." She snarled to 'Tom'– she didn't care what happened to Voldemort but the Dark wizard was currently possessing Harry's body and she'd die before she let Harry's body be hurt and she'd kill anyone who tried.

'Tom' went very, very still, the wand dropping from his fingers and hitting the ground with a small clunk. Hermione kicked it away with her foot, sending it skidding across the ground and far out of reach, before taking several quick steps backwards– with 'Tom' now unarmed she was in more danger if she remained within striking distance. Voldemort had watched their brief exchange with sharp eyes and as she moved back he stepped in closer.

"Who are you?" 'Tom' asked in a voice that was flat and cold. Hermione wasn't sure if he was talking to her or Voldemort but Voldemort was the one who answered.

"Your past, present and future." He said smoothly, "I am Lord Voldemort."

"Prove it!" Demanded 'Tom', in a dangerous voice, "how do I know you're not just Harry Potter trying to trick me?"

:::So suspicious, Tom... good::: hissed Voldemort. :::The first snake we ever spoke to called itself Thsaass:::;

"It really is you." The boy said slowly, a gleam in his eyes. His gaze then flickered over to her. "And who is your companion?" He asked and Hermione didn't reply, instead examining the
younger Voldemort with narrowed eyes– Tom was very attractive; fair skinned with dark tousled hair, an angular face and eyes an interesting grey-violet shade.

"She is an associate of mine." Voldemort answered for her anyway. "Her name is Hermione Granger."

"Granger... Hermione Granger. Yes, little Ginny wrote to me about you," Tom mused, his voice turning soft and lightly mocking, "she was quite jealous. Wanted the famous Harry Potter to notice her like he noticed you."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at Voldemort, ignoring Tom for the moment. "You knew what was happening from the start," She said in a low, furious voice. "You knew this– you're opening the Chamber!"

"I am a memory," Tom said lightly, "preserved in a diary for fifty years." He pointed towards the floor near the statue's giant toes. Lying open there was a little black diary.

"That's impossible." Hermione disagreed flatly, "memories don't work like that. There's something else about that diary, some other magic you used. Very powerful magic– and probably very Dark and very, very illegal."

Tom gave her an interested look, like he was seeing her properly for the first time, while Voldemort smiled a deceptively pleasant-looking smile. "You are a very bright girl, Miss Granger." He said.

"I've heard that before," Hermione muttered under her breath before sliding the switchblade away and striding over to pick up the diary.

"What are you doing?" Tom demanded, his voice suddenly sharp.

"What I came down here to do," she replied coldly. "I'm stopping you from opening the Chamber– I don't know how you're doing it, except you're doing it through your little diary and you're putting Harry in danger. I can't let that happen– I won't let you."

Tom's eyes narrowed. "Yes, Harry Potter. Ginny told me his whole fascinating history. May I ask how it is, exactly, that this situation came about?"

"A Magical Oath." Hermione said, meeting his narrow-eyed stare with a fierce, challenging one of her own. "Our guaranteed safety in return for the Philosopher's Stone." She had to fight the urge to fidget under the weight of the twin gazes directed her way, one an almost glowing crimson and the other the color of crushed violets. "I don't want the diary, you can have it back, I just want you to keep it out of the school until Harry and I have graduated." She told them both, more than happy for the Chamber mess to be put behind her. The mental and emotional trauma of the past few hours had the ghosts of old memories trailing ice-cold fingers down the back of her neck and she just wanted to be curled up next to Harry somewhere; wanted to anywhere but this dark, enclosed space far too reminiscent of her nightmarish past.

"I believe you owe me a favor, Miss Granger." Voldemort's voice was just as soft as Tom's and twice as dangerous. Hermione felt herself tense, her fingers suddenly aching for her knife again.

"A promise is a promise." She said stiffly.

"Yes," Voldemort said, "and I think I'll collect on that promise now." He walked over to her and held out his hand. Wordlessly, Hermione handed him the diary and he stroked the black leather cover thoughtfully. "This diary is very valuable to me, Miss Granger. I would hate to see anything
"And?" she asked cautiously.

"And I want to bind you to it." Voldemort said simply before smiling— it wasn't a nice smile and it didn't belong on Harry's face. "Consider it protection and insurance."

Fear rushed through Hermione before she pushed it back down and nodded at the Dark Lord. It wasn't like she had any choice— a promise was a promise and she'd have to be an idiot to go back on her word to Lord Voldemort. And nobody had ever accused her of being an idiot.

Voldemort raised his hand and touched the tip of Harry's wand to her forehead and began speaking in Latin. Hermione managed to translate a handful of words before a sudden pain exploded white-hot behind her eyes, turning her vision black and spotted. She inhaled sharply, gritting her teeth to hold back the scream that threatened to tear itself from her throat as for nearly ten seconds there was just blinding agony and then it was gone and the world slowly started to swim back into focus.

Hermione took several deep, ragged breaths as panic crawled over her, thick enough for her to choke on. It was only the memory of the Magical Oath, that whatever Voldemort had done wasn't intended to harm her, that allowed her to suppress the sharp flashes of old traumas dancing at the edges of her mind.

Voldemort was still holding the diary but Tom was nowhere to be seen and Hermione forced her empty lungs to fill then empty then fill again until she was confident she could speak without her voice betraying her. "Did it work?" she asked and was viciously proud by her flat, steady tone.

The diary flipped open by itself and an invisible hand wrote yes.

"Alright." She nodded, "how does this work then?"

"Consider yourself a safety measure." Voldemort answered, his crimson eyes meeting hers unblinkingingly. "If something happens to the diary, you will feel it. In dire cases, you will be able to draw power from it and Tom will be able to draw power from you."

Protection and insurance, Hermione remembered his earlier words. Now she understood what he meant— he wasn't talking about the diary, not really; he was using it to bind her and Harry to him. By binding her to the diary Voldemort was ensuring that she, and therefore Harry, had a vested interest in... well, in his best interests. Hermione exhaled sharply, frustrated with herself and with Voldemort but knowing better then to complain.

"Can he come out at all?" She asked instead and in response the pages of the diary fluttered and then Tom was standing in front of her; not fully corporal but not a ghost either, much clearer then he had been before.

"Interesting." He mused, "You are a very powerful witch. Your magic is... quite intoxicating."

"Thanks." Hermione said awkwardly, thrown by the somewhat suggestive wording and frustrated with herself for being thrown. She felt shaken, emotional and bone-tired, but more then that she felt vulnerable and she hated feeling vulnerable. So Hermione did what she'd always done in the past— she used that hate, used it to smother the fear and the anger and the panic and let cold-hearted, calculating survivor slide into place; the girl who'd been torn apart and built back up by the rough streets of London, her sharp edges made sharper by the cruelty of the world she'd raised herself in.

It was more Jane then Hermione who glanced down at the body of little Ginevra Weasley with cool indifference before turning back to the two Dark Lords. "We're going to need a scapegoat."
"I can think of someone." Tom said with a smirk. "If you don't mind a death being on your conscience, that is."

"Murder does very little to affect my conscience," she said, ignoring the curious and intrigued looks her statement had caused. "What's your plan?"

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Harry's POV:

Harry blinked blearily as he drifted into consciousness. The world around him was blurred and out of focus and he wasn't quite sure where he was. He tried to remember what had happened but it was like his brain was filled with fog, his last memories about as tangible as mist as he tried to reach for them.

"Hey." A soft voice murmured and moments later a small hand was sliding his glasses onto his face bringing the world back into sharp focus. He was in the hospital wing and there was a very familiar person sitting on the chair beside the cot he was laying on, looking thin, tired and wan but still the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen.

"Hermione," Harry croaked, wincing slightly as his mouth felt like sandpaper when he tried to speak. He still managed to smile at her, despite how stiff and uncooperative his body felt and how concerned he was by her appearance.

Hermione's hair was free, the wild curls spilling chaotically down over her shoulders, and there were dark shadows like bruises under her eyes and a hollowness to her cheeks like she hadn't eaten for days. She still smiled at him, her eyes lighting up as she stood and fetched him up a glass of water, pressing the cup to his lips. Harry gulped the water down greedily and when he tried speaking again he was much more successful. "What did I miss?" He asked, voice hoarse but legible.

"What do you remember?" She asked, her voice soft. Harry strained his memory and it slowly started to come back to him.

"I remember... the Great Hall," he said, slowly, "and then... someone attacked me? I think it was Weasley, but... the memories are kind of muddled and then there's just this whole heap of nothingness."

"I'm not surprised, considering how hard your skull hit the ground." Hermione muttered, looking furious for a moment. She then leaned forwards and pressed her lips to his ear, hissing softly.

:::Weasley and his brother beat you half to death in retaliation for their sister being kidnapped by the Heir and taken down to the Chamber of Secrets. I used your mind link to talk to Voldemort and he possessed you and led me to the Chamber. It turns out that little Ginevra Weasley was the one who attacked the muggleborns, except she was being controlled by a diary that Voldemort used some powerful Dark magic on to preserve a... shade, of sorts inside it. Almost a living, breathing copy of his teenage self, but not quite. We all came to the agreement that diary won't be used to open the Chamber again while we're both still at Hogwarts and no one thinks you're the Heir anymore:::

:::Why not?: he hissed back, puzzled. Even in Parseltongue, Hermione's voice seemed to radiate
It turns out that Gilderoy Lockhart was being quite the naughty boy. Pity for him that he was caught in the act, setting fire to the greenhouse where the mandrakes were kept. Even more's a pity that instead of allowing himself to be taken into custody, he fled into the Forbidden Forest and ended up being torn apart by a nest of Acromantula. When a search of Lockhart's office then revealed Ginevra Weasley's dead body the Ministry immediately launched a full inquiry and found a highly illegal potion hidden in his rooms— a potion that mimics the effects of a Basilisk, petrifying the one who drinks it:

And the ghost?

The Ministry assumes the ghost witnessed Lockhart and he used some sort of foreign spell on it he learned while he was travelling looking for stories to steal: Hermione hissed, looking very amused. Harry couldn't help but snort.

The Ministry are idiots. How about Dumbledore?:

He can't prove anything. But he did get reinstated as headmaster: Hermione looked very annoyed by this.

Damn:: he pulled a face and Hermione's face softened into a smile as she straightened back up and ran her fingers gently through his hair.

"I've missed you these past few days." She told him quietly.

"Few days? How long was I out for?" he asked, surprised.

"Four and a half days altogether. You beat George Weasley in waking up though— he's still unconscious but finally on the mend, unfortunately."

"What was the damage? To me?" Harry asked, shocked that he'd been unconscious for so long. Hermione's face darkened.

"Four broken ribs, three broken knuckles, your left wrist was broken and the back of your skull was fractured. You suffered a cerebral hematoma— if Madam Pomfrey and Snape weren't as good as they are or as quick, you could have died."

"Please tell me Weasley and his brother were expelled!" Harry said furiously.

"Apparently, Ginny's death was punishment enough. I think a total of, oh, one hundred and fifty points were taken from Gryffindor for nearly beating you to death!" Hermione's voice actually shook she was so furious and Harry clenched his fists as rage rushed through him.

"Those fucking bastards!" He seethed.

"Don't worry," Hermione said. Her voice was flat and cold and there was death in her eyes. "They'll pay in blood for what they did to you." Her words weren't a threat they were a promise and Harry smiled a fierce smile back at her because he might not be a naturally violent person but he could definitely be a vindictive one and he'd help Hermione see her promise through.

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They'll pay in blood for what they did to you. Those words echoed in Severus's mind over and over as he paused outside the curtains shielding Harry's hospital bed from view.

Granger's voice had been colder then he'd ever heard it, colder even then when she'd told Greyback she hoped he drowned in his own blood or when she'd promised retribution on the one who'd petrified the cat. And he knew she wasn't exaggerating either– she meant exactly what she said. He didn't know when or how, but Granger was not going to ever let this go and she was going to make Ron, Fred and George Weasley bleed for what they'd done to Harry. He didn't blame her either– didn't even feel slightly inclined to stop her. Severus was furious enough that he actually felt like helping her dish out whatever revenge she thought was necessary.

And Granger was capable of being ruthless. Beyond ruthless, if what she'd done to Lockhart was any kind of example.

He didn't know how she'd found the Chamber of Secrets, how she'd got inside it or how she managed to get past the monster to get Ginevra Weasley's body, but he had absolutely no doubt in his mind that she had.

He also didn't know how she'd gotten control over Lockhart when the whole school was on full alert or how she'd managed to leave Ginevra's body in his office and got him to burn down the greenhouse where the mandrakes were kept before sending the incompetent moron to his death in the Forbidden Forest, but she had.

And it had worked.

Apart from himself, Minerva and Albus, everyone was satisfied with the conclusion the Ministry inquiry had come up with– Gilderoy Lockhart had murdered Penelope Clearwater and Ginevra Weasley, had petrified the others and had cast some sort of foreign Curse on the ghost after Nearly Headless Nick had witnessed him trying to drag Finch-Fletchley into an empty classroom. His fraudulent books had been proven as false and it was widely accepted that setting everything up as if the Chamber of Secrets had been opened so he could fight and defeat the culprit would be the late fraud's latest 'victory over evil' to write about.

In the eyes of the world, the culprit had been found and punished.

More importantly, in the eyes of the student body of Hogwarts Harry Potter had been cleared of any wrongdoing or possible involvement in the whole mess.

All was "well".

Except Albus was angry, Minerva loathed Granger with a passion and Severus torn– torn between the fact that he not only understood but approved of Granger's actions and that he was supposed to be on the side of the Light. Which Hermione Jane Granger was certainly not.

Pulling himself from his thoughts, Severus cleared his throat to signify his presence and pulled open the curtains surrounding the hospital bed Harry was occupying.

"Mr. Potter, a pleasure to once again see you in the land of the living," he said, actually quite sincere in his words. "I trust Miss Granger has explained what has happened in your absence?"

"She did," Harry's expression was equal parts surprised and horrified. "I had no idea that Lockhart was such a– a monster!"
"Indeed," he said, dryly. "And I trust that neither of you will be surprised that Mr. Potter is being summoned up to the headmaster's office."

"Not in the least." Hermione said, cold-eyed and calculating. "But Dumbledore won't find a thing."

That was a lot more ominous sounding then 'we have nothing to hide' and Severus just hoped she was right, that if there was anything to find– and he had no doubt there was– that Albus wouldn't be the one to uncover it.

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Harry's POV:

"I'm to be personally escorted to the Dursleys by Professor Snape." Harry said flatly as he looked up at Dumbledore.

The headmaster had questioned him for nearly ten minutes about anything he might know about the Chamber of Secrets to which Harry had replied it was a legend and that Lockhart had been responsible for the hoax– that the Ministry officials had said so. Dumbledore had then tried questioning him about Hermione's possible involvement to which he'd flatly stated was ridiculous and refused to say another word about it. Then the headmaster had moved onto Legilimency but Harry's mind had been well protected by a darkly amused Voldemort.

Finally defeated, Dumbledore had then given him the crushing news that he wouldn't have the chance to escape from King's Cross with Hermione like they'd previously planned as instead he was being escorted to the Dursleys by his Head of House to "make sure he didn't try to run off again".

"It's the safest action we can take, Mr. Potter." Dumbledore said gravely. "You need to spend time with the Dursleys otherwise the blood wards will not hold."

"I don't care about the blood wards!" Harry said furiously.

"My dear boy," Dumbledore said gently, "I know you are too young to understand now but in a few years you will thank me for this."

"Yeah, that's likely!" Harry spat angrily. "Now if you'll excuse me, sir, I have to go pack."

With that he turned on his heel and stormed out of the headmaster's office. Hermione was waiting at the bottom of the spiral staircase for him and she linked her arm through his as they headed to the Slytherin common room, Harry openly seething.

"What did he have to say?" She demanded.

"I'm being taken to the Dursleys, personally." Harry snarled. "And wards will be put up so I can't leave!"

"That bastard." Hermione hissed, eyes flashing with fury before a sudden thoughtful expression crossed her face. "I think I've got an idea." She said slowly as Harry snapped the password to the Slytherin dungeons. But before she could expand upon that as they stepped into the common room, Draco practically ran over to them, grabbing Harry by his forearm and dragging him– and by default Hermione, whose arm was still linked with his– into their dormitory.
Theo and Blaise were already sitting there talking quietly to each other, but their conversation immediately stopped when the three of them entered.


"The Chamber of Secrets? You already know the truth." Harry said while Hermione raised an eyebrow at the three boys.

"The Ministry might be thick enough to believe that Lockhart was responsible, but that's a lie." Draco said, narrowing his eyes at them. "That ponce had nothing to do with the Chamber, but you two do– and everyone in Slytherin knows it. Hermione went missing for hours and then suddenly there was an announcement that it was all over and that the culprit had been identified."

"I wasn't missing. I was in the hospital wing, sitting next to Harry." Hermione said calmly.

"With the curtains around the bed drawn. Nobody would have been able to see if you were there or not. The Chamber of Secrets opening wasn't some hoax that Lockhart staged for his next book– it really was opened. And you two know what happened– you've known since the first attack!"

"Maybe," Hermione said before a wicked smile crossed her face ::Or maybe not:: she hissed.

Laughing at the stunned looks on the three Slytherins' faces, Hermione turned to him. "Coming?" She asked, deeply amused.

::Right behind you:: he replied, cheered up slightly.

As the next morning rolled around, though, it was a very glum Harry who stood in his empty dormitory with his packed trunk beside him.

Hermione had shrunk her own trunk and asked him to store it in his earlier that morning before she'd kissed his cheek and said good-bye by the school gates and he'd had to walk slowly back up to the castle on his own– Snape was going to Portkey Harry directly to Privet Drive. With a groan, Harry grabbed the handle of his trunk and pulled it into the Common Room, about to head up to the Great Hall to meet Snape when he froze and his eyes went wide.

Curling up in front of the fire, a familiar looking silver-grey serpent lifted its head and flicked its tongue at him. ::Summer can be lonely:: Hermione hissed, in her animagus form, ::which is why your most wonderful friend in the whole world bought you a snake to keep you company before she left this morning on the Hogwarts express. Do you think your new familiar will like Privet Drive?::

::I think:: Harry hissed back, as he lifted the snake off the ground and let it coil around his neck, ::that staying with the Dursleys is going to be a lot more fun with my new pet::

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Terrible screams of agony echoed around the empty manor house in Little Hangleton. The screams seemed to carry on for hours and hours, until they finally stopped. On a bed of silk, a figure rose into a standing position. Robes cut from expensive black cloth clothed him. A pale, long-fingered hand lifted and a slender wand of yew flew across the room to be reunited with its master once more.

And miles and miles away, in his office at Hogwarts, Severus Snape let out a gasp as his Dark Mark flared to life, turning jet black on his pale skin.
END OF PART TWO, THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS
Part Three: The Prisoner of Azkaban - Chapter XVII

Chapter XVII:

Harry's **POV**: 

The second the words left his mouth, Harry Potter knew he'd have to run. He turned on his heel and sprinted down the hall with Dudley on his heels. He was scrambling up the stairs now, if he could just get to his room, to his best friend, to his only source of protection--

Harry yelped as he felt one of Dudley's large clammy hands grab his ankle. He thrashed his legs wildly, trying to free himself from his cousin's grip, but to no avail. Dudley yanked him by the leg and he lost his grip on the top stair, enabling Dudley to drag him back down the stairs.

The friction of Petunia's hideous floral carpet left angry burns on Harry's elbows and Dudley pushed him roughly against the wall making him wince as he felt the end of the banister dig into the small of his back. There was a part of Harry that was screaming at him to fight back, the same part of him that Hermione had ruthlessly trained in hand-to-hand fighting for the better part of a year, but a childhood of torment suffered at Dudley's hands and the steep price he'd paid whenever he fought back had Harry's deeply ingrained instincts kicking in, turning pliant in his cousin's grip.

Dudley was about three times his size and the fist that collided sharply with his jaw had Harry seeing stars as pain exploded across his face and there was already another punch fast approaching his left eye.

And then Dudley screamed and practically threw himself off to the side, his fist only clipping the side of Harry's chin. The cause for Dudley's distress was the very reason Harry had so urgently tried to reach his room.

The beautiful silver-grey snake at the top of the stairs reared its head, spitting angrily with its fangs bared ready to strike. Harry, as he slid down so he was sitting and lifted his hand to gingerly prod his already swelling jaw couldn't help the dark enjoyment he felt at the sight of Dudley's distress.

::I am going to kill him!:: hissed his best friend Hermione Granger from where she was poised ready to strike at the top of the stairs.

As far as Harry knew, Hermione was the only witch who had ever been able to achieve an animagus transformation at twelve years old. A Muggleborn in Slytherin, even at age fourteen Hermione was known as the brightest witch of her age and promised to be one of the most powerful witches of their time.

And she had secrets. Secrets that only he knew; dark, dangerous and disquieting secrets, not the least of which being that Hermione was a murderer. His best friend had killed people, or at least played a significant role in their deaths. Some of them had deserved it like her first "victim", a Muggle pedophile who had murdered Hermione's young charge. And some who didn't, like their old Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher Gilderoy Lockhart, who had been torn apart by
Acromantula in the Forbidden Forest.

But Harry loved Hermione. She was his first friend and he'd do anything and everything for her. It was Hermione who had helped him uncover the truth about the manipulations of Dumbledore, the headmaster of Hogwarts. Dumbledore had wanted to groom Harry into becoming an ideal weapon and an icon for the Light— and he'd wanted Harry to become a killer.

But the old man's plans had been ruined when Hermione appeared in his life and blasted them to smithereens. Harry trusted Hermione more then he trusted anyone else in this world and he knew that despite her default wariness and mistrust of the world in general, Hermione trusted him.

In some ways, Hermione's life wasn't dissimilar to his own. Kindred spirits, she'd called them, when they first met on the train on the way to Hogwarts. Hermione's parents had died in a car accident when she was only three and Hermione had spent the next three years living in an orphanage run by abusive nuns before running away at age six. From then on, she'd lived on the streets under the name Jane.

Harry had spent the last summer as a runaway, living on the streets with her and it had been the strangest but best summer of his life. This year, though, Dumbledore had made sure he couldn't leave the Dursleys. The old bastard had spouted shit like it was for Harry's own good as he trapped Harry with his abusive relatives with magical wards that tied him within a hundred meters of Number Four Privet Drive at all times.

That's when Hermione had come up with her plan and had joined him at his home in Privet Drive as his pet snake, a disguise that neither Dumbledore nor anyone else had managed to see through. Hermione had sworn that she wouldn't let Harry come to any harm which was what had led to their current situation.

"MUM! DAD! THERE'S A SNAKE IN THE HOUSE!" Dudley wailed as Hermione slid down the stairs, her dark, shiny eyes fixed on the large, blonde boy. There was the sound of stampeding feet like a herd of elephants was running through the house and seconds later the large form of his uncle emerged from the living room.

Vernon Dursley was a large, beefy man with very little neck and a lot of moustache. He also had a pink scar on his face, like a wonky 'U', that Hermione had carved into him last summer in retaliation for his treatment of Harry. Behind his Uncle was Petunia Dursley; Vernon's wife, Dudley's mother and Harry's dead mother's sister. Petunia resembled some kind of sickly horse with her long neck and stick-thin body and his Aunt let out a shrill scream as she caught sight of Hermione, clutching at Vernon's arm.

"Vernon! Vernon! Do something!" she demanded shrilly.

"You! Boy! What have you done?" Bellowed Vernon, pointing a shaking finger in Harry's direction. Harry scowled at Vernon.

"If Dudley hadn't attacked me then she wouldn't be attacking you." He snapped.

Harry's feelings regarding his relatives had moved into a very dark territory. For a long time, although Harry didn't love them— hell he didn't even like them— he'd never seriously considered killing the Dursleys or asking one of his more bloodthirsty acquaintances to have them killed. He'd just fantasized about it.

Dark thoughts for a teenager to have, but eleven years of hell twisted a boy and over the past two years being best friends with Hermione had made his morals a lot more flexible as well as
loosening some of his... darker inhibitions.

So as Hermione, in her highly venomous form, slid towards the Dursleys Harry found himself wondering whether or not he should stop her or if he even wanted to.

The answer to the latter was no– he didn't want to stop her. But to his dismay, he found himself speaking up against his wishes. \textit{Stop. You can't kill them:} he hissed to Hermione who stilled and turned her black, shiny stare on him. \textit{Not yet at least:} he added, wanting to appease her.

\textit{Your heart is too big:} she informed him, before slithering over and winding herself around him so she was draped over his neck in a similar manner to which her mangy fleabag of a cat, Iago, was usually draped around hers. Except Iago had stayed at Hogwarts this summer, keeping the old caretaker company as Argus Filch's cat was still Petrified thanks to Hermione setting fire to the greenhouse where the mandrakes had been kept in order to set up Lockhart.

He knew Hermione felt bad about that– which was probably the only part of the whole Chamber of Secrets mess she felt any guilt for– but it had been necessary to frame Lockhart as the person responsible murdering two students and Petrifying several more. The official story was Lockhart had faked the opening of the Chamber of Secrets for the plot in his newest book as a lengthy investigation into him had revealed that the man was a fraud who stole other witches and wizards achievements to pass off as his own.

According to most, the Chamber of Secrets was still just a myth and Lockhart was the culprit behind all the attacks. Harry, however, wasn't part of the "most" and neither was Hermione. They both knew the truth, that it had been Lord Voldemort who'd opened the Chamber through Ginny Weasley. He'd used a diary in which he had preserved some sort of living, breathing version of his sixteen-year-old self that had possessed the girl and used her life-force to give him enough strength to form his own body. And now that diary was in Hermione's care.

"Boy," Vernon's voice was low and calm which was a danger sign in and of itself. Harry couldn't help but cringe slightly. Hermione– no, Tox she'd told him to call 'snake-her' if anyone discovered her or she had to reveal herself in a situation like this– tightened her coils around his neck in a gesture that was comforting rather than threatening. "What is that?"

Uncle Vernon had been far more manageable since Hermione had threatened him last summer, barely speaking to Harry at all which he'd been more than fine with. He was pretty sure this was the longest they'd been in the same room since McGonagall had dropped him off at the end of the school year.

"This is Tox," Harry said somewhat awkwardly through his stiff and swollen jaw.

"Get rid of it." Vernon's voice left no room for argument. Harry had to steel up his courage for what was about to happen next– his first real altercation with the Dursleys since his return, five weeks ago.

Harry had been making quite the effort to stay out of the Dursleys way this summer. He only sat down to eat with them at dinner, skipping breakfast and lunch with them by making his own when they were out of the way. Other then that, he'd spent most of his time in his room reading, practicing his wandless magic, doing his homework and cursing Dumbledore's existence. In fact, until a little earlier when he'd finally snapped and angrily retorted to Dudley's goading he'd successfully managed to avoid any conflict at all.

Gritting his teeth then immediately regretting it as his sore jaw sent sharp bolts of pain radiating through his face, Harry met his uncle's piggy stare. "No." He said simply.
"No?" Vernon's face was rapidly going purple which made the scar stand out even more and the vein in his head pulsed in a thoroughly unpleasant manner. "No?"

"No," Harry repeated with a calm he most certainly didn't feel. "I didn't stutter. Tox is mine and she's staying here." This caused an immediate explosion.

"GET RID OF IT!" Bellowed Vernon, advancing on him with clenched fists. Immediately, Tox reared up hissing, fangs bared and body poised to strike. Vernon froze and Petunia and Dudley both made horrified sounds. Summoning his energy, Harry hauled himself to his feet and traded with the Dursleys looks of absolute loathing.

"Tox is staying. If you try doing anything, I'll let her kill you." His words had their desired impact causing Petunia's face to go white, her hands clutching her chest while Dudley let out a frightened wail. Vernon looked like he was about to have an aneurysm.

"GO TO YOUR ROOM! NOW!" He thundered and Harry didn't spare the obese walrus another glance, instead striding up the steps and into his room and shoving the door shut behind him. Tox slid from his neck and flowed into her natural form, her human form.

"Collorportus." She said, touching her hand to the door.

Hermione had read in their first year that the Trace applied to underage witches and wizards only picked up magic used through wands– any magic cast wandlessly the Ministry wouldn't be alerted to. She had then proceeded to spend the last two years teaching both of them to use as much wandless magic as possible. Harry wasn't as good at it as Hermione, as a childhood of using her magic to help keep her alive meant Hermione had an instinctive grasp of wandless magic that most adult witches and wizards couldn't match, but thanks to her help– or, as he liked to refer to it as, her strict, compulsory, merciless training regime– Harry's knowledge and ability was far beyond that of a normal almost-third year.

The door to his bedroom gleamed as if covered with a layer of film and Hermione stepped back with a satisfied look on her face. "No one's getting in here." She stated with absolute certainty before turning to him, her eyes narrowing. "You should have let me kill them."

Harry sighed, crossing the room and sitting heavily on his bed. "Dumbledore would have known I'd had something to do with it." He mumbled through his swollen jaw, "I mean, the Dursleys dying from a snake bite and me being a Parselmouth? Even Dudley would be able to connect the dots."

It should disturb him, he mused, that he talked about killing the Dursleys or letting them die with such nonchalance. But the truth was, he simply didn't care if they lived or died. Not anymore. No, he, Harry James Potter, did not give a flying fuck whether or not his relatives were murdered. In fact, he rather hoped they were or that they'd all die in some horribly 'tragic' accident.

Hermione crossed the room to sit next to him, a concerned look on her face and muted anger in her eyes as she took in the bruise. "I've got saddling solution and bruise paste in the bag in my satchel." She told him.

"Oh thank god." Harry groaned, relieved.

Hermione's satchel was currently hanging on the back of his door and she rarely went anywhere without it– for years it had carried all her worldly possessions and even now it was filled with everything she liked to have on hand, from a set of vicious looking blades to a worn copy of 'The Complete Works of Poe'.
Harry pulled the small leather bag she was talking about from the satchel and stuck his arm in it up to his elbow, rummaging around for the paste. The bag was a more recent addition— it hadn't been cheap, even secondhand, but it contained a nearly infinite amount of space to store things. It took Harry nearly five minutes to locate the bruise paste and swelling solution from amongst all the contents and he gratefully lathered them both on his chin, sighing in relief as a good portion of the pain ebbed away and he didn't need a mirror to know that the bruises would have changed from black-purple in color, to yellow-green.

As he went to replace the paste and solution with Hermione's other emergency medical supplies— both muggle and magical— his hand brushed against a familiar leather cover that stung his hand. "Ow." He complained, picking up the small black diary in question so he could glare at it. The pages fluttered and the figure of an older boy appeared in his room beside Harry. The boy was sixteen, very handsome and happened to be the younger self of Lord Voldemort. His name was Tom Riddle.

"Ouch." The older boy commented, raising an eyebrow at Harry's bruised chin as he crossed the room to lounge down across Harry's bed, next to Hermione. She glared halfheartedly at the older boy but to be honest they'd both started to accept Tom's presence— five weeks of being in close quarters with someone and you were bound to exchange more than a few awkward hellos. Tom was insanely smart, very charismatic, manipulative in a way no Slytherin could help but admire and had a certain dry wit about him that would make Snape proud.

When Harry met Tom for the first time and learned just what Hermione had sacrificed and the risks she'd taken in order to clear his name after the Weasleys, who'd blamed him for the death of their sister, had beaten him half to death over the whole Chamber of Secrets mess, Harry had been furious with her. But Hermione had stubbornly dug her heels in and said she'd do it again a hundred times if she had to and said she knew he'd have done the same thing if he was in her shoes. Knowing when he was defeated, Harry had reluctantly admitted she was right and they'd decided to make the best of the situation they'd found themselves in.

At first Harry had been extremely wary of Tom— and he still was to a degree— but the... memory or shade or whatever Tom was had slowly but surely started winning Harry over. It might be because of the fact he'd been trapped with the other boy in Number Four Privet for over a month now and the frequent exposure and boredom had led to a growing fondness of the younger counterpart of Lord Voldemort. Or maybe it was because Hermione seemed to mostly get along with Tom and Harry trusted her judgment.

Well, he trusted her judgment in everything but her killing his relatives.

"Dudley." Harry answered Tom's unspoken question about how he'd gotten the bruise with a shrug. Tom narrowed his eyes.

"My older self would be happy to dispose of those muggles."

Harry let out a small groan. "If you guys keep offering to get rid of them, one day I won't have enough strength to say no." He complained.

"You've figured out our master plan," Tom smirked, "what a pity. Now we'll have to kill you."

"Good luck with that." Harry told him grumpily before sitting down on his desk chair, seeing as Tom had stolen his spot on the bed. He spun the chair around a few times, trying to alleviate his boredom.

"Why don't you do your homework, if you're that bored." Hermione suggested, seemingly reading
his thoughts.

"Oh I'm not that bored yet." Harry assured her. "But if you've got any other ideas, I'd be open to
them." He added, after a short pause. Hermione gave him a mischievous smile.

"Want to play poker?"

It didn't take Harry long to bow out of the game and instead sit back and watch Tom and Hermione
battle it out with fascination, all traces of boredom long gone. Both the geniuses were card-sharks
and smart enough to do something Hermione called 'counting cards' to cheat.

Except Hermione claimed it wasn't cheating since it technically wasn't against the rules and was a
natural and automatic ability for people who were skilled enough at maths and had excellent recall
skills. Needless to say Harry fit neither category and had been losing miserably against the two.

Miserably.

Deciding that it would probably be safer to stay out of the Dursleys way, Harry skipped dinner and
spent the rest of the day in his room. He fell asleep that night next to Hermione, both of them kind
of squished on the small single bed but happy enough for the comfort the close proximity to each
other brought that they didn't really mind.

Tom had returned into the diary to preserve his strength which had increased dramatically since
absorbing the life force of Ginny Weasley, killing the girl in the process, but still wasn't strong
enough to allow him to leave the diary for extended periods of time.

Harry slept soundly that night and woke at seven the next morning with the realization that he was
now thirteen years old.

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Hermione's POV:

Hermione couldn't help but smile at the expression on Harry's face when he saw the pile of
presents at the end of his bed. She knew that Harry didn't look forward to his birthday like most
children– instead, he barely seemed to remember it. But this year was different; this year Hermione
had made sure that everyone knew when Harry's birthday was, thanks to a few dropped hints to
certain people in the Slytherin Common Room.

She'd woken up early that morning to open the window in Harry's bedroom in readiness for the
inevitable long stream of owls. She'd then untied the parcels and shooed each owl away before
placing the present it had delivered at the foot of the bed.

Although Harry had always been treated well in Slytherin, it wasn't until last year that he had really
earned the respect, and even the admiration, of his House. The revelations of Harry being a
Parselmouth and the suspicions the Slytherins all had that Harry had had a large part in the events
surrounding the opening of the Chamber of Secrets– which technically wasn't a complete lie– were
the causes of his raised status in the House, something Harry felt slightly uncomfortable about but
Hermione was happy to use to their advantage for him.

One such advantage including making sure Harry's birthday this year was one he'd never forget.

"Happy birthday!" she grinned and he beamed up at her.
"You are the best friend anyone could have." He told her before just about bouncing out of bed to start opening his presents.

He seemed to be thrilled with them all but it was the note from their friend Draco Malfoy that seemed to delight him the most.

Dear Harry,

Compared to all the excitement of last year, this summer's been quite dull. I hope those filthy muggles haven't been causing you any problems.

I've been missing your company, I have to admit, and I've tried to invite you over to spend the final few weeks of the holidays at the Manor– Mother in particular is quite fond of you and Hermione– but Uncle Severus says that the headmaster will not allow you to leave your disgusting relatives' house.

I'll need you to tell Hermione about the invitation as, like you, she's welcome to come stay at the Manor anytime and I know that you'll be able to get into contact her– I tried sending her a letter by owl but it just looked at me confused.

Anyway– happy birthday.

Sincerely,

Draco A. Malfoy

"He sounds like an obnoxious prat even on paper." She said with a snort and beside her Harry burst out laughing.

The most unusual present Harry had received was the one from Hagrid. He'd opened the rectangular shaped package and a book of all things had fallen out. Hermione barely had time to register the handsome green cover, emblazoned with the golden title 'The Monster Book of Monsters', before it flipped onto its edge and scuttled sideways along the bed like some weird crab.

"Uh-oh." Harry muttered and Hermione couldn't help but groan.

The book toppled off the mattress with a loud clunk and shuffled rapidly across the room. After trading bewildered looks, Harry followed it stealthily while Hermione sat back and watched in amusement. The book was hiding in the dark space under his desk and Hermione watched with an expectant grin as he dropped onto his hands and knees and reached toward it. She wasn't disappointed.

"Ouch!" Harry yelped as the book snapped shut on his hand and then flapped past him, still scuttling on its covers. Hermione almost fell off the bed she was laughing so hard as Harry scrambled around after it, eventually throwing himself forward and managing to flatten it.

Hedwig, perched on the edge of the windowsill, watched interestedly as Harry struggled to clamp the struggling book tightly in his arms. Finally getting off the bed now that her ankles were safe, a still giggling Hermione crossed the room and pulled a belt out of the chest of drawers and tossed it over to him. Harry quickly buckled it tightly around the book which shuddered angrily but could no longer flap and snap.

Harry threw it on the bed, disgruntled, and reached for the accompanying card.

Dear Harry, Hagrid had written,
Happy birthday!

Think you might find this useful for next year. Won't say no more here. Tell you when I see you.

Hope the Muggles are treating you right.

Say hello to Hermione for me!

All the best,

Hagrid

"At least we know this year's not going to be boring." She noted before handing over a letter stamped with a Hogwarts crest. Harry opened it and pulled out the first page of parchment within. It was a letter from Snape.

Mr. Potter,

I've included Miss Granger's booklist and Hogsmeade form in here as I have no doubt that unlike the rest of us you'll be able to contact her.

Professor Snape

"Short, brief and to the point." She noted.

"Everyone seems to expect I know where you are." Harry complained.

"Which you do." She reminded him.

"Yeah, but I'd look really stupid if I didn't." He muttered.

Rolling her eyes, Hermione fished out the booklist which was underneath the two permission slips for Hogsmeade.

Harry, however, seemed more interested in the forms. "Wouldn't it be wonderful to visit Hogsmeade?" He sighed, "just think– it's a village entirely for witches and wizards!"

"What makes you think you can't go?" She asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I need the Dursleys to sign the permission slip," Harry pointed out, "and I don't exactly see them doing that."

"Harry," Hermione said slowly, as if she was explaining something to a small child, "you have a highly dangerous pet snake that obeys your every command. I highly doubt you'll have a problem getting the Dursleys to sign." Harry's face instantly lit up with a wicked grin.

"You're an evil genius, you know that, right?"

"You tend to remind me of the fact at least once a day," She replied dryly. Practically bouncing up and down, Harry grabbed the permission slip and headed for the door.

"Hurry up Tox," he called over his shoulder and with another roll of her eyes, Hermione let the sensation of changing into her animagus form wash over her until instead of a human she was a snake, darting across the floor with quick movements and then being scooped up into Harry's arms. He lifted her onto his shoulders where she draped herself lazily, feeling a sadistic sort of excitement for what was about to happen.
Harry went down to breakfast where the Dursleys were already sitting around the kitchen table, watching a brand-new television—a welcome-home-for-the-summer present for Dudley. Dudley had spent most of the summer in the kitchen, his piggy little eyes fixed on the screen and his five chins wobbling as he ate continually.

Of course, as Harry sat down the television was instantly and abruptly forgotten, all three gazes now turned to her and, by extension, Harry. Tox flickered her tongue, enjoying the taste of fear in the air.

"Morning," Harry smiled brightly before placing the form on the table. "I need you to sign this, Aunt Petunia." Petunia opened her mouth, no doubt to throw a shrill negative at Harry, when Tox raised her head and hissed threateningly. Petunia paled and stood up, crossing the kitchen to retrieve a pen before returning to the table and signing the form with a hand that shook slightly.

"Thanks," Harry said just as brightly, before tucking the form in his pocket and helping himself to a piece of toast. He looked up at the reporter on the television, who was halfway through a report on an escaped convict:

'...the public is warned that Black is armed and extremely dangerous. A special hot line has been set up and any sighting of Black should be reported immediately...'

"No need to tell us he's no good," snorted Vernon, staring over the top of his newspaper at the prisoner. "Look at the state of him, the filthy lay-about! Look at his hair!" He shot a nasty look sideways at Harry. According to her best friend, Vernon had always found his nephew's untidy hair to be a source of great annoyance. Of course, when she gave a warning hiss, raising her head to fix the walrus man with a snake-y version of a glare, Vernon hastily looked back over at the television.

Tox turned her gaze over to the television too, mildly interested by the image of the gaunt face displayed on the screen that was surrounded by a matted elbow length tangle of hair. As the reporter reappeared, Tox noted something strange.

The reporter hadn't told them where Black had escaped from.

Vernon, still eyeing her nervously, drained his teacup, glanced at his watch and said, "I'd better be off in a minute, Pet. Marge's train gets in at ten." Tox felt Harry tense beneath her.

"Aunt Marge?" he blurted out, "She–she's not coming here, is she?"

::Who's Aunt Marge?:: asked Tox, enjoying the nervous, frightened looks on the Dursleys faces as Harry hissed back to her, speaking to her in Parseltongue, a language which only she, Harry, Voldemort— and by extension Tom— could speak.

::Vernon's sister. Last time she visited her dog chased me up a tree and the hag didn't call him off until past midnight:::

Tox let out an angry sound, turning venomous eyes towards each of the Dursleys in turn. They all shrunk back from her stare and she could taste the fear in the room which had spiked in potency.

"Y-yes," Vernon stammered, before clearing his throat and drawing himself up, trying not to look as intimidated as it was. "And while we're on the subject, we need to get a few things straight before I go and collect her."

::Act like Snape::: Tox hissed to him. Under her, she felt Harry straighten up slightly, shifting his posture to mimic that of their Head of House.
"Do tell," Harry said to Vernon in a cool voice.

"Firstly, you'll keep a civil tongue in your head when you're talking to Marge." Vernon blustered, obviously trying to take control over the situation.

"As long as she returns the favor." Harry curled his lip in a move worthy of Snape and Tox hissed her approval.

"Secondly," Vernon said, acting as though he hadn't heard Harry's reply. The man's blustering was quite amusing—Tox could taste his panic and it was delicious. "Marge doesn't know anything about your free-- school stuff," Vernon hastily corrected, seeing Tox once again turn her head to look at him, "s-so no doing anything funny while she's here, like talking to that snake." Harry arched an eyebrow.

"I'll consider it." He drawled and Vernon had to take several deep breaths before continuing, his mean little eyes now slits in his great purple face.

"We've told Marge you attend St. Brutus's Secure Center for Incurably Criminal Boys." He informed Harry who promptly burst out into laughter.

"Thanks for the warning," he shorted when he managed to calm himself down, "I'll try and remember that." Her best friend then took a few quick breaths, before reassuming his cold mask. 
"'Course, if Marge doesn't behave herself, I might get angry and start to forget..." His voice trailed off, threat clear.

Feeling smug, Tox flicked her tongue at the Dursleys, in an immature gesture they couldn't quite appreciate while she was in her snake form, and Harry stood up to make his way back to his bedroom.

Tox flowed back into Hermione the moment he placed her on the bed and she couldn't help but start snickering. "Well that was amusing."

"What was?" Tom asked, the Diary lying innocently open on Harry's desk and the older boy in his corporal form.

"Harry threatening the zoo downstairs," Hermione explained. "I thought the walrus was going to blow up he was that pissed."

"Zoo?" Harry asked.

"The walrus, the horse and I'm tossing up between blubber whale and hog for dear old Dudders." She clarified.

"Darling Duddykins? Definitely a blubber whale." Tom drawled, "Calling him a hog is an insult to pigs everywhere-- they're actually quite clean, intelligent animals."

"They are?" Harry asked at the same time as she huffed and said,

"I know that."

"'Course you do," Harry threw his hands up in the air dramatically which caused her to shove him, before turning back to the topic at hand.

"So what are we going to do about Marge?"
"What do you mean?" Harry asked, sounding confused as he looked over at her.

"Who's Marge?" was Tom's question from where he was leaning back against the wall now and looking amused. Hermione grinned.

"The walrus's sister. She's been told Harry goes to St. Brutus's Secure Center for Incurably Criminal Boys." Tom sneered at that, his lip curling, but he did seem amused by the lie. Really, it was hard not to be.

"Tell us about this Marge, Harry." Tom ordered the younger boy and Harry frowned at both of them before walking over to his bed and flopping down on it.

"You're going to do something horrible to her whether I tell you about her or not, aren't you?" he asked, looking up at the ceiling instead of at them. She and Tom traded evil grins. Well, she grinned-- Tom's expression looked more like the lovechild of a sneer and a smirk.

"Oh Harry," she told her best friend, affectionately, "You know us so well."

"She loves dogs." Harry mused, rolling over so he could look at them both smirking wickedly back at him. "She breeds bulldogs. Her favorite one's called Ripper. He always comes with her, wherever she goes. He chased me up a tree last time she visited and didn't let me down for hours. It was dark by the time Marge called him off."

"Looks like Ripper's going to meet Tox." Hermione said, her voice a purr and her irises darkening briefly to the shiny, coal black color of her animagus form. Tom laughed, the ice-cold sound of it thrilling in a way she couldn't quite identify, and Harry didn't seem to be able to help his own reluctant smile.

Hermione got the feeling it was going to be a very entertaining few days.
Part Three: The Prisoner of Azkaban - Chapter XVIII

Chapter XVIII:

_Hermione's POV:_

They all heard when Marge arrived but Harry decided not to go down until dinner so they spent the day going through Harry's new things. Hermione lost herself in a book on the Grey Arts that had been a present from Tracey Davis while Harry enthusiastically used his new broomstick servicing kit to polish his *Nimbus Two Thousand and One*, which had been a Christmas– or Yule, as traditionalists called the holiday– gift from Draco.

Tom remained in the diary for the majority of the day, emerging only to play a game of Wizarding Chess, Gobstones and then Exploding Snap with Harry. He won them all.

At seven o'clock, Vernon bellowed up to Harry that dinner was ready and Hermione changed into her animagus form, coiling out of sight under Harry's shirt. Tom had _politely requested_ that they take him with them so Harry had stashed the diary in his pocket.

Her head poking out of Harry's collar, hidden behind the curtain formed by Harry's shoulder-length, messy black hair, Hermione's first impression of Marjory Dursley was that she looked very much like her brother– large, beefy and purple-faced; she even had a moustache, though not as bushy as Vernon Dursley's.

As Harry sat down at the table, a big, mean-looking bulldog growled, directing Marge's attention towards Harry for the first time.

"So!" she barked, "Still here, are you?"

::I've figured out which member of the zoo she is:: Tox hissed softly, so only Harry could hear,
::she's the dog– and I'm going to go with a bulldog::

"Yes." Harry answered Marge, who Tox decided suited her 'bulldog' nickname more and more with every new word the woman spoke, every new tone she used.

"Don't say 'yes' in that ungrateful tone," Marge growled, "It's damn good of Vernon and Petunia to keep you. Wouldn't have done it myself. You'd have gone straight to an orphanage if you'd been dumped on my doorstep."

"Actually, I think I'd rather live in an orphanage than with Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia." Harry said in a deceptively pleasant sounding tone. Marge swelled up in fury and looked like she was about to start shouting at him. Vernon hastily tried to change the subject, but without success.

"Heard the news this morning, Marge? What about that escaped prisoner, eh?" Marge ignored her brother and instead concentrated her mean stare on Harry.

"Ungrateful boy!" she barked, before turning to her brother, "you mustn't blame yourself for the way he's turned out, Vernon. If there's something rotten on the inside, there's nothing anyone can
"Shut. Up." Harry's voice was low and quiet. It was a danger sign. Tox could taste the tenseness in the air, Harry's mounting fury, the Dursley's panic and Marge's self-righteous anger.

"It's one of the basic rules of breeding," she continued, loudly, "you see it all the time with dogs. If there's something wrong with the bitch, there'll be something wrong with the pup--"

"DON'T TALK ABOUT MY MOTHER!" Harry shouted, standing bolt upright and knocking the table as he did so, sending plates and wine glasses crashing. Tox decided to make her presence known, slithering up out of Harry's shirt and onto the table. Petunia started screaming and clutching Dudley to her.

Tox remembered Harry's account of his last summer with the Dursleys. It was Vernon mentioning Lily, Harry's mother, which had lead to Harry yelling the Killing Curse at him. Lily Potter was a sensitive topic for Harry– Marge calling her a "bitch" was possibly the worst mistake the woman could have made.

"YOU PROUD OF YOUR PARENTS, BOY?" Marge was screaming at Harry as she swelled up with fury, "YOU ARE AN INSOLENT, UNGRATEFUL LITTLE--" that's when Ripper let out a loud howl and Marge, Vernon, Dudley and Harry seemed to notice, for the first time, that the snake wasn't on the table anymore.

"Ripper!" Marge shrieked out in horror as Tox slithered away from the convulsing bulldog who was now lying on his side and frothing at the mouth. She was feeling quite satisfied with herself as the dog's sounds of anguish were echoed by his owner as Marge fell to her knees beside the dying dog. "RIPPER!"

"Don't you dare disturb me!" Harry just about snarled at his relatives before spinning around and storming out of the room, up the stairs. Tox slithered after him, her movements quick and darting.

Once they were in Harry's room, she changed back and placed her palm on the door again. "Collorportus." She muttered, incase Marge was stupid enough to try barreling up here to pummel Harry into a pulp.

Harry's face was pale with anger and there was crimson swimming in his Avada Kedavra-green eyes. Tom, who had emerged from the diary, was observing Harry with a shrewd look on his face. Hermione was concerned– Harry was just about trembling with fury with his hands clenched into fists.

"Harry," she said soothingly, walking over and placing her hand gently on his arm. "Deep breaths, Harry." Harry closed his eyes and inhaled then exhaled, repeating the exercise four times before opening his eyes again.

"I want to kill her." He said flatly.

"I know." She replied gently, "but we can't, not right now."

"Why not?" Harry shouted, tensing up again. "All summer you've been trying to convince me to let you kill the Dursleys! Now I want to and you're saying no?"

"I'm saying no, Harry, because I want to make sure you don't regret this in the morning." She said sharply. "You're fucking furious right now and not thinking straight! Now get on the bed, lay down and close your fucking eyes!"
Harry looked like he was about to argue, before he slumped, the fire in his eyes dying, any trace of red disappearing from the green irises. He did as she ordered, walking over to the bed and laying down on it, closing his eyes. "Now what?" His voice was flat.

"Now think about something that makes you happy. I mean it, Harry!" She snapped when he opened his mouth to argue, "Do it. Think over your happiest memory." Harry exhaled noisily but nodded and Hermione ran her fingers through his hair in a soothing, repetitive motion until his breathing evened out and soft snores started to escape him.

Tom crossed over to her and spoke softly, looking down at Harry. "Have his eyes done this before?"

"Only when Voldemort possessed him." She whispered back.

"Hmm," Tom's eyes were sharp and knowing but he didn't say anything more.

-Voldemort's POV:

Harry Potter really did have quite the temper, Voldemort mused. As soon as that ugly female Muggle made the comment about Lily Potter, the mind link burst open, allowing him a front row seat to what had proved to be quite the entertaining show. He especially amused by the swift and deadly way Hermione Granger had taken care of the dog.

An animagus by the end of her first year— if he hadn't seen the proof with his own two eyes he'd say it was impossible. It should be impossible. Hermione Granger was... an anomaly. She would only grow more powerful as she grew older— one of the main reasons he'd entrusted the care of his Horcrux with her. The other main reason was the fact that he needed some influence over her and through her the boy; Harry Potter, his so-called prophesied enemy.

Those children had the potential to be invaluable allies. Ones that he, unlike Dumbledore, would take great steps to avoid making his enemy.

Hermione Granger and Harry Potter, as per the Oath they'd taken, could not kill him or harm him—physically. But there were more ways to destroy someone. Permanent imprisonment for one, so long as he wasn't harmed, just contained. Becoming the figurehead to his enemies, someone to rally around. Fighting his forces just not him. When he discovered the loophole he'd thought it was an oversight of the girl.

Now he wasn't sure.

Hermione Granger didn't seem to do oversights.

Underestimating your enemy was just as dangerous as overestimating one and that was why Voldemort was so wary about Hermione Granger and Harry Potter becoming his enemies— he had no idea of what they were capable of.

-Tom's POV:
Tom Riddle had spent a very long time being very, very bored.

He sometimes wondered if the other soul pieces had the same awareness as he did; the ability to think and feel for themselves.

He didn't know.

He hoped not. Because he wouldn't wish the sheer utter boredom of the last fifty years on even the worst of his enemies... except Dumbledore, perhaps.

Being trapped in the pages of a diary... sometimes he wanted to curse Voldemort, as he'd taken to calling the original soul who was currently residing in the homunculus it had created after its original vessel was destroyed– the body he was born with, before he became they. Although they, Voldemort and Tom, were bound quintessentially to each other, they started to form their own separate memories. Had their own experiences.

So although they had originally been one, although they were still tied to each other, they weren't the same being.

He was Tom Marvolo Riddle, age sixteen, almost seventeen, in his Final Year of schooling at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Lord Voldemort, despite his late thirties appearance, was in his seventies, had initiated the Blood War, fought, murdered, tortured, created several more Horcruxes, led armies, lived as a wraith for eleven years...

Yes, the differences between the two of them were rather extreme. Lord Voldemort had taken his path and Tom Riddle would take his own.

Fifty years of having nothing to do but stew through his thoughts had allowed him to gain some introspection. He was immortal, which was nice, but he'd rather like to gain a permanent form of his own.

And he knew who could help him.

Hermione Granger.

He couldn't figure her out. He understood why the original soul kept her close– the girl was an enigma with an intelligence and skill that far surpassed her age of fourteen. She had accomplished achieving her animagus form at age twelve, had a firm grasp of wandless magic and had a good grasp on two languages other then English– not including Parseltongue. She was a prodigy and as much as it pained him to admit it– and it pained him a great deal– the girl had more raw power and potential then even he'd had at her age.

And she was ruthless. Especially regarding Harry Potter. When he'd initially seen her approach the dying little Ginny Weasley he'd been surprised as all hell about how she'd gotten into the Chamber before deciding she'd make a nice snack for Blink the basilisk– once he'd figured out how she'd done it, of course. He'd taken great pleasure in surprising her and had taunted her with the fate of little Ginny, who was beyond salvation, but Hermione had been unaffected. She simply hadn't cared, hadn't had any feelings about Ginny's situation other then scorn for the silly little girl getting into it in the first place. She had similarly not had a problem with allowing his future self to use the Imperius Curse on one of the faculty to set the fool up and then send him to his death.

Anything for Harry Potter. That's what Voldemort had told him, briefly, while the girl was distracted with moving the Weasley girl's body. Hermione would do anything for the boy.
And Harry Potter. His raw power levels were much higher than your average wizard's, even Hermione's, but he lacked the instinctive talent she seemed to have. That wasn't to say he didn't excel. Harry worked just as hard as Hermione and his exam results were third highest in their year. The boy was powerful in his own right with his own brand of intelligence. He could think on his feet, quickly picked up what he was taught and could be lethal.

But his fierce protective instinct only seemed to stretch to cover two people– his dead mother and Hermione. Which brought him back to the Harry and Hermione paradox.

To his unending frustration, Tom couldn't get a bead on their relationship. There didn't seem to be any romantic interest, despite the fact they were both very attractive people, although he supposed they were still young. But despite the lack of romantic interest, there was this bond, this powerful, powerful bond. And he knew, without a doubt, that they would do anything for each other. They would kill for each other. They would die for each other.

And he was jealous.

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Severus's POV:

Severus sat down heavily in Lucius's study, a tall glass of Firewhiskey in his hand.

Lucius gave him an assessing look and he supposed his long time friend was taking in the rumpled state of his robes, the paler then usual pallor of his skin and– most telling of all, once he dropped the glamour– the dark shadows under his eyes.

"Something," Lucius appeared to be choosing his words very carefully, "appears to be bothering you, my old friend."

"Something is, Lucius." He agreed, taking a large sip of Firewhiskey to try and slow the maelstrom in his head. "I fear I have become... disillusioned. And it has affected me more then I thought it would."

"Ah," Lucius said, leaning back in his leather chair, "I suppose we are referring to the Potter boy."

"Actually," Severus snorted, taking another large swallow, "for once I am not. For all my bluster, I must confess that I find myself quite fond of the boy." Lucius raised his eyebrows.

"I suspected that you harbored no ill-feelings towards the child, but an expression of fondness... from you, Severus, that is the equivalent of a declaration of undying love!" Severus rolled his eyes at his friend, doing his best to ignore the smug look on Lucius's face.

"If this bout of melancholy isn't originating from the Potter boy then my second guess would have to be the esteemed headmaster." The blonde ventured a guess, sipping from his tumbler of expensive whiskey.

"I admit that despite my allegiance to the Dark Lord, I had always held Albus in high regard." Severus sighed, running a hand through his hair in frustration, "I had always thought him to be a good man."

"Until?" Prompted Lucius, with an arched brow.
"Until he ordered me to personally escort one of my students to an abusive home after putting up wards to ensure that said student cannot leave the home, nor can any of his friends get in!"

"Potter's guardians are abusive?" Lucius sounded surprised. Severus gave him an exasperated look.

"For the sake of my sanity, let us at least pretend you don't know just exactly who it is I'm talking about."

"Why?" Lucius countered, "Harry Potter is being abused." Severus felt himself flinch, but Lucius ignored it and kept going. "The son of your worst enemy is being abused--"

"Stop."

"--and despite how hard you've tried, when you look at the boy you don't see James Potter. You see yourself."

"Stop!" Severus repeated, knuckles turning white as he gripped the glass hard.

"And you decided to do what nobody did for you," Lucius continued, talking right over him. "You tried getting him removed from his home. And from what you've said, I assume that Dumbledore has taken action to prevent you from doing so. The headmaster you admired is not only knowingly allowing a student to remain in an abusive home but is actually taking action to ensure that he stays there."

Lucius's calm steel-grey gaze met his and Severus took a deep shuddering breath. "I always saw Albus as a good person despite my allegiance and loyalty to the Dark." He said hoarsely. "But now when I look at him, all I see is a monster. A monster who's actions– and inactions– are equally as terrible as the Dark Lord's. Or perhaps worse."

"Worse?" Lucius raised an eyebrow.

"Worse," Severus repeated quietly. "For at least the Dark Lord recognizes what he is." He couldn't help his bitter laugh here. "To think that a Muggle-raised first year figured it out before even entering the man's presence, whereas I've known the man since I was eleven and have spent the past twelve years in his highest confidence yet am only just beginning to see the slips in the old man's façade."

"You shouldn't be too hard on yourself, Severus." Lucius said, reaching out to gently clasp his hand. Severus looked up and gave the blonde a tired smile. "I have spent time in Miss Granger's presence. I dare say her mind is a match to the Dark Lord himself."

He was taking a deep swig of his Firewhiskey when Lucius dropped a bombshell on him. "A part of me wonders whether they're related, her and the Dark Lord." Severus spluttered, spraying the alcohol all over Lucius and his desk. The blonde pulled a face and vanished the liquid while Severus eyed him incredulously.

"You think Miss Granger and the Dark Lord could be related?" He repeated, mentally reminding himself that as far as most were concerned Granger was a Halfblood.

"Well, she does speak Parseltongue." Lucius shrugged.

Severus dropped his glass.
Harry's POV:

"Okay, we need a plan."

Harry looked across at the determined Hermione who was perched up on the edge of his desk, looking deep in thought. "What for?" he asked her and she gave him a look that clearly said he was being an idiot.

"To get out of here. What else?"

"Oh." Harry said, a bit surprised as he took in his best friend's fierce expression.

"There is not a fucking chance that we stay here any longer then we absolutely have to." She said, eyes flashing. "Look, we've got our booklists. Owl Hogwarts and ask if someone can take you to Diagon Alley, seeing as you're under house arrest, and once we're there we'll give them the slip."

"We?" he asked and Hermione gave an innocent look.

"You and your new pet, of course. Tox hasn't seen Diagon Alley before– she's quite looking forward to it."

Deciding to go about the same route as last time, with Hermione's help Harry packed his trunk and left it in his room, released Hedwig from her cage, with instructions to meet him at Hyde Park and packed anything that he'd need for the final few weeks of the holidays into the leather bag– including Hermione's satchel– which he then stashed in a back-pack along with his wand and invisibility cloak.

"It's such a bloody shame we can't use our wands out of school." Hermione muttered, eyeing his trunk. "It would be so much easier if we could just shrink your trunk so we could take it now."

"There is a solution to that," Tom commented. The older boy was holding the Diary and flicking idly through the pages. Hermione's reaction to his words was so swift it was almost violent.

"You wait until now to tell us?" she demanded and Tom rolled his eyes at her. Tom, however, met Hermione's angry stare with an impassive stare.

"The wand chooses the wizard, but you can gain allegiance over a wand by defeating its previous master." He said in a lecturing tone, "if you want a wand that works for you and doesn't have a Trace, you need to defeat another wizard and take theirs– which is something even more difficult to do because of the fact you cannot use your own wand due to the Trace."

Harry grimaced. "Yeah, I can't see that happening any time soon." He muttered but Hermione looked thoughtful.

"Do we have to defeat its previous owner using magic?" she asked and Tom's face turned equally thoughtful.
"I am unsure– wand lore is vague; it never fully specifies."

"That man in Knockturn Alley," Harry realised suddenly and Hermione nodded.

"Exactly. I defeated him without using magic."

"Knockturn Alley?" Tom looked exasperated, "Why does it not surprise me you've been down there?"

"Because it's Hermione we're talking about here." Harry snorted before turning glum. "Is there any other way to get rid of the Trace? Any way at all?"

"There's one other way," Tom said before smirking, "and it has a five hundred galleon fine if you get caught."

"Now I'm intrigued," Hermione leaned forwards, arching an eyebrow.

"You buy a second wand."

Harry blinked.

"What?" Hermione asked and Harry was pleased to see she looked just as surprised as he did.

"Where on earth do we buy another wand?"

"Where do you think?" Tom countered and Hermione's brow furrowed for a moment for smoothing over and she looked like she was about to hit herself.

"Knockturn Alley." She said. "We need to go to Knockturn Alley."

That, Harry realized, unfortunately made sense. It also made him cringe. Although he knew Hermione had been there twice, Harry had never actually set foot in the shady Alley– and for good reason too. He was held in regard, by the Britain Wizarding population as the symbol of the Light, despite the fact he'd never actually done anything Light. Well, not since he was fifteen months old. But he was the boy who brought down Voldemort. The Boy-Who-Lived. Supposed paragon of everything that was Light. And Knockturn Alley? The people who ventured there were decidedly not Light. They were Dark and he was the symbol of their defeat. In their eyes he was their enemy.

"I'll be killed before I take two steps in there, Hermione." He told her but Hermione shook her head.

"We'll disguise you like last time." Harry immediately blanched and Tom laughed at his expression. Hermione looked affronted. "You liked what I did to your hair!" she complained. Harry cringed and desperately tried to think up a plan b. His jaw actually fell open when he came up with one.

"I've got an idea!"

Hermione gasped theatrically, falling back on the bed and fanning herself. "It– it's a miracle! Hallelujah!" she cried out.

"Oh shut up," he grumbled, "but seriously– I do have an idea. How about I go under the cloak?"

"Oh." Hermione looked putout. "Why didn't I think of that?"
Professor McGonagall met him at the front door at nine the next morning. Her expression was a lot more relaxed when faced with what she thought was just Harry and her smile was warmer. That was, until she spotted the snake that was coiled around Harry's neck not unlike a scarf.

"Good morning, Mr. Potter." McGonagall smiled at him, before her mouth twisted slightly in distaste as her gaze flicked back to the snake. "You're bringing your... pet?"

"I don't trust the Dursleys around her." Harry lied flawlessly. "I want to make sure she's safe." McGonagall's expression clearly read that she didn't care at all if the Dursleys did something to the snake but she didn't protest and instead walked into the house. Harry closed the door behind her as McGonagall looked around.

"Where are your relatives?" she asked. Harry pulled a slight face.

"Sleeping. They don't get up until past ten at least, on a weekend." McGonagall looked extremely disapproving at this and she held out her arm.

"Ready Mr. Potter?" Harry nodded then gritted his teeth through the awful experience that was Side-Along Apparation. Well, apparition was terrible whether it was side-along or not.

They arrived in the courtyard out the back of the Leaky Cauldron and McGonagall briskly tapped the bricks with her wand, opening up the archway and revealed Diagon Alley in all its glory.

Just like Hogwarts, this glimpse into the Magical World still took Harry's breath away. Well that, or maybe it was Tox tightening around his neck slightly as McGonagall shot the snake another look of distaste.

"Can we go to Gringotts first, ma'am?" Harry asked politely. McGonagall agreed and after he withdrew the gold they'd need from the bank with McGonagall waiting outside, he and the Deputy Headmistress spent up until lunchtime gathering everything on the booklist. When McGonagall asked why he was buying two of everything, he explained that he was also purchasing Hermione's things. McGonagall's lips tightened.

Tox hissed her amusement.

"Well, it's almost time to head back." McGonagall said after checking the time and shrinking everything they bought so it fit inside Harry's backpack.

"Can we get some lunch first, ma'am?" Harry asked politely.

"I don't see why not," McGonagall decided after a short pause. "Is there anywhere in particular you wish to go, Mr. Potter?"

"This is only the third time I've been here, Professor." He explained, "I don't really know anywhere."

"Well I know a nice little restaurant up here," McGonagall said with a small but genuine smile before turning and leading them further up the Alley. Harry walked behind her slowly, waiting until she was around a meter ahead before acting quickly.

::Now!:: hissed Tox and he yanked the Invisibility Cloak out from where he'd rested it right on top of the backpack, the zip of which he'd left undone in order to be able to quickly pull it. In the hustle and bustle that was Diagon Alley, no one noticed one boy disappear.

Except McGonagall, of course, who once she realized her charge was no longer following her
started to panic. "Mr. Potter!" She called out, "Mr. Potter! Come back here at once!"

::Stupid old cow:: hissed Tox, rubbing her diamond-shaped head against Harry's chin in an affectionate manner. ::Time for Knockturn?::

::Yes:: Harry agreed, though his stomach crawled at the thought. ::Time for Knockturn::
Chapter XIX:

Hermione's POV:

Tox enjoyed the feeling of being invisible as Harry cut unseen through the throngs of people swarming around the Alley, expertly weaving his way through the crowd. It wasn't long until they were standing by the entrance to Knockturn Alley, McGonagall left far, far behind them. ::It'll be okay, Harry:: she hissed, comfortingly, rubbing her head against his cheek.

::I hope so:: he hissed back. Tox held herself poised and ready to attack at a moment's notice as Harry crept, unseen, down the creepy as hell Alley before stopping in front of the shop labeled 'Wendelin's Wands'. ::This is it:: he hissed softly before crouching down and placing the back-pack he'd been carrying on the cobbled ground. He sifted carefully through it before pulling out the Diary and standing back up. The pages fluttered and Tom joined them, the older boy stooped under the cloak.

"Can we get out from under this infernal thing?" He drawled, raising an eyebrow. Tox hissed wordlessly at him and he sighed in a heavily put-upon before holding up an arm so that she could slide from Harry's shoulders into his grip. Tom then carefully placed her on the ground and Tox flowed back into Hermione.

"Get changed, Harry," she ordered, pointing to the backpack.

"Yes, your Majesty." Harry said, rolling his eyes good-naturedly before crouching back down and pulling out the robes that had been stuffed in there. With much shuffling, standing on toes, bumping and cursing, Harry was finally dressed in full wizarding robes just like Tom and Hermione, albeit Tom's were several inches too short despite both his and Hermione's best efforts to wandlessly lengthen the material. Harry was a short boy, his growth stunted from a decade of malnourishment, and despite Tom's own slender build the sixteen year old was still much taller then Harry was.

Pulling off the invisibility cloak, Hermione felt the slight tugging as Tom drew strength from her magic to make himself look fully corporeal. The older boy then led the way, sweeping into the shop with a regal air.

The shop inside was small, dusty and cluttered and Hermione scrunched her nose slightly, hoping she wouldn't sneeze. "Naughty little boys and girl, creeping down the bad, bad alley." The thin lady with strange, pale lilac eyes and long dark hair standing behind counter cooed at them. Her voice was high and reedy and her wide smile was disturbing as she peered across at them. "Come to buy one of Wendelin's special wands, have you?"

"We have the money," Tom's voice was smooth, "seventy-five galleons a wand, if I'm not mistaken. We'd like three." Hermione nudged Harry in the ribs and he jolted slightly before getting her meaning and pulling out the pouch from Gringotts.

The witch– Wendelin– peered inside the pouch, at the gleaming gold coins it contained and her smile widened enough to reveal all her gleaming white teeth. "It looks like the naughty little boys and girl can afford Wendelin's special wands," she murmured. "Well come forwards, my little ones,
come forwards and find which wand picks you."

Almost an hour later they left the shop, two hundred and twenty-five galleons lighter and the owners of three very illegal wands.

"I think I need a shower. A long one. With lots and lots of soap." Hermione muttered.

"Or a bath." Harry mumbled, looking equally as uncomfortable. Tom, meanwhile, was twirling his new wand between his long, slender fingers with a triumphant look on his face.

"Yew, eleven inches, with a Basilisk heartstring core." She murmured, as she looked over at Tom's wand.

"Acacia, ten inches, cockatrice feather core." Tom replied. He raised an eyebrow as she shot a flat look at him. "You mean we weren't stating what each other's wands are?" he asked, dryly.

"Oh shut up." She told him, before turning to Harry and the blackthorn wand he held with its unicorn hair core. Harry was looking down at it with a fascinated look on his face.

"It feels so... different to my other wand." He said, his tone reverent almost. "But they both feel so right!"

Tom rolled his eyes at Harry's statement but Hermione found herself nodding in agreement. This wand felt... different. It felt Darker.

She found that she rather liked it.

"What happens to your wand when you're in the Diary?" Harry asked Tom curiously.

"Hermione will need to look after it." Tom said easily and she narrowed her eyes.

"Oh Hermione will, will she?" Harry snorted at this while Tom's mouth curled in amusement. Hermione narrowed her eyes at them both. "Boys." She muttered.

"We should leave here," Tom warned, the good-humour leaving his face as his eyes swept up and down the Alley.

"Diagon's probably crawling with Dumbledore's cronies by now." She said, frowning.

"We've got the cloak, we can get passed them." Tom said dismissively before he started heading towards the mouth of the alley. Hermione exchanged a look with Harry before hurrying after Tom. Aware of all the looks they were gathering she tried to stick closer to the shadows, falling back on the old instincts that urged her to keep out view.

That proved to be a mistake when calloused hands grabbed her, one clamping over her mouth before she could make a sound as she was dragged down a darkened side-street. She immediately kicked back at her assailant making him grunt and she managed to rake her nails down his arm before he threw her against the side of a building. A groan escaped Hermione as her skull collided against the brick wall with enough force to make her vision go spotty. She tried to pull her magic forth but her head was spinning and she couldn't focus, couldn't even think straight.

One hand fastened around her neck, blocking her airway, and holding her body off the ground. She writhed and choked, clawing at the hand around her throat while her toes scuffed against the stones below as she desperately tried to find some kind of purchase.
"You know, we never exchanged names." Her attacker's voice was rough and raspy, almost as if coming from underground, and through her blurred vision, Hermione could make out the reason for that. A deep raised scar crossed over the man's throat.

Her blood ran cold as the familiar face leered down at her. Amber eyes, a mane of grey hair...

"I'm Fenrir Greyback, the most feared werewolf in Britain," the man's voice lowered to a growl and Hermione's heart raced as she tried to think through the dark fog that was clouding her head, her struggles growing progressively weaker as her brain was deprived of oxygen. "And you– you're the little bitch who almost killed me."

Just when she thought she was going to pass out Greyback suddenly released his grip. Hermione fell to her knees and gasped for breath, ignoring the sharp aching in her throat as she sucked in precious lungful's of oxygen. "You know," Greyback leered down at her, "I rather like you on your knees like that." Panic overtook her need for breath and she tried throwing herself to the side but Greyback had grabbed a handful of her hair and was pulling her back up, back to her feet.

His lips crashed onto hers and she struggled fiercely to shove him back, to push him away from her, but he was stronger and she was concussed and jammed up against the wall with no room to manoeuvre. She was half-dazed but still had enough presence of mind that when Greyback forced his tongue into her mouth she bit down on it– hard. He pulled back laughing and gave her a bloody grin, his lips and teeth stained red with his own blood.

"You like to bite, my pretty girl?" he chuckled, eyes gleaming as he stroked her face with the hand not holding her upright. He leaned in to whisper in her ear, his breath rancid. "Well guess what? So do I." The hand on her face suddenly moved, clamping over her mouth so that she couldn't scream and Greyback used his teeth to rip the material of the robes she was wearing, looking up briefly to grin at her panicked expression before his teeth sunk into the soft flesh of her shoulder and there was pain.

Hermione tried to scream but the sound was muffled so she viciously bit down as hard as she could on the hand over her mouth only to let go in agony when Greyback increased the force behind his bite.

It felt like forever before Greyback released her shoulder. His head moved back into her sight and her stomach rolled at the sight of him, of the bloody grin on his face. There was a lot more blood now, smeared across his chin and dripping down onto his tattered robes. Blood. Her blood.

The world blurred in and out of focus and Hermione could feel her mind trying to shut down, to dissociate her from her body in a way she hadn't had to for years. She fought it, though, fought to stay present, but when a rough hand ripped open her shirt and ragged fingernails started kneading her breast she stopped fighting it, stopped fighting her mind's attempt to protect her, giving into the inevitability of it.

Except suddenly there was nothing supporting her and she was falling, hitting the ground with a jarring thud. A small, pained sound escaped her as her head slammed against the stone below and Hermione had a moment to register that the hands were gone before darkness rose up to claim her.

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Tom's POV:
It was Harry who first noticed that she was gone. "Hermione!" He gasped, causing Tom to spin back around, his new wand raised and a curse on his lips. The reason for the younger boy's alarm was abruptly clear– Hermione was no longer with them.

Tom's eyes narrowed as possessive rage reared its ugly head inside him– somebody had dared touch what belonged to him. Furious, Tom turned back the way they'd come, striding back deeper Knockturn, reaching out with his free hand to seize Harry's forearm in a grip the younger boy wouldn't be able to free himself of. "Stay close," he warned the younger boy who glared at him despite the blatant fear on his face.

"Kind of hard to do anything else when you're grabbing me tight enough to cut off my circulation!" he snapped trying to yank his arm free, but Tom ignored him as he scanned for any sign of Hermione– he wasn't about to let the boy be defiled in any way by the predators in this Alley too.

"There's her wand!" Harry said suddenly and Tom changed direction, cutting down the small alleyway between shops. "I can hear something up ahead," the younger boy whispered, and Tom nodded, his face grim, as he turned a sharp corner only to go still.

A man was holding Hermione against a wall, his hand pressed over her nose and mouth. There was blood on the ground under them and Hermione's head had lolled to the side, her eyes vacant and glassy. Harry let out a furious shout and tried to rush forwards, and Tom could have cursed the boy for losing their advantage gained by the element of surprise. The man spun around, releasing his grip on Hermione who fell to the ground and landed in a crumpled heap. Tom's mouth curled into a snarl as her head met the ground with a sharp smack.

"Avada Kedavra!" He snarled but Hermione's attacker ducked, the jet of green hitting the blood-smeared wall he'd been holding Hermione up against. Before Tom could cast again, the man was gone, apparating away with a loud crack.

Tom released his grip on Harry and the younger boy rushed forwards, falling to his knees beside Hermione with a desperate expression on his face. "She's still breathing," he choked out and Tom felt something loosen slightly in his chest.

"Let's keep it that way." He said, voice grim.

"We need to find McGongall," Harry said urgently, "she'll still be searching for us–"

"I've got a better idea," Tom interrupted him, having absolutely no intention of going to Minerva McGonagall– and through her, Dumbledore. "We need an owl."

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Hermione's POV:

Awareness slowly filtered back through her and the survival instinct that was second nature to her had Hermione keeping her eyes closed and her breathing slow and even, giving no sign to whoever was near that she was awake.

The surface she was laying on was soft and a blanket was draped over her. She couldn't feel any restraints of any sorts so she concentrated on the sound of low voices.

"When will she wake up?" Harry whispered.
"Soon, love." A feminine voice assurred her best friend, soothing and familiar.

"She's already awake." This third voice was amused, but grimly so. It was Tom's voice.

Hermione's body was moving before she'd even fully opened her eyes, pushing up into a crouched position that had her ready to either fight or flee. For a heartbeat she held herself there, tensed and panicked, before she registered her surroundings.

"Oh." She said, frowning slightly as she let some of the tension leave her body. "When did we arrive at Malfoy Manor?"

"You were unconscious." Tom informed her from where he was leaning against the doorframe. Harry rushed forwards then, wrapping his arms around her and hugging so tight that she could barely breathe. Hermione clung to him for a moment before looking up over his shoulder to where she could see Tom's gaze fixed on her, some hidden emotion flickering behind his eyes.

Taking in his stiff stance, Hermione felt a tired smirk stretch across her face. "Aw, Tommy, were you worried about me?" she taunted the young Dark Lord. Tom narrowed his eyes at her.

"I was nothing of the sort."

"Liar." Harry said without even looking at Tom, having not moved from his stranglehold around Hermione. Tom scowled, his face going dark, dangerous. Hermione dropped her mocking air, giving him a tired but sincere smile.

"Thanks." She told him, softly, before tugging herself out of Harry's fierce embrace and turning to face the owner of the familiar voice she hadn't quite placed before. "It's lovely to see you, Narcissa," she greeted the Lady of the Manor, "I'm sorry it was under these circumstances."

"Believe me, love, Lucius and I don't mind you and Harry coming to stay." Narcissa said, with a warm smile and worried eyes. "Why, we've been trying to invite you all holidays," she added lightly, "but Severus– ah apologies, Professor Snape says that Harry wasn't able to leave the house of your relatives and that no one could find Hermione."

"Er, Hermione and I kind of gave McGonagall the slip in Diagon Alley." Harry mumbled, looking embarrassed.

"How did you get me here, anyway?" Hermione asked, her hand drifting to her shoulder which was currently covered by what felt like silk. Looking down at herself, she figured out where the silk had come from– she was wearing what looked like some kind of nightgown out of the eighteen-hundreds, all lace and frills and bows. She had to fight the urge to blanche.

"Tom cast some kind of healing spell on you to stop you bleeding then he went into Eeylops to owl Lucius while I hid outside with you under the invisibility cloak." Harry explained and Hermione leaned forwards and pulled Harry into her arms again, as if she were hugging him.

"And what's the story about Tom?" she murmured in his ear.

"You met him in Diagon over the summer and bonded over your nerdiness. I said I wanted to meet him when you wrote about it so we all arranged to meet up today after I gave McGonagall the slip." Harry whispered back.

Deciding that the cover story was acceptable– which meant that Tom most likely came up with it–Hermione slumped back down on the pillows. "Narcissa," she asked, hesitantly, "what– what's the damage?"
Seeing Narcissa's confusion at the Muggle term, Harry quickly clarified, "She means her injuries."

"Oh," Narcissa said, comprehension dawning on her beautiful face before she hesitated, "you don't mind Harry and Tom being here, do you?"

"I'm not leaving." Tom stated, flatly, at the same time as Harry asked,

"Can we stay?" and Hermione said,

"I don't mind my boys staying."

Narcissa looked between them all, amusement clear on her face, before her expression turned more serious. "You had a bad concussion, love, and some nasty bruises which I was able to heal without any trouble, but the bite mark... I got it to stop bleeding and heal over, but the scar tissue is... rather inflamed, and I can't get it to heal properly."

"I'm not surprised." Hermione said with a fierce glower. "The bastard was a werewolf."

"A what?" Harry demanded, his eyes wide and shocked. "How did you know?"

"Easy," Hermione said with a bitter laugh, "he told me. Claims to be the most feared werewolf in Britain. Fenrir Greyback." Narcissa let out a soft gasp, her lovely face paling as she raised a hand to her mouth. The gears in Hermione's head began to turn and her stomach lurched. "He... he really is the most feared werewolf in Britain, isn't he?" she said, uneasily.

Narcissa nodded, face still pale and shaken. "I'm afraid so, love. I– I need to talk to Lucius." The beautiful blonde gave her a strained smile before turning and hurrying from the room.

Tom immediately shoved the door shut and strode over, to join Harry on the bed. His eyes were narrowed and he looked angry but his movements were gentle as he lifted her arm and slid across the silky material of her nightgown. All three of them sucked in a breath at the sight. 'Inflamed' didn't really do it justice. "He nearly bit down to the bone." Tom murmured, running the tips of his long, slender fingers over the raised scar tissue and Hermione couldn't help but shiver slightly.

"I'm not one of those girls who hates scars," she said as she stared at the marred flesh of her shoulder, "but this isn't a scar. This is a fucking mark." Her stomach rolled and she had to close her eyes. "I think I'm going to be sick."

"What about a glamour?" Harry asked, his voice sounding desperate.

"Normal glamours would have to be constantly reapplied," Tom answered for her, "but..." Hermione felt the smooth tip of a wand trace the scarred tissue. ::Dissimulare:: hissed Tom and she felt a pulse of magic wash over her. Harry's relieved sigh gave her the courage to open her eyes and she looked at the unmarked skin of her shoulder in relief.

"Parselmagic is very different from normal magic." Tom explained to Harry as he reached out to trace his fingertips over her shoulder again. The skin was smooth.

"So... it's healed?" Harry asked, reaching out to feel it too.

"No, just hidden. It can't be healed." Tom said, eyes flashing with anger.

Hermione felt oddly... touched by the protective side both boys were showing. Of course, should anyone ask she'd deny it in a heartbeat, but there was a part of her that found all their worrying– no matter how hard Tom was trying to hide it– and their fierce protectiveness of her... well, attractive
would be the most polite way to phrase it, but honestly? It made her feel empowered.

"Hermione?" She pulled herself out of her thoughts as two pairs of eyes looked down at her, emerald green and crushed violet. She'd chosen well, she decided, with a slight smirk; she had very attractive friends.

"Yes?" She replied to Harry.

"Just wondering where you went." Harry smiled at her and grasped her hand, squeezing it gently.

"Just thinking that next time I fatally wound someone, I better make sure they actually do die."

"Wait, Greyback was the person who attacked you last year?" Harry demanded.

"You got the drop on a werewolf without magic?" Was Tom's question. Giving Tom a quick glare, she turned to Harry.

"Yes, same pervert. He must have been fucking goddamn lucky because I slit his carotid artery and he should have bled out within three minutes. But no, some dumb shit healed his stupid arse and now I have an angry werewolf out to get me!"

"You slit his carotid?" Tom arched an eyebrow. "Are you positive it was the same person?"

"Oh I'm pretty damn sure," she responded with another bitter laugh, "and the damn big scar on his throat cleared any doubts I had." She then sighed and ran her hands through her hair in a frustrated gesture. "Sorry, sorry, I'm sorry for lashing out, I'm just really pissed off. Plus I'm getting a headache."

"Narcissa said that if you stressed too much you'd mess up your healing," Harry instantly started fretting over her, "lay back down and relax. Heal first, work everything out later."

"Okay." She agreed with a fond look at her best friend, not seeing any reason not to now she knew she was in a safe place. It didn't take her long to fall back asleep and when she next woke up Harry was the only one in the room.

"Tom went back in the Diary." he said quietly, nodding to her satchel which was sitting on top of the drawers. "He had to use a lot of magic to stay out for as long as he did looking fully corporeal, as well as casting spells without using your magic to help."

"Does Narcissa know about the glamour?" she asked and Harry shook his head.

"If she does ask, though, we can just tell her the truth. Well, a slightly omitted version of the truth," he amended, "she knows we both speak Parseltongue, so we tell her it's Parselmagic. We just don't mention it wasn't one of us who cast it."

"Alright." Feeling a lot more relaxed, she fixed Harry with a look as a thought struck her. "Oh you two had better have found my wand! If I got attacked by that filthy mutt for nothing then I'm going to kick both your arses to— oh." She broke off guiltily as Harry pulled her lovely new illegal wand out of his sleeve. "Sorry."

"It's how we found you, actually. Dropping it turned out to be a good thing." He said as he passed it to her. She scowled at him, even as she slid it under her pillow.

"I didn't drop it, Greyback took it off me!" She snapped. Harry raised his hands up in a surrender gesture and she huffed. "How long was I out for?"
"It's been about... sixteen hours." Harry checked his watch then nodded.

"Which means it's...?" she prompted him.

"Oh. Right." He gave her a silly grin, "around three in the morning."

"Three in the what?" Hermione lowered her voice to a loud whisper. "Harry James Potter, have you slept at all?"

"I wanted to make sure you were okay." Harry's grin faded and a serious look replaced it. "Hermione, you gave me the biggest fright of my life today. Well, yesterday, but you get my drift. Never do that again."

"Never," she promised, reaching out her open palm. Harry took her hand in his and they shook on it before she used her grip to yank him forwards, pulling him into the bed next to her. With a bit of squirming she managed to get the duvet out from under Harry and move it so it was on top of them both. "Sleep." She ordered him before turning over so her back was facing him. "And cuddle me." She added.

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Harry's POV:

Harry woke up with a yawn. He then choked when said yawn caused him to inhale a mouthful of his best friend's hair. Spluttering and coughing, he rolled away from her and, once his airways were once again blessedly unobstructed, he became aware of something which made him incredibly thankful for his impromptu choking fit.

This had only happened to him a few times. Unfortunately, one of the first times was when he and Hermione had been sharing a bed. He had been embarrassed and confused and mortified. Hermione had been completely nonchalant and told him that it wasn't uncommon that when males reached puberty they started getting 'morning wood' she called it. Seeing his somewhat bemused expression, she'd rolled her eyes and told him that he'd start waking up with erections every now and then and the best thing to do was go wank in the shower.

His face had burned hot enough to fry an egg and she'd burst out into laughter which led to him trying to smother himself with his pillow. Once she'd finally stopped laughing, Hermione told him not to worry, it'd go by itself.

She was right– as usual. All he had to do was think of something embarrassing, like Hermione's birds and bee's talk with him, and it'd disappear in a flash. The problem was when he woke up with his problem and Hermione was in the same bed as him.

Like now.

Praying she hadn't noticed, he turned and gave her a bright smile. She was scowling at him. "If you were that hungry, you could have called the house elf– you didn't need to start chomping my hair!" She complained. Relieved that she hadn't noticed, Harry poked his tongue out at her and they bickered back and forth for a few minutes before Hermione stood up and announced she was off to get changed.

Picking up her satchel, she paused in the doorway of the walk-in closet and turned to give him a truly evil smirk. "Shower's on the left, Harry." She said sweetly before disappearing, leaving him
trying to smother himself with his pillow once again.

After the suggested shower, Harry dressed in the clothes Hermione had so thoughtfully laid out for him on the end of the bed—light grey casual robes and dragon-hide boots—then made his way down to the dining room, hoping that would be where he'd find the Malfoys.

He was relieved to see that yes, Hermione and Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy were already there—Draco had yet to return from Blaise's, where he'd spent the last few days—and after quickly apologizing for taking too long in the shower he sat down next to Hermione. He then ignored Hermione as she kicked his leg gently under the table, and instead smiled at the Malfoys. "We're very sorry about all the drama," he apologized, "but thank you for helping us."

"It was nothing, love," Narcissa dismissed with a wave of her hand, "anything for a friend of Draco's."

"It means a lot to us, Narcissa." Hermione spoke quietly from beside him, a genuine look of sincerity on her face. "And not just for healing me, but for welcoming us into your home." Two small spots of pink appeared on Narcissa's cheeks, and it took Harry a moment to realize that Narcissa was blushing. He hadn't actually known she could do that.

Dobby served up breakfast soon after that and Harry started eagerly tucking into the delicious food the house elf had cooked up. That was until Hermione let out a sharp sound from his right and he glanced over and almost sprayed his mouthful of scrambled eggs all over the Malfoy's expensive-looking white tablecloth.

"Isn't—isn't that the guy from the Muggle news? The one who escaped jail?" he asked, forgetting decorum as he stared at the cover of the copy of the Daily Prophet Hermione was reading. Featuring on nearly the entire page was one of the Wizarding world's moving photographs, this one of the same man Harry had seen on the Muggle news with the gaunt face and elbow-length matted hair.

"Well, that explains why they never mentioned which prison he escaped from." Hermione said with a frown. "They couldn't exactly say he escaped from Azkaban."

"Azkaban?" Harry echoed, feeling like an idiot.

"The Wizarding prison." Hermione told him. "It's a fortress surrounded by the ocean. Nobody has ever broken out of it before. Ever. It's supposed to be impossible."

"People also thought that the very notion of there being a Chamber of Secrets was impossible," he told her, forgetting their company, "and they were wrong."

"Harry," Hermione's voice was dry but the look she gave him was amused. "The Chamber of Secrets is a myth, remember—Lockhart just faked it opening for his new book."

"Oh." Harry gave the Malfoys a weak smile. "That's right."

"Why don't we get back to the original topic?" Hermione suggested, seemingly having found enough sadistic enjoyment from embarrassing him today—for now, at least. "Sirius Black."

"Mr. Mal— I mean, Lucius," Harry quickly corrected himself, "do you know what Black was imprisoned for?"

Here he'd expected Lucius to just throw around a few names of people Black had killed, buildings he'd destroyed, lives he'd ruined, etc.. Instead, both Lucius and Narcissa traded a long look before
turning back to him. "Harry," Narcissa seemed to be trying to figure out exactly how to say. "Sirius Black is the one who betrayed your parents to the Dark Lord."

Dead. Silence.

Harry sat there stunned, unable to even think properly. Words like 'betrayed' and 'parents' kept floating around his mind and some long forgotten memory niggled at the corner of his mind.

"How?" Harry's question– demand, actually, would be a better way to describe it– caused the elder Malfoys to trade another long look, and this was when Harry figured out they weren't thinking about not telling him rather they were deciding who should tell him.

It was Narcissa, again, who spoke. "Sirius was my cousin," she said quietly, "he was.. quite the rebel of the family, the only Gryffindor in our lines for generations. And when Sirius met James Potter... they were practically soul mates, brothers in all but blood. When Sirius ran away from home at sixteen it was the Potters who took him in."

"But– but why would he betray them? If they were best friends?" Harry demanded.

"We don't know." Lucius spoke this time and his voice was just as quiet. "It's said that even the Dark Lord's followers had no idea where Black's loyalties truly lay."

Harry didn't hear much else that breakfast, too lost in his own thoughts.
Harry's POV:

Harry was sitting on his bed, Hermione next to him with a book propped open on her lap, when Draco entered the room looking equal parts pleased and annoyed. "Mother said you were here," he informed them, "but she wouldn't say what happened."

"What makes you think something happened?" Hermione shot back and Draco huffed.

"Mother doesn't lie to me. She just doesn't respond if she can't tell me the truth."

"We were attacked in Knockturn Alley." Harry decided to answer and Draco gave him an incredulous look.

"What were you doing in Knockturn Alley?"

"Buying illegal goods." Hermione answered, without pause. She then scowled. "I've definitely learnt my lesson."

"What, that we shouldn't wander around Knockturn Alley?" He asked her.

::{No}: Hermione hissed, surprising him slightly with her abrupt change to Parseltongue,::{Next time I fatally injure someone I should make sure they're actually dead before leaving:}

Harry couldn't help his surprised snort and Draco pouted, crossing his arms. "That's just mean!" he whined.

"That's life." Hermione smiled blandly at the irate blonde who just grumbled louder before sighing.

"Okay, we're going to just forget the why and concentrate on the fact that you're here now," Draco informed them. "We're going to have a wonderful time." He added smugly and Harry couldn't help but laugh.

"Agreed." He said, a big smile on his face.

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Severus's POV:

"You lost him?" Severus looked at Minerva incredulously. "You managed to lose Ha– Potter?"

Minerva scowled at him with her arms crossed against her chest and Albus had a concerned look on his face. "You said he was there one minute, then gone the next." He confirmed with Minerva who nodded. "Then I fear," he said grimly, "that I know how our Mr. Potter is vanishing from sight."

"How?" Demanded Minerva, "how in Merlin's name did he just disappear?"
"Two years ago on Christmas I returned an item his father lent me." Albus confessed, actually looking rather sheepish despite the gravity of the situation. "An Invisibility Cloak."

"You gave a first year an Invisibility Cloak." Minerva said, just about bristling with fury. Severus, who'd already known about the blasted cloak, leaned back in his chair, looking for all intents and purposes as if he was enjoying the show when in actuality his mind was racing.

Harry would be safe, he assured himself. Granger was logical to the point of icy—she'd have prioritized Harry's physical wellbeing over that of his emotional wellbeing. If she had aided Harry in his escape, of which he had absolutely no doubt, then she was fully confident that the boy would be safe.

After all, if Albus couldn't find them then how could anyone else? He reasoned with himself. Except... except would Granger know about Black? About the danger he presented to Harry? A sick feeling grew in his stomach as Severus realised just how much danger his two students were in. How could Minerva have taken her eyes off the boy for even a moment, knowing Black was out there hunting him down? He thought, furiously.

A house elf suddenly apparated into the room with a pop and Severus recognized it as one of Lucius's elves. "Master is asking Dobby to bring Master Snape to Master's home." The small creature—Dobby—stammered nervously.

Severus directed his gaze to the headmaster. "While you're sorting out the mess Minerva's made, I believe my friend needs me." He said icily, none of the fear that made him feel like he might be sick showing on his face. Albus nodded.

"I will contact you if I am in need of your services."

Giving Minerva one last sneer, Snape strode out of the headmaster's office and quickly made his way to his quarters, the elf trotting at his heels. Throwing a handful of powder into the fireplace, he stepped into the emerald flames with a snapped, "Malfoy Manor, Lucius's study."

Lucius was waiting for him as he stepped out of the fireplace, flicking his wand at his robes to wordlessly vanish the soot. "You look upset, old friend." He stated and Severus glared at him.

"The Deputy Headmistress, in all her wisdom, managed to lose Harry in the middle of Diagon Alley when Black's trying to kill him!" he seethed. "Stupid, incompetent—"

"Harry's here, Severus." Lucius interrupted his rant and Severus jolted slightly then glowered at Lucius, murderous intent clear in his gaze.

"And you couldn't have opened with that?" He just about snarled. Far from being intimidated, Lucius just laughed.

"You," Severus informed him darkly, "are evil."

"That was part of the requirement for our little extracurricular group." Lucius pointed out his steel colored eyes flicking down to his left forearm, covered by his sleeve.

Under the thick material of the expensive robe, Severus knew what he would find—a faint mark similar to that of a tattoo of a skull with a snake protruding from its mouth.

"Out of interest," Severus didn't bother trying to hide his desire to change the subject, "how did
"Ah," Lucius leaned back in his chair, a thoughtful expression on his face. "That's actually quite an interesting tale. Around six hours ago, I received an urgent letter via owl requesting my immediate presence in Diagon Alley. When I got there, Harry and an older boy I didn't recognize were waiting outside Eeylopes. The moment they saw me, Harry revealed Miss Granger from where she was hidden under an invisibility cloak."

Here Lucius paused, a sympathetic expression crossing his face. "Greyback, unfortunately, managed to survive his encounter with her last year and this time she was lucky to survive him."

Severus felt a wave of fury rush through him at the thought of Greyback even touching his brightest student. "How far did he get?" His voice was low, a sure sign for anyone who knew him that this quiet voice was far more dangerous then any screaming or shouting he could be doing.

"A severe concussion was the worst injury," Lucius said before his mouth twisted, eyes narrowing. "The filthy mutt bit her."

"But it wasn't a full moon!" Was his automatic response and Lucius shook his head.

"Not that sort of bite, he bit her while he was in human form." Severus's eyes widened in furious comprehension.

"The animal marked her as his." He said through clenched teeth.

"Yes, in Greyback's eyes Hermione belongs to him." Lucius agreed, before a sinister looking smirk crossed the older blonde's face. "What a shame for the mongrel that only werewolves will even pause to acknowledge it."

"While true, that doesn't negate the fact that Greyback's life is forfeit." Severus stated, his face dark.

"Maybe this will post-pone the mongrel's death sentence," Lucius said and the sudden trace of anger in the blonde's voice had Severus pause, dread starting to build up inside him.

"What is it?" He asked and Lucius's face turned grim.

"When Narcissa was using purity charms to examine the girl for sexual assault, she discovered something rather... disquieting."

"Are you actually going to get around to spitting this out, Lucius?" Severus asked through gritted teeth, already knowing he wasn't going to like what he was about to hear.

"Our Miss Granger... she isn't a virgin. And according to the charm, she hasn't been one for nearly four years."

Severus blinked. "Nine?" he just about croaked, horrified beyond belief. "She was... assaulted when she was just nine years old?"

Lucius nodded grimly and Severus proceeded to sum up his thoughts with one word.

"Fuck."
Hermione's POV:

The remainder of the summer holidays passed quickly but pleasantly with Hermione enjoying making use of the Malfoy family's library which was filled with a number of rare and expensive books that hummed with all sorts magic– Light, Dark and Grey. She wasn't ignorant of the looks she was receiving from the elder Malfoys, but she dismissed them as products of Greyback's attack.

The time he wasn't spending with Draco, Harry spent with her to practice and perfect the new spells she'd found– something they were able to now do, courtesy of their new, illegal wands.

Tom also kept her company while Harry was off playing Quidditch or whatnot with Draco. The three of them had decided to hide Tom's presence from the Malfoys and when he was out of the diary Tom would put up wards to warn them when one of the Malfoys were approaching.

It was two days before their scheduled return to Hogwarts that Narcissa brought up the Gala the Malfoys were hosting that evening. They hosted two every year, one near the end of summer and one over Yule.

As the boys fled off with Lucius, Hermione resigned herself to being Narcissa's dress-up doll for the day as the older woman seemed to absolutely adore pampering her; taking her to get her nails done, for spa treatments, hair appointments... She treated Hermione like her own daughter which Hermione normally found useful though at times like this it could be quite horrifying.

Looking in the mirror, Hermione decided she had never seen a set of dress robes quite as hideously girly as the set she was now wearing. They were made of rose-pink silk with silver Acromantula thread stitched in twirling, intricate patterns and far there were frills and bows and so much fucking lace.

Narcissa had done something funny to her wild, curly hair using mother-of-pearl hairpins and a diamond encrusted silver hair comb to hold it high up above her neck, with only the odd curl springing free.

This was worse then the Yule Gala, Hermione thought darkly as she glared at her reflection. The only thing she liked about this particular dress was that compared to the last one Narcissa had dressed her in was that instead of making her look like a pretty little princess, this dress actually complimented her maturing body. She was still petite, but the cut of the dress didn't make her look short so much as slender and delicate-looking and it was expertly tailored to bring attention to the subtle flare of her hips and the soft curve to her chest.

If it weren't for, well, for every other fucking part of it, she might have actually liked the dress. But– pink. Frills. Bows. Lace.

Enough said.

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The Gala had a 'Heaven on Earth' theme, and the Malfoy Manor was done up spectacularly. Whites, creams, and glittering gold gave the entire ballroom an ethereal glow. Sheer, flowing fabrics were draped down, some crisscrossed, to give the room a soft feel to it as if the place were one with the clouds. Feathers floated down from above around the outer edges of the room, so as not to interfere with the guests, while the illusion of falling feathers could be seen now and again around the dance floor.

"Holy hell," Harry muttered from beside her.
"It's stunning," Hermione agreed before turning to face Harry and then startling. "Tom? What are you doing here?"

Tom, fully corporeal, was dressed in a set of fine silk robes and looking handsome, elegant and smug. "My other self will no doubt be attending and I wish to speak with him." He said.

"And you couldn't, oh I don't know, have just asked me to talk to him?" She asked sarcastically.

"Do you have any idea how dull it is in the Diary?" Tom countered and Hermione shuddered at the idea. Without any stimuli, she couldn't even imagine how unbearably bored she'd be.

"Fair enough," she admitted.

"There you two are!" Draco said sounding annoyed as he appeared behind them. The blond's expression turned confused as he looked at Tom who was standing between them. "Who's this?"

"This our friend, Tom." Harry introduced with a smile. Hermione was tempted to raise an eyebrow at the 'friend' status Harry had apparently elevated Tom to but refrained while in front of Draco.

Draco seemed satisfied with that explanation, and smiled in a somewhat pompous manner at Tom. "Draco Malfoy, welcome to my home." He said in a gracious voice.

"Charmed." Tom drawled back and Hermione bit the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing. Linking her arm with Tom's, Hermione gave Draco a bright smile.

"We'll catch you later, Draco. Tom's introducing me to a few of his friends." She lied, "come on Harry." She added when Harry just stood there, looking at her arm linked with Tom's. Sensing his insecurity, Hermione reached out her free hand to clasp onto Harry's, tangling their fingers together and tugging him after them.

"So that's the Malfoy boy," Tom mused aloud, "he reminds me of his grandfather, Abraxas."

"Shallow?" Hermione guessed and Tom smirked.

"Exactly."

"He's not that bad!" Harry defended the blond. "Well, maybe just a little." He admitted as they both just stared at him, amused. Taking pity on him, Hermione scanned the room.

"Do either of you know what he actually looks like?" She asked the other two, quietly.

"No," Tom shook his head, an odd gleam in his eyes, "but I don't need to– I can feel him."

Hermione let the older boy lead them across the room, angling towards a handsome man who looked to be in either his late twenties or early thirties. She could see traces of Tom's features in his face but there were differences, significant ones, like the lighter shade of hair and the slight changes in bone structure.

Voldemort was talking to Lucius as they approached and the blond aristocrat nodded at them in greeting as they approached. "Hermione, Harry, Tom, this is Thaddeus Dagworth." Lucius introduced them to Voldemort, "he's quite the up and comer at the Ministry."

"Mr. Dagworth, it's a pleasure." Hermione smiled sweetly.

"The pleasure is mine." Voldemort replied, his voice a pleasant baritone.
"Lord Malfoy," a lady twittered as she pranced over to Lucius– Hermione guessed that she was a wife to one of the Ministry employees. "Can I just say, what a lovely house you and your wife have!" she gushed.

Taking advantage of Lucius's distraction while dealing with the woman, Voldemort led the way out of the side of the ballroom and into one of the cloak rooms so they could speak in private.

"Have you enjoyed your summer, Tom?" Voldemort asked and Hermione was reminded of when the Dark Lord had asked a similar question down in the Chamber of Secrets.

"Yes," Tom replied, leaning back against the wall in a languid pose that both Hermione and Harry recognized well. "It was very... enlightening."

"Er, can I ask a question?" Harry spoke up, sounding nervous.

Voldemort tilted his head. "I'm going to guess you want to ask about your godfather." He said and Harry nodded.

"I– I can't blame you for murdering my mum and dad," he said quietly. "I mean, I can, but you never– you didn't betray them. You didn't have their trust and their– their love and then give them up for slaughter." He took a shuddering breath, eyes wet with unshed tears and Hermione reached out for his hand again to squeeze it gently. "I need some sort of revenge," Harry said, his voice almost pleading. "I need to make someone pay for taking them from me and leaving me to grow up in that– that hell-hole! It's his fault! It's that traitor's fault!" Harry's voice had started to rise and Hermione rubbed soothing circles on his palm with her thumb.

"What are you asking?" Voldemort looked thoughtful and Hermione had to fight the urge to glare at him. She didn't quite succeed.

"I want to know what happened. What he did. And... and I want him to pay for what he did. I want him dead." Harry said, firmly.

Hermione was unsurprised by this. Harry needed revenge for the murder of his parents, and seeing as he couldn't harm their murderer then their betrayer was the next best thing, really.

"What will I get in return?" Voldemort asked pointedly.

"I'll owe you another favor." She said bluntly before Harry could offer one of his own– she'd much prefer she was in the Dark Lord's debt then Harry. Voldemort's lips stretched into a satisfied smile even as Harry shook his head.

"Hermione!" he exclaimed, "don't do that!"

"Too late." Hermione told him calmly before turning back to Voldemort. "The full story please."

"Sirius Black is innocent." Voldemort paused for a moment, seeming to enjoy their shock. "It was Peter Pettigrew who told me your parents location. Black was set up to take the fall."

"Pettigrew's dead." Harry denied, shaking his head.

"Possibly. But Pettigrew has a few tricks up his sleeve, the most... interesting being his ability to turn into a rat."

"He was an animagus," Hermione said slowly as comprehension dawned on her. "Black went after him for revenge then the little rat faked his death to set Black up."
"That is my belief." Voldemort agreed.

"So you weren't involved in his escape from Azkaban." Harry guessed.

"No." Here Voldemort grimaced. "I have yet to figure out a way to free my most loyal from Azkaban without alerting the Ministry to my return."

For such an intelligent man, Voldemort could be quite stupid, Hermione noted. "You realize you've just been given the perfect set-up, right?" She asked, somewhat incredulous that the Dark Lord hadn't thought of it himself. "To the world, Black is a Death Eater. Black escaped Azkaban. It's not much of a stretch to think that he'd return to free his comrades in arms."

Voldemort looked disgruntled. "That... could work." He admitted reluctantly. "But we're straying from topic. Pettigrew. With the world believing him dead, it will be almost impossible for you to track him down, Harry. Which is why I'm going to offer you a deal."

"A deal?" Harry asked cautiously.

"A deal." Voldemort said pleasantly. "I have a way to track Pettigrew. You do this one thing for me and I'll deliver you the rat."

"He won't say yes until you tell him his part of the deal." Hermione said quickly. Her expression left no room for negotiation—she wasn't going to risk Harry getting trapped in some a possibly harmful situation.

"It's not hard. Kill Black, Harry, and the rat is yours." Voldemort told her best friend.

"Kill... kill Sirius Black?" Harry asked, looking honestly bewildered. "Why?"

"He must not be proved innocent." Voldemort said. "He will approach you, Harry, I have no doubt, and when he does, if you kill him and I'll give you the rat."

"Can— can I think about this?" Harry asked, face looking somewhat pale. Voldemort smirked, somewhat mockingly.

"Take all the time you need, Harry. I don't require an immediate answer." And with that, the Dark Lord strode out of the cloakroom and back to the ballroom to rejoin the crowd.

"I... I... I..." Harry mumbled in what seemed to be shock and she wrapped her arms around him, hugging him tight.

"The cocky bastard's right," she told him. "No offense Tom." She added as an afterthought and Tom just rolled his eyes at her so she continued on. "You don't have to figure out an answer right now. So stop worrying. Enjoy the party."

Harry gave her a doubtful look, but nodded. "Okay. Let's do that." He mumbled.

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Severus's POV:

Severus watched Harry and Granger leave the ballroom following after Thaddeus Dagworth, a smooth, charismatic politician who was rising quickly through the ranks of the Ministry and Wizengamot. He didn't recognize the older boy with them but Lucius had identified the teenager as
'Tom', the one who was with the two in Diagon Alley when Granger was attacked.

"Do you think they know each other? Potter, Granger and Dagworth?" Lucius asked, looking in the same direction.

"If they do, I'll be quite interested in knowing how." Severus commented. "Granger looks well." He added and Lucius nodded.

"She recovered quickly. Narcissa tells me that the girl uses a parseltongue glamour to hide the scar."

"Has Narcissa talked to her at all about the sexual assault?" Severus asked quietly.

"No." Lucius admitted, "but she plans on doing it soon."

"She doesn't have much time left to put it off." Severus noted Lucius grimaced.

"I know, but Cissy... she dotes on the girl. Adores her. And Miss Granger seems fond of Narcissa—at least fond enough to allow my wife to dress her up and play doll with her." Lucius chuckled slightly.

"I couldn't see Granger picking out those dress robes." Severus laughed with his friend before his face turned serious again. "Dagworth... everyone keeps saying he's quite the up and comer."

"He's certainly stirring the waters," Lucius agreed. "He has money, charisma and a silver tongue. The women love him and the men respect him. Those of us who see through his mask can only respect him more for it— he's going to make big changes, Severus. Good ones too."

"Good ones?" Severus asked, truly curious.

"Mr. Dagworth is very much inclined towards the restoration of old ways, amongst other things. The Pureblood circles are getting excited." Lucius said quietly, nodding at the crowds of nobles and dignitaries, Ministry employees and close friends. "And if I'm being honest, Severus, I have to admit that I am getting excited too."

"Dagworth has returned," Severus noted, when the man they'd just been discussing strode back into the room, and was immediately accosted by eager fans.

"Without the children." Lucius noted. "Should we be concerned?"

"Lucius, this is Granger we're talking about." He reminded his friend and Lucius chuckled.

"Good point."
Chapter XXI:

Hermione's POV:

After the Gala, with only one night until the return to Hogwarts Hermione found herself sitting next to a nervous looking Narcissa in a private wing branching off the older woman's rooms.

"Are you okay, Narcissa?" Hermione asked, concerned by the woman's actions. Narcissa gave a shaky sort of smile.

"I'm okay, love, just unsure about how to proceed." The woman confessed.

"Just say what you need to, Narcissa. I won't be mad, if that's what you're worried about. How could I be angry after everything you've done for Harry and I?" Hermione coaxed the woman, playing on Narcissa's maternal instincts, the one weakness in her Pureblood mask.

"Were you assaulted, love?" Narcissa burst out, before her cheeks tinged pink.

"Pardon?" Hermione asked, confused. "You know I was– you healed me." She reminded the woman, wondering if she maybe needed to notify the house elf about his mistress's ailment. "Have you found you've been forgetting things, recently?" she asked Narcissa, concerned.

"I, no I could have worded that better." Narcissa twisted her hands slightly in her lap. "Hermione, love, when I was healing you I performed a spell... it's an old Pureblood one. It records a woman's... purity."

"Ah." Hermione murmured, finally understanding where Narcissa's hesitation, fear and worry were coming from.

"Your purity was taken four years ago, when you were nine years old." Narcissa's eyes filled with tears and she leaned forwards, gently clasping Hermione's hands in her own. Narcissa's skin was very soft, Hermione noted. "Is there anything I can do to help right this terrible wrong that had been done to you?"

"The man who did that to me is in jail." Hermione forced herself to tear up, made her voice choke. "Muggles are mostly useless, but they did make the one who hurt me pay for it."

"I am glad," Narcissa let out a relieved sigh and leaned forwards, gently kissing her forehead. Hermione hid her surprise and gave Narcissa a watery smile that was absolutely and entirely fake.

"Thank you, Narcissa. You have... you have no idea how much this means to me. You, caring..." Narcissa looked like she was about to burst into tears and Hermione gently wrapped her arms around the older woman. Narcissa hugged her back, and Hermione felt her lips twitch.

For a Pureblood, a Black especially, Narcissa was exceedingly easy to manipulate.

As she made her way back to Harry, Hermione thought over the conversation she'd just had.
Purity.

It was treated as such a treasured commodity in the Wizarding world, in Pureblood circles especially. Which was why she couldn't have just come out and told Narcissa that she hadn't been sexually assaulted.

She had been taken advantage of, Hermione could admit, though she didn't like doing so – she heavily resented the fact that she, the master manipulator, had been manipulated with such relative ease.

Jed had been four years older then her. He was a street rat, just like her, and he'd been... nice. He'd wormed his way around her defences and was one of the few people she'd ever let into her heart.

It certainly hadn't been an experience she'd repeated in a hurry.

Jed had introduced her into the world of sex and despite her age, Hermione had had the relative maturity to deal with both the repercussions and the act itself. Sex, she had discovered, was a useful tool. And that's when Jed had stopped using her, and she'd started using him. He didn't realise she'd been using sex control their relationship manipulate him into getting her what she wanted until after she'd finished the arrangement. She'd left Jed after milking him for anything that could possibly be of any use to her and she had never taken on another lover. But she hadn't forgotten what the older boy had taught her and the realizations that had accompanied his teachings – men were stupid when it came to sex, stupid and easily manipulated, and her body could be used as a weapon in more ways then one.

Narcissa, who would have been pure until her wedding night as per Pureblood customs, if she knew the truth would likely be horrified. Hence the necessity of the lie.

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Hermione noted that the atmosphere the night before their return to Hogwarts was relaxed, with all of them laughing freely – or at least pretending to, in her case, chatting happily, sharing stories and Lucius even letting Draco and Harry have a small glass of wine each. Hermione, much to Narcissa's approval, had declined the gracious offer.

What the proper Pureblood wife didn't know was that Hermione's lack of interest in tasting the fine wine was less to do with the fact that it wasn't considered very 'proper' for a young lady and more to do with the fact the very few times she'd drank in the past she'd drunk in the past she'd preferred something stronger and had usually done so on cheap whiskey before Sting stitched her up, the warmth of the alcohol in her stomach numbing the pain in place of painkillers. Other times, on especially bad days, she and Sting would find somewhere and drink until they passed out.

Alcohol just had too many associations for it to particularly appeal to her as anything but a coping mechanism.

Lucius had accompanied Hermione over a week ago to retrieve Harry's belongings from Privet Drive. Harry wasn't able to retrieve them himself due to the fact that if he stepped foot within a certain radius of Number Four the wards would trap him, rendering him unable to leave.

Lucius had been particularly unimpressed with this and, upon Hermione's request, had provided her with a series of books on Wizarding law as well as a promise to send around a few queries about the legalities of such wards.

It seemed that all too soon the night had rolled into day and Hermione was dressing in a pretty
lavender dress that Narcissa had had tailored for her, her satchel slung over her shoulder and her hair neatly braided. Her vine wand, the legal one, was resting in her pocket, while her acacia wand was hidden up her sleeve. Tom's yew wand was stashed in her satchel along with the Diary.

She and Harry, along with the Malfoys, all flooed to Platform Nine and Three Quarters and after thanking and bidding Lucius and Narcissa farewell, she and Harry boarded the Hogwarts Express. It was already packed and Draco seemed unsurprised when instead of joining the other Slytherin third years, Hermione and Harry went to find their own compartment.

Unfortunately, they were all full except for the one at the very end of the train. "The Malfoys really take the whole 'fashionably late' thing to the extreme." Harry noted as they peeked at the lone occupant of the compartment. "I've never seen an adult on the train before." He added.

Hermione took note of the man sitting fast asleep next to the window. He was wearing an extremely shabby set of wizard's robes which had been darned in several places and he looked ill and exhausted. Though he appeared to be quite young, his light-brown hair was flecked with grey.

"Who do you think he is?" Harry asked as they sat down and slid the door shut, taking the seats furthest from the window.

"Professor R. J. Lupin." Hermione answered him.

"How the hell d'you know that?" Harry asked her, surprised.

"I used my eyes, Harry. It's on his case." She gestured to the luggage over the man's head where a small, battered case, held together by an abundance of knotted string, had the name R. J. Lupin stamped across one corner in peeling letters.

"You'd think after a childhood of being punished for missing even a speck of dust when cleaning would teach me to be more observant." Harry noted. "Pay attention to the small details, and all that."

"Can't argue with that." Hermione agreed, before pulling the Diary out of her satchel, along with a Muggle pen. 'You can't come out' she wrote, 'there's a professor here, the new Defense one probably, but he's sleeping so you can still write'.

*Can you do a silencing charm?* Tom's flowing handwriting appeared on the slightly yellowing page.

*If you want to spend the trip sitting under the invisibility cloak, then sure.* She wrote, not really expecting the pages to flutter in response and for Tom to appear. He looked more incorporeal then he usually did, which she supposed was due to the fact he wasn't wasting any magic to solidify his appearance more because he was about to be invisible.

"Here," she said, fishing the invisibility cloak out of her satchel and tossing it over to him. Tom donned it immediately, disappearing from sight, and Hermione pulled out her vinewood wand and cast a few quick silencing charms so that Lupin wouldn't be able to hear them talk.

"So that's the new Defense professor," Tom said, his voice sounding amused. "Certainly doesn't look like much, does he?"

"He can't be worse then Lockhart," Hermione said.

"Even Quirrell was better then Lockhart and he had Voldemort growing out the back of his head." Harry added.
"Could you try to make my future self sound less like some sort of parasite?" Tom asked dryly.

"Well technically he's not your future self anymore," Hermione corrected him, turning so she was looking approximately where she thought Tom's face would be. "We're shaped by our experiences just as much as we are our DNA. With you and Voldemort both experiencing different things, thus forming your own memories and separate relationships with people, you can't say you're past and present versions of the same person anymore. You might have started off that way, but with whatever magic Voldemort used to separate you from him he ended up creating a whole new personality."

There was a short pause, then Tom spoke, his voice surprisingly hesitant. "Do you... do you really think so?" he asked quietly.

"We know so, Tom," Harry answered for her. "You're not him; you're Tom and you're both so different. I mean, both of you are mean, snarky, sarcastic, sadistic evil geniuses, but that and sixteen years of memories is the only thing you have in common."

Tom fell silent and Hermione sensed that this was probably a good time to change the subject– she knew the older boy wasn't a fan of appearing... vulnerable. She understood– she didn't like it either.

"So, have you thought at all about Voldemort's offer?" she asked Harry who immediately stiffened, throwing a nervous reflexive glance in Lupin's direction. "Silencing wards." She reminded him and he nodded slightly before answering.

"A bit." He admitted quietly.

"And where have your thoughts been drifting?" She coaxed and Harry sighed.

"I don't know. Back with Marge, I was really ready to kill her, Hermione. I wanted her dead. Hell, after twelve years of dealing with them, I want all the Dursleys dead and I know that if it really came down to it, I could probably kill them. But I don't know if I could kill Black. I don't know if I could kill a stranger. An innocent."

"Black isn't really innocent," Tom pointed out. "If he hadn't impulsively gone after Pettigrew, you wouldn't have had to grow up with the Dursleys. In a way, he's as much responsible for your time spent in their tender loving care as Dumbledore."

Harry's face darkened and Hermione knew that Tom had hit the jackpot. If anything could bring out Harry's murderous intent, it was the Dursleys.

Hermione decided to direct the conversation away from the rather serious path it had taken, and brought up the subject of Animagus transformations. "This is the year you'll do it, Harry." She stated with absolute confidence.

"You really think so?" Harry asked doubtfully and she smiled at him.

"I know so, Harry. You are, after all, the third in our year." Harry blushed a bit at that and she couldn't resist the urge to pinch his cheek.

"Hey!" he protested weakly causing her and Tom to both laugh.

And the conversation carried on.

The Hogwarts Express moved steadily north and the scenery outside the window became wilder and darker while the clouds overhead thickened. At around mid-afternoon it started to rain,
blurring the rolling hills outside the windows, thickening as the train sped further north. The train rattled as the rain hammered and the wind roared but still Professor Lupin slept.

"I think he might be dead." Harry commented, leaning forwards in his seat to look closer at the professor. Those words had barely left him when the train started to slow down.

"That's strange– we can't be at Hogwarts yet." Hermione frowned.

"Why are we stopping?" Harry asked, puzzled. As he was nearest to the door, it was Harry who got up to look into the corridor. "There's loads of other people looking out," he said and he might have been about to say more when all the lamps on the express went out at the same time and they were plunged into darkness.

"What the hell?" Hermione demanded, cancelling the silencing charms and casting a lumos. It sent an eerie glow through the carriage and she was startled to see that Professor Lupin seemed to have finally woken up. The dim light illuminated his grey face but his eyes looked alert and wary.

"Stay where you are." He said in a hoarse voice as he slowly got to his feet. But the door slid slowly open before Lupin could reach it and standing in the doorway was a cloaked figure that towered to the ceiling. Its face was completely hidden beneath its hood and the single hand protruding from the cloak was glistening, greyish, slimy-looking and scabbed.

As an intense cold swept over them all, Hermione felt her breath catch in her chest as she realized what this was. Dementor.

Slamming her Occlumency shields in place, Hermione tried to push past the cold that went deeper then her skin, the cold that was inside her chest, inside her very heart...

And then her attention was pulled away from the Dementor as Harry let out some kind of gasping, whimpering sound. Something was wrong– he had gone rigid in his seat, his eyes rolled back in his head. Then he crumpled, sliding off the seat and onto the floor and twitching and jerking like he was having a seizure.

"HARRY!" she screamed, before slashing her wand in the direction of the Dementor. "REDUCTO!" she shouted, and a burst of red light exploded out of the tip of her wand, forcing the Dementor back several feet. If it were human, she would have just blown a hole in its chest. As it was, the Dementor just got angry and swooped forwards, her shields started weakening, cracking, the dread was growing, there was a rushing in her ears... Take Hermione! Take our little girl, get her out of here! Do it! Do it Richard! Please! – Sharpie, no-no-no, please don't die – red hair, purple bruises, blood on her hands – there's bone, she can see bone and she's going to be sick – Lacey, don't leave me- please, please – stop, stop, it hurts, please, don't touch me – pain so bad it's like she's been split in half – you've got a sweet face; it won't stay that way – Nymph! Oh god, oh god, don't be dead, don't be dead –

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!" Professor Lupin shouted, and a silvery thing shot out of his wand, and it was forced back.

Hermione swayed and she felt hands grab her, balance her, invisible hands– Tom's hands. Her breathing was coming in short, wheezy gasps and her body was shaking violently as she sat down heavily. She could feel the weight of her memories pressing against her and it felt like one noise would shatter the brittle tension keeping her spine stiff as she held back a break down like the one in front of the Mirror of Erised. It was too much to hold back for long; she knew her shields wouldn't last another day before they crumpled to pieces, but she wanted to be alone in the safety of her dorm with the curtains drawn around her bed and silencing charms applied as she shook to
pieces under the onslaught of the memories rattling at the bars of their prison.

She was still forcing herself to breathe, raw and ragged, while she painstakingly patched up her Occlumency shields the best she could when Harry shuddered his way back to consciousness, gasping and trembling as he pushed himself up into a sitting position. Reasonably confident she wasn't going to fall apart the moment she tried moving, Hermione slid to the ground next to him and gently ran a hand through his hair, damp with sweat. It was a motion that grounded her as much as it did Harry and he pushed his glasses back on, looking sick. "W-what happened?" He asked in a voice that shook. "Where's that– that thing? Who screamed?"

Who hadn't screamed? All their voices, echoing in her ears, a medley of grief-pain-horror-fear memories kept buried down where they couldn't hurt her–

"That was a Dementor. Once of the guards the Dementors of Azkaban." Lupin answered, Hermione unable to open her mouth for fear of what would come out. There was a loud snap and she spun around, a curse already glowing on the tip of her wand before relaxing as she saw that it was only Professor Lupin breaking an enormous slab of chocolate into pieces. "Here," he said gently, handing Harry a particularly large piece and then passing another to her. "Eat it. It'll help."

Harry took the chocolate and when he didn't make a move to eat it at once she nudged him. "It will help," she said quietly. "Chocolate releases endorphins in your brain. It helps counteract the Dementor's effects."

"Who screamed?" Harry asked again, his face very pale looking. Hermione imagined hers looked the same.

"I don't know." She told him, shivering. "A Dementor makes you relive your worst memories. The screaming was from a memory."

"But– but what memory?" Harry asked, bewildered. "I don't– I've never heard that before in my life!" Hermione turned and fixed Lupin with a look.

"Maybe you should go speak to the driver." She said pointedly. Lupin nodded in understanding, giving them both a tired smile before exiting the compartment and disappearing down the corridor. A flick of her wand had the door slide shut, a quick murmur reapplying the silencing wards and a final notice-me not charm ensured no one would be looking in through the windows.

Tom appeared, the Invisibility Cloak tossed onto the seat as he leaned over and helped her pull Harry off the floor and back onto his seat. "Did any of you– fall off your seats?" Harry asked, now sounding embarrassed as well as shaken.

"Dementors affect people in different ways," Hermione explained quietly. "The strength of the impact it had on you doesn't say anything about your character, it means that you've had worse memories to relive. I escaped the worst of the effects because I threw up my Occlumency shields the moment I figured out what it was, otherwise I would have been down there on the floor beside you." She didn't tell him what would be happening that night. He'd been a wreck after seeing her break down in front of the Mirror– there was no need to put him through that again.

"I– I still don't know where the screaming came from." Harry said helplessly.

"I have an idea." Tom said, his face carefully wiped clean of any emotion. "Twelve years ago on Halloween you witnessed at least part of the death of your mother. I suspect that event was traumatic enough that your younger self repressed the memory and the Dementor's presence dragged it to the front of your mind."
Harry shuddered again and she curled into him, offering silent comfort. He wrapped an arm around her as she rested her head on his shoulder, one of her hands tangling with his, their fingers entwined.

"Lupin will be back soon." Tom said quietly. "I'll return to the Diary." Before she could even acknowledge that she'd heard him, Tom disappeared and the Diary flipped shut. Hermione pulled away from Harry for a moment to pick up the cloak and the Diary to push them into the satchel and pulling her wand out of her sleeve to take down the charms she'd put up before curling up to Harry.

About a minute later Lupin appeared in the entrance of the compartment. He paused, looked around and said, with a small smile, "I haven't poisoned that chocolate, you know..."

Hermione silently picked up the piece he'd given her and took a bite. Warmth spread through her body, to the tips of her fingers and toes. Harry looked similarly lifted beside her. "We'll be at Hogwarts in ten minutes," Lupin said, "Are you all right, Harry?"

Hermione didn't spare a thought as to how Professor Lupin knew Harry's name– everyone knew Harry. Harry looked embarrassed and muttered a quick, "fine."

Hermione knew his pride was hurt, so she didn't try to start any conversations, just kept leaning into him.

At long last the train stopped at Hogsmeade station and there was a great scramble to get outside. It was freezing on the tiny platform; rain was driving down in icy sheets. Hermione, gripping Harry's hand tight so they didn't get pulled apart by the crowd and made their way along the platform, out onto a rough mud track where at least a hundred stagecoaches awaited the remaining students, each pulled by a thestral, a creature only visible to those who had witnessed death.

As Harry hadn't mentioned them, Hermione could only assume that he couldn't see them which gave her the idea that while he'd heard his mother's death he hadn't witnessed her being murdered.

They joined Draco, Blaise and Theo in one of the coaches. It smelled of mold and straw, and bumped and swayed along. As the carriage trundled towards a pair of magnificent wrought iron gates, Hermione saw two more towering, hooded Dementors standing guard on either side. Her spine turned to cold iron and she couldn't feel her fingers for a moment, whispers echoing in her ears as a wave of sickness threatened to engulf her. Beside her, Harry shuddered.

"Those things are fucked up." Blaise muttered, his face pale.

"I nearly pissed myself when one passed our compartment." Draco shuddered.

"I got my feet trampled all over and Pansy's head almost broke my nose." Theo complained.

"Did they go into your compartment?" Draco asked.

"We must have got lucky." Hermione lied, shaking her head. "It just drifted past ours, but that was more then enough."

After exiting the carriage, Hermione once again held Harry's hand tight as they joined the crowd swarming up the steps through the giant oak front doors and into the cavernous entrance hall which was lit with flaming torches and housed a magnificent marble staircase that led to the upper floors.

The sorting was over quickly and when the headmaster stood up to speak Hermione's eyes narrowed and beside her Harry tensed. Dumbledore appeared to be a grandfatherly figure, with his kind smile and twinkling eyes, but she and Harry knew the truth.
Dumbledore was a manipulative old bastard who was planning to forge Harry into a weapon to destroy Lord Voldemort. Unbeknownst to him, Harry had no intention of killing Voldemort— in fact, he physically couldn't due to the Magical Oath he had taken. Hermione was looking forward to seeing Dumbledore's expression when he found that out— preferably moments before she killed him.

Dumbledore gave a short speech, welcoming everyone back and warning them about the Dementors stationed at every entrance to the grounds. As he introduced Professor Lupin, Hermione couldn't help but notice the expression twisting Snape's face— there was more than just anger in his expression; it was a look pure loathing. Hermione knew immediately it wasn't the result of Lupin had been given the post as the DADA professor– no, this was caused by something deeper and darker.

Lupin wasn't the only new member of the staff, however– Hagrid, it seemed, was now taking over the post of Care of Magical Creatures professor. She supposed that certainly explained the 'Monster Book of Monsters'.

"We should have known– who else would have assigned us a biting book?" Harry voiced what she was thinking with a laugh as he joined in the applause.

"Not a soul." Hermione agreed with a small but genuine grin.

It was a delicious feast with the hall echoing with talk, laughter and the clatter of knives and forks but Hermione, her body still wired and subtly trembling, struggled to enjoy it, especially with the knowledge of what the night would bring and the weight of old memories breathing down the back of her neck. Adrenaline was thrumming through her veins and when Harry bumped his shoulder against hers for a moment, her vision blacked out, but she forced herself back into the present. Her hands were aching for her knives and old instincts were screaming at her to get away from the boisterous crowd, to find somewhere hidden and alone and safe. Soon, she promised herself, clinging tightly to the remaining shreds of her shields.

At the end of the feast, she and Harry were making their way down to the Slytherin Common Room which was situated near the dungeons when Snape stepped in front of them.

"Let me guess," Hermione said, feeling drained and exhausted and jittery. "Our illustrious headmaster would like a word with Harry."

"Right in one, Miss Granger." Snape nodded. "Five points to Slytherin for the correct answer." He added after a moment, which was enough to draw a tired smile to her face.

"Well, let's get go see what the great and powerful Oz wants." She said, her attempt at a joke falling flat as she was unable to summon the energy for her usual cheek. The corners of Snape's mouth still twitched slightly and Harry let out a quiet snort.

"He said alone, Miss Granger." Snape said and Hermione let her anger lend her strength.

"The Hogwarts rules clearly state that a student has the right to the presence of a third party of his choosing when meeting with a figure of authority." She said, raising her eyebrow as though daring Snape to counter her statement. He didn't. Very wise of him. Instead, he looked proud.

"Very well." He said, the approval clear in his voice, before he turned and led the way back up to Dumbledore's office, her and Harry trailing after him.

This was going to be fun, Hermione thought sarcastically.
Severus's POV:

As he lead the way to the Headmaster's office, Severus reflected on the memory Narcissa had passed on, about her asking Granger about the loss of her 'purity'. Granger had acted the part of a distressed victim admirably but Severus knew her better then the Lady Malfoy and he could read the look in her eyes. She was lying. He didn't know why, just that she was.

Severus wondered whether she'd be more open to him. Maybe he could ask her, as her 'concerned' Head of House. Yes, that could work, he thought with a roll of his eyes, as they entered Albus's office.

Albus was seated behind his desk smiling genially though his expression dimmed when he spotted Harry's companion. Minerva's face was severe. "Severus, did I not say that I wished to speak to Mr. Potter alone?"

"Kind of hard to speak to me alone with Professor McGonagall in the room." Harry pointed out.

"Harry, my boy," Albus's face had turned stern, "I really must--"

"Hermione can stay." Harry interrupted, his voice firm and Granger raised her chin in defiance.

"I must insist--" Albus started but Granger interrupted him.

"I did some reading over the summer, professor. Check section nineteen, subsection three of the Hogwarts Faculty Code of Conduct." She smiled darkly. The anger in her expression made her look less pale and hollow-eyed– the Dementors, he was guessing, had not agreed with her. "It states that if a student feels uncomfortable in the presence of a member of the staff, they are able to– how do I put this?– 'bring along a friend'. Also, section thirteen, subsection nine of the Hogwarts Faculty Code of Conduct states that a student has the right to the presence of a third party of his choosing when meeting with a figure of authority."

Minerva scowled at Granger who looked extremely smug and Severus found himself smirking slightly, impressed by his little snake.

"She's right, headmaster." He drawled and Albus shot him an irate look.

"Very well then," the old man said in a tone that clearly stated that it wasn't at all 'well', "let's get to the topic at hand. Your disappearing act this summer, Harry, was an extremely foolish thing to do and I find myself very disappointed in you."

"And?" Granger countered before Harry could say anything, "Harry doesn't give a damn about how you think of him and his behaviour– and neither do I, for that matter. Is that all?"

"Is that all?" Albus looked incredulous. "Miss Granger, Mr. Potter left the Dursleys against my direct orders for him to remain there over the holidays!"

"Well it's a pity that during the summer you have no legal right to demand anything of Harry." Granger said pointedly.

"No legal right? Harry has to stay at the Dursleys where the wards can protect him for his own safety!" Albus snapped.
"And he acknowledges your advice but politely declines and if you even try to imprison him again in Privet Drive we will be forced to take legal action." Granger's eyes were glinting with a vicious sort of victory.

"And can Mr. Potter speak for himself?" Minerva snapped. Granger raised an eyebrow.

"Why don't you ask him? It's not like he isn't standing right next to me." Minerva bristled at the mocking tone.

"I agree with everything Hermione said." Harry said quickly, seeing Minerva about to open her mouth and start arguing with Granger. Severus was almost disappointed– he enjoyed watching his student outwit the Deputy Headmistress.

"We shall be talking about this again, Mr. Potter, Miss Granger." Albus warned before turning to him. "Take them to their dormitories, Severus." He ordered.

"As you wish, headmaster." Severus sneered at the headmaster before spinning on his heel and striding out of the office, Harry and Granger on his heels. They walked in silence until they reached the entrance to the Slytherin common room which was enchanted to look like a stone wall. "I shall see you both tomorrow. The password is 'runespoor'. Now get to bed." He ordered them as the door appeared. They both nodded and Granger even had the audacity to salute him.

"Aye, aye, sir." She said, before ducking through the door and out of glaring range. Harry gave him a slightly sheepish look.

"See you tomorrow, sir."

"Just get to bed, Potter." Severus rolled his eyes at the boy before turning and making his way back to his office, where he had no doubt Albus would be waiting.

It was going to be a long night.

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Hermione's POV:

The bathroom was empty and quiet. Hermione had tried laying in her four-poster bed, forcing her lungs to work until the panic of being underground became too much, rising up in her throat to choke her, and she had to get out of the dungeons.

The girl’s loos where the Chamber of Secrets entrance was located was almost permanently out of order and Hermione didn’t have any issue slinking through the darkened of the corridors of Hogwarts. No patrolling professors could sneak up on her or catch her unawares, not when she was so hyperaware, when all her senses were trained on picking up the faint patter of footsteps, the quiet rustle of clothes and the soft, whispering sound of inhaling and exhaling. And Hermione had been hiding from grown men in shadows since she was six.

The ghost– Moaning Myrtle– wasn’t present, much to her relief. Locking the bathroom was easy, as was applying the necessary silencing charms. The old fashioned bathroom had a row of sinks, three toilet stalls and three shower stalls. The only source of light was through the window, the soft glow just barely lighting the empty room.

Hermione was shivering, teeth chattering in a way that had little to do with the cold and more to do with the knowledge of what was about to come. It felt like there was ice sliding through her veins
and, somewhat impulsively, she stepped into one of the shower stalls and turned on the hot water. She wasn’t sure if it would work, if it was out of order like everything else, but with only a slight rattling of piping hot water started pouring from the tarnished shower head.

Hermione sat on the floor of the stall, pulled her knees to her chin and squeezed her eyes tightly shut. She could feel the steaming water soaking through her pajamas, the burn of it centering her. Her hair was quickly plastered against her face, neck and back and she wrapped her arms around her legs and let her head fall down onto her knees.

Her skin was already stinging, the heat of the water now painful against her raw-feeling flesh, but the ice had thawed inside her so Hermione just sat there, letting the shower stream over her. The water couldn’t rinse away the memories, though. No matter how hot it was, no matter how long she sat under it, and Hermione let her nails dig into thighs as the pitiful dregs of her Occlumency patch-job washed away down the drain.

It was as horrible as it always was. Hermione wasn’t sure how long she stayed curled up at the bottom of the stall, only that by the time she unfolded from herself and turned off the water, her skin was raw and burning. Stumbling out of the stall felt almost like stepping into a freezer and she started shaking violently, teeth chattering hard enough it felt like they might shatter in her mouth.

She felt numb and broken and empty and heavy, so heavy. She remembered the spell to dry her pajamas but her hair hung wet and cold as she slipped through the empty corridors back down to the Slytherin dungeons. With her shields firmly in place once more, being underground no longer caused panic to steal the breath from her lungs. Her hair soaked straight through the thin material of her pillow but the exhaustion dragged Hermione under before it could bother her.

She dreamed of nothing.
Chapter XXII:

Harry's **POV:**

As usual, he and Hermione were some of the first to rise. Harry actually arrived in the common room before Hermione, which wasn't quite as usual, and his best friend's face looked wan with purple smudges under her eyes. She didn't say anything, though, so Harry didn't mention it either and together they made their way down to the Great Hall. Halfway down they ran into Argus Filch, the caretaker of Hogwarts and the one who'd taken care of Hermione's beloved tomcat, Iago, over the summer holidays while Hermione was staying at Privet Drive with him.

After an affectionate reunion between Hermione and Iago that Harry was pleased to note had made Hermione looking less tired and drawn, he led the way to the Great Hall rolling his eyes at his best friend who was making cooing noises with Iago draped over her shoulders like a scarf, purring loudly. Harry sort of liked the cat, but he was pretty sure Iago hated him– despite Hermione's claims that the opposite was true. If it was, then Iago must go by the old saying "love hurts" because he'd clawed the hell out of Harry on multiple occasions.

As usual, Snape was already handing out schedules and Harry examined his. "We've got Divination first," he told Hermione, "then after that Transfiguration then Care of Magical Creatures."

"At least our first class is a new subject." Hermione said. "Though I wish it was Arithmancy or Ancient Runes."

"You were the one who decided to do Divination," Harry reminded her, "I just copied your schedule."

"It should be interesting," she shrugged, "but not as intellectually stimulating as Ancient Runes and Arithmancy."

"Which means I'll probably like it the best." Harry muttered, under his breath, before making an 'ow' sound as Hermione elbowed him.

"Also," she added, leaning in so only he could hear her next words, "remember that prophecy Voldemort mentioned?" Harry nodded, pulling a face– that prophecy had been the reason his parents had been killed. "Well, I thought it would be a good idea to learn more about it." Hermione said quietly. "And about prophecies in general."

"That's pretty clever," Harry admitted, because he hadn't thought of that– though he tried not to think about the prophecy at all if he could.

"I just wish the spy had heard the whole thing from start to finish," Hermione said, frustrated. "Only knowing part of it makes me very nervous." Harry pulled another face, shuddering slightly. He hated the idea of some prophecy giving him a predestined fate– he hoped the Magical Oath he'd given Voldemort rendered the whole thing invalid; he refused to be a puppet, not even to destiny.
Hermione had fallen into a contemplative silence and Harry had almost finished his breakfast when Hagrid entered the Great Hall, dressed in a long moleskin overcoat and absentmindedly swinging a dead polecat from one enormous hand. "All righ'?" he said eagerly, pausing beside them on the way to the staff table. "Yer in my firs' ever lesson! Right after lunch! Bin up since five getting' everythin' ready... Hope it's okay... me, a teacher... hones'ly..." He grinned broadly at them and headed off to the staff table, still swinging the polecat.

"Whatever he's been getting ready, it can't be worse then Fluffy or Norbert- right?" Harry asked Hermione anxiously and she groaned.

"Dammit Harry, you just jinxed it you idiot!"

As the hall started to fill, more and more people coming up for breakfast before their first lesson of the day, Harry and Hermione returned to the Slytherin dormitories to get their things and flip through a book– Harry had 'Quidditch Through The Ages' while Hermione was re-reading their Arithmancy course-book– for a half hour before Hermione shut her book with a sigh and stood up.

"The Divination classroom is at the top of the North Tower," she said, "we probably ought to get going– it's going to take us about fifteen minutes to get there." Harry stood up too, slinging his book-bag over his shoulder and they headed off to their first class of the school year.

The journey through the castle to North Tower was a long one. Two years at Hogwarts hadn't taught them everything about the castle and neither of them had ever been inside the North Tower before. Finally, at the end of a long hall, they approached a narrow spiral staircase and climbed, proceeding to get dizzier and dizzier until they climbed the last few steps and emerged onto a tiny landing where most of the class was already assembled. There were no doors off this landing but there was a circular trapdoor above them with a brass plaque on it.

"Sibyll Trelawney, Divination teacher." Harry read, "How're we supposed to get up there?" As though in answer to his question, the trapdoor suddenly opened and a silver ladder descended right at Harry's feet. Hermione made a face– heights, Harry knew, wasn't her thing; or rather, it wasn't the heights, exactly, but the fear of falling.

"After you." His best friend gestured at the ladder and Harry cautiously climbed up first and emerged in the strangest-looking classroom he had ever seen. In fact, it didn't look like a classroom at all, more like a cross between someone's attic and an old-fashioned teashop.

He and Hermione quickly made their way to a table situated in the middle of the room as the rest of the class climbed up the ladder, all talking in loud whispers.

"Where is she?" Ron Weasley asked loudly causing Hermione tensed up beside him and Harry couldn't help the scowl that crossed his face at the sound of the redhead's voice. Ron Weasley had been responsible for nearly killing him last year when he and his brothers blamed him for their sister's death and Dumbledore had refused to expel them, saying that losing their sister was punishment enough. In Harry's opinion, it definitely wasn't– and it was an opinion that Hermione shared.

"Welcome," a soft, misty sort of voice interrupted his thoughts, causing him to look up to the front of the classroom and at the professor now standing there. "How nice to see you in the physical world at last."

His immediate impression of Professor Trelawney was that of a large, glittering insect. She was very thin, draped in a gauzy, spangled shaw and her large glasses magnified her eyes to several times their natural size. Innumerable chains and beads hung around her spindly neck and her arms
and hands were encrusted with bangles and rings.

Harry listened to her welcoming speech, unable to help but feel doubtful. It all sounded a bit fantastical, even in a world of magic. This term they would be "devoted" to reading the tea leaves after which they'd study palmistry, followed by the progression to the crystal ball in second term.

After spouting a lot of Muggle fortune-telling sort of predictions, the Trelawney instructed them to divide into pairs and collect tea cups which she then filled. They were to then sit down and drink the tea until only the dregs remained—Blaise audibly complaining about the "atrociously cheap" flavour of it as he did so— and then hand the cup to their partner to read and interpret the patterns using pages five and six of their textbook 'Unfogging the Future'.

Harry drank his scalding tea quickly—Blaise was right, it was awful—and swilled the dregs around as Trelawney had instructed before draining the cup and swapping over with Hermione.

"Well? Am I going to win the lottery?" She asked sarcastically and Harry grinned as they both opened their books at pages five and six.

"Dunno. All I can see is a load of soggy brown stuff."

"Well you've obviously been gifted with the Sight." Hermione said, her mouth twitching, and Harry grimaced slightly—the heavily perfumed smoke in the room was making him feel sleepy and stupid.

"Broaden your minds, my dears, and allow your eyes to see past the mundane!" Trelawney cried through the gloom and Harry tried to pull himself together.

"Right, well, that kind of looks like a diamond which means you will be gratified by a sum of money—maybe you should buy that lottery ticket after all." He joked weakly and Hermione rolled her eyes.

"I'll keep that in mind." She said, before peering into his teacup and making a face. "Well that could be a hammer which is triumph over adversary," she turned the teacup the other way, "and that looks like a wonky cross which means you're going to go through trials and suffering—you know, the usual." Harry had to stifle his laughter and Hermione smirked before returning to the teacup. "And there's something here," she turned the cup again, "that looks like some kind of four legged animal. Since it's you we're talking about, it's probably an ass."

Harry wasn't quite as successful in stifling his laughter this time and Trelawney whirled around as he let out a loud snort.

"Let me see that, my dear," she said reprovingly to Hermione, sweeping over and snatching Harry's cup from her. Hermione's eyes narrowed dangerously and everyone went quiet to watch the inevitable Hermione versus Trelawney—nobody snatched something off Hermione Granger and Harry was already feeling a bit sympathetic towards Trelawney as he settled back in his seat and wondered if Hermione would end up making their new professor cry.

Trelawney, currently, was staring into his teacup and rotating it counter-clockwise. "The falcon...my dear, you have a deadly enemy." She said, in her misty voice.

"Everyone knows that." Hermione scoffed. When Trelawney stared at her, Hermione arched an eyebrow and stared right back, her gaze challenging. Wisely choosing not to reply, Trelawney lowered her huge eyes to Harry's cup again and continued to turn it. "The club...an attack. Dear, dear, this is not a happy cup. The skull...danger in your path, my dear."
Everyone barring Hermione was staring, transfixed, at Trelawney, who gave the cup a final turn and let out a small scream. Harry's Seeker instincts had him grabbing the cup the professor dropped before he watched with a kind of morbid fascination as Trelawney sank into a vacant armchair, her flittering hand at her heart and her eyes closed.

"My dear boy... my poor, dear boy... no... it is kinder not to say... no... don't ask me..."

"What is it?" Ron Weasley asked at once. Everyone had got to their feet and crowded around Harry and Hermione's table, starting to press close to get a good look at Harry's cup before Hermione shot them a withering glare that had everyone taking several very hasty steps back.

"My dear," Trelawney's huge eyes opened dramatically, "you have the Grim!"

"The what?" Harry asked. He could tell he wasn't the only one who didn't understand but most of the class had clapped their hands to their mouths in horror.

"The Grim, my dear, the Grim!" cried Trelawney, who looked shocked that Harry hadn't understood. "The giant, spectral dog that haunts churchyards! My dear boy, it is an omen- the worst omen- of death!"

Harry's stomach lurched and one of the Gryffindor girls let out a small shriek. Everyone was looking at Harry with wide eyes, everyone except Hermione who had slid the cup back across the table so she could take a look inside. "I don't think it looks like a Grim," she said flatly and Trelawney surveyed Hermione with mounting dislike.

"You'll forgive me for saying so, my dear, but I perceive very little aura around you. Very little receptivity to the resonances of the future."

"Then you're wrong twice, Professor." Hermione said, with a saccharine smile.

"Wrong?" Trelawney looked puzzled.

"Yes, twice." Hermione's voice was dripping with sweetness. "First, I don't forgive you. And second, that's not a Grim at all- it's a dog and its position at the top of the cup is a favourable sign of faithful friends." Trelawney blinked at Hermione, her mouth hanging open slightly as if she was unable to process what Hermione had just said. Hermione smirked. "My, my, what sort of Seer are you if you didn't see that coming?" she taunted the woman.

"I think we will leave the lesson here for today," said Professor Trelawney after a long pause, purposefully looking away from Hermione. "Yes... please pack away your things..."

Hermione snorted and stood straight up, not bothering to take her teacup back to Trelawney before packing her book back into her satchel and descending down the ladder without even waiting for Trelawney to dismiss the class. With an internal shrug, Harry followed after her.

"Well that was a load of crap." Hermione commented once they'd reached the bottom of the spiralling staircase.

"When did you read up about the dog thing, anyway?" he asked her and she grinned at him.

"I memorized the course-book." She said, before pulling a face. "Wouldn't have bothered if I knew the class was going to be such a waste of time."

Leaving the North Tower proved to be just as difficult as finding it in the first place and they ended up taking so long to find the Transfiguration classroom that, early as they had left Divination, they
were only just in time for class to start. Harry chose a seat near the middle of the room and worked on ignoring the way the rest of the class kept shooting furtive glances at him as though he might drop dead at any moment. Hermione kept snickering at him.

He concentrated on the lecture Professor McGonagall was giving them about Animagi, only half interested to watch as she transformed herself in front of their eyes into a tabby cat with spectacle marking around her eyes. Hermione's form, he decided, was much prettier.

He still gave a polite clap as she transformed back but he was one of the only ones and McGonagall noticed. "Really, what has got into you all today?" she said, turning back into herself with a faint pop and staring around at them all. "Not that it matters, but that's the first time my transformation's not got applause from a class."

"Oh yes, it doesn't matter one bit." Hermione whispered mockingly and Harry had to fight the urge to grin, even as everybody's heads turned towards him in response to the teacher's question. "Oh honestly," Hermione snorted before speaking up, her voice thick with sarcasm. "We've just had our first Divination lesson and Professor Trelawney dazzled us with her incredible gift by reading the clump of tea dregs in Harry's teacup and informing us he is going to die."

It really went to show how much McGonagall apparently didn't like Trelawney that she didn't once tell Hermione off for mocking another professor— in fact, she didn't even scowl at Hermione like she usually did, instead there was a rare glint of approval visible on her face before she turned to fix her eyes on him. "I believe you should all know, then, that Sibyll Trelawney has predicted the death of one student a year since she arrived at this school. None of them has died yet. Seeing death omens is her favourite way of greeting a new class. If it were not for the fact that I never speak ill of my colleagues—"}

McGonagall broke off and Harry saw that her nostrils had gone white. She took a moment before she went on, speaking more calmly. "Divination is one of the most imprecise branches of magic. I shall not conceal from you that I have very little patience with it. True Seers are very rare, and Professor Trelawney—" she stopped again and then said, in a very matter-of-fact tone, "You look in excellent health to me, Mr. Potter, so you will excuse me if I don't let you off homework today. I assure you that if you die, you need not hand it in."

Hermione leaned back in her chair, expression equally as mocking as it danced over the class who all looked less... well, less like they were expecting him to drop dead any second.

When the Transfiguration class had finished, they joined the crowd thundering toward the Great Hall for lunch. Unfortunately, Ron Weasley stopped ahead of them, an ugly sneer on his face. "You'll be dead soon Potter! My Uncle saw a Grim and he died twenty-four hours later– how long do you think you have? In my opinion, the sooner you drop dead the better!"

"And that's why no one asks for your opinion, Weasley." Harry told Weasley with a look of disgust on his face.

"You never know, Harry— with one less Weasley around now, he has got more room to talk." Hermione's amused comment was vicious and Weasley looked furious at the reference to his dead sister.

"You bitch!" he shouted, apparently too overcome in his fury to even think of using magic and instead just lunging at Hermione.

"MR. WEASLEY!" shouted McGonagall, appearing just as Hermione neatly sidestepped the furious redhead then stuck out her foot so he went stumbling, arms waving around wildly, before
he fell on his face right at McGonagall's feet. "Five points from Gryffindor for that outrageous show of behaviour!" The professor snapped.

"She— that bitch— how dare she—!"

"Oh do shut up, Weasley." Hermione drawled as the Gryffindor sputtered incoherently, his face red with rage. "Let's go, Harry." She added and Harry linked arms with her, letting her cut a path through the students.

"That was great." Blaise snickered as they all sat down at the Slytherin table.

"Which part? With the bug-eyed fraud or with Weasley?" Hermione looked very satisfied with herself, not unlike the cat who'd caught the canary.

"Both." Theo said, at the same time as Draco said,

"Weasley." And Blaise said,

"Bug-eyes."

"You're on a roll today." Harry told Hermione who laughed, leaning into him slightly as he slung an arm around her waist.

"What does that mean?" Theo asked, looking confused by the Muggle saying. Harry and Hermione just exchanged exasperated looks.

"Never mind." He said, at the same time as she replied,

"Figure it out, geniuses."

Harry was pleased to get out of the castle after lunch. Yesterday's rain had cleared; the sky was a clear, pale grey and the grass was springy and damp underfoot as they set off for their first ever Care of Magical Creatures class.

Hagrid was waiting for his class at the door of his hut where he stood in his moleskin overcoat with Fang the boarhound at his heels, looking impatient to start. "C'mon, now, get a move on!" he called as the class approached. "Got a real treat for yeh today! Great lesson comin' up! Everyone here? Right, follow me!"

For a horrible moment, Harry thought that Hagrid was going to lead them into the Forbidden Forest— going by the look on Hermione's face she had too— but instead Hagrid strolled off around the edge of the trees and, five minutes later, they found themselves outside a kind of paddock. There was nothing in there. "Everyone gather 'round the fence here!" Hagrid called. "That's it— make sure yeh can see— now, firs' thing yeh'll want ter do is open yer books—"

"How?" drawled Draco.

"EH?" said Hagrid, looking puzzled. Hermione looked like she was trying not to laugh and Harry elbowed her.

"How do we open our books?" Draco repeated. He took out his copy of 'The Monster Book of Monsters', which he had bound shut with a length of rope. Other people took theirs out too; some, like Harry, had belted their book shut; others had crammed them inside tight bags or clamped them together with binder clips.
"Hasn’– hasn' anyone bin able ter open their books?" asked Hagrid, looking crestfallen. The class all shook their heads. "Yeh've got ter stroke 'em," he said, as though this was the most obvious thing in the world. "Look–"

He took Hermione's copy and ripped off the Spellotape that bound it. The book tried to bite but Hagrid ran a giant forefinger down its spine and it shivered then fell open and lay quiet in his hand. "Oh, how silly we've all been!" Pansy sniped. "We should have stroked them! Why didn't we guess!"

"I– I thought they were funny," Hagrid said uncertainly to him.

"Oh, tremendously funny!" Pansy sneered. "Really witty, giving us books that try and rip our hands off!"

"Shut up, Pansy!" Hermione snarled, and Pansy wisely stopped talking and eyed Hermione nervously as Hermione gave her a dark glare that promised pain– and lots of it– if the girl kept talking.

"I think they're great," Harry lied to Hagrid, an encouraging smile on his face. "They're like practice for the real magical creatures we'll be learning about– you need to know how to approach them all differently, just like you need to stroke the book's spine."

"Righ' you are, Harry," Hagrid said, instantly seeming to brighten up again, a wide smile returning to his face. "Five points ter Slyth'rin for workin' it out!" Harry grinned back at Hagrid who beamed at the class again. "Righ' then," he said, "yeh've got yer books so now yeh need the Magical Creatures– wait here an' I'll go get 'em."

He strode away from them into the forest, whistling happily as he turned out of sight. A few people looked like they were going to say something but a withering glare from Hermione had them all staying silent.

"Ooooooooh!" squealed Brown suddenly, pointing toward the opposite side of the paddock. Trotting toward them were a dozen of the most bizarre creatures Harry had ever seen– they had the bodies, hind legs and tails of horses, but the front legs, wings and heads of what seemed to be giant eagles, with cruel, steel-colored beaks and large, brilliantly orange eyes. The talons on their front legs were half a foot long and deadly looking.

Each of the beasts had a thick leather collar around its neck which was attached to a long chain and the ends of all of these were held in the vast hands of Hagrid, who came jogging into the paddock behind the creatures.

"Gee up, there!" he roared, shaking the chains and urging the creatures toward the fence where the class stood. Everyone drew back slightly as Hagrid reached them and tethered the creatures to the fence. "Hippogriffs!" Hagrid roared happily, waving a hand at them. "Beau'iful, aren' they?"

Harry could sort of see what Hagrid meant. Once you got over the first shock of seeing something that was half horse and half bird, you started to appreciate the hippogriffs’ gleaming coats, changing smoothly from feather to hair and each of them a different color: stormy gray, bronze, pinkish roan, gleaming chestnut, and inky black.

"So," said Hagrid, rubbing his hands together and beaming around, "if yeh wan' ter come a bit nearer–"

No one seemed to want to, but Harry approached the fence cautiously and he heard Hermione sigh
in exasperation but she followed him. "Now, firs' thing yeh gotta know abou' hippogriffs is, they're proud," said Hagrid. "Easily offended, they are. Don't never insult one, 'cause it might be the last thing yeh do. Yeh always wait fer the hippogriff ter make the firs' move," he continued. "It's polite, see? Yeh walk toward him, and yeh bow, an' yeh wait. If he bows back, yeh're allowed ter touch him. If he doesn' bow, then get away from him sharpish, 'cause those talons hurt. Right– who wants ter go first?"

Most of the class backed farther away in answer. Even Harry had misgivings– the hippogriffs were tossing their fierce heads and flexing their powerful wings; they didn't seem to like being tethered like this. "No one?" said Hagrid, with a pleading look.

"I'll do it," said Harry. There was an intake of breath from behind him as he climbed over the paddock fence and he heard Hermione swear under her breath.

"Good man, Harry!" roared Hagrid. "Right then– let's see how yeh get on with Buckbeak." He untied one of the chains, pulling the gray hippogriff away from its fellows and slipping off its leather collar. The class on the other side of the paddock seemed to be holding its breath– Harry was holding his breath too. "Easy now, Harry," said Hagrid quietly. "Yeh've got eye contact, now try not ter blink.... Hippogriffs don' trust yeh if yeh blink too much...."

Harry's eyes immediately began to water but he didn't dare shut them. Buckbeak had turned his great, sharp head and was staring at him with one fierce orange eye. "Tha's it," said Hagrid. "Tha's it, Harry... now, bow."

Harry didn't feel much like exposing the back of his neck to Buckbeak but he did as he was told and gave a deep, albeit quick and jerky, bow and then looked back up. The hippogriff was still staring haughtily at him. It didn't move. "Ah," said Hagrid, sounding worried. "Right– back away, now, Harry, easy does it– "

But then, to Harry's enormous surprise, the hippogriff suddenly bent its scaly front knees and sank into what was an unmistakable bow. "Well done, Harry!" said Hagrid, ecstatic. "Right– yeh can touch him now! Pat his beak, go on!"

Feeling that a better reward would have been to back away, Harry moved slowly toward the hippogriff and reached out toward it. He patted the beak several times and the hippogriff closed its eyes lazily as though enjoying it. The class broke into applause, all except for Weasley and his lot who were looking deeply disappointed.

"Righ' then, Harry," said Hagrid cheerfully. "I reckon he might' let yeh ride him!"

This was more than Harry had bargained for. He was used to a broomstick; but he wasn't sure a hippogriff would be quite the same– but for Hagrid, he gritted his teeth and nodded and the large man beamed at him. "Yeh climb up there, jus' behind the wing joint," Hagrid instructed, "an' mind yeh don' pull any of his feathers out, he won' like that...."

Harry put his foot on the top of Buckbeak's wing and hoisted himself onto his back. Buckbeak stood up and Harry wasn't sure where to hold on; everything in front of him was covered with feathers. "Go on, then!" roared Hagrid, slapping the hippogriffs hindquarters.

Without warning, twelve-foot wings flapped open on either side of Harry and he just had time to seize the hippogriff around the neck before he was soaring upward. It was nothing like a broomstick and Harry immediately knew which one he preferred– the hippogriff's wings beat uncomfortably on either side of him, catching him under his legs and making him feel he was about to be thrown off; the glossy feathers slipped under his fingers and he didn't dare get a
stronger grip; instead of the smooth action of his *Nimbus Two Thousand and One*, he now felt himself rocking backward and forward as the hindquarters of the hippogriff rose and fell with its wings.

Buckbeak flew him once around the paddock and then headed back to the ground; this was the bit Harry had been dreading and he leaned back as the smooth neck lowered, feeling he was going to slip off over the beak, then felt a heavy thud as the four ill-assorted feet hit the ground. He just managed to hold on and push himself straight again.

"Good work, Harry!" roared Hagrid. "Okay, who else wants a go?" Emboldened by Harry's success, the rest of the class climbed cautiously into the paddock. Hagrid untied the hippogriffs one by one and soon people were bowing nervously all over the paddock. Longbottom ran repeatedly backward from his, which didn't seem to want to bend its knees, and Hermione was tickling under the chestnut's chin as it let out crooning, chirping noises, having long since bowed. Hermione was actually smiling and Harry was reminded of her saying, back in their first year, how she'd always liked animals better then humans— animals weren't cruel, not like people were. As he watched, his best friend leaned in to kiss the hippogriff's beak which it rubbed affectionately against her cheek.

Draco, Vince, and Greg had taken over Buckbeak. The hippogriff had bowed stiffly to Draco who was now patting his beak, looking disdainful. "This is very easy," Draco grumbled, "I bet you're not dangerous at all, are you?" he said to the hippogriff. "Are you, you great ugly brute?"

It happened in a flash of steely talons; Draco let out a high-pitched scream and next moment, Hagrid was wrestling Buckbeak back into his collar as he strained to get at Draco who lay curled in the grass, blood blossoming over his robes. Harry's stomach lurched, fear for his friend rushing through him.

"I'm dying!" Draco yelled as the class panicked. "I'm dying, look at me! It's killed me!" Hermione was kneeling at Draco's side in a flash, forcing the blond's hand away from the wound. Hagrid, who had gone very white, leaned over above her.

"He'll fine," Hermione reassured the large man and Harry let out a sigh of relief that was echoed by Hagrid.

"I'm dying!" Draco wailed again and Hermione slapped the side of his face causing him to promptly shut up and stare at her in shock.

"Shut up," she ordered him briskly. "It's just a little cut and if you keep carrying on like a child you'll just work yourself up into a right state, so calm the fuck down!"

Draco shut his mouth with a click and looked very much like he was pouting.

"Honestly," Hermione muttered as he gestured for Hagrid to pick him up which Hagrid did easily, "I've been stitching up deeper cuts then that since I was seven and I swear I never complained half as much."

Harry winced slightly, mouth turning down– he hated hearing about how Hermione had suffered in the past, though he comforted himself with the fact she didn't have to live like that anymore.

"Harry, you deal with this—" Hermione gestured to the class as she wiped her bloodied hands on her robes. "Hagrid, let's go."

Harry felt himself smile slightly, despite the gravity of the situation– Hermione keeping a cool
head in an 'emergency' and taking charge was so typical of her and no one had even tried to protest.

"Right," he said, as everyone turned to him. "Class dismissed?" Blaise snorted but everyone just went along with it. Harry hung back and eyed the hippogriffs, Theo and Blaise staying with him. "I think we're going to have to figure out how to get their collars back on." He said glumly.

"You mean you have to figure it out," corrected Blaise with a smirk. "Hermione ordered you to deal with it, remember?"

"Yeah," Harry said, smirking right back. "And since she put me in charge, I'm ordering you to get off your lazy arse and help me."

Theo just laughed.

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Hermione's POV:

Hermione had to walk swiftly to keep pace with Hagrid's strides as he carried Draco through the school and to the Hospital Wing. Madam Pomfrey, of course, didn't have any difficulty healing the blond and Hermione ordered Hagrid to go make sure Harry hadn't accidentally released all the hippogriffs, patting his arm briskly and waiting for him to leave before she settled down on the seat next to Draco's bed.

"What did you mean by 'stitching up' cuts?" Draco asked, looking puzzled.

"Muggles don't have potions, remember?" Hermione said, reaching over to tap the white bandage wrapped around Draco's forearm. Underneath the bandage, there was only a thick pink line left where only ten minutes previously there had been a jagged wound. "If a cut is deep enough, they have to use thread to hold the skin together while it heals."

"Thread?" Draco asked, horrified. "Like for robes? Do they actually use needles to sew skin together?"

"Usually it's done by doctors– Healers– with a special drug that's injected into the skin that numbs the area," Hermione explained. "A drug is sort of like a potion," she added, seeing Draco's confusion at the term. "I... did not have access to any doctors," she admitted, "which meant when I was injured I had to do it myself, or have a friend do it, without the drug." Draco looked at her with wide eyes as she showed him her palm. Scars criss-crossed the surface, some looking older then others. "See that one?" she said, tapping one of the thicker scars. "I was seven, I think, when I did that– can you see the little white spots along the scar?"

Draco peered closer and nodded. "That's where–?"

"That's where it was stitched together," she confirmed. Draco looked up at her with wide eyes.

"Didn't it hurt?" He demanded and she laughed.

"God yes– but my friend told me to suck it up and shut the fuck up before I gave him a headache with my bratty little princess whining." Draco frowned.

"He doesn't sound like a good friend," he said.
"Where I lived, there was no room to be soft," Hermione told him. "We've led very different childhoods, Draco– I needed to be tougher, needed to be harder, if I wanted to survive. Making sure I'd be able to survive was more important than cuts and bruises. Sting was harsh with me because the world can be a harsh place to live in and I needed to learn to be harsh to stay alive– tears are useless and so is complaining; if you're hurt then you're hurt, nothing you do will change that so you just have to grit your teeth and carry on."

"That sounds..." Draco trailed off, not seeming to know how to finish his sentence. "I'm sorry you had to grow up like that." He said, after a moment. "That– that's not fair. You shouldn't have had to. Nobody should."

Hermione blinked, looking at Draco in surprise. That had been shockingly insightful for the blond. "Thank you," she said. "But life isn't fair and that's just the way it is. I can either be angry and mad about it or just accept it and make the best with what I've got."

"I'm not going to try and get Hagrid fired, you know," Draco said, his cheeks going a bit pink. "I wouldn't do that to you and Harry. You're my friends and I know you're fond of him– well, Harry's fond of him and you're fond of Harry."

"Oh," Hermione said, surprised. "Thank you. I thought I was going to have to threaten you– no, I'm joking. Will your father let it go, though?"

"Oh," Draco said, frowning. "Probably not. I could talk him out of going after Hagrid, but he'll want the hippogriff to be put down at the very least."

"Could we possibly go about that in a way that is slightly less official way?" She asked. "I'd rather the authorities weren't alerted to the... incident."

"Less official way?" Draco asked, confused.

"The hippogriff will still be put down but we could just not involve the Ministry."

"I'm still confused." Draco grumbled. "How can we not involve the Ministry?"

"Because I'll kill the bloody pigeon," Hermione said, exasperated. "Honestly, Draco. I should ask Madam Pomfrey to check you for brain damage because that was a sensational impersonation of a Gryffindor."

"It's the blood loss!" Draco exclaimed, looking outraged. "I'm not even slightly like a Gryffindor! Wait– did you say you were going to kill it?"

"You're the one who thinks Harry and I opened the Chamber of Secrets," she pointed out, "following that logic, why on earth wouldn't I be capable of dealing with the hippogriff?"

"So you're not denying it?" Draco asked, eagerly. "You really did open the Chamber?"

"For fuck's sake," she muttered. "No, Draco, that wasn't a confession of guilt. Yes, Draco, I am saying I'll kill it. Will that satisfy your father and stop him from going after Hagrid and getting the Ministry involved?"

"I'll make sure of it," Draco said, determinedly.

"Thanks." Hermione told him and she meant it.

Now she just had to go kill a hippogriff.
When Hermione rejoined Harry later in the Great Hall for dinner, he was looking anxiously up at the staff table. "They won't fire Hagrid, will they?" he asked her, his face pale.

"Don't worry, I sorted it out with Draco." She told him, "he said he's not going to try and get Hagrid fired and he said he'll make sure his father doesn't either." Harry let out a sigh of relief.

"How did you convince him to do that?" he asked.

"I didn't have to ask Draco anything," Hermione said, "he knows you like Hagrid. We had to figure out a way to appease his father so Lucius wouldn't try kicking up a fuss regardless but we sorted that out."

"You did? How?" Harry asked with a frown.

"You don't want to know." She said dryly and he immediately looked concerned.

"What did you sort out?" he demanded.

"Harry, relax." She sighed. "Honestly. We just skipped the official process that would have been involved regardless and went straight to the inevitable conclusion."

"And that inevitable conclusion is?" Harry prompted. Hermione fought the urge to roll her eyes.

"Fine, don't say I didn't warn you– if Lucius had kicked up a fuss the hippogriff would have had to be executed, so I... expedited the execution."

"You... killed Buckbeak?" Harry asked, eyes almost comically wide.

"It was Hagrid or the hippogriff, Harry. I chose Hagrid." She told him with a shrug. "I stand by my reasons– I dealt with it before coming to dinner. Hagrid's job is safe and there's going to be no messy paperwork and legal proceedings."

Harry was looking a bit stunned but he nodded. "Thanks. For doing that." He told her, in a quiet voice. "I know how much you don't like, you know, hurting animals, but... you saved Hagrid's job. So thank you." Hermione smiled at him and squeezed his hand.

"Anything for you, Harry." She said. And she meant it.

The next day, she and Harry went down to visit Hagrid who was inconsolable, the half giant having been the one to find a decapitated Buckbeak. "An' 'is head's still missin'!" Hagrid howled, tears leaking down his face and into his beard while Harry tried to comfort him– Hermione wasn't that good at comforting people, which wasn't surprising considering Sting was more likely to tell her to "suck it up and shut the fuck up" then pass on any sympathy. Harry was much better at it then her.

"At least Draco said he wouldn't complain, Hagrid." She said 'encouragingly' while mentally counting down how much longer they'd have to spend here before they could claim they had a class they had to get to. "He admits that it's his fault for not listening to your warning about them being proud creatures and as long as you don't give him detention or take points for disturbing class and ignoring a professor then he won't make a complaint."
Hagrid nodded, sniffed again and blew his nose noisily on a handkerchief the size of a tablecloth.

"Yer a good girl, Hermione." He said emotionally, patting her back hard enough to pitch her forwards, almost into her tea.

Hermione bit back a snort, darkly amused by the thought of what Hagrid would think of her if he knew the truth about the demise of two of his beloved pets, Buckbeak and Norbert.

"Draco said he'll spread around the story that one of the older Slytherins killed the hippogriff to get in good with his father," she told Harry later, when they finally got to head back up to the castle. "Because everyone "knows" that he won't complain because he knows how much you like Hagrid. The teachers will get wind of the story before the end of the day, and everything will be settled."

"Let's just hope Hagrid starts off smaller next lesson." Harry sighed.
Part Three: The Prisoner of Azkaban - Chapter XXIII

Chapter XXIII:

Hermione's POV:

Potions was their first class of the day and the Slytherins all spent the morning gaining a great deal of amusement out of Snape ordering Weasley to prepare all of Draco's ingredients due to Draco's 'injury'. It was when they were exiting the classroom that she and Harry overheard two Gryffindors talking excitedly about a nearby sighting of Sirius Black. They'd both exchanged looks at this and Hermione's heart ached at her best friend's torn expression.

After Potions was lunch and then their first Defense Against the Dark Arts with their new professor. Professor Lupin wasn't there when they arrived at the classroom so she and Harry just found some seats and took out their books, quills and parchment. The whole class was present when Lupin finally entered the room.

"Good afternoon," he said. "Would you please put all your books back in your bags. Today's will be a practical lesson. You will need only your wands."

A few curious looks were exchanged as the class put away their books. They had never had a practical Defense Against the Dark Arts before, unless you counted the memorable class last year when Lockhart had brought a cage full of pixies into the classroom and set them loose.

"Right then," said Professor Lupin, when everyone was ready. "If you'd follow me."

Puzzled but interested, the class got to its feet and followed Professor Lupin out of the classroom. He led them along the deserted corridor and around a corner where the first thing they saw was Peeves the Poltergeist, who was floating upside down in midair and stuffing the nearest keyhole with chewing gum.

Peeves didn't look up until Professor Lupin was two feet away; then he wiggled his curly-toed feet and broke into song. "Loony, loopy Lupin," Peeves sang. "Loony, loopy Lupin, loony, loopy Lupin--"

Rude and unmanageable as he almost always was, Peeves usually showed some respect toward the teachers. Everyone looked quickly at Professor Lupin to see how he would take this; to Hermione's slight surprise he was still smiling.

"I'd take that gum out of the keyhole if I were you, Peeves," Lupin said pleasantly. "Mr. Filch won't be able to get in to his brooms." Peeves paid no attention to his words except to blow a loud wet raspberry. Lupin gave a small sigh and took out his wand. "This is a useful little spell, he told the class over his shoulder. "Please watch closely."

With the force of a bullet, the wad of chewing gum shot out of the keyhole and straight down Peeves's left nostril. The poltergeist whirled upright and zoomed away, cursing. "Cool, sir!" said Dean Thomas in amazement.

"Thank you, Dean," said Lupin, putting his wand away again. "Shall we proceed?"
They set off again, most of the class looking at shabby Lupin with increased respect. Hermione was reserving her judgment.

Lupin led them down a second corridor and stopped, right outside the staffroom door. "Inside, please," he said, opening it and standing back.

The staffroom, a long, paneled room full of old, mismatched chairs, was empty except for one teacher. Snape was sitting in a low armchair, and he looked around as they all filed in. His eyes were glittering and there was a particularly nasty sneer playing around his mouth that Hermione made note of to practice later—she'd learned several very impressive scowls from Snape in the past.

As Lupin came in and made to close the door behind him, Snape said, "Leave it open, Lupin. I'd rather not witness this." He got to his feet and strode past the class, his black robes billowing behind him. At the doorway he turned on his heel and said, "Possibly no one's warned you, but this class contains Neville Longbottom. I would advise you not to entrust him with anything difficult."

Longbottom went scarlet and Hermione bit back an amused smile at the look of anger on the faces of the Gryffindors. Honestly, it wasn't as if any of them were actually friends with Longbottom.

Lupin had raised his eyebrows. "I was hoping that Neville would assist me with the first stage of the operation," he said, "and I am sure he will perform it admirably." Longbottom's face went, if possible, even redder. Snape's lip curled but he left, shutting the door with a snap. "Now, then," said Lupin, beckoning the class toward the end of the room where there was nothing but an old wardrobe where the teachers kept their spare robes. As Lupin went to stand next to it, the wardrobe gave a sudden wobble, banging off the wall. "Nothing to worry about," he said calmly because a few people had jumped backward in alarm. "There's a boggart in there."

Most people seemed to feel that this was something to worry about. Hermione frowned, remembering what she'd read about boggarts— they were amortal shape-shifting non-beings that took on the form of the viewer's worst fear.

Longbottom gave Lupin a look of pure terror and Harry turned to her confused and she mouthed 'later'.

"Boggarts like dark, enclosed spaces," said Lupin. "Wardrobes, the gap beneath beds, the cupboards under sinks— I've even met one that had lodged itself in a grandfather clock. This one moved in yesterday afternoon and I asked the headmaster if the staff would leave it to give my third years some practice. So, the first question we must ask ourselves is, what is a boggart?"

Patil answered the question. "It's a shape-shifter, sir," she said, a look of apprehension on her face. "It turns into what scares us most."

"Excellent," Lupin nodded at the Gryffindor in approval. "So the boggart sitting in the darkness within has not yet assumed a form. He does not yet know what will frighten the person on the other side of the door. Nobody knows what a boggart looks like when he is alone, but when I let him out he will immediately become whatever each of us most fears. This means," he said, apparently choosing to ignore Longbottom's sputter of terror, "that we have a huge advantage over the boggart before we begin. Have you spotted it, Harry?"

Beside her, Harry looked a little bit stunned at being called upon to answer the question. "Er— because there are so many of us, it won't know what shape it should be?" He said, after a moment.

"Precisely," said Lupin and she flashed a relieved Harry a quick smile. "It's always best to have company when you're dealing with a boggart." Lupin continued. "He becomes confused. Which
should he become, a headless corpse or a flesh-eating slug? I once saw a boggart make that very mistake—tried to frighten two people at once and turned himself into half a slug. Not remotely frightening.

"The charm that repels a boggart is simple, yet it requires force of mind. You see, the thing that really finishes a boggart is laughter. What you need to do is force it to assume a shape that you find amusing.

"We will practice the charm without wands first. After me, please ... Riddikulus!"

"Riddikulus!" said the class together.

"Good," said Lupin with a smile. "Very good. But that was the easy part, I'm afraid. You see, the word alone is not enough. And this is where you come in, Neville."

The wardrobe shook again, though not as much as Longbottom who walked forwards as though he were heading for the gallows. "Right, Neville," said Lupin. "First things first: what would you say is the thing that frightens you most in the world?" Longbottom's lips moved, but no noise came out. "Didn't catch that, Neville, sorry," said Lupin cheerfully.

Longbottom looked around rather wildly, as though begging someone to help him, then said, in barely more than a whisper, "Professor Snape."

Nearly everyone laughed. Even Longbottom grinned apologetically. Hermione traded amused looks with a snickering Harry. Lupin, however, looked thoughtful. "Professor Snape... hmmm... Neville, I believe you live with your grandmother?"

"Er– yes," said Longbottom nervously. "But– I don't want the boggart to turn into her either."

"No, no, you misunderstand me," said Lupin, now smiling. "I wonder, could you tell us what sort of clothes your grandmother usually wears?"

Longbottom looked startled, but said, "Well... always the same hat. A tall one with a stuffed vulture on top. And a long dress... green, normally... and sometimes a fox-fur scarf."

"And a handbag?" prompted Lupin.

"A big red one," said Longbottom.

"Right then," said Lupin. "Can you picture those clothes very clearly, Neville? Can you see them in your mind's eye?"

"Yes," said Longbottom uncertainty, plainly wondering what was coming next.

"When the boggart bursts out of this wardrobe, Neville, and sees you, it will assume the form of Professor Snape," said Lupin. "And you will raise your wand– thus– and cry 'Riddikulus' – and concentrate hard on your grandmother's clothes. If all goes well, the Boggart-Professor Snape will be forced into that vulture-topped hat, and that green dress, with that big red handbag." There was a great shout of laughter from the Gryffindors, but Hermione's lips tightened as she narrowed her eyes, not finding the idea of her Head of House being humiliated like that at all amusing.

"If Neville is successful, the boggart is likely to shift his attention to each of us in turn," said Lupin. "I would like all of you to take a moment now to think of the thing that scares you most, and imagine how you might force it to look comical...."
The room went quite and Hermione tried to think. Beside her, Harry shivered before quickly glancing around, most likely hoping that no one had noticed. Many people had their eyes shut tight. Ron Weasley was muttering loudly to himself. Hermione's lip curled.

"Everyone ready?" said Lupin.

Hermione felt a lurch of uncertainty. She wasn't ready. She had no idea what scared her the most, she couldn't pin-point one thing, not when she spent so much time pushing her fears to the back of her mind and repressing them, ensuring she never had to think about them. Could a boggart turn into a dark, enclosed space? Could it make her feel like she was falling? Hermione doubted it, which meant she honestly had no idea what it could turn into but she didn't want to ask for more time; everyone else was nodding and rolling up their sleeves. Well, everyone except for Harry who was trying to hide a look of desperation. She squeezed his hand, trying to both give comfort and receive it. He gave her a strained smile in response.

"Neville, we're going to back away," said Lupin. "Let you have a clear field, all right? I'll call the next person forward.... Everyone back, now, so Neville can get a clear shot--"

They all retreated, backed against the walls, leaving Longbottom alone beside the wardrobe. He looked pale and frightened, but he had pushed up the sleeves of his robes and was holding his wand ready. "On the count of three, Neville," said Lupin, who was pointing his own wand at the handle of the wardrobe. "One, two, three– now!"

A jet of sparks shot from the end of Lupin's wand and hit the doorknob. The wardrobe burst open. Expression menacing, her Head of House stepped out, his eyes flashing at Longbottom. Longbottom backed away, his wand up, mouthing wordlessly. Snape was bearing down upon him, reaching inside his robes. "R- r- riddikulus! " squeaked Longbottom.

There was a noise like a whip crack. Snape stumbled; he was wearing a long, lace-trimmed dress and a towering hat topped with a moth-eaten vulture, and he was swinging a huge crimson handbag. There was a roar of laughter from the Gryffindors and Hermione's jaw clenched. The boggart paused, confused, and Lupin shouted, "Parvati! Forward!"

Patil walked forward, her face set. Snape rounded on her. There was another crack, and where he had stood was a bloodstained, bandaged mummy; its sightless face was turned to Patil and it began to walk toward her very slowly, dragging its feet, its stiff arms rising–

"Riddikulus!" cried Patil. A bandage unraveled at the mummy's feet; it became entangled, fell face forward, and its head rolled off.

"Seamus!" roared Lupin. Finnegan darted past Patil. Crack! Where the mummy had been was a woman with floor-length black hair and a skeletal, green-tinged face– a banshee. She opened her mouth wide and an unearthly sound filled the room, a long, wailing shriek that made the hair on Hermione's head stand on end– "Riddikulus!" shouted Finnegan. The banshee made a rasping noise and clutched her throat; her voice was gone.

"Crack!" The banshee turned into a rat, which chased its tail in a circle, then- crack!- became a rattlesnake, which slithered and writhed before- crack!- becoming a single, bloody eyeball.

Hermione couldn't help but find herself disgusted– these were her classmates biggest fears? Pathetic. They wouldn't know real fear if it slapped then across the face.

"It's confused!" shouted Lupin. "We're getting there! Dean!"
Thomas hurried forward. Crack! The eyeball became a severed hand, which flipped over and began to creep along the floor like a crab. "Riddikulus!" yelled Thomas. There was a snap, and the hand was trapped in a mousetrap.

The only people with actual, genuine fears in their class were two of her fellow Slytherins, Blaise and Tracey. Blaise's boggart had turned into a beautiful woman dressed all in black with a veil covering her face. She was clutching a framed photograph in her hands, both clad in black silk gloves—a photograph of Blaise's face.

Adrienne Zabini, the Black Widow. Blaise's mother. She had six dead husbands—and Hermione felt a twinge of sympathy as she realised there was a part of Blaise that apparently feared one day he would be her next victim. With a 'Riddikulus' Blaise had changed his mother's mourning clothes into a wedding dress. Hermione didn't understand why it was amusing but Blaise had let out a bark of laughter, and apparently that had been enough.

Tracey's fear was an Auror. Hermione, thinking of Tracey's knowledge of nasty, questionable curses and her gifts of books on Grey Arts, didn't have to wonder just why her fellow Slytherin was so afraid of law enforcement. Tracey's 'Riddikulus' had set the Auror on fire—Hermione had laughed, but most of the class had been too shocked.

Hermione waited impatiently for her own turn, nervous anticipation building up inside her until there was only Weasley left before her and Harry.

"Excellent! Ron, you next!" Lupin called out and Weasley leapt forward. Crack! Quite a few people screamed. An Acromantula, six feet tall and covered in hair, was advancing on Weasley, clicking its pincers menacingly. For an entertaining moment, she thought Weasley had frozen and wondered if boggarts actually tried to kill people, Lupin hadn't said. Before she could find out if the Acromantula would actually attack, though—

"Riddikulus!" bellowed Weasley and the spider's legs vanished. She had a moment of disappointment and then it rolled over and over until it came to a halt at Harry's feet, to her left. Harry raised his wand, ready, but—

"Here!" shouted Lupin suddenly, hurrying forward. Crack! The legless spider had vanished. For a second everyone looked wildly around to see where it was. Then they saw a silvery-white orb hanging in the air. Annoyance flared through her as Lupin raised his wand.

"Excuse me!" She spoke up sharply, drawing the class's attention. "You skipped Harry and I." Lupin looked awkward, though half of his attention was fixed on the silvery white orb. "There's enough time." She added when it looked like he was searching for some sort of excuse. She might not want to face her fear but if she ever found herself up against a boggart she fully intended on knowing how to deal with it—that's what the class was for, after all, learning how to defend themselves.

"Very well," Lupin's voice was reluctant. "You first, Hermione." Equals parts triumphant and nervous, she stepped in front of the professor and Crack!

It was Harry; Harry's body, sprawled on the ground, his bright green eyes dull and glassy. The pale skin of his neck was marred with violent, purple-black hand-shaped bruises; identical to the ones she'd seen on her—

Hermione's vision blurred for a moment and she couldn't breathe around the ice in her lungs. "R-Riddikulus!" she choked out, but her voice was strange and cracked; like it splintered and been put back together all wrong. There was another crack and the class gasped, most letting out cries of
shock and horror as Hermione's whole body seized up and her throat made a dry keening sound. Lying before them all was the corpse of a small girl. She was naked, curled up on the floor like a baby kitten and her long red hair made her look almost like she was lying in a pool of blood. Her tiny body was mottled with bruises, including a ring of dark purple ones around her small neck that were shaped like fingers. Her little face was battered and bloody, there was blood and semen streaked down her inner thighs and—

"R-Riddikulus!" Panic had slammed into her in full force; it was like she'd hit her head, she couldn't focus and the world was blurred and now it was Tom's body there, laying spread-eagled on the staff-room floor, eyes blank and unseeing. "Fuck this!" She hissed between her teeth, a sudden, terrible rage filling her. If anyone hurt Harry or Tom she'd rip them to pieces—there wouldn't be enough of them to fit in a match box once she was done. Anger gave her strength, the way it always had, and this time her voice was strong and clear. "RIDDIKULUS!" Life flowed back into Tom's body, causing 'him' to stand up, alive and healthy, and blow the room a kiss. The action was so unlike Tom that she couldn't help her burst of laughter, though the sound edged closer to hysteria then humour.

Someone touched her shoulder and she flinched, wrenching herself out of their grip. Her heart racing a million miles an hour, Hermione sucked in a breath, then another and another, not breathing out until it hurt, and then everything reassembled itself around her, the blurriness in her vision receding as the world swam back into focus.

"I'm fine," she said, before anyone could ask. "I'm fine." She wasn't fine. She was rumpled, sweat-soaked, wild-eyed and shaking, but she glared so fiercely at everyone in the room that no one could meet her eye and not even Lupin protested her words. She glanced over at the professor as she stepped back, letting Harry take her place. Lupin's face was pale, sick, his eyes horrified as they met hers and she couldn't breathe properly again, neither of them looking away until— a loud crack and the lamps around the staffroom flickered and went out.

Hermione turned her head back around so quickly she almost gave herself whiplash and then had to fight the urge to stumble backwards as she saw the Dementor the boggart had turned into, its hooded face turned towards Harry and one glistening, scabbed hand gripping its cloak.

The Dementor started to sweep silently forwards, drawing a deep rattling breath and Hermione watched Harry go rigid. She knew that he had precious few seconds of consciousness left so, taking advantage of the dim light of the staffroom, she grabbed a handful of Harry's robes from behind and yanked him back so she was the one in front of the Boggart-Dementor. The classroom dissolved, she was falling through a thick white fog—

Get Hermione out of here, Richard, get her out—screech of tires on the road, screaming in her ears, can't breathe, iron bands tightening around her lungs—blood bubbling between Sharpie's lips as she coughs—you like to bite, pretty girl? So do I—why're ya here, Jane? Ya think this is worth it? Go home, kid!—fuckin' shut up or ya gonna git us all killed!—it hurts, oh god it hurts so much, please stop, please stop, please!—wicked devil child!—black, it's all black, there's no light and she's hungry and she's crying and pleasepleaseplease get me out of here—she's dead, she's dead, and it's my fault, all my fault—

Hermione jerked back to life. She was lying flat on her back on the floor and the lamps in the staffroom were alight again. Cold sweat plastered her clothes to her body and her heart was pounding frantically in her chest. She could hear the muttering sounds of their classmates but she was unable to stop herself trembling all over and her throat made a pathetic little sound. Breathe, she needed to breathe, she needed to get herself back under control and get out, she was too exposed—
Hermione managed to push herself up with trembling arms so she was sitting, pulled her knees to her chest and rested her forehead on them, drawing in longer and longer breaths like Sting had taught her; *in, count to one, out, count to one, in, count to two, out, count to two...* her breathing finally evened out and she lifted her head back up. Harry, who was kneeling beside her, looked grey and sick and she reached out to him, curling a hand around his wrist, her thumb digging into his pulse, letting the steady thud of it anchor her.

"Are you alright?" He asked, his voice shaky.

"I've certainly been better." She replied hoarsely.

"I can't believe you fainted!" Weasley's voice suddenly called out, mocking and derisive, "that's pathetic Granger!" Hermione felt a blaze of anger rush through her. On her feet in a second, she had her wand out and pointed towards him with a curse on her lips and her other hand reaching for a blade when Lupin shouted,

"ENOUGH!"

Panting angrily, her hand shook but she refused to lower her wand. "The effect the Dementor had on Hermione has nothing to do with weakness." Lupin said, sharply. "Dementors are among the foulest of creatures that walk this earth. They infest the darkest, filthiest places, they glory in decay and despair, and they drain peace, hope and happiness out of the air around them. And it is those with true horrors in their pasts that are affected worse."

Hermione wanted to cut Weasley open, she wanted to punch Lupin and even more then that she wanted to curl in a ball and cry. "If you'll excuse me." She spat as she strode across the room, cutting a path through the students who hastily parted for her and storming out of the staffroom.

Harry jogged to catch up to her, panting slightly. "Theo says he'll grab our stuff from the classroom." He said and she nodded shortly, her lips pressed tightly together. "Hermione," his voice was pained, "I-- I'm sorry, I should have been able to--"

"You would have passed out too, Harry." She interrupted him and if her voice was shaking then it didn't matter, because only Harry was there and Harry was safe, he had no sharp edges for her to cut herself on; he wouldn't make her bleed. "And you're a boy." She added. "You'd be ridiculed for something that isn't your fault. I'm a girl. We're expected to faint."

"Thank you, Hermione." Harry said, still looking horribly guilty as he kept up with her brisk strides. "You're... you're right."

"It's the golden rule, Harry," she muttered, her breath hitching as hysteria swam inside her. "Hermione's always right."

She entered the Slytherin Common Room and went straight up to the girl's dormitory, Harry following close on her heels. She made it to her dorm room and slammed the door shut, locking it behind her before she collapsed into a crouch on the floor. She couldn't do anything but violently tremble as she harshly bit her tongue hard enough she could taste the sweet copper of her own blood; didn't have the energy to try and lift herself up, to do anything at all.

Tears streamed down her face as silent sobs tore through her, rattling her bones. Her hands curled over her head, nails digging into her scalp as she hunched into herself, breaking to pieces for the second time in a mere handful of days. She felt hands stroking her back, cradling her, rocking her, running through her hair... absentmindedly, she noted that Tom must have emerged from the Diary.
She pulled herself together as quickly as she could force herself to. Despite the double attack of the boggart and the boggart-Dementor, practice made perfect and she was getting better at pushing down all the memories, locking them away so they could rattle at their prison bars but were unable to reach her.

It took much less time then after her first run-in with a Dementor for her to become aware of her surroundings once more, all her broken shields forced back together and stronger then ever. She was, Hermione realised, being cradled between Tom and Harry. Harry's arm was wrapped around her waist, his hand resting on the curve of her hip, while Tom's arm curved around her shoulders.

She blamed her raw emotional state on the way her skin tingled and her abdomen clenched. She was fourteen years old now and it wasn't unreasonable for her to be attracted to people.

She hadn't given romance much thought over the years, but as she became very aware of Harry's hand on her hip she realised there was a part of her that had always expected she and Harry to end up together like that. She loved Harry. She trusted him with her life and would gladly lay down her own life in trade for his. Before he'd been younger, before she hadn't seen him in this sort of light. But the way his green, green eyes seemed to burn with concern, his innocently intimate touch... yes, it felt quite nice.

Tom, though... she hadn't expected Tom. His whole presence was still something she was wary about, the knowledge of just who he was and how dangerous he could be never quite able to leave her. But they were bound together; Hermione wasn't sure if it was a temporary arrangement or something irreversibly permanent. And Tom wasn't someone who was difficult to be around– he'd grown on her, not unlike fungus, and had started to worm his way behind her defences. He was sharply intelligent, handsome and he understood her, understood her deeper, darker urges, understood the way Harry never would be able to– the way she never wanted Harry to be all to– and never condemned her for them. He fulfilled the one need in her that Harry couldn't and she hadn't realised how much she'd needed that until she suddenly had it.

Tom and Harry knew her; they knew who she was underneath her masks, knew about her scars both internal and external and the blood on her hands. Their dead bodies were two of her worst fears. She loved Harry, loved him more then life itself. She didn't love Tom, but she didn't think it was impossible that one day she might feel something very close to love for him. Not yet, she didn't know him well enough, didn't trust him enough; didn't trust him to put anyone but himself first. Not that she judged him for that– she would always put Harry and herself before anyone else, would gladly kill whoever or whatever she needed to in order to keep them both safe.

She loved Harry and he loved her. She understood Tom and he understood her. Harry's heart was too big and Tom was too possessive– and she was greedy enough to take advantage of both those facts, to want both of them, to want them as her own. She doubted either of them would protest.

She could already see it, could already the three of them tangling themselves up together so tightly they'd never be able to let each other go, and oh; what a glorious mess they would make.

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Remus's POV:

"I'm not surprised."

Remus looked over at Severus, shocked that it had been him who first responded.
"Miss Granger has always shown that she will do anything to protect Mr. Potter." Severus continued, tone matter-of-fact.

It was a staff meeting and Remus had just given everyone present a brief recap over the Boggart lesson with an emphasis on the conclusion. He'd never seen something like that before. After realizing the threat the Boggart-Dementor posed, Hermione Granger hadn't hesitated a second before pulling Harry out of the way, and standing in his place. She had literally stepped in the path of a Dementor for Harry– a Dementor!

Time had seemed to stand still as Hermione fell to the ground, her body seizing like she was having a fit, before Remus had jerked back into motion, banishing the Boggart. Harry had dropped to his knees at the girl's side, pulling her out of unconsciousness. Hermione had then been able to calm herself down from a panic attack in a way that spoke of experience, and the look in her eyes when Ron Weasley had taunted her afterwards... if he hadn't stopped her, Remus got the feeling that Ron would be nothing but a smear of blood on the wall. She hadn't looked like she wanted to curse the boy, to hurt him. She'd looked like she wanted to kill him. Remus himself had been furious enough that he'd given the boy detention.

"I'm also not surprised she passed out. Her past is decidedly less then pleasant. Before coming to Hogwarts, she was homeless and lived on the streets of London. Her last known address is Saint Agatha's Orphanage, except according to their records she ran away when she was six years old." Severus continued, and the staffroom was filled with shocked gasps.

"That's just awful!" Filius squeaked, face horrified.

"No wonder the poor dear's always so distant." Pomona said, looking teary. Remus turned to Albus and Minerva and was surprised to see their grim expressions unchanged.

As the meeting drew to a conclusion, Remus was shocked by Severus approaching him. His old classmate's expression was fixed in a sneer but for once it wasn't aimed in his direction.

"Nothing Granger does is ever good enough for those two." Severus nodded at the headmaster and his deputy. "In her first year she fought a mountain troll without a wand to protect Harry and they still don't trust her."

Remus wasn't sure what startled him more– Severus's use of Harry's given name, or the man's defense of Hermione Granger. "Why don't they like her? Is it because of House prejudices?" He asked.

"They don't like her because she's smarter then them, more cunning then them, has far more influence over Harry then them, absolutely loathes them and can see through Albus's manipulations." Severus listed with a snort.

"Oh." Remus murmured, "I... I have to say, I am glad Harry has her. She seems to care a great deal about him. One of her worst fears was him dead, as well as another boy, an older one."

"Dark haired, pale skinned, strange eyes?" Severus asked curiously and Remus nodded. Severus looked thoughtful but didn't elaborate. Instead he asked, "was that all the boggart showed?"

Remus hesitated, shuddering slightly at the memory– "A third body. One of a young child." He said, quietly. Severus's face went blank. "The child's body, it was... Well, both Harry's body and this Tom's body both had the same cause of death– manual strangulation. I believe that that particular fear is too specific not to have actually happened to somebody she knew. I suspect that specific fear originated from the young girl's death."
"Describe the child." Severus said quietly. Remus didn't want to think about the child's corpse but Severus was Hermione Granger's Head of House and out of all the staff, he seemed to care the most for her— he would have the best chance of helping her.

"Young, maybe seven at the most. Underweight, old scars like cigarette burns on the arms. Naked and beaten, strangulation bruises around her neck, lying on the ground as if she'd been dropped or thrown, just... discarded." He tried to be as clinical as possible, before he just couldn't. "She'd been raped," he whispered and Severus immediately, "there was so much blood on her thighs... and she had long red hair and green eyes. She looked so much like—" Severus made a sharp sound, slashing his hand through the air in a slashing motion.

"Enough." He hissed and Remus fell silent. Severus closed his eyes, took a deep breath and then exhaled slowly.

"I would appreciate it," he said stiffly, opening his eyes to meet Remus's and Remus tried not to flinch at the truly tired look in them, "as would Miss Granger, if details of her boggart were not spread around."

"Of course," Remus said, surprised and a little defensive, "I would never violate a student's privacy like that and I made sure all the students in class knew that anyone caught discussing what happened in the room would be given detention." Severus nodded, exhaling slowly. He still looked very tired but he wasn't ending their conversation and moving away so Remus tentatively spoke up again. "Is she related to the Dagworth-Grangers?" He asked, "I don't recognize her surname."

"Hermione Granger is a Muggleborn." Severus said and Remus gaped at him, openly shocked.

"What?"

"She's a Muggleborn in Slytherin and she's got the whole House wrapped around her little finger." Severus seemed amused by this, and he'd relaxed, his body losing the tenseness and his mouth curling into a smirk. "She actually displays the qualities of a true Slytherin, not like most of my students, the majority of them being blood purists and from old family lines."

"Do they know she's a Muggleborn?" Remus asked and Severus snorted.

"She backed them into a corner," he said, appearing genuinely amused. "She made it so they couldn't claim she was a Muggleborn without going against their own Pureblood supremacy rhetoric."

"How in Merlin's name did she manage that?" Remus asked incredulously and Severus smirked.

"By very publically retaliating to Ron Weasley's attempted assault on Harry in their first year. He tried to ambush the boy and she defended Harry, warning Weasley to back off and the other Slytherins backed her up. Weasley then asked them why they were associating with a Muggleborn and Granger wandlessly froze the little idiot in place, gave a pretty speech about how she must be a Halfblood because how could a Muggleborn be as powerful as she was, then she broke Weasley's nose."

Remus blinked. "She... she is..."

"I believe the words you are looking for are 'something else'." Severus said and Remus nodded, feeling a touch dazed.

"You said– you said she took on a mountain troll?"
"Killed it too." Severus looked very proud and Remus didn't blame him—Remus was proud of the girl and he'd only had one lesson with her. Stepping in front of a Dementor for someone she loved was one of the bravest things he'd ever seen someone do and it was twice as impressive coming from a child. Lily would love her, Remus thought, remembering the other muggleborn in Harry's life who had stepped in front of Harry, protecting him from danger.

And apparently the Dementor wasn't the first time Hermione Granger had reacted so selflessly, disregarding her own wellbeing for Harry's sake. How could Severus not be proud of the girl?

"And you said she didn't have a wand when she faced son the troll?" he asked, wide-eyed and stunned.

"Correct." Severus nodded, his pride clear for anyone to see. "Granger and Harry got trapped in an empty classroom with a twelve foot mountain troll. She knew that its skin was impervious to spells, so she climbed up onto its back and used a switchblade to skewer its brain."

"Skewer its brain?" Remus repeated faintly, trying to picture petite little Hermione Granger who must have been even tinier in her first year taking on a twelve foot mountain troll. "How? Their skin is so thick!"

"Granger believes in being prepared," Severus smirked at the memory, "as it turned out, she carried several blades upon her person—a relic from her life on the streets, I imagine. Being a homeless is not safe for a child." Brief anger flashed in Severus's eyes and Remus swallowed back a growl at the thought of the poor girl being attacked, of only having herself. "She used one of those blades to pierce one of a troll's only vulnerabilities." Severus returned to the troll story.

"Its eyes," Remus realised. "That's why she climbed up to its neck—she needed to reach its eyes. Oh, that clever girl! And it worked?"

"She had her arm almost elbow-deep into its skull while clinging to its back." Severus confirmed and Remus shook his head in amazement.

"That's... brilliant." He said. "And my god, what a brave girl! Most adult wizards wouldn't be able to keep their head when faced with a mountain troll but she managed to figure out its weakness and formulate a plan—what an amazing, clever, selfless little girl."

"She's one of those rare children that makes teaching feel less like I'm pulling my own fingernails out with a pair of pliers." Severus agreed.

"You must be very proud. She is truly a credit to your House," Remus said very genuinely.

"That she is." Severus said, looking even more smug.

"How did she and Harry become friends in the first place?" he asked, curiously, deciding to make the most of Severus's seemingly pleasant mood.

"They bonded on the Express their first year, before the Sorting." Severus told him, "Granger runs circles around everyone else, but as I have told Albus and Minerva over and over, with Harry she is always genuine."

"You keep calling him Harry," Remus couldn't help but say, even though he knew it would most likely annoy Severus and cause the other man to sneer at him, spit out a few insults, then storm away. To his surprise, although Severus did sneer he still answered Remus's unspoken question, albeit not in great detail.
"I call him Harry because he is not his father." Severus said, before turning and walking off, leaving Remus to puzzle over what the Head of Slytherin had just said.

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Severus's POV:

"Ah Severus," Lucius greeted him as he stepped out of the floo. "Here already? You must have had a trying day." Severus pulled a face.

"I just experienced the absolute pleasure of a conversation with an old school friend of mine." He sneered, his lip automatically curling at the thought of the werewolf, but try as he might he just couldn't manage his old hatred, too drained by the revelations of the boggart class that he really wished he'd stayed for after all. And, if he was being honest, too pleased by Lupin's open admiration and praise of Granger. He hadn't been expecting that from him– he'd been expecting Lupin to side with Albus against his student, but Lupin had been genuine in both his own pride in the girl for her actions in his class and in his amazement of her previous actions.

She is a credit to your House, Lupin had told him, and it hadn't been an insult. The werewolf had genuinely complimented both Granger and Slytherin.

"Remus Lupin, I assume?" Lucius arched an eyebrow and Severus nodded, keeping his thoughts about Lupin's open approval of Hermione– and his surprising lack of animosity towards Slytherin and the fact that Harry had been sorted into it– to himself.

"He was very interested in learning about Harry and Granger's friendship." Severus did say.

"Can you blame him?" Lucius asked. "I am curious myself. They seem closer then just school friends, yet they don't appear to share a romantic relationship of any kind."

"And then there's the older boy. Tom." Severus said with a grimace– he didn't like puzzles and Tom, whoever he was and however he'd gotten close to Harry and Granger, was most certainly a puzzle. "They went up against a boggart today. Granger's worst fears included Harry and this Tom dead."

Lucius winced, genuine sympathy on his face. "That can't have been pleasant. What about Harry's?"

"A Dementor. Lupin told me he passed out on the train when the Dementors were searching it. He almost collapsed again but Granger stepped in front of him, I presume to save him from the ridicule."

"How did she go against it?" Lucius asked, interested and impressed.

"She collapsed and according to Lupin had a sort of seizure." Severus answered. "Then she almost blew Weasley's head off."

"Pity she didn't." Lucius sighed. "Any other interesting news?" Severus decided not to mention the dead child– that was a mystery he intended on solving himself.

"Yes, your son had an unpleasant encounter with a hippogriff during Care of Magical Creatures." Severus had to hold up a hand as a suddenly furious-looking Lucius opened his mouth, presumably to start yelling. "Draco declined to make a complaint and asked me to pass on the request that you
don't make an issue over it. He said there was no point involving the Ministry and making an official mess when it could all be sorted out quietly."

"Sorted out quietly?" Lucius asked through gritted teeth.

"The hippogriff in question was found decapitated."

"You suspect Granger had something to do with it." Lucius looked slightly less like he was about to storm to Hogwarts and demand Hagrid be fired. "She certainly has quite the vicious streak, doesn't she?"

"That she does." Severus agreed dryly. "She was also the one to accompany Hagrid up to the hospital wing after his Draco's injury, giving her plenty of time to talk it out with him. Harry's quite fond of Hagrid, which I presume she used to talk Draco out of issuing an official complaint."

"I'm not sure whether to be annoyed or impressed." Lucius mused, looking disgruntled. "An official complaint would have led to the possible firing of the oaf and the execution of the beast. It seems Miss Granger and Draco decided to skip straight to the execution."

"She's quite the enigma, isn't she?" Severus commented and Lucius nodded, chuckling slightly.

"I think we can expect interesting and powerful things from her, Severus."

Severus nodded, in complete agreement with his oldest and dearest friend. Hermione Granger was destined for greatness and even Albus wouldn't be able to hold her back.
Chapter XXIV:

Harry's POV:

In no time at all, Defense Against the Dark Arts had become most people's favorite class. The next few lessons were just as interesting as the first. After boggarts, they studied Red Caps, nasty little goblin like creatures that lurked wherever there had been bloodshed: in the dungeons of castles and the potholes of deserted battlefields, waiting to bludgeon those who had gotten lost. From Red Caps they moved on to kappas, creepy water-dwellers that looked like scaly monkeys, with webbed hands itching to strangle unwitting waders in their ponds.

Divination on the other hand... Harry was growing to dread the hours he spent in Trelawney's stifling tower room, deciphering lopsided shapes and symbols, trying to ignore the way Trelawney's enormous eyes filled with tears every time she looked at him. He didn't like Trelawney, even though she was treated with respect bordering on reverence by many of their classmates. It was only Hermione's blatant challenging and subtle mocking of Trelawney during the lessons that got him through.

Care of Magical Creatures was interesting. At first Hagrid seemed to have lost his confidence and they spent to next few lessons learning how to look after flobberworms, which had to be some of the most boring creatures in existence. But after Hermione had a stern speaking to with Hagrid, dragging a pouting Draco along to do so, he had cheered up and introduced them to a range of both interesting and terrifying Magical Creatures, including bowtruckles, fire crabs and even a shy little mooncalf. Originally he hadn't set much homework but Hermione had forced him to go over all his lesson plans with her and assigned the different classes and year levels appropriate work to be completed after class. Harry had been annoyed until Hermione pointed out that if Hagrid's students all failed their exams then he'd be fired for incompetence. Harry had apologised and the homework wasn't really that bad– it was more diagrams and stuff then essays.

At the start of October, Harry had something entirely new to occupy him. The Quidditch season was approaching and Marcus Flint, Captain of the Slytherin team, was working them hard. No matter the weather, he'd drag them out to the pitch every day– the two hour practices on weekdays alternated between mornings and evenings and on Saturday and Sunday practice could be anywhere between two to four hours long.

Harry was exhausted by the new work load and practices, and he was relieved that Hermione hadn't tried to make them start their extracurricular lessons on offensive and defensive magic, though she did make him spar with her twice a week– once with knives, once without.

He was returning to the Slytherin common room from Quidditch practice one evening, cold and stiff but pleased with the way the training had gone, only to find the room buzzing excitedly.

"What's happened?" he asked Hermione, who was sitting by the fireside and completing her Divination homework with a look of great distaste.

"First Hogsmeade weekend," she said absently, pointing at a notice that had appeared on the bulletin board. "End of October. Halloween."
Harry felt excitement flare up in him. "Are you coming?" He asked her excitedly and was shocked when she shook her head. "What? Why not?" He demanded.

"No one to sign my permission form." She shrugged.

"What about Snape? He might," Harry suggested, not really wanting to go without her. It wouldn't be nearly as much fun exploring the village without her obscure facts and cutting observations.

A thoughtful look crossed Hermione's face. "You know, that's actually worth a try." She said.

Together they made their way to Snape's office and Harry knocked. "Enter." Drawled Snape and Harry beat down the usual flutter of nervousness he always got in Snape's presence— during their first year Snape had seemed to dislike him; it hadn't been until after their detention in the Forbidden Forest that he'd warmed up to him.

Their Head of House looked up as he and Hermione entered his office and raised an eyebrow. "Is there something I can do for you?"

"According to the Hogwarts rules, as an orphan I'm officially considered a ward of the school." Hermione said calmly.

"I'm sorry for your recent loss." Snape drawled and Hermione rolled her eyes.

"We're both know that's not true, professor," she said, "there's no point continuing the lie when by now I assume you're aware my parents weren't working that day I met you in Hyde Park."

"Your parents have been dead for eleven years." Snape said bluntly and Harry winced slightly. Hermione didn't even twitch.

"Yes." She said calmly, as if they were discussing the weather not the death of her mum and dad. "And because they're dead, I'm a ward of the school."

"And your point, Miss Granger?" Snape prompted.

"My point is that as my Head of House you can be considered my de facto guardian and it is therefore within your rights to sign my permission slip for Hogsmeade." Hermione said confidently. Snape's lips twitched into a smile.

"Indeed, Miss Granger." He said, before he seemed to shift his attention to Harry. He swallowed nervously. "And do you have your slip, Mr. Potter?"

"Right here, sir." He said hastily, pulling out the form with Aunt Petunia's signature. Snape examined it.

"It's rather shaky." He observed.

"As it happens, Petunia Dursley isn't a fan of snakes." Hermione smiled her wolf-grin, sharp and predatory on her pretty face. Snape snorted.

"Consider you form signed, Miss Granger. Try not to cause too much trouble at Hogsmeade."

"We'll certainly try our best." Hermione said sweetly and Harry just rolled his eyes and pulled her back out of Snape's office with a hasty goodbye before Snape took points off them for cheek.
To Harry's surprise, they actually managed to follow their Head of House's orders to not cause trouble. It wasn't that he'd been setting out to do so, but trouble had a habit of finding him. For once, though, it seemed that everything was going smoothly. Harry was filled with amazement as he and Hermione visited their first ever all wizard village. They tried to visit everything— Dervish and Bangs, the wizarding equipment shop, Zonko's Joke Shop and the post office in which there were over two hundred owls, all sitting on shelves, all color-coded depending on how fast you wanted your letter to get there.

They finished up at Honeydukes where they bought a mountain of brilliantly colored sweets before returning to the school with just enough time to place their purchases in their dorms before hurrying back to the castle in time for the Halloween Feast. This year Harry was determined to sit through the feast— not because he wanted to celebrate on the anniversary of his parents death, but because after the last two Halloweens he wanted to spend the evening surrounded by witnesses and in the safest location possible. Hermione, upon hearing his reasons, had laughed but agreed to go along with it.

The Great Hall had been decorated with hundreds and hundreds of candle-filled pumpkins, a cloud of fluttering live bata and many flaming orange streamers which were swimming lazily across the stormy ceiling like brilliant watersnakes.

The food was delicious and even though he was full to bursting with Honeydukes sweets, Harry managed second helpings of everything. The feast finished with an entertainment provided by the Hogwarts ghosts. They popped out of the walls and tables to do a bit of formation gliding and the Gryffindor ghost had a great success with a reenactment of his own botched beheading.

It had turned out to be such a pleasant evening that even the knowledge that it was the anniversary of his parent's murder failed to spoil Harry's good mood. At the end of the feast, he and Hermione followed the rest of the Slytherins to the Common Room and had started to make themselves comfortable, settling down in front of the fire when Snape reappeared.

"Everyone return to the Great Hall immediately," he ordered. Harry bit back a groan as his hopes for a peaceful Halloween were abruptly crushed underfoot.

As the confused Slytherins all trooped back to the Great Hall, Harry didn't miss the fact that Snape was walking within arms reach of him; face grim and wand in hand.

"Something's happened," Hermione murmured to him, her eyes sharp with focus. "Something big." Harry swallowed back his uneasiness and nodded.

The Gryffindors were already in the Hall, chatting excitedly amongst themselves, while the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs trailed in looking a confused as the Slytherins. Dumbledore stood up at the head of the Hall and his wand let of several loud bangs, attracting the attention of the student body. "The teachers and I need to conduct a thorough search of the castle," he announced as Professors McGonagall and Flitwick closed all doors into the hall. "I'm afraid that, for your own safety, you will have to spend the night here. I want the prefects to stand guard over the entrances and I am leaving the Head Boy and Girl in charge. Any disturbances should be reported to me immediately," he added to the Head Boy, one of the Weasleys, who was looking immensely proud and important. "Send word with one of the ghosts." Dumbledore paused, about to leave the hall, and said, "Oh, yes, you'll be needing..."

One casual wave of his wand and the long tables flew to the edges of the hall and stood themselves against the walls; another wave, and the floor was covered with hundreds of squishy purple sleeping bags. "Sleep well," said Dumbledore, closing the door behind him.
The hall immediately began to buzz excitedly, the Gryffindors telling the rest of the school what had just happened. Sirius Black had been spotted in the castle. Sirius Black had tried breaking into the Gryffindor Tower. Harry felt his heart stutter inside his chest and for a long moment he couldn't breathe. Hermione tangled their fingers together and squeezed and his lungs started working again.

"Everyone into their sleeping bags!" shouted Weasley. "Come on, now, no more talking! Lights out in ten minutes!"

"Let's go," Hermione muttered and he quickly picked up a sleeping bag and followed her into a corner where they curled up together, Hermione resting her head on his shoulder as he wrapped his arms around her.

"Do you think Black's still in the castle?" He asked quietly, not sure how he felt except overwhelmed and lost. He'd very purposefully tried not to think about Voldemort's proposal– could he really kill someone? Harry shuddered, horrified that he was actually even considering it, because he was and that just made him even more confused and distressed.

"Dumbledore seems to think he might be," Hermione said. "But Dumbledore's a fuck-wit, so who knows?" Harry had to stifle a laugh, feeling that it wouldn't exactly be considered appropriate. "It's quite the coincidence he picked tonight, you know," Hermione mused, the corner of her mouth twitching as they climbed fully dressed into their sleeping bags and propped themselves up on their elbows to talk. "The one night when the students weren't in their common rooms."

"Not really," Harry offered. "We know he's innocent– he probably didn't want to hurt anyone."

"But why would he come here at all then? And what does he need to get that's in the Gryffindor Tower?" Hermione pressed and Harry had no answer.

Unlike Hermione who was concentrating on the why, everyone else seemed more interested in how– all around them, students were asking the same question: "How did he get in?"

"Maybe he apparated," said a Ravenclaw a few feet away. "He could have just appeared out of thin air, you know."

"Disguised himself, probably," said a Hufflepuff fifth year.

"He could've flown in," suggested a Gryffindor.

"Honestly, am I the only person who's ever bothered to read Hogwarts, A History?" Muttered Hermione disdainfully under her breath to Harry.

"Probably," he agreed readily. "Why?"

"Because the castle's protected by more than just gates and walls. There are all sorts of enchantments on it, to stop people entering by stealth. You can't just apparate in here. And I'd like to see the disguise that could fool those bloody Dementors. They're guarding every single entrance to the grounds and they'd have seen him fly in too. And Argus knows all the secret passages, he'll have them covered."

"The lights are going out now!" Weasley shouted. "I want everyone in their sleeping bags and no more talking!"

The candles all went out at once. The only light now came from the silvery ghosts, who were drifting about talking seriously to the prefects, and the enchanted ceiling, which, like the sky outside, was scattered with stars. What with that, and the whispering that still filled the hall, Harry
felt as though he were sleeping outdoors, like in the summer after first year.

Once every hour, a teacher would reappear in the hall to check that everything was quiet. Around three in the morning, when many students had finally fallen asleep, Dumbledore himself came in. Harry watched him looking around for Weasley, who had been prowling between the sleeping bags, telling people off for talking. He'd only tried telling Hermione off once—she'd fixed him with a venemous look of pure loathing and had continued talking, blatantly ignoring his orders. Weasley had spluttered a bit but hadn't tried to challenge her.

The hall was quiet enough and Weasley close enough that Harry and Hermione, pretending to be asleep as Dumbledore's footsteps drew nearer, were able to hear the conversation between the two.

"Any sign of him, Professor?" asked Weasley in a whisper.

"No. All well here?"

"Everything under control, sir."

"Good. There's no point moving them all now. I've found a temporary guardian for the Gryffindor portrait hole. You'll be able to move them back in tomorrow."

"And the Fat Lady, sir?"

"Hiding in a map of Argyllshire on the second floor. Apparently she refused to let Black in without the password, so he attacked. She's still very distressed, but once she's calmed down, I'll have Mr. Filch restore her."

Harry heard the door of the hall creak open again, and more footsteps. "Headmaster?" It was Snape and Harry kept very still, listening hard. In his arms, he could feel Hermione tense slightly, her breathing deceptively deep and even. "The whole of the third floor has been searched. He's not there. And Filch has done the dungeons; nothing there either." Snape reported.

"What about the Astronomy tower? Professor Trelawney's room? The Owlery?"

"All searched."

"Very well, Severus. I didn't really expect Black to linger."

"Have you any theory as to how he got in, Professor?" asked Snape. Harry almost stopped breathing, only Hermione's fingers briefly applying pressure over where her arm was draped over his chest reminding him again.

"Many, Severus, each of them as unlikely as the next." Dumbledore replied in a frustratingly enigmatic way.

Harry opened his eyes a fraction and squinted up to where the three people stood; Dumbledore's back was to him, but he could see Weasley's face, rapt with attention, and Snape's profile which, he was surprised to see, looked tight with anger.

"You remember the conversation we had, Headmaster, just before—ah—the start of term?" said Snape, who was barely opening his lips as though trying to block Weasley out of the conversation.

"I do, Severus," said Dumbledore, and there was something like warning in his voice.

"And has this made you reconsider your stance?" Harry pictured Snape's sneer that went with that
specific tone of voice and almost felt sorry for Dumbledore (okay, that was a lie- he felt more gleeful, then anything).

"I do not believe a single person inside this castle would have helped Black enter it," said Dumbledore and his tone made it so clear that the subject was closed that Snape didn't reply. "Now I must go down to the Dementors. I said I would inform them when our search was complete."

"Didn't they want to help, sir?" asked Weasley.

"Oh yes," said Dumbledore coldly. "But I'm afraid no Dementor will cross the threshold of this castle while I am headmaster."

Weasley looked slightly abashed. Dumbledore left the hall, walking quickly and quietly. Snape stood for a moment, watching the headmaster with an expression of deep resentment on his face; then he too left.

Harry glanced sideways Hermione. She had her eyes open too and looked thoughtful. "What was all that about?" He mouthed.

"I'm not sure," Hermione mouthed back, her eyes steely with determination. "But I'm definitely going to find out."

"We're going to find out." Harry corrected her, in a low whisper, and she smiled warmly at him, a smile that made his heart skip a beat.

"Yes," she whispered back, "yes we are. Together."

The school talked of nothing but Sirius Black for the next few days. The theories about how he had entered the castle became wilder and wilder, while he and Hermione brainstormed what exactly it was that Black could have needed in the castle. They were both coming up blank.

To Harry's surprise, Professor Snape summoned him into his office the following day.

"Potter," he said, in a serious voice, that for once wasn't filled with it usual drawl, "the headmaster has decided there is no point hiding the truth from you any longer. Sirius Black is after you."

"That's not much of a surprise" Harry gave a wry smile.

Snape seemed momentarily taken aback by Harry's apparent easy acceptance of the fact a mass murderer was targeting him. Maybe he should have acted more disturbed, he thought. After all, only five other people knew that Black was actually innocent and Snape wasn't one of them.

His Head of House gave him a long look before continuing. "Professor McGonagall has raised the concern that it's not a good idea for you to be practicing Quidditch in the early mornings and evenings. She believes that out on the field with only your team members, it's very exposed—"

"And I'm sure the fact we've got our first match on Saturday against her Gryffindors has nothing to do with her 'worries' at all." said Harry indignantly and Snape's lips twitched into a smile.

"Well then," his Head of House drawled, "all things considered, I believe that I should inform Professor McGonagall that I'll be requesting Madam Hooch to oversee your training sessions. Like you pointed out, we do have a match on Saturday and you will need to train." Harry couldn't help but grin slightly.

"Thanks sir."
The weather worsened steadily as the first Quidditch match drew nearer. Undaunted, the Slytherin team was training harder than ever, now under the eye of Madam Hooch.

It was after an early morning practice that Harry was running late to class and he was still panting when he skidded to a halt outside the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, pulling the door open and dashing inside.

"Sorry I'm late, Professor Lupin. I–" But it wasn't Lupin who looked up at him from the teacher's desk; it was Snape.

"This lesson began ten minutes ago, Mr. Potter. Go sit down. If you are late again, I'm afraid I won't be as forgiving." His Head of House ordered.

"You took ten points off Dean for being five minutes late!" Ron Weasley said furiously.

"And you just lost another five points for Gryffindor by speaking out of turn." Snape sneered.

Making his way over to Hermione, Harry sat down and whispered, "Where's Lupin?"

"Snape says he's feeling too ill to teach today," she murmured and Harry frowned.

"Did he say what's wrong with him?"

"Only that it's nothing life-threatening. He sounded disappointed." She grinned slightly Harry muffled a snort as he pulled out a roll of parchment and a quill while Snape resumed the lecture.

"As I was saying, Professor Lupin has not left any record of the topics you have covered so far--"

"We've done boggarts, Red Caps, kappas, and grindylows," one of the Gryffindors, Fay Dunbar, piped up. "We're just about to start--"

"Be quiet," said Snape coldly. "I did not ask for information. I was merely commenting on Professor Lupin's lack of organization."

"He's the best Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher we've ever had," said Dean Thomas boldly and there was a murmur of agreement. Personally, Harry also thought that but he was definitely smart enough not to say so out loud. Snape looked more menacing than ever as he fixed Thomas with a cold stare.

"You are easily satisfied. Lupin is hardly overtaxing you– I would expect first years to be able to deal with Red Caps and grindylows. Today we shall discuss--" Harry watched him flick through the textbook, to the very back chapter, which he must know they hadn't covered. "Werewolves," said Snape.

"I wonder why he wants us to cover them?" Hermione murmured to Harry, looking curious. "We're not supposed to do werewolves yet." Harry shrugged, flipping his book open to page 394 as Snape instructed.

Many of the Gryffindors were trading bitter sidelong looks and muttering sullenly as they opened their books but personally Harry found the topic fascinating.

"Which of you can tell me how we distinguish between the werewolf and the true wolf?" said Snape. Everyone sat in motionless silence; everyone except Hermione that is, who raised her hand almost lazily. "Anyone besides Miss Granger?" Snape asked, dipping his chin in Hermione's direction. Hermione dropped her hand and leaned back in her seat, a slightly malicious smile
playing on her face as the Slytherins all prepared for a bout of Gryffindor baiting.

Snape gave the class a twisted smile. "Are you telling me that Professor Lupin hasn't even taught you the basic distinction between--"

"We told you," said Patil suddenly, surprising Harry with her boldness. "We haven't got as far as werewolves yet, we're still on--"

"Silence!" snarled Snape. "Well, well, well, I never thought I'd meet a third-year class who wouldn't even recognize a werewolf when they saw one. I shall make a point of informing Professor Dumbledore how very behind you all are...."

"How can we know about werewolves when we haven't even studied them yet?" Weasley asked furiously. "Were you even listening when we said we hadn't reached them yet? What's the point in asking questions you know we don't have the answers to?"

The class knew instantly Weasley had gone too far. Snape advanced on him slowly and the room held its breath. There was a gleeful anticipation in Harry's stomach– if there was one student at Hogwarts he absolutely loathe it was Weasley. "Forty-five points from Gryffindor and detention," Snape said silkily, his face very close to Weasley's. "And if I ever hear you criticize the way I teach a class again, you will be very sorry indeed."

No one made a sound throughout the rest of the lesson. They sat and made notes on werewolves from the textbook, while Snape prowled up and down the rows of desks, examining the work they had been doing with Lupin.

"Very poorly explained... That is incorrect, the kappa is more commonly found in Mongolia.... Professor Lupin gave this eight out of ten? I wouldn't have given it three...."

When the bell rang at last, Snape held them back. "You will each write an essay, to be handed in to me, on the ways you recognize and kill werewolves. I want two rolls of parchment on the subject and I want them by Monday morning. It is time somebody took this class in hand. Weasley, stay behind, we need to arrange your detention."

Harry and Hermione left the room with the rest of the class. Once they were well out of earshot, the Gryffindors burst into a furious tirade about Snape.

"Snape's never been like this with any of our other Defense Against the Dark Arts teachers, even if he did want the job," Thomas said angrily. "Why's he got it in for Lupin? D'you think this is all because of the boggart?"

"He's actually got a point," Hermione said thoughtfully to Harry. "Whatever's going on between Snape and Lupin, it isn't over a teaching post– it's personal. Deeply personal."

Harry woke extremely early the next morning to the sound of thunder rumbling overhead, the pounding of the wind against the castle walls, the distant creaking of the trees in the Forbidden Forest and the disheartening knowledge that in a few hours he would be out on the Quidditch field, battling through that gale.

Quickly giving up on the idea of more sleep, Harry got up, dressed, picked up his Nimbus Two Thousand and One and walked quietly out of the dormitory.

The noise of the storm was even louder in the Common Room but Harry knew better than to think
the match would be canceled; Quidditch matches weren't called off for small trifles like thunderstorms. Nevertheless, he was starting to feel very apprehensive. The Gryffindor Seeker was a fifth year and a lot bigger than Harry–Seekers were usually light and speedy, but Greene's weight would be an advantage in this weather because he was less likely to be blown off course.

Harry whiled away the hours until dawn in front of the fire until at long last he thought it must be time for breakfast so he headed to the Great Hall.

He revived a bit over a large bowl of porridge, and by the time he'd started on toast, Hermione and the rest of the team had turned up. "It's going to be a tough one," said Marcus commented.

"I'm sure you boys won't mind a bit of rain." Hermione replied with a smirk.

But it was considerably more than a bit of rain. Such was the popularity of Quidditch that the whole school turned out to watch the match as usual, but they ran down the lawns toward the Quidditch field with heads bowed against the ferocious wind, umbrellas being whipped out of their hands as they went.

The team changed into their green robes in the locker rooms and trooped after Flint as he beckoned for them to follow him. The wind was so strong that they staggered sideways as they walked out onto the field. If the crowd was cheering, Harry couldn't hear it over the fresh rolls of thunder. To his dismay, rain was splattering over his glasses and he had no idea how he was supposed to see the Snitch like this.

The Gryffindors were approaching from the opposite side of the field, wearing scarlet robes. The Captains walked up to each other and shook hands; Wood and Flint both looking like they were trying to break the other's fingers. Harry saw Madam Hooch's mouth form the words, "Mount Your brooms!" He pulled his right foot out of the mud with a squelch and swung it over his Nimbus Two Thousand. Madam Hooch put her whistle to her lips and gave it a blast that sounded shrill and distant they were off.

Harry rose fast, but his Nimbus was swerving slightly with the wind. He held it as steady as he could and turned, squinting into the rain.

Within five minutes he was soaked to his skin and frozen, hardly able to see his teammates, let alone the tiny Snitch. He flew backward and forward across the field past blurred green and red shapes with no idea of what was happening in the rest of the game. He couldn't even hear the commentary over the wind and the crowd was hidden beneath a sea of cloaks and battered umbrellas. Twice Harry came very close to being unseated by a Bludger; his vision was so clouded by the rain on his glasses he hadn't even seen them coming.

He quickly lost track of time and it was getting harder and harder to hold his broom straight. The sky was getting darker, as though night had decided to come early. Twice Harry nearly hit another player, without knowing whether it was a teammate or opponent; everyone was now so wet, and the rain so thick, he could hardly tell them apart.

With the first flash of lightning came the sound of Madam Hooch's whistle; Harry could just see the outline of Marcus through the thick rain gesturing him to the ground. The whole team splashed down into the mud.

"I called for time-out!" Marcus told the team. "Come on, under here-" They huddled at the edge of the field under a large umbrella; Harry took off his glasses and wiped them hurriedly on his robes.

"What's the score?" He asked, shivering.
"We're seventy points up," said Marcus, "but unless we get the Snitch soon, we'll be playing into the night."

"I've got no chance with these on," Harry groaned, waving his glasses. At that very moment, Hermione appeared at his shoulder; she was holding her cloak over her head.

"Hand them over, quick!" She ordered. He handed them to her and as the team watched Hermione tapped them with her wand and said *impervious*.

"There!" she said, handing them back to Harry. "They'll repel water!"

"Brilliant!" Marcus grinned approvingly. "Good work Granger. Okay, team, let's go for it!"

Hermione's spell had done the trick. Harry was still numb with cold and wetter than he'd ever been in his life but he could see. Full of fresh determination, he urged his broom through the turbulent air, staring in every direction for the Snitch, avoiding a Bludger, ducking beneath Greene, who was streaking in the opposite direction....

There was another clap of thunder, followed immediately by forked lightning. This was getting more and more dangerous and Harry needed to get the Snitch—quickly.

He turned, intending to head back toward the middle of the field, but at that moment, another flash of lightning illuminated the stands and Harry saw something that distracted him completely, the silhouette of an enormous shaggy black dog clearly imprinted against the sky, motionless in the topmost empty row of seats.

Harry's numb hands slipped on the broom handle and his Nimbus dropped a few feet. Shaking his sodden bangs out of his eyes, he squinted back into the stands. The dog had vanished. "Potter!" came Flint's yell. "Behind you!"

Harry looked wildly around. Greene was pelting up the field, and a tiny speck of gold was shimmering in the rain-filled air between them.

With a jolt of panic, Harry threw himself flat to the broom-handle and zoomed toward the Snitch. "Come on!" he growled at his Nimbus as the rain whipped his face. "Faster!"

But something odd was happening. An eerie silence was falling across the stadium. The wind, though as strong as ever, was forgetting to roar. It was as though someone had turned off the sound, as though Harry had gone suddenly deaf—what was going on?

And then a horribly familiar wave of cold swept over him, inside him, just as he became aware of something moving on the field below...

Before he'd had time to think, Harry had taken his eyes off the Snitch and looked down. At least a hundred Dementors, their hidden faces pointing up at him, were hovering beneath him. It was as though freezing water was rising in his chest, cutting at his insides. And then he heard it again.... Someone was screaming, screaming inside his head... a woman...

"– *Not Harry, not Harry, please not Harry!*"

"*Stand aside, you silly girl... stand aside, now.... *"

"*Not Harry, please no, take me, kill me instead – *"

Numbing, swirling white mist was filling Harry's brain.... What was he doing? Why was he flying?
He needed to help her... She was going to die.... She was going to be murdered....

He was falling, falling through the icy mist.

"Not Harry! Please... have mercy... have mercy,..." A shrill voice was laughing, the woman was screaming and Harry knew no more.

- -

Hermione's POV:

Hermione's heart nearly stopped as Harry's slight frame fell from his broom, fifty feet up in the air. "NO!" she shrieked in horror, lunging out of her seat, her hands reaching out to the tumbling body as if trying to catch him. She didn't know any spells to use, spells to help Harry, so she did what she'd always done, back before she knew what magic was and thought it was some sort of genetic mutation—she used her intent. Pushing her magic out through her palms, Hermione concentrated on the panic she felt inside her and *used* it, let it fuel her 'special talent' the way she'd taught herself, when she was alone and freezing and starving and afraid. She could feel the yank of her magic inside her as Harry's fall slowed but it wasn't enough, she wasn't strong enough.

Remembering what Voldemort had said in the Chamber, Hermione desperately reached to the back of her mind, to where she could feel the Diary bound to her, and she *pulled*. A fresh wave of power welled up inside her, foreign and humming in her veins as it joined her own magic and Harry's body was slowing, slowing, slowing, until he finally came to a standstill, hovering around a meter of the ground.

Hermione shoved through the crowds, scaling over the stands and dropping over the edges, falling almost ten feet down to the ground below. She landed in a crouch that jarred her ankles but she ignored the pain, stumbling back up in the slick mud and running forwards, beating even Dumbledore onto the pitch. Pushing past the icy cold of the Dementors, past the screaming voices in the back of her mind, she stumbled over to Harry, reaching him at the same time as her spell gave out.

Harry's body fell on top of her, knocking her to the ground, but she didn't care, all that mattered was that he was okay, he was still breathing. Tears streamed down her face as she clung to him, barely noticing Dumbledore's arrival on the field, barely noticing the silvery phoenix of shining light that burst out of the tip of his wand and drove the Dementors back.

Snape and McGonagall joined him on the field and as Dumbledore looked down at her, for once his expression wasn't one of dislike— it was one of relief. He magicked a stretcher, and tried to levitate Harry onto it but she stubbornly clung to him, refusing to let go. Her body was trembling from fear and adrenaline, her skin felt like it was too tight and short, strangled sobs were bubbling from her throat.

"Hermione," it was the first time she'd heard Snape call her by her first name. His voice was soft, another first. "Hermione, you need to let go. You need to let the Headmaster take him up to the hospital wing. He's going to be fine, I promise. You did very well and now it's our turn."

Hermione released Harry and let Snape pull her into his arms. She swayed unsteadily, exhaustion weighing down her limbs. "You did a good job, Hermione." Snape told her gently and she nodded, tears still streaming down her face.
Snape helped her up to the hospital wing, supporting her as she kept stumbling and tripping, to the point where he was half carrying her despite all the mud on her robes and she just clung to him, pathetic but not caring.

When they reached the hospital wing, Madam Pomfrey hurried over and cast a drying charm on her before coaxing her over to the cot next to Harry. It really said to the fact of how utterly drained she felt that Hermione didn't even put up a fight, just turned her head so Harry was still in her line of vision.

"Severe magical exhaustion," she heard Madam Pomfrey tell her Head of House, "I'm surprised she's even conscious– should be as right as rain in a day or two, she just needs to rest."

Hermione fought her heavy eye-lids, refusing to let Harry out of her sight. Snape noticed, of course he did, and with a murmured word her cot slid across so it was close enough to Harry's that she could reach out and clasp his cold, clammy hand in her own, could press her thumb against his pulse with bruising pressure, letting the steady thump-thump calm her to the point that she could finally surrender to her exhaustion.

She woke before Harry, lethargic and with a brain that felt full of wool. She managed to move from the cot she'd been lying in to one of the seats next to Harry's cot where she leaned against the mattress. Harry didn't wake up for nearly another hour and by the time he had, Draco, Blaise, Theo, Daphne and Tracey had all joined her, gathered around his hospital bed.

"Harry!" Theo said, as Harry's eyes snapped open suddenly. "How're you feeling?"

"What happened?" Harry croaked, the tired-looking boy pushing himself up into a sitting position.

"You fell off your broom," Draco's voice was shaky, "must've been about seventy feet!"

"But the match," Harry shook his head, looking confused. "What happened? Are we doing a replay?" Hermione couldn't help it– she exploded.

"Who gives a fuck about the fucking Quidditch match!" She shouted, causing everyone to spin around and look at her. She knew her eyes were bloodshot and that her controlled visage had fallen, but that didn't matter, not right now. "You almost fucking died Harry!"

Harry's face went white and he reached a hand out towards her. "I'm sorry." He whispered, as he intertwined his fingers with hers. She took a deep, shuddering breath.

"If you ever do something like that again, I'll--"

"Take me out to the middle of the Forbidden Forest, to where nobody can hear me scream, tie me to a tree and then skin me from the knees down so that I can experience the joy of all the man-eating creatures who live there. And while they rip the flesh from me, feet upwards, you will occasionally glance up to monitor their progress while you read *Hogwarts: A History.*" Harry interrupted her, with a weak smile

"I was going to say I'd fucking kill you, but that works," Hermione glared before her expression softened slightly. "You remembered."

"It was kind of hard to forget." Harry admitted and for the first time since he fell off the broom she smiled.
"That was disgustingly vivid." Theo said with a grimace.

"That was almost exactly what Snape said." Harry gave a tired laugh.

"Professor Snape." She corrected him, absently.

"So what did happen? You know, after I fell?" Harry asked, quietly.

"Hermione blew everyone's minds by using wandless magic to slow down your fall, stopping you about a meter off the ground. She and Snape, McGonagall and Dumbledore all ran onto the field and Dumbledore pointed his wand at the Dementors, shot some silver stuff at them which made them leave the stadium while Hermione went over to you." Blaise recounted.

"And her spell cancelled right when she was standing under you, so you squashed her." Draco added helpfully.

"And then she clung to you like a limpet and Snape had to practically drag her off you." Theo added with a grin. The glare she fixed on him was murderous and Theo gulped.

"Did someone get my Nimbus?" Harry appeared to be trying to change the subject, possibly in an effort to save Theo's life.

"Er—" The boys traded panicked looks and Hermione winced, knowing that couldn't mean anything good.

"What?" Harry asked, looking from one to the next.

"Well... when you fell off, it got blown away. Blaise said hesitantly.

"And?" Harry's voice sounded panicked.

"And it hit the Whomping Willow.""And it hit the Whomping Willow." Blaise repeated, slower and with a cringe. Harry's face paled.

"And?" he repeated weakly.

"And, well, the Whomping Willow, it-- it doesn't like to be hit." Blaise grimaced.

"Flitwick brought it back just before you came around." Draco said quietly and Theo slowly reached for the bag at his feet and turned it upside down on the bed, tipping a dozen bits of splintered wood and twig onto the bed.

"Bollocks." Whispered Harry.
Chapter XXV:

Severus's POV:

Severus was sitting in Albus's office only half listening to the headmaster and Minerva talk, too distracted by his thoughts to give them his full attention.

Harry had almost died.

Harry had almost plummeted about sixty feet to his death and Severus had been fucking terrified for the boy.

Severus knew from the Boggart lesson that Harry's worst fear was a Dementor and he knew from Lupin that the boy had passed out on the train when the Dementors had searched it– and now he also knew that he needed to teach Harry how to defend himself from a Dementor.

"What magic was that, Albus?" Minerva's subdued voice broke him from his thoughts. "I've never seen anything like that."

Ah. Granger's—Hermione's magic. It was impossible to stay continue staying impersonal about the girl and using her surname after she'd clung so desperately to him, trembling and crying those Merlin-damned silent tears— Severus hated whoever had taught his student that she wasn't allowed to make noise when she cried. He'd held her up, let her get mud all over his robes and had come to the shocking realisation that Hermione trusted him enough to let herself be vulnerable with him.

Like he said, staying impersonal was impossible after that.

And her magic... Severus honestly had no idea what she'd done, or how she'd done it, just that she had reached out with her hands towards the boy and his plummeting had slowed to a standstill. Minerva was right— he'd never seen anything like that before, that raw burst of magic formed only by her sheer strength and the force of her intent.

"I have no idea what kind of magic that was." Albus spoke slowly. "It seemed to be some combination of wandless and accidental magic. Yet it wasn't wandless magic for she did not use a spell and it wasn't accidental magic because it wasn't an uncontrolled burst— she was able to get it to do exactly as she intended. I truly do not know how she managed to accomplish such a feat and I confess that it concerns me greatly."

"It doesn't matter!" Severus spoke up with an angry snarl, unable to believe that they were worrying about what she'd done while skipping over the why. "It doesn't matter how she did it, because if she hadn't then Harry could have died!" Both Albus and Minerva visibly flinched, Minerva's face showing her horror at the idea while Albus looked very tired.

"She needs watching, Severus." He said quietly. "She's even more powerful then we realized, and that makes her even more dangerous then we've predicted."

"You've predicted." Severus corrected the headmaster in a low, furious voice. "Miss Granger is dangerous, I agree, but only towards those who aim to harm Harry."
"We cannot guarantee that, Severus," Albus said gravely.

"When has Miss Granger ever threatened or hurt someone who hasn't wronged or threatened or hurt Harry?" Severus demanded.

"What about when she stole the Philosopher's Stone?" Albus countered, his twinkling blue eyes serious over his half-moon spectacles.

"A mere theory," Severus dismissed with a sneer. "And a pathetic one at that-- there's no evidence whatsoever that she had anything to do with it." Except I happen to know for a fact she did, he thought. Which once again had him wondering what in the seven hells the troublesome twosome had done with the Stone. From Hermione's words he suspected they'd destroyed it, as revenge for the Mirror of Erised 'incident', but he couldn't be sure-- for all he knew, she could have been misleading him. While she'd trusted him enough back then to hint that they were the ones responsible, he doubted she'd trusted him enough to be honest about what they'd done with their stolen treasure-- and he doubted someone who'd grown up homeless and starving would destroy a source of unlimited gold in a fit of spite.

"You're always defending her!" Minerva said, visibly frustrated. "Why?"

"Because someone has to!" He exploded, the stress and anger stripping his control from him. "Her parents died when she was just three years old, chances are she's been living on the streets since about age six, she was raped on at least one occasion when she was nine and has formed what seems to be her only genuine friendship with Harry, and yet you're trying to rip them apart!"

"R-raped?" Minerva's face went white. Even though the deputy headmistress didn't like Hermione, it was clear the woman was horrified by Hermione's ordeal-- only a monster wouldn't be.

"While healing Granger after an accident during the summer, Narcissa Malfoy used an old Pureblood spell on her which showed that she lost her purity when she was nine. So unless you think she was willingly having sex before she even hit double digits..." Severus let his voice trail off, his expression dark.

And yet, his thoughts were racing-- this was Hermione Granger they were talking about. Her life was one he couldn't even imagine living. Was it actually possible that she had *willingly* had sex at nine years of age? And when he said 'willing' he wasn't actually talking about her truly consenting-- there was no such thing as consensually having sex when there was a child involved; no, he was referring to Hermione been manipulated into the situation as so that she believed she had willingly consented.

Or, even more sickening and yet even more likely, was the possibility that she had been desperate enough to prostitute herself like that fourteen year old girl she'd been talking about. It sickened Severus that he could see it happening all too easily-- Hermione had been skin and bones the first time he'd met her and she'd been dressed in clothes that were barely better then rags. To a starving, freezing child whose only tradable item of monetary worth was what people would pay for her body, what was there to truly stop her from selling herself? Why wouldn't she use what she had, just to get something to eat or a place to stay? She'd been young, alone and desperate-- and Severus knew just how coldly practical Hermione could be. Her ruthless pragmatism wasn't something people were born with, and in his experience the origin of such traits was never a good one. He just hoped to Merlin he was wrong about this, because it honestly didn't bear thinking about.

"Whatever Miss Granger's faults," Albus spoke up, and Severus was actually thankful to the distraction from the disturbing turn his thoughts had taken, "she does seem to care for Harry very much. Her distress was very genuine. So while we will be keeping a close eye on her, you are
right, Severus, and perhaps... perhaps we should cut her a little slack."

Severus gave a curt nod. "See to it, headmaster." He said coldly before leaving Albus's office and making his way back to his quarters. He was only about halfway there before he changed his mind and turned, making his way up to the hospital wing.

A reluctant Madam Pomfrey allowed him in and he strode over to the cots Harry and Hermione were lying in. They were still side by side and their hands were clasped. Hermione, he noticed, had her thumb pressed over Harry's pulse— he was quite confident that the placement was not accidental.

"Professor." Hermione's voice was quiet and hoarse and her eyes were still rimmed with red. "Can we help you?"

"Once you're both in full health you're going to start lessons with Professor Lupin on how to defend yourselves against Dementors." He said in a voice that left no room for argument. He would teach them himself except his Patronus was possibly one of the most private things in his life. And he was sure Lupin would be more than happy to teach them—and if he wasn't, well, Severus fully intended on using guilt to convince the werewolf to do so.

"The Patronus charm?" Hermione asked and he nodded, not surprised she'd heard of it—after her experience with the Dementors on the Express he imagined she'd researched them quite thoroughly. And even if she hadn't then, she most certainly would have after the DADA lesson with the boggart.

"The Patronus charm? What's that?" Harry asked, speaking up for the first time since Severus had entered the Hospital Wing.

"It's a spell that drives away Dementors." Hermione explained and Harry gave a small nod.

"I guess that could be useful." He mumbled.

*Guess? You guess?* Severus wanted to ask incredulously—Hermione looked just as incredulous at Harry's noncommittal attitude— but neither of them said anything. The boy looked too tired and too miserable to chastise, so instead he just gave a short nod before he left.

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*Tom's POV:*

"And this is why I loathe that ridiculous, infernal sport!" Tom snapped as he paced angrily in the Hospital Wing, empty except for Hermione and Harry—the petrified students from last year had been transferred to their own homes seeing as no special care was required to keep them in perfect health. Tom glared at the younger boy who was slumped back in his cot.

Harry looked exhausted, purple shadows dusting under his eyes, his skin pale and his hair limp. Hermione looked similarly exhausted, but her eyes glittered with anger.

Tom had felt the sudden pull on his magic, had felt the surge of Hermione's urgency through the binding, and had pushed as much magic as he could spare to her. He'd then had to wait for nearly twenty-four hours for one of them to fetch the diary and tell him just what the hell had happened.

Been back at Hogwarts was boring, Tom would admit. After fifty years of being confined in the
diary, however, a little boredom was something he could deal with—whenever Hermione or Harry left him in the dorm, he’d be able to read from Hermione's rapidly growing collection of books, catching up on the last fifty years. She’d also managed to procure a complete set of course-books for the seventh year curriculum as Tom had been sixteen when the diary was created— which meant he had no memory of Voldemort completing their seventh year at Hogwarts. The studying had certainly kept him busy, which helped stave off the boredom, but after spending the summer constantly interacting with Harry and Hermione he found he was missing the company.

Which, considering his entire childhood all he'd wanted was to be left alone, was bizarre. Then again, fifty years of solitude did tend to change things—the silence weighed down on Tom now, it made him feel stagnant and claustrophobic in a way he'd never admit to. It was a weakness, his desire for contact, one that he'd never reveal but hadn't been able to stop himself indulging.

When she had time or when she was studying away from the other Slytherins, usually during Harry's Quidditch practices, Hermione would always ask if he wished to come out—which he always took care not to sound too eager about agreeing to—and they'd discuss and debate magical theory for hours, would trade knowledge on spells and potions that they'd picked up and sometimes they'd just read in each other’s company.

There was an unspoken understanding between the two of them. They both had a darkness lurking inside them, monsters under their skin. Hermione's "monster" was cold-hearted, calculating, vicious when provoked and a survivor. Her past had shaped her into a dangerous person who would not ever hesitate to do what she felt needed to be done, had made her into someone incapable of empathising with those who she didn't care about. Her suffering had made her capable of cruelty, too—it was the vicious cycle of life; the abused become the abusers, victims turning into the biggest monsters of them all. After all, nobody truly knew suffering like those who had suffered and those who knew suffering could cause the greatest suffering of all.

Despite the similarities, at the core Tom's own "monster" was different to Hermione's. While Hermione was born with the capacity of becoming the person she was today, it had been her experiences that had turned her into what she was. She had learned not to care, but Tom never had; he’d simply been born that way—smarter and stronger then the other children at the orphanage, the only real person in a world of paper cut-outs. Other humans were meaningless, useful only in what they could do for him; what he could make them do. The power he’d had over others—the power to hurt them, to make them suffer, the power to force them to do his bidding, being the hand that pulled their puppet strings, and the power to kill them, to snuff out their worthless existence—had always been something capable of breaking the monotony. The world was a dull, grey thing that had always bored him in its predictability. Even magic had only added colour to his life for so long, eventually it just became another part of the grayed out world.

There had been a few people, however, who weren't just grey bits of scenery. Lucretia and Cygnus Black had been bright splashes of colour; real and visceral in a way almost everyone else was not, lighting things up and bringing brightness to the world. There were others, others who'd attracted his attention, had become real to him in a way that most people weren't, became more then objects for him to manipulate for his own enjoyment. Lucretia and Cygnus had been special. They were dead now, a fact which sat uncomfortably with him as he found he quite disliked that his lovers were gone. The world was a duller, greyer place without them.

But Hermione Granger had colour; bright and fierce and real, a bloodied streak of red against the grey that bled colour into his life.

Harry Potter had colour too. He shone, almost; bright and steady and real, a constant, unwavering spark that lit up the world around him in soft radiance.
Harry wasn't like Hermione— he'd trusted Tom long before she had even started to let him in; a process he was still working on. Harry had darkness in him— you didn't grow up with people like his disgusting muggle relatives and stay whole. The boy had spent his childhood in a cupboard— everything about him screamed dark and yet people expected him to be untouched, pure, unblemished. The truly astounding part, though, was that he'd actually almost succeeded in fulfilling those expectations. It was only the small things that gave him away; the short bursts of anger, hot but fast to burn out, his acceptance of the Darkness in those around him, his capability to rationalise away acts of violence that would horrify anyone else— and his willingness to sacrifice the rest of world for the sake of those he loved, if the deal he made with Voldemort was any indication.

Harry didn't discuss magical theory or read with him and he wasn't really interested in most of the spells Tom liked— violent, messy, Dark curses that gave him a rush or the complicated, fiddly charms and pieces of transfiguration that required absolute precision, challenging him to be interesting. But Harry did like talking and he liked playing card games and chess— even though he always lost— and he was surprisingly tactile in a way Tom didn't think the boy even noticed. And Harry genuinely seemed to care; he treated Tom like a person, like a friend— he cared how Tom felt, was happy when Tom was happy and upset on his behalf when Tom expressed any sort of discontent.

Harry and Hermione were bright and beautiful and they were his. And Dementors had dared enter the school grounds, had dared hurt Harry, his Harry, they had nearly killed him— and Tom was furious. Hermione's face was pale but rage had colored her cheeks a rosy pink.

"The sooner Black stops being a problem, the better," she snarled. "I don't care if he's killed, Kissed or arrested— I just want him dealt with and the Dementors gone!"

Flushed with rage, Hermione made a pretty picture; the too-large pyjamas supplied by the school mediwitch slipping down past a thin shoulder, exposing an expanse of pale, soft skin and just the barest hint of the curve of her breast. She was such a delicate-looking girl; a deceptively petite build that hid the vicious strength and brutal violence it was capable of, and her long, wild curls framed a pretty face; all big eyes, sharp cheekbones and soft, pouty lips. She was already a lovely-looking thing and Tom knew she'd only grow more beautiful as she got older.

Harry was just as lovely, in his own way. He had hair as dark as Tom's, a slight build with subtle but defined muscles from his Quidditch practice. He had a slender figure, porcelain skin that contrasted so nicely with his hair and set off the brilliant green of his eyes, the shade reminiscent to the Killing Curse in a way that made a familiar heat coil inside him.

They were both such pretty, little things; each beautifully broken in their own ways and all the more desirable for it. He wanted them like he'd wanted Lucretia and Cygnus. He wasn't surprised Voldemort had kept them so close— he was actually more surprised that the original soul had been able to let them go. They were young, he supposed; too young to fuck, probably. He wasn't quite sure. He just knew he wanted to push them down, wanted to touch them and taste them and let them show him the world through their eyes, bright and colourful. He wanted to own them, wanted to claim every part of them; he'd consume them and he'd never let them go.

Hermione used a knife-scarred hand to tug the slipping pyjama sleeve back up which was slightly disappointing and Tom turned his attention back to the conversation. "Dumbledore is going to be watching me closely after this," Hermione was saying and Tom nodded, agreeing with her. Tom had made the mistake of showing Dumbledore he was different; had slipped up that day the man had visited the orphanage and brought with him a burst of colour that made Tom reckless. He regretted that immensely— Dumbledore had never forgotten what he'd seen that day and had never
stopped watching Tom for what he'd known was lurking beneath his charming mask, just like he'd never stop watching Hermione for what he suspected hid inside her. And he wasn't wrong.

"Do you think he'll try anything?" Harry asked nervously. Hermione shook her head.

"No." Hermione said, confident in what she was saying. "Not yet, anyway."

"Not yet?" Harry's voice rose in his anxiety.

"Oh one day he'll do something," Hermione said, her voice deliciously dark sounding in a way that made Tom want to lick the words from her mouth. Her sharp wolf smile was fierce and challenging and he could almost see the blood on her teeth. "But we'll be ready when he does, Harry. And he's going to regret everything he's done to us."

Tom couldn't help the answering smile that stretched over his face, sinister and anticipatory. Even Harry, the most gentle of them all, looked grimly determined. There was no trace of hesitation on his features and Tom let a curl of laughter escape him because he knew then that when they struck, Harry would not falter.

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Harry's POV:

Madam Pomfrey insisted on keeping him and Hermione in the hospital wing for the rest of the weekend. Neither of them argued or complained but Harry wouldn't let her throw away the shattered remnants of his *Nimbus Two Thousand and One*. He knew he was being stupid, knew that the Nimbus was beyond repair, but he couldn't help it; he felt as though he'd lost one of his best friends.

Both he and Hermione had a stream of visitors but nothing anyone said or did could make Harry feel any better. He felt sick and humiliated every time he thought of the Dementors– everyone said they were horrible, but only he and Hermione collapsed every time they went near one. Hermione had good reason to– Harry was well aware that what he knew of the traumas of her past only brushed the surface– but he didn't even remember the traumatic event that the Dementors kept forcing him to relive.

The echoes in his head of his dying parents.

Harry replayed it over and over again during the night hours in the hospital wing while he lay awake, staring at the strips of moonlight on the ceiling and remembering what the last moments of his mother's life, her desperate attempts to protect him and Voldemort's laughter before he murdered her. Harry spent his nights tossing and turning, sinking into dreams full of clammy, rotted hands and petrified pleading before jerking awake to dwell once more on his mother's voice.

He thought he'd be angry at Voldemort, that he'd hate him and want the man dead. But he didn't. He couldn't. He'd grown to tolerate the dark wizard. And he certainly liked Tom. He'd spent an entire summer getting to know Tom but he couldn't blame isolation completely for their friendship, not when even now at Hogwarts he continued to enjoy spending time with the older boy. Tom helped him with his homework, was always happy to card games or chess or gobstones with him or take him exploring, the three of them hiding under the invisibility cloak while Tom showed them parts of the castle Harry hadn't even known existed. Not to mention Tom and Hermione could argue for hours about magic theories that made his head spin and they'd swap spells and trade
knowledge, Tom proving to be a talented teacher with a seemingly inexhaustible repertoire of spell.

And Tom offered Hermione something that he couldn't– Harry had always been able to accept Hermione's Darkness, but he couldn't embrace it, not like Tom did. Harry felt horribly guilty that he couldn't be enough for Hermione in that way; she'd never asked him to, had never wanted him to, but Harry still felt like he was failing her when to him the violent, cruel parts of her were just another facet of what made her Hermione. Tom, though– Tom saw them as something beautiful and Hermione needed that, needed someone who looked at all the Darkest parts of her and didn't just accept but embraced them, celebrated them. It just wasn't who Harry was to appreciate the Darkness in people; he accepted it and he loved them regardless, but he couldn't appreciate it. And that's why Harry had decided to open his heart up and let Tom in, and he had yet to regret that decision.

So, no; it wasn't Voldemort or Tom who filled Harry with burning rage and icy hatred every time he dwelled on his mother's pleading voice– it was Pettigrew; the traitor, the one who his mum had trusted but who had betrayed her. It hadn't been personal to Voldemort– it was a war and his parents had been an obstacle. But Pettigrew, he was supposed to have been their friend. Harry didn't know how or when but he vowed he'd make the traitor pay– because he might not be able to appreciate and embrace people's Darkness but that didn't mean he was afraid to ask them to use it. And it definitely didn't mean he didn't have his own lurking inside him.

It was a relief to return to the noise and bustle of the main school on Monday where Harry was forced to think about other things, even if he had to endure Ron Weasley's mocking. Weasley was almost beside himself with glee at Slytherin's defeat an whenever they passed each other in the corridors he'd do spirited imitations of Harry falling off his broom.

Weasley also spent much of their next Herbology lesson doing Dementor impressions across the greenhouse until Hermione lost her temper and flung a heavy flower pot at him. It hit him in the face, knocking him out and causing Sprout to take fifty points from Slytherin and give her a week of detentions ("Worth it." She'd muttered darkly).

"I wonder if Snape's teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts again?" Harry tried to change the subject as they headed toward Lupin's classroom after lunch, Hermione's expression still stormy with barely suppressed rage.

"It'll be Lupin. The Full Moon was five days ago." Hermione answered him absently, distracted by her seething.

"What does that have to do with it?" He asked before nearly falling over and dropping his book-bag as realization struck him. "He's a werewolf?" He whispered furiously to her. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I only figured it out after completing the essay. I was going to wait and see how long it took you to figure it out." Hermione said, calming down from her rage as she smirked. Harry ran over the evidence in his mind– Lupin's "sick" days, his Boggart, the fact that Hermione thought he was and Hermione was always right...

"Well," Harry said, blinking. "That's... different."

And so, to neither his or Hermione's surprise, Lupin was back at work. Harry noted that the man's robes were hanging even more loosely on him and there were dark shadows beneath his eyes.
Nevertheless, Lupin smiled at the class as they took their seats, and all the Gryffindors burst at once into an explosion of complaints about Snape's behavior while he'd been ill.

"It's not fair, he was only filling in, why should he give us homework?"

"We don't know anything about werewolves two rolls of parchment!"

"Did you tell Professor Snape we haven't covered them yet?" Lupin asked, frowning slightly. The babble broke out again.

"Yes, but he said we were really behind he wouldn't listen--"

"--two rolls of parchment!"

Lupin smiled at the look of indignation on so many faces. Hermione looked disdainful. "Don't worry. I'll speak to Professor Snape. You don't have to do the essay."

"Bugger," Harry muttered, thinking of the two rolls of parchment he'd spent nearly three and a half hours on. Hermione looked similarly displeased.

They did, however, still have a very enjoyable lesson. Lupin had brought along a glass box containing a hinkypunk, a little one-legged creature who looked as though he were made of wisps of smoke, rather frail and harmless looking.

"Lures travelers into bogs," Lupin said as they took notes. "You notice the lantern dangling from his hand? Hops ahead-- people follow the light-- then--" The hinkypunk made a horrible squelching noise against the glass.

When the bell rang, everyone gathered up their things and headed for the door, Harry and Hermione among them, but--

"Wait a moment, Harry," Lupin called. "I'd like a word." Harry doubled back, Hermione right next to him, and watched Lupin cover the hinkypunk's box with a cloth. "I heard about the match," he said, turning back to his desk and starting to pile books into his briefcase, "I'm sorry about your broomstick, Harry. Is there any chance of fixing it?"

"No," Harry said, mouth turning down. "The tree smashed it to bits." Lupin sighed.

"They planted the Whomping Willow the same year that I arrived at Hogwarts. People used to play a game, trying to get near enough to touch the trunk. In the end, a boy called Davey Gudgeon nearly lost an eye and we were forbidden to go near it. No broomstick would have a chance."

"Did you hear about the Dementors too?" said Harry with difficulty. Hermione stiffened beside him and Lupin looked at them quickly.

"Yes, I did. I don't think any of us have seen Professor Dumbledore that angry. They have been growing restless for some time-- furious at his refusal to let them inside the grounds.... I suppose they were the reason you fell, Harry?"

"Yes," said Harry. He hesitated, and then the question he had to ask burst from him before he could stop himself. "Why? Why do they affect me like that? Am I just--?"

"It has nothing to do with weakness," said Lupin sharply, as though he had read Harry's mind. "Like I told Hermione, during the lesson with the boggart-- Dementors affect you worse than the others, both of you, because there are horrors in your pasts that the others don't have. Similarly to
how Hermione, who has mastered every other spell I've set on her first try, struggled with the boggart," Hermione stiffened at his side, and Harry hoped Lupin realized the dangerous territory he was stepping in. "For those of us with fears that are very real and memories so terrible..." Lupin shook his head slowly, looking very tired. "Getting too near a Dementor... every good feeling, every happy memory will be sucked out of you. If it can, the Dementor will feed on you long enough to reduce you to something like itself-- soulless and evil. You'll be left with nothing but the worst experiences of your life. And the worst that happened to you, Harry, is enough to make anyone fall off their broom. You have nothing to feel ashamed of."

"When they get near me," Harry stared at Lupin's desk, his throat tight. "I can hear Voldemort murdering my mum." Lupin made a sudden motion with his arm as though to grip Harry's shoulder but thought better of it. Hermione's hand clasped onto his and she squeezed hard. Her lips were pressed into thin white lines. There was a moment's silence, then-- "Why did they have to come to the match?" said Harry bitterly.

"They're getting hungry," Lupin said, shutting his briefcase with a snap. "Dumbledore won't let them into the school, so their supply of human prey has dried up.... I don't think they could resist the large crowd around the Quidditch field. All that excitement... emotions running high... it was their idea of a feast."

"Did Professor Snape speak to you, sir?" Hermione cut in, suddenly.

"He did." Lupin nodded, suddenly looking reluctant. "He has... requested... that I teach you both the spell that repels Dementors. He assures me that despite your age, you are both powerful and talented enough to learn it."

"Oh we will." Hermione's voice was grim. "We definitely will."

Lupin looked into their hard, determined faces, hesitated, then nodded, "I'll try and help but it will have to wait until next term, I'm afraid. I have a lot to do before the holidays. I chose a very inconvenient time to fall ill."

Once they left the room, Hermione and Harry traded looks.

"Yes, he 'chose' a very inconvenient time to fall ill." Hermione muttered and Harry snorted.

With the promise of anti-Dementor lessons from Lupin, the thought that he might never have to hear his mother's death again and the fact that Ravenclaw flattened Gryffindor in their Quidditch match at the end of November, Harry's mood took a definite upturn. Slytherin were not out of the running after all, although they could not afford to lose another match. Marcus was working the team as hard as ever in the chilly haze of rain that persisted into December. Harry saw no hint of a Dementor within the grounds. Dumbledore's anger seemed to be keeping them at their stations at the entrances.

Two weeks before the end of the term, the sky lightened suddenly to a dazzling, opaline white and the muddy grounds were revealed one morning covered in glittering frost. Inside the castle, there was a buzz of Christmas-- or Yule, if he went by traditional magical customs-- in the air. Flitwick had already decorated his classroom with shimmering lights that turned out to be real, fluttering fairies. The students were all happily discussing their plans for the holidays. Both Harry and Hermione were among the first to sign up to stay and to everyone's delight there was to be another Hogsmeade trip on the very last weekend of the term. "We can do all our present shopping there," Hermione said, sounding very satisfied with the fact.

On the Saturday morning of the Hogsmeade trip, he and Hermione wrapped up tightly in cloaks
and scarves and walked out into the snow.

Hogsmeade looked like a Christmas card; the little thatched cottages and shops were all covered in a layer of crisp snow; there were holly wreaths on the doors and strings of enchanted candles hanging in the trees.

After a quick visit to Honeydukes, Hermione suggested they go to the Three Broomsticks and get a butter beer. Harry was more than willing; the wind was fierce and his hands were freezing so they crossed the road and in a few minutes were entering the tiny inn.

Too busy exploring, they hadn't visited the Three Broomsticks last time but it was a nice place— it was extremely crowded and noisy, but it was also warm and smoky. A curvy sort of woman with a pretty face was serving a bunch of rowdy warlocks up at the bar.

Harry made his way to the back of the room where there was a small, vacant table between the window and a handsome Christmas tree which stood next to the fireplace. Hermione disappeared then came back a few minutes later, carrying two foaming tankards of hot butterbeer. "Merry Christmas!" She said with a smile, raising her tankard and Harry drank deeply. It was the most delicious thing he'd ever tasted and seemed to heat every bit of him from the inside.

When they spotted McGonagall entering, along with Hagrid and a few other teachers and, surprisingly, the man Harry recognized from the Malfoy's gala as the Minister of Magic, they both decided to leave and made their way back out into the snow storm.

Christmas shopping took them nearly two hours, Hermione not complaining about Harry supplying the funds, and then they headed back up to the castle, ready to wrap the gifts and get a head start on their holiday homework.

By the next morning, most of the students had left and the usual magnificent Christmas decorations had been put up around the castle, despite the fact that hardly any of the students remained to enjoy them. Thick streamers of holly and mistletoe were strung along the corridors, mysterious lights shone from inside every suit of armour, and the Great Hall was filled with its usual twelve Christmas trees, glittering with golden stars. Harry wasn't exactly sure why Hogwarts celebrated Christmas instead of Yule and according to Tom when he attended Hogwarts they'd celebrated Yule so he guessed it probably had something to do with Dumbledore.

On Christmas morning Harry was woken by Hermione pouring a cup of water on his head. He spluttered, sitting up and grabbing his glasses while she and Tom laughed at him. One of the reasons Harry loved Christmas so much was because Hermione seemed to glow during it. It was one of the only times when she let a childlike joy overwhelm her.

A large stack of parcels had appeared at the end of his bed and apparently Hermione had already cheerfully started unwrapping hers and he stumbled out of bed to join her. He quickly sorted through all his presents, the ones from his friends in one pile and the ones from the other Slytherins in the other, and, to his confusion, spotted a long, thin package that looked suspiciously like a broomstick— he'd think it was from Draco, if he hadn't already moved Draco's present into the friend pile as well as the fact the wrapping paper was plain, nothing like the expensive stuff Draco was fond of using.

"Who sent that?" Hermione asked curiously as she glanced over, a freshly unwrapped set of delicate, gossamer dress robes on her lap— Harry guessed they were probably from Narcissa.

"Not sure..." He said as he ripped the parcel open, then gasped at the magnificent, gleaming broomstick that rolled out onto his bedspread. He couldn't even speak. This wasn't a *Nimbus Two*
Thousand and One—it was a Firebolt; the newest and best broom on the market. Its handle glittered as he picked it up, breathless, and he could feel it vibrating under his touch. Harry let go and it hung in midair, unsupported, at exactly the right height for him to mount it. His eyes moved from the golden registration number at the top of the handle, right down to the perfectly smooth, streamlined birch twigs that made up the tail. It was the most amazing broom he'd ever seen. Ever.

"Look and see if there's a card," said Tom, looking impressed despite himself. Hermione had already started picking through the Firebolt's wrappings, though, and she frowned.

"Hm. Nothing. Who do you think spent that much on you?"

"Well," Harry said, feeling stunned, "I'm betting it wasn't the Dursleys. Do you... do you think it was Dumbledore? I mean, he sent me the Invisibility Cloak anonymously...."

"That was your father's, though," said Hermione, with a shake of her head. "Dumbledore was just passing it on to you."

"Besides," added Tom, "no matter how much he wants to win you over, I doubt he could afford to spend hundreds of Galleons on you."

"I can't believe this," Harry muttered, running a hand along the Firebolt, while Hermione and Tom traded thoughtful looks. "Who--?"

"Sirius Black is technically your godfather, isn't he?" Hermione said, suddenly.

"Yes... according to Lucius, anyway." Harry said, confused for a moment before his eyes widened. "Oh! You think--?"

"It's my best guess." Hermione shrugged.

"The Blacks are-- or, they were extremely wealthy," Tom added, "and as the only surviving heir, Black has a fortune at his fingertips."

"So... do you think it's safe?" Harry gave the broom a cautious look.

"Black doesn't want you dead so I don't see why it wouldn't be." Hermione said. "Of course, we should definitely scan it for different curses and jinxes-- Tom?"

Tom nodded and Hermione handed him his wand. Waving it over the broom, Tom started chanting in Latin. Nearly ten minutes passed of quiet casting before Tom sat back with a small smile. "I can't find any trace of Dark magic on it." He said.

"Which means we give you permission to drag us out onto the grounds and make us watch you fly while we stand in the cold." Hermione added. Harry instantly opened his mouth to say they didn't have to but she just laughed and Tom shook his head in amusement.

"Don't worry, I'll bring along some of my new books to read." Hermione promised when he still went to protest and Harry just didn't have the strength to insist.

After spending an exhilarating morning on his broom while Tom and Hermione read, Harry and Hermione made their way to the Great Hall after returning the Firebolt to his dorm. When they arrived they found that the House tables had been moved against the walls again and that a single table, set for twelve, stood in the middle of the room. Dumbledore, McGonagall, Snape, Sprout, and Flitwick were there, along with Filch who had taken off his usual brown coat and was wearing a very old and rather moldy-looking tailcoat. There were only three other students, two extremely
nervous-looking first years and a sullen-faced fifth year.

"Merry Christmas!" said Dumbledore as they approached the table. "As there are so few of us, it seemed foolish to use the House tables.... Sit down, sit down!"

Harry and Hermione sat down side by side at the end of the table. "Crackers!" said Dumbledore enthusiastically, offering the end of a large silver noisemaker to Snape, who took it reluctantly and tugged. With a bang like a gunshot, the cracker flew apart to reveal a large, pointed witch's hat topped with a stuffed vulture.

Harry, remembering the boggart, winced for Snape's sake. Snape's mouth thinned and he shoved the hat toward Dumbledore who swapped it for his wizard's hat at once. "Dig in!" he advised the table, beaming around.

As Harry was helping himself to roast potatoes, the doors of the Great Hall opened again and he almost groaned out loud. It was Trelawney, gliding toward them as though on wheels. She had put on a green sequined dress in honor of the occasion, making her look more than ever like a glittering, oversized dragonfly.

"Sibyll, this is a pleasant surprise!" said Dumbledore, standing up.

"I have been crystal gazing, Headmaster," said Trelawney in her mistiest, most faraway voice, "and to my astonishment, I saw myself abandoning my solitary luncheon and coming to join you. Who am I to refuse the promptings of fate? I at once hastened from my tower, and I do beg you to forgive my lateness...."

"Certainly, certainly," said Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling. "Let me draw you up a chair--" And he did indeed draw a chair in midair with his wand, which revolved for a few seconds before falling with a thud beside Snape and McGonagall. Trelawney, however, did not sit down; her enormous eyes had been roving around the table, and she suddenly uttered a kind of soft scream.

"I dare not, Headmaster! If I join the table, we shall be thirteen! Nothing could be more unlucky! Never forget that when thirteen dine together, the first to rise will be the first to die!"

"We'll risk it, Sibyll," said McGonagall impatiently. "Do sit down, the turkey's getting stone cold."

Trelawney hesitated, then lowered herself into the empty chair, eyes shut and mouth clenched tight, as though expecting a thunderbolt to hit the table. McGonagall poked a large spoon into the nearest tureen. "Tripe, Sibyll?" Hermione snorted quietly and Harry bit back a grin.

Trelawney, though, ignored her. Eyes open again, she looked around once more and said, "But where is dear Professor Lupin?"

"I'm afraid the poor fellow is ill again," said Dumbledore, indicating that everybody should start serving themselves. "Most unfortunate that it should happen on Christmas Day."

"But surely you already knew that, Sibyll?" said McGonagall with her eyebrows raised and Harry could see Hermione biting her lip to keep from laughing. Trelawney gave McGonagall a very cold look.

"Certainly I knew, Minerva," she said quietly. "But one does not parade the fact that one is All-Knowing. I frequently act as though I am not possessed of the Inner Eye, so as not to make others nervous.

"That explains a great deal," said McGonagall tartly. Hermione couldn't quite muffle her loud snort...
this time and Trelawney's voice suddenly became a good deal less misty.

"If you must know, Minerva, I have seen that poor Professor Lupin will not be with us for very long. He seems aware, himself, that his time is short. He positively fled when I offered to crystal gaze for him--"

"Imagine that," said McGonagall dryly and Harry watched in amusement as Hermione ducked her head to hide her silent laughter behind a curtain of curls.

"I doubt," said Dumbledore, in a cheerful but slightly raised voice, which put an end to McGonagall and Trelawney's 'conversation', "that Professor Lupin is in any immediate danger. Severus, you've made the potion for him again?"

"Yes, headmaster," said Snape.

"Good," said Dumbledore. "Then he should be up and about in no time... Derek, have you had any of these chipolatas? They're excellent!" The first year boy went furiously red on being addressed directly by Dumbledore, and took the platter of sausages with trembling hands.

Trelawney behaved almost normally until the very end of Christmas dinner, two hours later. Full to bursting and still wearing their cracker hats, Harry and Hermione got up first from the table and she shrieked loudly.

"My dears! Which of you left their seat first? Which?"

"I don't believe it matters, Professor." Hermione's voice was saccharine, and McGonagall added her two cents.

"And I doubt it will make much difference," she said coldly, "unless a mad axe-man is waiting outside the doors to slaughter the first into the Entrance Hall."

Hermione and McGonagall actually traded looks of 'can you believe this sheer idiocy?' and Harry tried not to feel like the apocalypse was impending as girl and woman nodded at each other, before Hermione linked arms with him and tugged him after her.

(Harry carefully did not comment on the fact that she made sure she was the first one to step out into the Entrance Hall, apparently 'just in case').
Chapter XXVI:

Harry's **POV:**

After a perfectly enjoyable holidays it was a shame when the rest of the school returned shortly after New Year and the Slytherin Dungeon became crowded and noisy again. It also meant that Tom couldn't lounge around the common room and dorms with them anymore and Harry found himself missing the older boy's company.

When classes started again, the last thing anyone felt like doing was spending two hours on the grounds on a raw January morning but Hagrid had provided a bonfire full of salamanders for their enjoyment and they spent a good lesson collecting dry wood and leaves to keep the fire blazing while the flame-loving lizards scampered up and down the crumbling, white-hot logs.

The first Divination lesson of the new term was much less fun; Trelawney was now teaching them palmistry, and she lost no time in informing him that he had the shortest lifeline she had ever seen. An angry Hermione retaliated to this by loudly providing logical counterpoints to everything Trelawney said, which caused her to get flustered to the point where Harry thought the woman might burst into tears.

Defense Against the Dark Arts continued to be great fun and both he and Hermione were keen to get started on the anti-Dementor lessons as soon as possible.

"Ah yes," said Lupin, when they reminded him at the end of class. "Let me see... how about eight o'clock on Thursday evening? The History of Magic classroom should be large enough.... I'll have to think carefully about how we're going to do this.... We can't bring a real Dementor into the castle to practice on...."

At eight o'clock on Thursday evening, however, it was only Harry who left the Slytherin Common Room for the History of Magic classroom. Hermione was serving detention for cursing Weasley—the only consolation was that Weasley had also been given detention because he'd thrown the first curse—so it was just him. It was dark and empty when Harry arrived but he lit the lamps with his wand and only had to wait about five minutes before Lupin turned up, carrying a large packing case which he heaved onto Binn's desk.

"What's that?" Harry asked curiously.

"Another boggart," said Lupin, stripping off his cloak. "I've been combing the castle ever since Tuesday, and very luckily, I found this one lurking inside Mr. Filch's filing cabinet. It's the nearest we'll get to a real Dementor. The boggart will turn into a Dementor when he sees you, so we'll be able to practice on him. I can store him in my office when we're not using him; there's a cupboard under my desk he'll like."

"Okay," said Harry, trying to sound as though he wasn't apprehensive at all and merely glad that Lupin had found such a good substitute for a real Dementor.
"So..." Lupin had taken out his own wand and indicated that Harry should do the same. "The spell I am going to try and teach you is highly advanced magic, Harry– well beyond Ordinary Wizarding Levels. It is called the Patronus Charm."

"Yeah, Professor Snape said that. How does it work exactly?" asked Harry nervously.

"Well, when it works correctly, It conjures up a Patronus," said Lupin, "which is a kind of anti-Dementor– a guardian that acts as a shield between you and the Dementor." Harry had a sudden vision of himself crouching behind a Hagrid-sized figure holding a large club. Lupin continued, "The Patronus is a kind of positive force, a projection of the very things that the Dementor feeds upon– hope, happiness, the desire to survive– but it cannot feel despair, as real humans can, so the Dementors can't hurt it. But I must warn you, Harry, that the charm might be too advanced for you. Many qualified wizards have difficulty with it."

"What does a Patronus look like?" Harry asked curiously.

"Each one is unique to the wizard who conjures it." Lupin said, mouth curving into a sad-looking smile.

"And how do you conjure it?"

"With an incantation, which will work only if you are concentrating, with all your might, on a single, very happy memory."

Harry cast his mind about for a happy memory. Certainly, nothing that had happened to him at the Dursleys' was going to do. Finally, he settled on the moment when he had first ridden a broomstick. "Right," he said, trying to recall as exactly as possible the wonderful, soaring sensation of his stomach.

"The incantation is this–" Lupin cleared his throat. "Expecto patronum!"

"Expecto patronum," Harry repeated under his breath, "expecto patronum."

"Concentrating hard on your happy memory?"

"Oh– yeah–" said Harry, quickly forcing his thoughts back to that first broom ride, and he held out his wand. "Expecto patrono– no, patronum– sorry –expecto patronum, expecto patronum!"

Something whooshed suddenly out of the end of his wand; it looked like a wisp of silvery gas. "Did you see that?" said Harry excitedly. "Something happened!"

"Very good," said Lupin, smiling. "Right, then– ready to try it on a Dementor?"

"Yes," Harry said, gripping his wand very tightly, and moving into the middle of the deserted classroom. He tried to keep his mind on flying, but something else kept intruding.... Any second now, he might hear his mother again... but he shouldn't think that, or he would hear her again, and he didn't want to... or did he?

Lupin grasped the lid of the packing case and pulled. A Dementor rose slowly from the box, its hooded face turned toward Harry, one glistening, scabbed hand gripping its cloak. The lamps around the classroom flickered and went out. The Dementor stepped from the box and started to sweep silently toward Harry, drawing a deep, rattling breath. A wave of piercing cold broke over him–

"Expecto patronum!" Harry yelled. "Expecto patronum! Expecto-" But the classroom and the
Dementor were dissolving.... Harry was falling through thick white fog and his mother's voice was louder than ever, echoing inside his head–

"-Not Harry! Not Harry! please -- I'll do anything!-

"-Stand aside. Stand aside, girl!-

"Harry!" Harry jerked back to life. He was lying flat on his back on the floor. The classroom lamps were alight again. He didn't have to ask what had happened.

"Sorry," he muttered, sitting up and feeling cold sweat trickling down behind his glasses.

"Are you all right?" said Lupin.

"Yes." Harry pulled himself up on one of the desks and leaned against it.

"Here--" Lupin handed him a Chocolate Frog. "Eat this before we try again. I didn't expect you to do it your first time; in fact, I would have been astounded if you had."

"It's getting worse," Harry muttered, biting off the Frog's head. "I could hear her louder that time. And him-- Voldemort." Lupin looked paler than usual.

"Harry, if you don't want to continue, I will more than understand--"

"I do!" said Harry fiercely, stuffing the rest of the Chocolate Frog into his mouth. "I've got to! What if the Dementors turn up at our match against Ravenclaw? I can't afford to fall off again. If we lose this game we've lost the Quidditch Cup!" He then paused for a moment. "Er, don't tell Hermione I said that. If she asks or anything, could you just stick to the 'what if Dementors turn up' bit?"

"Alright then, " said Lupin, his mouth twitching slightly in a smile. "You might want to select another memory, a happy memory, I mean, to concentrate on-- that one doesn't seem to have been strong enough."

Harry thought hard and decided his feelings when Slytherin had won the House Championship last year had definitely qualified as very happy. He gripped his wand tightly again and took up his position in the middle of the classroom.

"Ready?" said Lupin, gripping the box lid.

"Ready," said Harry; trying hard to fill his head with happy thoughts about Slytherin winning, and not dark thoughts about what was going to happen when the box opened.

"Go!" said Lupin, pulling off the lid. The room went icily cold and dark once more. The Dementor glided forward, drawing its breath; one rotting hand was extending toward Harry -

"Expecto patronum!" Harry yelled. "Expecto patronum! Expecto Pat-" White fog obscured his senses... big, blurred shapes were moving around him... then came a new voice, a man's voice, shouting, panicking-

"Lily, take Harry and go! It's him! Go! Run! I'll hold him off.-" — The sounds of someone stumbling from a room —a door bursting open — a cackle of high- pitched laughter —

"Harry! Harry... wake up...." Lupin was tapping Harry hard on the face. This time it was a minute before Harry understood why he was lying on a dusty classroom floor.
"I heard my dad," he mumbled, not even meaning to. "That's the first time I've ever heard him -- he tried to take on Voldemort himself, to give my mum time to run for it...." Harry suddenly realized that there were tears on his face mingling with the sweat. He bent his face as low as possible, wiping them off on his robes, pretending to do up his shoelace so that Lupin wouldn't see.

"You heard James?" said Lupin in a strange voice.

"Yeah..." Face wiped dry again, Harry looked up. "Why-- you didn't know my dad, did you?"

"I-- I did, as a matter of fact," said Lupin. "We were friends at Hogwarts. Listen, Harry-- perhaps we should leave it here for tonight. This charm is ridiculously advanced--"

"No!" said Harry. He got up again. "I'll have one more go! I'm not thinking of happy enough things, that's what it is.... Hang on...."

He racked his brains. A really, really happy memory... one that he could turn into a good, strong Patronus... Hermione. If she wasn't a happy memory, he didn't know what was.... Concentrating very hard on the memory of her arms around him, the smell of her hair, her eyes glowing with rare, genuine happiness as she looked at him, Harry got to his feet and faced the packing case once more.

"Ready?" said Lupin, who looked as though he were doing this against his better judgment. "Concentrating hard? All right-- go!" He pulled off the lid of the case for the third time and the Dementor rose out of it; the room fell cold and dark

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!" Harry bellowed. "EXPECTO PATRONUM! EXPECTO PATRONUM!"

The screaming inside Harry's head had started again, except this time, it sounded as though it were coming from a badly tuned radio-- softer and louder and softer again-- and he could still see the Dementor-- it had halted-- and then a huge, silver shadow came bursting out of the end of Harry's wand to hover between him and the Dementor, and despite how his legs felt like water, he was still on his feet, though for how much longer, he wasn't sure--

"Riddikulus!" roared Lupin, springing forward. There was a loud crack and Harry's cloudy Patronus vanished along with the Dementor. He sank into a chair, feeling as exhausted as if he'd just run a mile and felt his legs shaking. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Lupin forcing the boggart back into the packing case with his wand; it had turned into a full moon again.

"Excellent!" Lupin then said, striding over to where Harry sat with a wide smile on his face. "Excellent, Harry! That was definitely a start!"

"Can we have another go? Just one more go?" He pleaded.

"Not now," Lupin said firmly. "You've had enough for one night. Here--" He handed Harry a large bar of Honeydukes' best chocolate. "Eat the lot or Madam Pomfrey will be after my blood. Same time next week, I think, though I imagine that Hermione will be joining us."

"If she doesn't get caught cursing Weasley again," Harry said without thinking then he blushed. "Er... I mean, uh--" Lupin shook his head, amused.

"Don't worry, Harry," he said, "I remember being a student too. Eat your chocolate." Harry smiled sheepishly and took a big bite of the chocolate, watching Lupin extinguishing the lamps that had rekindled with the disappearance of the Dementor.

Harry said goodbye to Lupin and left the classroom, walking along the corridor and around a
corner before taking a detour behind a suit of armor and sinking down on its plinth to finish his chocolate. Despite himself, he found his thoughts kept wandering back to his mother and father.

Despite being so full of chocolate, Harry felt drained and strangely empty. Terrible though it was to hear his parents' last moments replayed inside his head, those were the only times Harry had ever heard their voices that he remembered. But he'd never be able to produce a proper Patronus if he half wanted to hear his parents again... "They're dead," he told himself sternly. "They're dead and listening to echoes of them won't bring them back. You'd better get a grip on yourself if you want that Quidditch Cup."

He stood up, crammed the last bit of chocolate into his mouth, and headed back to the Slytherin Common Room.

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Hermione's POV:

Harry had finally cheered up much to her relief, and it was in no small part because of Gryffindor's win against Ravenclaw which had left Slytherin in the running for the Quidditch Cup. Practices had increased to every day of the week and Hermione loyally watched every single one, even those that began at five in the morning.

The patronus lessons with Lupin were continuing and Hermione could admit that she was... struggling with them. Not only with finding a happy enough memory, but the innate Lightness of the spell went against the Darkness in her mind, the Darkness that whispered to her, always tempting her to just get rid of her problems, of threats to Harry, in a very permanent fashion. And then there was the fact the spell was so fuelled by emotion and Hermione was always careful to lock her emotions down— though the Dementors had been wreaking havoc on that. She'd had to escape to Moaning Myrtle's bathroom every night after the patronus lessons where she could privately break down before building her Occlumency shields back up. It was exhausting and Hermione wasn't sure she'd be able to cope with it happening many more times.

Harry was struggling too, but for a very different reason. Her best friend had admitted to her that he had to fight the urge to just let the Dementor do its work so he could hear his parent's voices, clear as crystal in his mind. And she understood.

Neither of them possessed a single photograph of their parents. There were no letters, no trinkets, nothing to say they ever existed except the memories— memories she had, but Harry... Harry did not. The first time he'd ever heard his parents was because of the Dementor on the train and then during the Quidditch match and now during the lessons— they were the only memories he had of them. She couldn't even imagine how hard it was.

So while they could both manage to produce indistinct silver shadows, their patronuses were too feeble to do anything but hover between them and the Boggart-Dementor.

"I thought a Patronus would— I don't know— charge the Dementor or something!" Harry said to her frustratedly as they were walking back to the Slytherin dungeon after a lesson.

"A true Patronus does," she told him, her voice as dull and strained as Harry's was. The 'but we can't cast one' went unsaid but still rang loudly in their ears.

January faded into February and Hermione watched as Harry grew more and more tense as the
match against Hufflepuff drew nearer.

The afternoon of the Quidditch match, Hermione felt wired and shaky, sharp panic edging at the corners of her mind. Although they didn't say it, both she and Harry knew that they were both terrified by the idea of the Dementors turning up again.

It was, at least, a nicer day; Hermione reflected as she joined the Slytherin third year boys and Daphne and Tracey up in the podiums. The sun was out and the sky was clear. Foot bouncing up and down, Hermione watched with baited breath as the two teams walked onto the pitch.

A surge of anger punched her in the gut as the Ravenclaw Seeker smiled at Harry and Harry's cheeks went pink. Harry was hers and everybody knew that—what was that bitch playing at?

The game started and Hermione kept her eyes glued to Harry. She didn't bother keeping track of the score, though she did note that Slytherin was in the lead. The Ravenclaw Seeker kept cutting Harry off and Hermione only just refrained from cursing the Ravenclaw beater when he pelted a bludger straight at Harry when he dived for the snitch, causing him to have to swerve and lose sight of the flying golden ball.

Grinding her teeth together and promising a later revenge, Hermione tracked Harry with narrow eyes. The Slytherins on either side of her knew better then to even try speaking to her, or distracting her from the game. She knew the moment that Harry spotted the snitch and she grinned as he started racing down the pitch, in her direction. He was so close to getting the fluttering golden ball when the Ravenclaw Seeker made a loud exclamation and pointed down.

Hermione's blood turned to ice. Three tall, black hooded Dementors were beside the pitch, looking up at Harry. Both she and Harry reached for their wands, Harry pulling his out quicker and whipping it in the direction of the Dementors he bellowed, "EXPECTO PATRONUM!"

She couldn't help but gasp in shock as an enormous silvery stag erupted from the end of his wand and pride rushed through her, fierce and sure. She was so focused on Harry's Patronus, his fully corporeal Patronus, that she didn't even realize he'd caught the snitch until she heard the Slytherins around her start cheering.

Leaving the podium, Hermione rushed to the grounds to where Harry had landed and was being tackled by several members of the team. He was grinning widely at her as he yanked her into the fold, hugging her tight while simultaneously shielding her from the press of bodies around them.

"That was quite the Patronus." Lupin looked both shaken and pleased, as he joined the crowd moving forwards to congratulate Harry.

"The Dementors didn't affect me at all!" Harry said excitedly, squeezing her hand tight in his "I didn't feel a thing!"

"That would be because they—er—weren't Dementors." Said Lupin and Hermione felt anger stir inside her as he said, "Come and see."

The professor lead them out of the crowd until they were able to see the edge of the field. "You gave them quite a fright," said Lupin, sounding very amused by the fact.

Lying in a crumpled heap on the ground were a handful of Gryffindors, including Wood, Ron, Fred and George Weasley and Seamus Finnegan, all of them struggling to remove themselves from long, black hooded robes. Standing over them with an expression of fury and loathing on his face was Snape.
Hermione couldn't hear what it was her Head of House was saying, but judging by the pale, wan expressions on the Gryffindor's faces, it wasn't good— and she could see McGonagall storming over looking just as enraged.

"Did you see what form my Patronus took?" Harry asked her as they joined the crowds making their way back up to the castle, Hermione committing the memory of Snape and McGonagall both shouting at the Gryffindors.

"I did," she told Harry, smiling softly up at him. "It was a stag— and it was magnificent, Harry." Harry's cheeks turned red and he beamed at her.

The Slytherins threw a party that didn't end until an irate looking Snape stormed into the Common Room at one in the morning and threatened anyone who didn't return to their dormitories within the next ten seconds with detention scrubbing chamber pots.

The next morning they were all in for a surprise when they learned that Sirius Black had once again broken into the Gryffindor Tower. Apparently he'd slashed the curtains around Ron Weasley's bed with a knife.

"It's a shame he didn't slash Weasley's throat." Draco pouted nearly all morning. Hermione nodded in very sincere agreement— Weasley was a problem and Hermione did not like problems. She had yet to properly repay him and the twins for their attack on Harry but revenge was a dish best served cold and the death of their sister had certainly not satisfied her need to make them pay.

Tighter security had been employed in the castle, including a bunch of surly security trolls that had been hired to guard the entrance to the Gryffindor Common Room. To Hermione's continued bewilderment people still thought that Black was after Harry. They all just assumed that he thought Harry was in Gryffindor and hadn't got the memo that Harry was, in fact, a Slytherin. "I mean, how thick can you get?" She kept asking Harry who looked just as bewildered as her.

Divination classes were dull and infuriating and when she finally snapped, Hermione was just honestly surprised it had taken so long for her to reach her breaking point.

It was just before Easter when she'd entered the dim, stifling tower room and found herself faced with a crystal ball full of pearly white mist glowing on every table. Hermione had no interest in fortune telling or seeing the future— she'd wanted to take Divination to find out more about how prophecies worked. It was a lingering worry in her mind she'd had ever since Voldemort had first spoken about it, and she'd hoped the Divination classes would provide the answers she'd been looking for.

She had been very, very wrong and found herself wishing she did have the Inner Eye solely so she'd have been able to see how pointlessly boring and ridiculous Divination was and have never signed up for the damn subject in the first place.

Already in a terrible mood from the classroom alone, she found a seat with Harry and studied the orb sitting in front of them with a great deal of disdain. "I thought we weren't starting crystal balls until next term," She said, her eyes narrowing.

"Don't complain, this means we've finished palmistry," Harry muttered back. "I was getting sick of her flinching every time she looked at my hands."

"Good day to you!" said the familiar, misty voice and Trelawney made her usual dramatic entrance out of the shadows. Patil and Brown quivered with excitement, their faces lit by the milky glow of their crystal ball. "I have decided to introduce the crystal ball a little earlier than I had planned,"
she said, sitting with her back to the fire and gazing around. "The fates have informed me that your examination in June will concern the Orb, and I am anxious to give you sufficient practice."

Hermione couldn't help her disgusted scoff. "Well, honestly... 'the fates have informed her' who sets the exam? She does! What an amazing prediction!" she said, not troubling to keep her voice low. Harry choked back a laugh.

It was hard to tell whether Trelawney had heard her, as the woman's face was hidden in shadow, but she continued on as though she had not. "Crystal gazing is a particularly refined art," she said dreamily. "I do not expect any of you to See when first you peer into the Orb's infinite depths. We shall start by practicing relaxing the conscious mind and external eyes so as to clear the Inner Eye and the superconscious. Perhaps, if we are lucky, some of you will see before the end of the class."

And so they began. Hermione felt like an absolute moron scowling at the crystal ball, not even bothering to try and keep her mind empty of thoughts such as 'this is pathetic'. It didn't help that Harry kept breaking into silent laughter.

"Seen anything yet?" She asked him sarcastically after an exceptionally dull quarter of an hour of 'gazing into the Orb'.

"There's a burn on this table," Harry pointed out. "Someone's spilled their candle."

"This is such a waste of time," Hermione spat, frustrated. "I could be practicing something useful--" Trelawney chose then to tustle past.

"Would anyone like me to help them interpret the shadowy portents within their Orb?" She murmured.

"I don't need help," Harry whispered to her. "It's obvious what this means-- there's going to be loads of fog tonight."

Hermione burst out into laughter and Harry looked pleased with himself. Trelawney, however, did not. "Now, really!" She said as everyone's heads turned in their direction. Patil and Brown were looking scandalized, though Hermione was viciously satisfied to see that both girls carefully avoided making eye contact with her, cowardly little lions that they were. "You are disturbing the clairvoyant vibrations!" Trelawney chided them as she approached their table and peered into their crystal ball. "There is something here!" She whispered, lowering her face to the ball, so that it was reflected twice in her huge glasses. "Something moving... but what is it?"

Hermione was prepared to bet everything she owned that it wasn't good news, whatever 'it' was. Harry's expression, she was sure, was a perfect reflection of her own.

And sure enough-- "My dear," Professor Trelawney breathed, gazing up at Harry. "It is here, plainer than ever before... my dear, stalking toward you, growing ever closer... the Gr--"

"Oh, for fucks' sake!" She said loudly, unable to hold it in any longer. "Not that fucking ridiculous Grim again!"

Trelawney raised her enormous eyes to Hermione's face. Patil whispered something to Brown, and they both glared at her too-- that was until she swept her venomous gaze over them and they both cowered and quickly looked away.

Trelawney stood up then, surveying her with unmistakable anger. "I am sorry to say that from the moment you have arrived in this class my dear, it has been apparent that you do not have what the noble art of Divination requires. Indeed, I don't remember ever meeting a student whose mind was
so hopelessly mundane."

Hermione couldn't help it. She started laughing incredulously. "Are you fucking kidding me? This shitty class is an absolute joke and you're the shittiest excuse for a teacher I've ever met, not to mention a complete and utter fraud! And you know what? I can't be bothered pretending to give a fuck about any of the crap you're constantly spouting anymore. I'll come back if Dumbledore ever regains enough of his senses to toss you out on your arse and get us a proper teacher." She gave Trelawney a last sneer before getting up, not even bothering to pick up her copy of 'Unfogging the Future'.

And, to the class's amazement, she strode over to the trapdoor, kicked it open, and dropped down the ladder out of sight.

She was halfway down the spiral staircase when Harry caught up with her. "I've wanted to do that all year." She told him and he laughed.

"Me too.

She and Harry never returned to Divination and nobody tried to make them. Classes continued and she and Harry skipped the next Hogsmeade visit, instead hanging out in Harry's dormitory with Tom. It was harder spending time with him when they were so busy with homework, Harry's Quidditch and classes, but she and Harry both did their best and they did have a handful of spare hours that used to be occupied by Divination that they could spend with him.

Tom was... good company, Hermione had long since discovered but only more recently had cared to admit to herself. He wasn't like Harry; Harry had no edges for her to cut herself on, he was safe and she loved that. Tom wasn't safe, he was nothing but edges; the sharpness of them cruel and vicious and cutting, but she knew better then most the rush that came with the pain of bleeding, the harsh sting of it twisting and tangling into pleasure as adrenaline thrummed in her veins, numbing her nerves and boiling her blood.

Hermione didn't think she'd be able to let either of her boys go, which was a problem. Harry, she knew, would cling on to her just as tight as she would to him; they were two parts of a whole, incomplete without the other. But she was greedy and Tom meant something to her too. He wasn't Harry, wasn't inseparable to her the way Harry was, but he was something to her. Tom had chipped away at their defences until he'd managed to slip through the newly-made cracks, twisting himself around them so they couldn't even take a breath without feeling him. Hermione didn't know if Tom understood, though, the consequences of what he'd done, of purposefully making himself such an intrinsic part of their lives. She and Harry both knew what it was like to have nothing, which meant they clung on to what they did have, to what was theirs, with a fierce, stubborn tenacity that screamed of never letting go. In his need to own them, Tom had instead managed to tangle them up to the point where she doubted either Harry or herself would be capable of letting the older boy go; they'd dig their claws into him and carve their names into his skin and onto his heart, making him theirs, always theirs.

Hermione had never doubted, not once she'd actually stopped to think about it, that one day she and Harry would become romantically involved. It was a given to her– she was Harry's and Harry was hers. She hadn't considered inviting anyone else into the intimacy they shared, though, until that day after the boggart lesson when she'd come back to herself after her break down and Harry had been pressed to one side of her and Tom to the other. They'd both been holding her together as she'd fallen apart and there'd been something about that shared moment that had been impossible for her to forget.

And she didn't want to forget it. She wanted to explore it, to unravel the complicated thing the three
of them shared so the answer was as clear to Harry and Tom as it was to her. She wanted them, wanted both of them, and if there was anything she'd learned in this cruel world it was that she had to take what she wanted before someone took it from her.
Chapter XXVII:

Hermione’s POV:

The Easter holidays weren’t exactly what Hermione would call relaxing. The third years had never had so much homework and poor Harry had had Quidditch practice every day for hours at a time.

The whole school was obsessed with the Quidditch final which was to be held the weekend after Easter and Hermione was sick of listening to everyone talk about it all the damn time. More and more she found herself retreating to abandoned classrooms where Tom could come out to keep her company as she poured over both her school and extracurricular work. She’d even managed to talk the older boy into sparring with her and after a few hours of repeatedly slamming him into the floor Tom had picked up enough so that as long as she didn't pull out her knives he could put up a semi-decent fight—there might be a large margin of difference in their skill levels but Tom wasn't afraid of fighting dirty or using his greater strength against her and he knew where to aim to hurt the most and read body language like an open book, anticipating her moves before she landed them by viewing the fight as a series of cause-effect reactions of the human body and reacting accordingly.

It was thrilling to be able to let loose; she didn't have to go easy and Tom and he didn't want her to. She could use her full strength, lash out at him with all she had, and on top of that she enjoyed watching Tom fight; she enjoyed watching inherent grace of his movements, the shift of his muscles and the shine of his sweat. And Tom didn't hold back, didn't hesitate to hurt her, to smack her around or crush her to the ground; he treated her like she was an equal and she loved it. Fighting with him was like dancing on broken glass; she'd come away bloodied but with a buzz in her veins, her muscles singing from use and pleasure flooding her nerve endings. And if there were times that she let Tom pin her to the floor just to feel the hot weight of him pressed to her back, well, that was her business.

They duelled too, sometimes. Hermione didn't enjoy it as much, didn't enjoy the lack of true physicality to it, but there was something truly stunning about Tom with a wand in his hand. It was easy to see how he'd ended up as Voldemort, a wizard so powerful that even after his 'death' people were too scared to say his name. Every victory she'd had against Tom while they sparred, he took out on her hide when they duelled and just like he wouldn't have thanked her for going easy on him during their spars, he never went easy on her either and she was glad for it.

Harry joined them when he had a spare moment, which admittedly wasn't often. He preferred to watch then join in, usually too exhausted and sore from Quidditch practice to get any enjoyment out of forcing himself to participate, but Hermione didn't mind that—she liked having him there, liked the feel of his eyes on her as she pinned Tom to the ground with her knees on his back or when she was trading curses with the older boy at a faster pace than she breathed.

She felt greedy and possessive and she didn't care, because in those moments the attention of both her boys was on her and she coveted that feeling, craved it like the oxygen she breathed. She wanted them, wanted both of them, her beautiful boys; her sweet, darling Harry, with his love, his loyalty, his kindness and his fierce protective spirit, and Tom, her vicious, clever Tom who radiated power and superiority and casual cruelty, like a black panther showing off its teeth as it prowled lazily around its helpless, cornered prey.
She wanted her boys but for the moment she contented herself with the knowledge that they were still hers, even if they weren't intimate; neither Tom or Harry looked at anyone but her or each other, they orbited each other without even realising— a solar system of three. And for now that was enough to satisfy her.

As the Quidditch match drew closer, getting away with Tom and Harry became more difficult and Hermione became unwilling to leave Harry alone as members of the Gryffindor and Slytherin Quidditch teams began to be targeted in the corridors. At first Harry had been having a particularly tough time of it, being unable to walk to class without Gryffindors sticking out their legs and trying to trip him up. Hermione had, however, firmly discouraged such behaviour by using bone-crushing curses on three of the saboteurs, leaving them screaming in agony, curled up on the corridor floors with splintered shins. She'd used the acacia wand so that when the professors tested her vine wand, they were unable to prove she was responsible.

The days approaching the match were filled with a highly charged nervous energy and a number of scuffles broke out in the corridors, culminating in a fourth year Gryffindor and sixth year Slytherin being hospitalised with leeks growing out of their ears. Hermione ended up cursing no less than seven people who'd tried to curse her and she found herself exceedingly grateful for Tom's ruthlessness in their duels as she was able to defend herself with ease from the far inferior duellers.

On the day of the match Harry looked to be a nervous wreck and she had to basically guide him to the Great Hall for breakfast he was so out of it. After force-feeding him toast and cereal, she was accompanying him out of the hall when the Ravenclaw Seeker, Cho Chang, called out, "good luck Harry!"

The sight of Harry's blush in response had anger pulsing through her, sharp and fiery, but she pushed her seething jealousy aside and instead concentrated on what Harry needed, hugging him tight before they had to part ways, Harry and the Slytherin team heading for the change-rooms while she joined Draco, Blaise, Theo, Vince, Greg, Daphne and Tracey on their way to the pitch.

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_Harry's POV:_

None of the team spoke as they changed into their emerald green robes and Harry wondered if they were feeling like he was– as though he'd eaten something extremely wriggly for breakfast.

In what seemed like no time at all, Flint was saying, "Alright team, let's go~" and they walked out onto the field to a tidal wave of noise. Only a quarter of the crowd was wearing green rosettes, waving green flags with the silver serpent of Slytherin glittering on them upon them or brandishing banners with slogans like "GO SLYTHERIN!" and "SNAKES FOR THE CUP". Everywhere else was a sea of scarlet and gold, but that didn't matter to Harry, because Hermione was up in the stands, sitting in the very front row with green ribbons wound through her twin braids and cheering for him.

"And here are the Gryffindors!" yelled Lee Jordan, who was acting as commentator as usual. "Greene, Bell, Johnson, Spinet, Weasley, Weasley, and Wood. Widely acknowledged as the best team Hogwarts has seen in a good few years~"

Lee's comments were drowned by a tide of "boos" from the Slytherin end and Harry rolled his eyes at the blatant favoritism.
"And here come the Slytherin team, led by Captain Flint. He's made some changes in the lineup and seems to be going for size rather than skill—" More boos from the Slytherin crowd and Harry decided then and there to just ignore the highly biased commentator. He knew that the Slytherin team were all skilled and that they'd all worked damn hard— Wood's words were inconsequential in the face of those facts.

"Captains, shake hands!" said Madam Hooch. Flint and Wood approached each other and grasped each other's hand very tightly; it looked as though each was trying to break the other's fingers. "Mount your brooms!" ordered Hooch. "Three... two... one..."

The sound of her whistle was lost in the roar from the crowd as fourteen brooms rose into the air. Harry felt his hair fly back off his forehead; his nerves left him in the thrill of the flight; he glanced around, saw Greene on his tail, and sped off in search of the Snitch.

"And it's Gryffindor in possession, Alicia Spinner of Gryffindor with the Quaffle, heading straight for the Slytherin goal posts, looking good, Alicia! Argh, no— Quaffle intercepted by Warrington, Warrington of Slytherin tearing UP the field— WHAM!— nice Bludger work there by George Weasley, Warrington drops the Quaffle, it's caught by— Johnson, Gryffindor back in possession, come on, Angelina— nice swerve around Montague— duck, Angelina, that's a Bludger!— SHE SCORES! TEN-ZERO TO GRYFFINDOR!"

The Gryffindor Chaser punched the air as she soared around the end of the field; the sea of scarlet below was screaming its delight— "OUCH!" Johnson was nearly thrown from her broom as Marcus went smashing into her.

"Sorry!" said Marcus as the crowd below booed. "Sorry, didn't see her!" Harry tried not to laugh, but he wasn't laughing a moment later when one of the Weasley twins chucked his Beater's club at the back of Marcus's head. Marcus's nose smashed into the handle of his broom and began to bleed.

"That will do!" shrieked Madam Hooch, zooming between then. "Penalty shot to Gryffindor for an unprovoked attack on their Chaser! Penalty shot to Slytherin for deliberate damage to their Chaser!"

"Come off it, Miss!" howled the Weasley, but Madam Hooch blew her whistle and Spinnet flew forward to take the penalty.

"Come on, Alicia!" yelled Lee into the silence that had descended on the crowd. "YES! SHE'S BEATEN THE KEEPER! TWENTY-ZERO TO GRYFFINDOR!"

Harry turned the Firebolt sharply to watch Marcus, still bleeding freely, fly forward to take the Slytherin penalty. Wood was hovering in front of the Gryffindor goal posts, his jaw clenched. "Come on, Marcus, come on, come on, come on," muttered Harry.

"'Course, Wood's a superb Keeper!" Lee Jordan told the crowd as Marcus waited for Madam Hooch's whistle. "Superb! Very difficult to pass— very difficult indeed— YES! I DON'T BELIEVE IT! HE'S SAVED IT!"

Groaning, Harry zoomed away, gazing around for the Snitch but still making sure he caught every word of Lee's commentary solely in order to keep track of the score.

"Gryffindor in possession, no, Slytherin in possession— no! Gryffindor back in possession and it's Katie Bell, Katie Bell for Gryffindor with the Quaffle, she's streaking up the field— THAT WAS DELIBERATE!"
Graham Montague had swerved in front of Bell and instead of seizing the Quaffle had grabbed her head. Bell cartwheeled through the air, managing to stay on her broom but dropping the Quaffle which Keane Dale managed to catch. But then Madam Hooch’s whistle rang out again and she soared over to Graham to start shouting at him. A minute later, Bell had put another penalty past Cassius Warrington, the Slytherin Keeper.

"THIRTY-ZERO! TAKE THAT, YOU DIRTY, CHEATING–"

"Jordan, if you can't commentate in an unbiased way–"

"I'm telling it like it is, Professor!"

Harry felt a sudden jolt of excitement. He had seen the Snitch it was shimmering at the foot of one of the Gryffindor goal posts– he pulled his Firebolt around and sped towards the goal posts, flattening himself against his broom and– WHOOSH.

One of the Bludgers came streaking past Harry's right ear, hit by one of the Weasley twins. And again– WHOOSH. The second Bludger grazed Harry's elbow as the other Weasley twin started closing in.

Harry had a fleeting glimpse of the twins zooming toward him, clubs raised and he turned the Firebolt upward at the last second, the twins colliding with each other below him with a sickening crunch.

"Dammit!" yelled Lee Jordan as the twins lurched away from each other, clutching their heads. "That little--! Too bad, boys! But it's Gryffindor in possession again as Johnson takes the Quaffle– Flint alongside her– poke him in the eye, Angelina!– it was a joke, Professor, it was a joke– oh no– Flint in possession, Flint flying toward the Gryffindor goal posts, come on now, Wood, save–!"

But Marcus had scored; there was an eruption of cheers from the Slytherin end and Lee swore so badly that Professor McGonagall tried to wrestle the magical megaphone away from him.

"Sorry, Professor, sorry! Won't happen again! So, Gryffindor in the lead, thirty points to ten, and Gryffindor in possession--"

It was turning into the dirtiest Quidditch game Harry had ever played in. Enraged that Gryffindor had taken such an early lead, his fellow Slytherins were rapidly resorting to any means to take the Quaffle. Lucian Bole hit Bell with his club and tried to say he'd thought she was a Bludger. One of the Weasley twins elbowed Lucian in the face in retaliation. Madam Hooch awarded both teams penalties, and bloody Wood pulled off another save, making the score forty-ten to Gryffindor.

The Snitch had disappeared again. Greene was still keeping close to Harry as he soared over the match, looking around for it...

Bell scored. Fifty-ten. The Weasley twins were swooping around her, clubs raised in case any of the Slytherins were thinking of revenge. Lucian and Peregrine Derrick took advantage of twins absence to aim both Bludgers at Wood; they caught him in the stomach, one after the other, and he rolled over in the air, clutching his broom, completely winded.

Madam Hooch was beside herself. "YOU DO NOT ATTACK THE KEEPER UNLESS THE QUAFFLE IS WITHIN THE SCORING AREA!" she shrieked at Lucian and Peregrine.

"Gryffindor penalty!"

And Spinnet scored. Sixty-ten. Moments later, a Weasley pelted a Bludger at Warrington, knocking the Quaffle out of his hands; Spinnet seized it and put it through the Slytherin goal--
seventy-ten.

The Gryffindor crowd below was screaming itself hoarse and Harry could almost feel hundreds of eyes following him as he soared around the field, high above the rest of the game with Greene speeding along behind him.

And then he saw it once again. The Snitch was sparkling twenty feet above him and Harry put on a huge burst of speed; the wind was roaring in his ears and he was stretching out his hand when suddenly his Firebolt started slowing down– Horrified, Harry glanced back and saw that Greene had thrown himself forward, grabbing hold of the Firebolt's tail and pulling it back.

"You fucking piece of shit–"

Harry was angry enough to hit Greene, but couldn't reach him– Greene was panting with the effort of holding onto the Firebolt but his eyes were sparkling victoriously. He had achieved what he'd wanted to do– the Snitch had disappeared once again.

"Penalty! Penalty to Slytherin! I've never seen such tactics." Madam Hooch screeched, shooting up to where Greene was sliding back onto his Comet.

Marcus took Slytherin's penalty and scored.

"Slytherin in possession, Slytherin heading for goal– Montague scores–" Lee groaned. "Seventy-thirty to Gryffindor..."

Harry was now marking Greene so closely their knees kept hitting each other. Harry wasn't going to let Greene anywhere near the Snitch.

"Get out of it, Potter!" Greene yelled in frustration as he tried to turn and found Harry blocking him.

"Fuck you!" Harry yelled back, snickering to himself as he turned sharply in order to block Greene again, sending the other Seeker spinning backwards in an effort to avoid a crash.

"Angelina Johnson gets the Quaffle for Gryffindor, come on, Angelina, COME ON!"

Harry looked around. Every single Gryffindor player apart from Greene was streaking up the pitch toward Spinnet, including the Slytherin Keeper– they were all going to block her– and yes! Slytherin had the Quaffle!

Harry suddenly saw something which made his heart stand still and he skidded to a halt in midair, reversed, and zoomed back into the middle of the field. Greene was diving, a look of triumph on his face, and there, only a few feet above the grass below, was a tiny, golden glimmer–

Harry urged the Firebolt downward, but Greene was miles ahead– "Go! Go! Go!" Harry urged his broom. He was gaining on Greene– Harry flattened himself to the broom handle as Weasley sent a Bludger at him– he was at Greene's ankles– he was level– Harry threw himself forward, took both hands off his broom. He knocked Greene's arm out of the way and–

"YES!"

He pulled out of his dive, his hand in the air, and the stadium exploded, the Gryffindors, Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs all booing but the Slytherins screaming and cheering in victory. Harry soared above the crowd, an odd ringing in his ears. The tiny golden ball was held tight in his fist, beating its wings hopelessly against his fingers.
Then Marcus was speeding toward him and he clapped Harry on his shoulder, hard. Harry felt two large thumps as Lucian and Peregrine hit them; then Graham's, Cassius's, and Keane's voices, "We've won the Cup! We've won the Cup!" Tangled together in a very manly, many-armed hug, the Slytherin team sank, yelling hoarsely, back to earth.

The emerald supporters was pouring over the barriers onto the field. Hands were raining down on their backs and Harry had a confused impression of noise and bodies pressing in on him. Then he, and the rest of the team, were hoisted onto the shoulders of the crowd. And there, fighting her way towards Harry, was Hermione. Words seemed to fail her. She simply beamed as Harry was borne toward the stands to where Dumbledore stood waiting with the enormous Quidditch Cup.

If only there had been a Dementor around.... As Dumbledore passed Marcus the Cup and he lifted it into the air, Harry felt he could have produced the world's best Patronus.

Harry's euphoria at finally winning the Quidditch Cup lasted at least a week. Even the weather seemed to be celebrating; as June approached, the days became cloudless and sultry and all anybody felt like doing was strolling onto the grounds and flopping down on the grass with several pints of iced pumpkin juice, perhaps playing a casual game of Gobstones or watching the giant squid propel itself dreamily across the surface of the lake.

But they couldn't. Exams were nearly upon them, and instead of lazing around outside, the students were forced to remain inside the castle, trying to bully their brains into concentrating.

Hermione's slave driving ways came into use as all the third year Slytherins went pleading to her to make them study timetables and beg for copies of her History of Magic notes.

The exams themselves were exhausting.

Harry was proud to say his Potions practical went well and he was even sort of confident with the written part of the exam. Then came Astronomy at midnight, up on the tallest tower; History of Magic on Wednesday morning, in which Harry scribbled down everything Hermione had ever told him about medieval witch-hunts in a stifling classroom. Wednesday afternoon meant Herbology, in the greenhouses under a baking-hot sun; then back to the common room once more, with sunburnt necks, thinking longingly of this time next day, when it would all be over.

To Harry's utmost relief, Thursday morning brought with it their last exam. The Defense Against the Dark Arts exam proved to be the most unusual one he'd ever taken; a sort of obstacle course outside in the sun, where the class had to wade across a deep paddling pool containing a grindylow, cross a series of potholes full of Red Caps, squish their way across a patch of marsh while ignoring misleading directions from a hinkypunk, then climb into an old trunk and battle with a boggart.

"Excellent, Harry," Lupin muttered as he climbed out of the trunk, grinning. "Full marks."

Flushed with his success, Harry hung around to watch Hermione. She did everything perfectly, of course, and even emerged from the boggart trunk with a satisfied smile on her face despite the trembling in her hands.

While everyone else had a final exam of the day, due to dropping Divination Harry and Hermione found themselves finally free from exams and Harry literally fell asleep in the common room and slept until dinner.

It was after dinner that something unusual happened. He and Hermione had just finished eating and
were about to make their way back to the Common Room when they were approached by the Ravenclaw Seeker, the fourth year Cho Chang. "Hey Harry," she said and Harry felt his cheeks grown warm.

"Er, hi Cho." He tried not to stammer too obviously as the pretty older girl smiled at him.

"Chang." Hermione greeted, smiling her brightest, emptiest smile at the girl while her eyes turned sharp as the steel edge of one of her knives. Harry turned and gave her a puzzled look, not understanding the sudden animosity. Did Hermione not like Cho? Before he could think any further on Hermione's strange behaviour, Cho was speaking again and he turned back to her to listen.

"So, I was wondering whether you wanted to practice flying together sometime." She said, smiling prettily at him, and he smiled back shyly, blushing even harder.

"S-sure," he stammered and Cho's face lit up.

"Great! See you soon, Harry." She said, giving him another bright smile before turning to Hermione. "Granger." She said with a short nod. Hermione smiled at Cho like she was planning a thousand ways to break the older girl into pieces and the moment Cho turned away, shuddering slightly, the smile vanished and blankness settled on Hermione's features like fallen snow, chilling and silent. Before Harry could ask what that was all about, Hermione turned and without a word she stalked off, leaving him standing there, watching her retreating back in confused bewilderment before almost tripping over in his haste to rush after her.

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Hermione's POV:

As she stormed back to the dormitories with Harry hurrying after her, seemingly baffled by her bad mood, she could feel the subtle tremor in her hands as rage and hatred warred for dominance inside her. She wanted to make Chang bleed, wanted to break her bones, to make her scream; she wanted to wrap her hands around the bitch's throat and watch the naked terror in Chang's eyes as she squeezed until she'd permanently snuffed the other girl from existence.

"What's up with her?" she vaguely heard one of the other Slytherins ask Harry as she stormed past them, cutting her way through the common room straight up the stairs to her dorm.

"I dunno." Harry replied, sounding bewildered. She kicked the door shut behind her as she entered her dorm, cutting the noise cut off, and started to pace. Her mouth tasted like copper and she wanted to murder something.

"You're in quite the mood," noted Tom, emerging from the Diary and lounging across her bed.

"Fight me," Hermione snarled, wheeling around so she was facing him, fingers curled like claws. Tom raised an eyebrow but inclined his head before standing and she lunged at him, throwing herself into the fight. Her muscles sang and her breath came heavy and ragged as she ducked a punch, grabbing Tom's arm and twisting it behind his back until the older boy was swearing and she had to let go before she broke bones. It didn't take her long to get him on the ground, kneeling on his chest with her hands on his neck, and it wasn't enough— she was still seeing red and her rage was such a bright, burning thing inside her.

"Hermione," Tom said, his voice soothing but tight, "let me up. Come on, darling— let me up."
Hermione realised, suddenly, that she'd been pressing down on his throat without even realising. She released him instantly, stumbling back to her feet and backing away from him. Tom stood up slowly, lifting a hand to rub against the red marks over his adam's apple. "I think we should duel," he said, after a long moment where his eyes didn't leave hers. "We're too... unevenly matched, for me to give you what you want in a fight." His face twisted slightly at his admittance of her higher skill and Hermione exhaled sharply.

"Alright," she said, pulling Tom's yew wand from her pocket and tossing it over to him. He easily caught it, running his fingers down the pale length of it and smiling. It wasn't a particularly nice smile, but Hermione wasn't looking for nice and she smiled right back as pulled out her own wand—it was a smile that showed all of her teeth and no humour at all.

They both gave a short bow and fell into a dueling stance. Tom launched the first spell. She twisted away and cast her own back. The following volley of spells was violent and lit up the room in a brilliant array of colour. Tom's spells were growing increasingly destructive, and a cutting curse tore through Hermione's arm, tracing a line of fire against her skin that soaks her sleeve in red but she didn't even flinch, her blood singing in her veins as her own curses grew in viciousness to match his.

A well-timed *reducto* blasted a bedside table into her legs, setting her to stumble long enough for Tom to get close enough to shove her bodily her to the nearby wall. Tom slammed the thin wrist of her wand arm against the wall and used his body weight to hold her in place.

Hermione, furious and snarling, met his eyes and was struck momentarily breathless by the familiar hunger evident there. She knew how to use that hunger, how to use it to her advantage, and she let herself lean forwards ever so slightly, her lips parting slightly as she focused on Tom's face before her. As his grip on her loosened slightly in response, she twisted out of his grip and threw herself away, diving into a roll then leaping back to her feet lithe as a cat, spinning around so her wand was pointed squarely at Tom, who was already on letting another curse fly.

And then they were dueling again, a furious firing of curses back and forth. Tom lashed out, a whip of flame darting towards her and she dodged it with quick steps, slinging a trunk towards him with a sharp flick of her wand. The fire whip faded away and she went on the offensive, casting a series of cutting hexes in quick succession, moving in a wide arc around her target.

She hadn't counted on Tom using Dark Arts though.

A vicious curse caught her in her upperarm and sent her blood spattering on the wall behind her as a crackling lightning strike of pain streaked up her arm, down her spine and exploded behind her eyes, turning her vision white and then black before she pulled it back into focus. She gasped and wheezed, coughing up flecks of blood. Tears were trickling down her cheeks as she looked up and met gleaming red eyes— it was the first time she'd seen it happen to Tom.

Hermione could sense the escalation in violence before it happened. It was like a scent in the room, heavy and heady. Curses came soaring across the distance between them as the Darkness in Tom curled through her, coaxing and crooning to her own Darkness, urging it to come out to play.

She met burning crimson with fierce eyes and smiled with blood-flecked lips, let her crimson-stained teeth show, and Tom simply stopped playing and lunged at her. He ducked underneath the curses she sent, his body contorting to avoid the bright beams of colour that flew toward him and tackled her to the floor.

Her acacia wand skittered across the ground as Tom held her down the way she'd taught him, straddling her waist and holding her thin wrists in an iron hold above her head against the floor,
squeezing hard enough she could feel her bones grinding together.

There was a moment's pause where Tom seemed to take the time to look down at her, his captive, and then he leaned forwards and savagely claimed her lips in a wild, possessive kiss, his tongue sliding in her mouth to lick the blood off her teeth.

When he finally released her wrists to brace himself Hermione reached up, tangling her fingers in his dark, silky hair and pulling harshly. There was nothing gentle here; no sweet words, no gentle touches and no hesitation. The kiss was all sharp teeth, splitting open her lips and tongue and flooding her mouth with the sweet-copper of her own blood. She was so fucking wet, the adrenaline, pleasure and pain all tangling inside her and making her moan. She rubbed her body against Tom's, drawing a guttural sound from the older boy and prompting him to start undressing her, yanking her robes off her in rough, impatient movements that caused the fabric to tear in places.

She wriggled out of her shirt and bra and quickly set to work on Tom's robes and shirt. It was only when Tom's pale chest was exposed that everything stopped suddenly, and they were both left panting on the floor. Hermione stared up at his chest, not with horror or pity, but with understanding. *Freak.* It was carved into his flesh. A scar for life. She looked up into those eyes, the red having since faded away. She looked back down and let her fingers trace the marks with a muted sort of fury, different from the burning rage and hatred from before but no less powerful.

"It was when I was a boy, before I came to Hogwarts." Tom said quietly.

"Did you kill them?"

"I did."

"Did you make them suffer?"

"As much as I was able."

"Good." And then she reached up and pulled him back down for another kiss, one that escalated until the older boy was pushing inside her, an achingly familiar stab pain of that had her gritting her teeth as her muscles cramped. She was well used to smiling through these bright, sharp bursts of agony, though, all too practiced at riding it out until the pain ebbed to a low thrumming. Tom's hips moved in deep, brutal thrusts and the swell of pressure grinding inside her began to feel good, prompting her to start rocking back against Tom. Her nails raked red lines down his back and drew blood as Tom's teeth dug into her shoulder, over where she knew the scar of Greyback's own teeth lay hidden.

The sharp ridge of Tom's pubic bone grinding against her clit had her gasping with pleasure and she came so hard that she felt it shake through her from the tips of her fingers to her toes. She let her head fall back and her body go limp beneath Tom, too-sensitive and twitching at the over-stimulation as he continued his thrusts, but it didn't take long for the shivers of it to stray closer and closer to good. She came again, just moments before she felt warmth spill inside her and then Tom was pulling out, moving off her so he was laying on the ground by her side. They were both panting, their bodies damp with sweat and smears of blood. Hermione could feel the stickiness between her legs, could feel the stinging salt of her tears on her split lips and the wild curls of her hair were plastered against her cheeks and neck.

She lifted a lazy hand to push her hair out of her eyes then let it flop bonelessly beside her. "That was nice." She said, voice slurred with pleasure.
"Mmm," Tom agreed lazily. "But I know what could have made it better."

"You mean who," she corrected and a moment of silent understanding past between them as they considered the missing member of their trio.

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**Harry's POV:**

Harry gently closed the door before Hermione or Tom saw him watching them through the small gap. He was glad Hermione had taught him how to cast silencing charms, because he was sure that the whole of the Slytherin dungeon would have been able to hear the sounds of Tom and Hermione's... well, their *that*. Sex. Oh god.

Retreating to his own dorm, Harry sat down on his bed in a state of shock. He'd been watching them since around halfway through their duel when Daphne had sent him up to make sure Hermione wasn't destroying the dorm room the Slytherin third year girls shared.

He'd watched, impressed, as Hermione put up a good fight against the more powerful Tom, casting a quick silencing charm to make sure the Common Room couldn't hear the duelling any longer seeing as none of them actually knew about Tom's existence and hearing an unfamiliar male voice might lead to awkward questions.

It was at the end of the duel he was stunned into silence. Frozen, unable to move, unable to look away, he'd watched as Hermione and Tom had done *that*. Had sex. With each other.

It had been... well, Harry's pants were feeling rather tight, and he knew he was going to need either a cold shower or a bit of relief soon. They had both just been so...

Primal. Passionate. *Overwhelming*.

Oh god.

Harry returned to the Common Room around an hour later, after a trip to the bathroom where he quickly 'took care of things' and pretended to be engrossed in a large tome on Animagus transformations when he wasn't absorbing a single word.

Hermione emerged around a half hour after he did, the only evidence of what she and Tom had done been her swollen, split lips which were easy to dismiss. She looked perfectly at ease, her burning anger from before having calmed, and she made her way over to him, curling into his side like she usually did. He had to resist the urge to wrap an arm around her, feeling too awkward and confused to tuck her to his side like he usually did.

"Is our dorm still in one piece after your little temper tantrum?" Tracey asked with a grin and Hermione's lips quirked into a smile.

"There's still a few scorch marks, but I fixed everything else."

"Sweet Morgana," Daphne sighed and Hermione smirked briefly before turning to face him.

"I need some fresh air. Come with me?" she asked and Harry nodded.

"Let me get the cloak," he said, closing his book and hurrying up to his dorm room. Returning with
the cloak, he waited until they'd exited the Slytherin Common Room before covering them both and rendering them invisible.

They made their way out to the grounds without any trouble, only having to dodge Flitwick who was whistling merrily to himself as he patrolled,

Exiting the school, Harry had to admit the fresh air did feel nice and Hermione's face was unguarded and relaxed. The very last rays of the setting sun were casting a bloody light over the long-shadowed grounds and the Invisibility Cloak made noises like a whispering creek with their movements.

Taking a deep breath, Harry steeled himself to bring up what he'd witnessed earlier.

And that's when they heard the screaming.

"What the hell?" He asked, startled, as Hermione whipped out her acacia wand, her eyes hard.

"It's coming from over there." She said, pointing to the Whomping Willow with her free hand. Its branches were thrashing from side to side and something huge and black was dragging what looked like a student, judging by the school robes, to the base of the trunk.

"What do we do?" he asked, turning wide-eyed towards Hermione. She frowned.

"I suppose nothing isn't the answer you're looking for." She said and Harry shook his head.

"No, not really." He admitted.

"It could be dangerous," she warned.

"Well do you have the Diary?"

"Yes, but--"

"Then we'll be fine." Harry said, firmly, before taking off. He heard Hermione swear under her breath, but she followed him anyway, like he knew she would.
Chapter XXVIII:

Harry's **POV:**

The invisibility cloak now rendered practically useless, Harry shucked it and shoved it into his pocket, the one Hermione had experimented on with a bottomless charm Tom had taught her. The pocket wasn't exactly 'bottomless' but he could stick his arm in it up to his elbow so he thought it was pretty useful– Hermione hadn't been as pleased as he was, though, and he now had four other jumpers with pockets of varying sizes as she'd continued practicing until she'd got the spell right.

The two of them reached the Whomping Willow, slowing to a halt just out of range of the branches, and Harry watched as the student– he couldn't see the face of whoever it was, though from their size he guessed they were either a second, third or fourth year– hooked their leg around a root in an effort to stop themselves from being dragged underground. And then a horrible crack cut through the air like a gunshot; the unidentified student's leg had broken and the next second they'd vanished from sight.

"Did you see who it was?" He asked, panting slightly. Hermione shook her head, her lips pressed into a thin white line. Harry took a deep breath and measured the distance between them and the hole where the massive beast and the student had disappeared. "Okay. How do we distract the tree?" he asked, determinedly.

"Distract it?" Hermione's voice was pitched higher then usual. "You want us distract the bloody tree then try and go fucking rescue that idiot kid?"

"Hermione– please!" Harry pleaded, needing her to understand that he couldn't just let some innocent kid be dragged off in front of him and not do anything about it. Harry knew his morals were already compromised and that they'd only get more so as time went on– but he also knew he wasn't the sort of person who could just stand back and watch a classmate be dragged away by some sort of monster.

Hermione let out a low groan as she correctly read the determination on his face but she nodded. "Fine," she said, "fine." A look of great concentration crossed her face and Harry watched as she swished her wand in a graceful arc and shouted, "IMMOBULOUS!" Abruptly, as though it had just been turned to marble, the Whomping Willow stopped moving. Not a leaf twitched or shook.

Hermione didn't waste a second, grasping his arm in a painful grip and sprinting forwards. They covered the distance to the trunk in seconds then dove through the hole, sliding headfirst down an earthy slope to the bottom of a very low tunnel. Behind them, Harry could hear the Whomping Willow start moving again and silently gave thanks for Hermione's foresight.

"Can you see anything?" He whispered to her as he tried peering around but Hermione shook her head.

"Let's keep moving," she urged and they hurried along as fast as they could, bent almost double. On and on the passage went and then the tunnel abruptly began to rise; moments later it twisted and Harry could see a patch of dim light through a small opening.
He and Hermione paused, gasping for breath for a few moments before edging forwards. He raised his wand and Hermione mirrored his actions to see what lay beyond.

It was a room, a very disorderly and dusty room, with paper peeling from the walls, brownish stains all over the floor that looked suspiciously like dried blood, with every piece of furniture broken and the windows all boarded up.

Harry carefully pulled himself out of the hole, staring around. The room he was in was deserted but a door to their right stood open, leading to a shadowy hallway. "Harry," Hermione breathed in his ear, "I think we're in the Shrieking Shack!"

"Well ghosts didn't do that," Harry whispered back, nodding towards where large chunks had been ripped out of the wall. At that moment there was a creak overhead—something had moved upstairs. Harry raised his eyebrows at Hermione and she narrowed her eyes, her lips pursed, but she nodded reluctantly.

Quietly as they could, they crept out into the hall and up the crumbling staircase. Harry's mind was racing and as they reached the dark landing he whispered, "*Nox*!" Only one door was ajar and, wand held tightly before him, he kicked it wide open.

On a magnificent four-poster bed with dusty hangings was—"*Weasley*?" Hermione's face was twisted with contempt and loathing. "Are you fucking kidding me?" She turned and glared furiously at him and Harry shrugged helplessly, already resigning himself to an extended ranting session and several 'owed' study sessions.

"Sorry?" he offered weakly and she scowled darkly at him.

"You are going to make this up to me." She threatened lowly. And then Ron Weasley spoke up.

"It's—it's him! He's a dog! An animagus!" Ron was staring over his shoulder and Harry wheeled around. With a snap, the man in the shadows closed the door behind them.

A mass of filthy, matted hair hung to his elbows. If eyes hadn't been shining out of the deep, dark sockets, he might have been a corpse. The waxy skin was stretched so tightly over the bones of his face that it looked like a skull and his yellow teeth were bared in a grin. It was Sirius Black.

"*Expelliarmus*!" he croaked, pointing the wand that Harry guessed was Weasley's at them. His and Hermione's wands shot out of their hands, high in the air, and Black caught them. Harry was never more thankful for the fact that Hermione had demanded they go and get illegal wands— he had a spare wand tucked in his pocket and he knew that Hermione had both hers and Tom's on her.

"Brave of you," Black said quietly as he stepped forwards with his eyes fixed on Harry, "not to run for a teacher. I'm grateful... it will make everything easier..."

"Make what easier?" Hermione asked sharply. "Pettigrew's the one you want to kill, not Harry, so what was the point in dragging Weasley down here?" Black's eyes bulged slightly.

"You know?" he demanded hoarsely, his eyes shining slightly as he turned to face Hermione. Harry began moving slowly, his hand drifting towards his pocket as Hermione held Black's attention.

"Pettigrew's a rat animagus. He betrayed Lily and James and then set you up." Hermione told Black calmly. "You know this, we know this. So what I don't know is why you're here and why you went after Weasley. Not that I blame you," Hermione's lip curled as she glanced back at Weasley, "whiny little shit, isn't he?"
"You bitch!" Weasley's voice was shrill. "You're in league with Black! You and Potter! I knew you were evil! I knew you were Dark! I knew it!"

"Oh for Merlin's sake!" Hermione's acacia wand was suddenly out and pointed right at Black's chest. "Do you ever shut up, Weasley?"

Harry froze slightly as Black jolted into movement, pointing the wand in his hand at Hermione with an incantation on his lips until a new sound interrupted them.

Muffled footsteps were echoing up through the floor—someone was moving downstairs. "HELP!" screamed Weasley. "I'M UP HERE! IT'S SIRIUS BLACK—HELP!"

The footsteps were now thundering up the stairs and the door to the room burst open in a shower of red sparks. Harry wheeled around as Lupin came hurtling into the room, his face bloodless and his wand raised and ready. His eyes flickered over Weasley, lying on the bed, over him, standing frozen, to Hermione, her wand covering Black, and to Black, whose wand was covering Hermione.

"Expelliarmus!" shouted Lupin.

Hermione's wand flew out of her hand, over the room, and Lupin deftly caught it. Harry immediately saw red at the sight of Hermione defenseless with two grown men pointing their wands at her. His hand dived into his pocket and then his blackthorn wand was in his hand. "Stupefy!" he shouted and a bolt of red light slammed into Lupin, who collapsed to the floor.

Hermione instantly dived forwards, knocking Black to the side as she lunged for her wands. Black tried grabbing onto her but Harry had his wand out and pointed at Black, and he shouted, "Stupefy!" sending Black slumping to the ground.

Panting, Hermione scrambled to her feet with both her wands in her hand. Stashing her legal one in her pocket, she pointed the acacia wand at Weasley and gasped, "Stupefy!" causing Weasley's eyelids close and his body go limp. Harry looked around them, at the three unconscious bodies scattered across the room. "Well," he said in a voice that only shook slightly, "not bad."

"No." Hermione's voice was calm, the sort of calm he knew meant she was burying whatever emotions she was really feeling under a mask of apathy or nonchalance. "Not bad at all."

"What do I do?" He asked her, starting to panic as the realization set in that he actually had Black right here, right in front of him.

"Whatever you choose." Hermione said quietly and Harry took a shaky breath, blinking back a suspicious dampness.

"I want Pettigrew." He whispered, the shameful admittance falling so easily from his lips.

Hermione lowered her wand and reached out to gently squeeze his shoulder. "Remember what I told you in our first year," she said, her voice quiet. "If you're going to kill Black make sure you do it for reasons you can stand behind or you'll regret it for the rest of your life. Whatever your decision is, if you don't think you can live with it then it's not the choice you should make."

Harry could feel himself trembling as panic threatened to steal the breath from his lungs. "He wants me to do this because I'm the only one who hasn't killed yet," he realized suddenly.

"I think so," Hermione said gently and Harry choked back a sob as he remembered the sound of his mother's terrified last moments.
"I don't think I could live with myself if I let Pettigrew get away with what he did to my mum and dad," he whispered, his face feeling numb. Hermione's hand, still resting on his shoulder, gave another soft squeeze.

"Then you know what to do," she said, her face tight with grief. "I'm so sorry Harry." She added tearfully and her eyes were wet. Harry gave her a weak smile, reaching up to his shoulder to press his hand over hers briefly before he took an unsteady breath and walked forwards so he was standing over Black, Hermione's hand falling away as he moved out of her reach. She didn't try walking after him, just stayed still and silent; a steady presence guarding his back.

"I-- I'm sorry about this," Harry rubbed his damp eyes with the back of his hand, his wand shaking as he spoke to the unconscious man.

Black would never know what had happened, Harry tried to comfort himself. He'd never have that split-second to know that it was his godson who had killed him-- he'd just... never wake up.

"I- I have to." He told the unconscious man, voice thick in his throat as he tried to explain why he was going to do what he was about to do to a man who'd never hear a word of it. "Voldemort-- he said he'll give me Pettigrew if I kill you." Harry took a breath and closed his eyes, thinking about the Dursleys, about how much he hated them and how they treated him and what this man's role in him being placed there was.

When Harry opened his eyes he had built up a layer of darkness, of resolve, enough so that he could do this. "Your impulsivity left me to grow up in hell while the true betrayer went free." He said quietly. "You probably don't deserve this but because you prioritised revenge over taking care of me I never got to know you well enough to say either way. I'm sorry."

He didn't... he couldn't use the Killing Curse. He'd read up on it, after the incident with Uncle Vernon, and he already knew he just didn't have that level of hatred, of desire to see Black dead. So, jaw set, Harry pointed his wand at Black's head and spoke with a voice that only shook slightly. "R-Reducto!"

Black's head burst like an overripe melon and blood, bone and brain matter went flying. Harry let out a gasping, choking sound, stumbling backwards, his eyes wide. Horror filled him, horror and despair, and he couldn't breathe, he couldn't breathe, but then Hermione was there. Hermione was there and she had caught him and she'd wrapped her arms around him tight, hugging him fiercely. His whole body was shaking, violent tremors that made his bones feel like they were rattling inside him. Hermione held him and as he cried ugly tears into her shoulder, soaking her shirt in tears and snot. She held him until the sobbing slowed down enough that he could breathe properly again and then she cradled his face in her hands and kissed him.

She kissed him and he kissed her back with a sort of desperation, clumsy and urgent; a hot, wet slide of mouths that tasted faintly of salt. His hands found her hair and he tangled his fingers in the curls, held her head in place as their teeth were clicked together and the sweet-copper tang of blood mixed with the saltiness from his tears as her bottom lip split open again.

When his head started to swim from lack of oxygen, he broke the kiss, panting and blinking back the dizziness. He didn't know what to say, what to do, and was relieved when Hermione moved into action.

"Tergeo." She said, pointing her wand first at his clothes and then at hers, vanishing all traces of blood.
"What do we do about Weasley and Professor Lupin?" Harry croaked, very carefully not looking behind him and concentrating on the immediate situation, pushing the kiss from his mind– for now.

"Memory charm them both." Hermione answered easily and he nodded, agreeing with her plan, before blurting out the question tingling at the forefront of his attention.

"Does," his voice cracked and he had to swallow, "does it get easier?" She looked at him and a smile tugged at the corners of her mouth.

"When they deserve it, I sleep like a baby. And they've always deserved it." Her words were honest and he nodded in understanding.

"Do you think... do you think he deserved it?" he gestured in the direction of Black's corpse, still not able to look. Hermione's face turned hard.

"People's stupidity, impulsivity and carelessness can ruin lives," she said tightly and Harry couldn't help but feel relieved that her anger wasn't directed towards him. "I don't know what kind of man Black was, but I do know your parents trusted him to take care of you if they died but he ignored their wishes, prioritising his revenge over your wellbeing and that decision cost you your childhood, leaving you to grow up abused and alone. I don't know if he deserved to die but I don't think he didn't deserve it."

Harry let out a long, slow exhale. He still felt sick when he thought about what he'd done, overwhelmingly sick, but... he stood by what he chose. He didn't think Black deserved to die but Pettigrew did and Black had had to pay the price for his decision, just like Harry had spent a childhood paying the price for Black's decision that Halloween twelve years ago.

"Close your eyes, Harry." Hermione's voice was gentle but firm and he nodded obediently, squeezing his eyes shut. He heard her murmuring things under her breath and started counting slowly, timing the numbers with his breathing. He'd reached one hundred and eleven when she told him he could open his eyes again.

The first thing he noticed was that much to his relief any sign of Sirius Black had vanished from the Shack. Harry didn't ask what had happened to the remains, Hermione's expression convincing him that he didn't need to know.

"Er, what about them?" He gestured to Lupin and Weasley. "Can you do the Obliviate better now?" Hermione's expression was conflicted.

"I don't know," she confessed, her voice troubled. "It's a hard spell, and I don't want Lupin to end up like that centaur. I think I sort of like him."

"Me too." Harry agreed, before sighing. "So what do we do?"

"Tom." Hermione said, snapping her fingers suddenly. Harry flinched slightly at the unexpected sound.

"You think he can do it?" He asked doubtfully, not sure when Tom would ever have used a memory charm before. Hermione gave him a droll look.

"He's a master Legilimens, Harry. For him, memory charms will be a piece of cake."

"Okay." Harry agreed readily enough and Hermione pulled the Diary from her pocket. The cover flipped open and the pages rustled, Tom appearing before them. He arched an eyebrow as he
scanned their surroundings and Harry had to fight the urge to blush, the memories of what he'd witnessed earlier that evening briefly surfacing. And then Tom spoke up, distracting him.

"You never take me anyplace nice anymore." He drawled.

"We've never taken you any nice in the first place." Hermione corrected him smartly.

"The Gala was nice," Harry mumbled, just for the sake of. Hermione tilted her head then nodded.

"That could qualify," she agreed before her expressions turned serious. "Tom, we need you to modify their memories." She said, gesturing to the unconscious Lupin and Weasley.

"May I ask why?" Tom said in a way that made it very clear he wasn't actually 'asking'.

"I did it." Harry said, his mouth suddenly dry. Tom looked at him, confusion dancing on his features, and Harry swallowed before repeating, "I did it. I... I killed Black."

For a moment Tom's face was blank and then his lips curved into a smile that looked hungry, and in a swift movement the older boy closed the distance between them. Standing so close to him that their feet were nearly touching, Tom gently cupped Harry's chin with his long fingers and tilted his head up so his eyes were boring into Harry's. "Let me in," Tom murmured and Harry took a shaky breath then relaxed his Occlumency shields.

The memories flashed before his eyes; following the dog and the student, figuring out the student was Weasley, fighting Black, him pointing his wand at Black, ready to kill him, the curse on his lips, Black's head exploding, the tears, and then the kiss between him and Hermione; the heated, passionate kiss, which led to the memories of watching Tom and Hermione kiss, of their hands touching each other's bodies, of Tom thrusting into her--

Harry gasped as Tom pulled out of his mind, sweat running down his back. He felt as though he'd just run a marathon and his legs threatened to collapse beneath him.

"You really did it," Tom's voice was soft and wondering, almost, and he was still cupping Harry's chin. Harry felt himself blush as he became uncomfortably aware of both their proximity and the fact Tom now knew Harry had watched what he and Hermione had done.

And then Tom suddenly leaned forwards and brushed his lips against Harry's own.

Tom's lips were soft and almost burnt him with their touch and Harry returned the kiss without even realizing what he was doing. It only lasted a few seconds, their mouths moving together slowly and lazily, almost, and then Tom was stepping back and leaving him standing there dazed and confused as the older boy turned to face Weasley.

Hermione had already pulled Tom's wand out of the bottomless pocket that she hadn't spelled onto her clothes until she'd finished mastering the charm on Harry's and handed the carved length of yew to the older boy. Tom twirled his wand in his long fingers before turning to face the bed and with a lazy flick and an "Obliviate" Weasley had been dealt with.

"I erased the last day from his mind." Tom explained out loud, before moving forwards and crouching down beside Lupin. "You want me to be careful with his mind." It wasn't a question, it was a statement. An observation. Harry nodded anyway.

"Remove any doubts he has about Black's guilt. Replace the memory of him coming down here with one of him doing whatever it was he was doing before all this. Oh, and while you're digging around in there can you please figure out how the hell he knew we were here, anyway?" Hermione
asked.

Tom nodded at her and, wand tip pressed against Lupin's temple, and he spoke firmly, "Legilimens!" The older boy's expression was blank for almost a minute before he pulled out of Lupin's mind and fixed Hermione with an annoyed look.

"You could have warned me he was a werewolf." He said and Hermione smirked.

"I thought you'd figure it out," she said and Harry couldn't help his growing smile. This almost felt... normal again. Hermione teasing, Tom trading barbs with her, and Harry laughing at them both.

"So how did he know we were here?" Hermione asked.

"He had a map of the castle that he enchanted along with Black, Pettigrew and Harry's father while they were at Hogwarts." Tom answered. "It turns out the four of them were best friends– they called themselves the 'Marauders' chose nicknames based on their animagus forms– Padfoot, Wormtail, Prongs and Moony."

"Moony has to be Lupin, Wormtail's the rat, and if I had to guess Padfoot would have been Black." Hermione mused and Harry suddenly had to swallow past the lump in his throat.

"My dad," he whispered. "Prongs."

"He was a stag animagus." Tom told him and Harry's eyes widened.

"My– my Patronus! It's a stag!" he said, excited. "Do you think that means I'll be a stag animagus too?"

"My Patronus is a raven," Hermione reminded him gently and his face fall.

"Oh." He mumbled.

"You still could be, Harry." Hermione said encouragingly and he gave her a weak smile before turning back to Tom.

"You said something about a Map?"

"The Marauder's Map. A complete map of the castle, including an ink dot of every single last person, giving the ability to track anyone and everyone in the castle. It's an impressive piece of magic." Tom sounded grudgingly impressed.

"How did he end up with it?" Harry asked.

"Apparently your father got it confiscated in their seventh year by Filch." Tom said, with a slight smirk, "Lupin found it in the possession of the Weasley twins."

"That's how they found us!" Hermione exclaimed loudly, sounding equal parts outraged and triumphant.

"What?" Harry asked, confused. She gave him an impatient look.

"Back in first year, when we got rid of Hagrid's dragon– we never did figure out how Weasley, Finnegan and Thomas knew we were out on the grounds." She explained and Harry's eyes widened in comprehension.
"Oh wow, I forgot about that." He said and Hermione narrowed her eyes at him.

"I'm glad one of us could."

"Not meaning to interrupt your very important conversation, but we might want to get out of here." Tom spoke up, a slight drawl to his voice.

"Why?" Harry asked, confused again, and Tom pointed up with one finger. Hermione's eyes widened with comprehension.

"Oh fuck," She said with a groan.

"What is it?" He demanded.

"It's a full moon tonight, Harry." She told him and he flinched away from Lupin on instinct.

"Let's get out of here!" He said, panicked.

Hermione made her way to the door, pausing only to pick the Diary up off the edge of the bed where she had left it and Harry made to follow her then paused. "What about Weasley?"

"What about him?" Hermione asked impatiently.

"If we leave him, he'll end up werewolf chow." He pointed out and Hermione raised an eyebrow.

"And?"

"And how do you think Lupin would feel, waking up amongst Weasley's bloody remains?" He asked her pointedly and understanding flickered over her face.

"Oh fine." She flicked her wand in Weasley's direction. "Mobilicorpus!" Weasley's body rose up into the air and started bobbing after them, as the three made their way through the Shrieking Shack.

"Do you think Lupin will be confused waking up here?" Harry asked the other two nervously.

"Not at all. This is where he normally transforms." Tom told him, "it's where he transformed back when he was at Hogwarts too."

"Oh." Harry blinked. "That's... convenient."

Hermione gave an amused snort. "Yes, how convenient this is." She said and he rolled his eyes at her.

"You know what I mean." He grumbled.

"I do," she agreed, giving him a warm smile. "Now let's get the hell out of here– there's an Acromantula nest in the Forbidden Forest I'm just dying to introduce Weasley to."

"Hermione," Harry said disapprovingly and she gave him a truly fierce glare.

"He will pay for what he did to you, Harry– if not today, then one day." She warned.

"But not today." He said, firmly. "Not after..." he shuddered slightly and Hermione's face softened.

"Fine." She agreed. "Not today. But I reserve the right to string him up somewhere public in a very
humiliating fashion."

"That I have no problem with you doing." Harry grinned weakly but genuinely at her.

"If you did, then I'd have to take a very careful look at our friendship," Hermione said, mischief in her eyes, and Harry snorted.

"C'mon, let's go."


Severus's POV:

After forcing the wolfsbane potion down the still unconscious Lupin's throat, Severus followed Harry and Hermione back up to the castle, his brain still not working properly after everything he'd just witnessed.

Earlier he'd followed Lupin who had dashed out of his office, forgetting his wolfsbane, and he'd watched suspiciously as Lupin approach the Whomping Willow. After casting a strong Disillusionment charm over himself, Severus had followed his old classmate to the Shrieking Shack where they'd come across quite the sight.

Black's wand had been pointed at Hermione and Hermione's wand had pointed right back at him while Harry stood frozen a few feet behind the two and Weasley lay squawking on the old, dusty bed.

Severus's vision felt like it had turned red when he saw Black pointing his wand at Hermione and when Lupin disarmed Hermione, Severus had moved, ready to kill them both when Harry had stunned the werewolf and Hermione had lunged for her wand, wrestling with Black briefly before Harry stunned him too. Hermione had then stunned Weasley and proceeded to have the most confusing conversation with Harry that he'd ever heard.

Not that what they were discussing was confusing in anyway. No, it was rather straightforward—they were discussing whether or not Harry was going to kill Black.

And then Harry had spoken to the unconscious Black, had told him that the reason he had to do 'this' was because Voldemort had promised to deliver to him Pettigrew, the true traitor, if Harry killed Black.

Severus was bewildered. Beyond bewildered. And then he'd watched with a morbid fascination and a grim sense of satisfaction as Harry had killed Black.

Harry had broken down briefly and Hermione had comforted them. They'd kissed and then, to make things impossibly stranger, the older boy Severus kept hearing about and seeing in their company appeared from the pages of a small, black bound book.

This boy, this Tom, wasn't just some ghostly apparition though, or an imprinted memory. No, Tom could use magic—and he could use it well. Neither memory tampering or Legilimency were easy to accomplish but Tom had performed both with ease.

And he'd kissed Harry.

Tom had kissed Harry.
Harry, who had just kissed Hermione.

Hermione, who hadn't seemed to mind the two boys kissing.

Sweet mother of Merlin, please spare him the complicated drama of teenage love-lives.

The fact Hermione had fully intended on feeding Weasley to the Acromantula colony probably should have bothered him, but Severus was already aware of the fact that the Gryffindor's life had already started on a count-down– Hermione Granger did not forget and she certainly did not forgive– and he had too much to concentrate on to worry about that.

The Dark Lord. Harry and Hermione had spoken to the Dark Lord. When?

The centaur– Hermione had mentioned a centaur and that time in the Forbidden Forest, back in their first year, both she and Harry had been found passed out beside a brain-dead centaur.

A growing sense of realization had Severus's eyes widening. The Philosopher's Stone going missing... the unicorns drained of blood in the Forbidden Forest... the attacks on the unicorns stopping after Harry and Hermione's detention in the forest... the Dark Mark growing in strength...

Had Harry and Hermione actually given the Stone to the Dark Lord?

Severus wasn't an idiot. He knew Hermione would have worked out the danger Harry was in from the Dark Lord and he knew she wasn't the type to just step back and let things run their course the way Albus intended for them to. Had she... was it possible... had Hermione come to some kind of agreement with the Dark Lord in order to protect Harry?

Exhaling shakily, Severus's gaze was tugged towards his left forearm, covered by the sleeve of his teaching robes.

Was it possible... could it be... were Harry and Hermione pro-Dark?

...Actually, he wouldn't be surprised if they were. Their upbringings weren't the type that resulted in healthy, happy children; their souls were darkened by the abuse heaped on them, and a good amount of hatred festered in them both.

But just how much?

As he watched Harry and Hermione enter the Slytherin Common Room, Severus couldn't help but be aware of just how much everything had changed– and he was the only one who knew it.

Lupin wouldn't remember that anything had occurred today besides his usual rituals during a full moon. Weasley had been dumped in the middle of the Great Hall and left naked, one leg mangled and the other one freshly broken to match, which would cause a great deal of discussion and gossip amongst the students and staff and everyone would know Hermione had something to do with it but no one would be able to prove it– and now that he knew about her second wand certain incidents over the year were starting to make much more sense.

When people woke up tomorrow, nothing would have changed. But for Severus, everything had changed.

He wondered how long it would take before the search for Black dried up. Hermione had shrunk the corpse and levitated it into a bottomless bag which she'd then pocketed and Severus had a feeling she would most likely burn the bag, erasing any and all evidence. With no sightings, eventually the Ministry would have to relax their search and within a few years Black would be
nothing but a distant memory, a folktale of sorts.

Now all Severus had to do was decide for once and for all whose side he was going to be on in the coming years.

Except, it wasn't really a decision he could make, because it was already made for him– he was on Harry's side. He had sworn a Vow to protect Lily's son and whichever side of the War Harry fought for, Severus would fight for too.

And if it turned out that Harry was Dark... well, Severus could admit that he wasn't displeased with the idea.

Albus Dumbledore was a manipulative old bastard who had left Harry in an abusive home to shape him into a malleable weapon to be used against the Dark Lord. Albus had left Lily's son in an abusive home. Albus was grooming Lily's son to be a lamb for the slaughter.

Besides, there was a reason he had joined the Death Eaters all those years ago. The only reason he'd turned his back on the Dark Lord was out of fear for Lily, for the woman he had loved.

But now... now it looked like he could turn back to where his truer allegiances lay.

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Remus's POV:

Remus couldn't help the niggling feeling in the back of his skull that he'd forgotten something, something important. The day was swelteringly hot and the students, taking advantage of the fact exams were over, were either visiting Hogsmeade or lazing about on the grounds.

He sighed as he looked down at his half-packed suitcase. He'd never been under any illusions that his post as the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor would last more than a year, but he was still disappointed that he had to leave.

He'd expected Severus to be the one to let slip his secret, but instead it was a Ravenclaw who had figured it out and the news had travelled like wildfire throughout the whole school.

While Albus told him he could stay, Remus knew that it wasn't really an option– no parent would be happy to let their child be taught by a werewolf.

There was a sudden knock at the door and Remus turned to see Harry and Hermione standing there. A sudden fear swept through him– did Harry fear him now? Was Harry disgusted by him?

"Professor Lupin," Harry's voice was soft, "can I come in?" Not trusting himself to speak, Remus nodded and tried to smile.

"We already knew you were a werewolf, Professor." Hermione spoke up suddenly, and he jerked his head around to face her.

"How long?" he breathed.

"Since Sna– Professor Snape set the essay." Harry hastily corrected himself when Hermione gave him a look. It almost brought tears to his eyes it reminded him so much of the antics of Lily and James. "We just came to say that we don't care you're a werewolf and that you're the best DADA
"I'm very glad you think so, Harry." He said softly and Harry's expression suddenly turned nervous.

"You mentioned something, a few months ago. You said that you were friends with my dad." Remus had to swallow past the lump in his throat.

"I was." His voice was hoarse.

"I was wondering... it's just, I've never seen a picture of them before and I was hoping that maybe we could keep in touch?" Harry asked, a note of pleading in his voice. "And maybe we could talk about my dad and mum?" Remus couldn't help a somewhat watery smile even as his heart broke just that much more– Harry had never even seen a photograph of his own parents?

"I'd like that, Harry." He told James's son. "I really, really would."

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Voldemort's POV:

Voldemort had been busy the past year. He'd quickly climbed up through the ranks of the Ministry to Senior Undersecretary of the Minister– his unfortunate predecessor, a dumpy, toad-like woman, had ‘tragically’ been mauled to death earlier that year by a werewolf. It was concluded by all the officials that she had been targeted because of the anti-werewolf legislation she'd written up earlier that year.

No one suspected Thaddeus Dagworth had anything to do with it. Here Voldemort gave a satisfied smirk as he'd certainly enjoyed feeding the woman to Greyback– she'd been quite the irritation.

With the year drawing to a close, Voldemort had decided that over the summer he would start notifying his most loyal to his return. Some of them would already suspect, he knew, which would make his job easier.

It hadn't been until he'd received an owl from Hermione carrying a package bound with string that he'd remembered Dumbledore would be forcing Harry to return to his loathsome relatives come the holidays. And as he checked the package for curses, a truly wicked idea had crossed his mind and even before he'd peered into the bag inside the brown wrapping and was treated to the delightfully surprising sight of the corpse of Sirius Black, he'd already started planning in his head the letter he was going to write.

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Hermione's POV:

"So," Hermione said with a wicked smirk on her face. "Are you ready to go, Harry?"

The two of them had shrunk their trunks and crept through the school under the Invisibility Cloak in the early hours of the morning on the day the Hogwarts Express was due to leave and made their way through the dark underground passage to the Shrieking Shack. Hermione wasn't taking any chances of Harry being returned to the Dursleys this summer and she'd already been plotting their
escape when the letter arrived.

Miss Granger, Mr. Potter, it had been addressed.

I must congratulate you, Harry. I wasn't sure you'd be able to fulfill my requirements but you did and I have upheld my end of the bargain. Which leads me to the true purpose of this letter— I'd like to invite you to stay in my manor over these holidays. The arrangement, I believe, would benefit us both, and surely my residence has to be superior to that of those filthy Muggles.

This letter is a Portkey, I assume you know what that is but if not ask Tom for an explanation. To activate it, simply tap it with your wand and say "portus" then place your hand on it and it will take you to me.

And Harry? Whether or not you decide to come to my home, I have your little rat waiting for you.

V.

Hermione cleared her throat and tapped the parchment with her acacia wand. "Portus." She said clearly and the parchment lit up with a blue glow. "Ready?" she asked a nervous looking Harry who gulped but nodded. "On the count of three— one... two... three!"

They both reached out and touched the Portkey at the same time. Hermione had to bite back her urge to hurl as she was spun wildly through space until she landed on her feet. Harry had ended up sprawled on the ground and she winced in sympathy for him as he rubbed his head before looked over at the handsome figure of Lord Voldemort, his ruby eyes glittering like jewels as he watched them both.

"Welcome," he said in a silky, sibilant voice, "to my home."

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END OF PART THREE: PRISONER OF AZKABAN
Chapter XXIX:

Hermione’s POV:

Hermione Granger had been enjoying her summer. She wasn’t exactly sure which part she liked best—living in a manor surrounded by riches, spending all day with Harry and Tom or the absolute freedom that it offered.

Accepting Voldemort’s invitation to spend the summer holidays at his manor had been, she’d decided early on, certainly one of the better decisions she’d made.

Turning around in the bed, she smiled softly at the expression on the sleeping Harry’s face. He looked so peaceful, so innocent. He had a slight androgynous look to him, with his full lips, softly curving cheekbones and long eyelashes. His hair, dark as night, was wavy and reached his shoulders. He was beautiful—and he was hers.

The bed shifted slightly, the mattress dipping, as another person settled onto the bed. Long fingers reached out to run through Hermione’s long, curly hair and she knew it was her other boy—although she couldn’t really call Tom a boy; at seventeen years old the younger counterpart of Lord Voldemort had long left childhood behind.

Tom’s hand slid from her hair and down her body until he was cupping her hip. Hermione turned around so she was facing the handsome young man with his aristocratic face and grey-violet eyes and she kissed him deeply, her hand moving down to the space between them to wrap her fingers around his hardening length and whisper the lubrication spell she’d learned.

No stranger to sex, Hermione had been nine years old when she lost her virginity and she had no problem now with guiding Tom to her entrance and as he thrust in she arched her head back and moaned.

That was another good thing about their summer living arrangements—Voldemort didn’t care if they fucked like bunnies, not like most adults would. Of course, Voldemort wasn’t exactly your average ‘adult’—he was a mass murdering, egotistical sociopath with no compunctions about his seventeen-year-old counterpart having sex with an underage witch and wizard.

Not that she cared either.

Tom rolled them around so he was on top of her and she wrapped her legs tight around his waist as he rolled his hips in slow, lazy thrusts. Their movements had woken up Harry who was now watching them, his cheeks flushed and his hand moving discretely under the covers of the duvet.
Unlike her and Tom, Harry had yet to feel comfortable enough to join in their shagging but he usually watched and the three of them knew that he was still just as big a part of their relationship. Hermione reached out with one of her hands to grasp a handful of Harry's hair and use it to yank him forwards. She pressed their lips together in a kiss that started as passionate but turned open-mouthed and sloppy, their mouths moving together with more and more urgency as Tom sped up his thrusts.

Hermione was the first to come when Tom did something particularly clever with his hips and as she clenched tight around him and moaned into Harry's mouth, her climax prompted her boys into their own. Tom pulled out, rolling off her and onto his back on the mattress beside her, murmuring a spell to clean up his spendings as Harry nestled up to her– he was always cuddly after any sort of sex.

"Anything special planed for today?" Tom asked lazily as he stretched against the silk sheets. Hermione bit her lip before answering.

"I thought that maybe we could visit Pettigrew." She said softly and Harry tensed beside her. She turned so she was facing him and studied head his expression– pale and conflicted.

Out of the three of them, Harry was the purest. He was so intrinsically good at heart that sometimes Hermione felt like she was infecting him with her darkness, that she was destroying that inherent goodness. But she was a selfish being at heart and if there was one person in the world that she couldn't live without it was Harry– and even if that meant she was destroying the part of him that was good, she couldn't bring herself to ever let go.

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Harry's POV:

Harry looked across at Hermione and Tom, the two people he felt the closest to in this world. Both their faces were flushed with afterglow but he could see the dark hunger visible there that was their desire to make Pettigrew hurt, to make him pay for what he'd done.

"Do you want to, Harry?" Tom asked, his eyes glittering. Harry took a deep breath.

That damned rat had a lot to answer for– Harry may not have known his parents but they were still his parents and the thought that it was that worthless wizard who had betrayed them made his blood boil.

People would probably think it was irrational for him to blame Pettigrew and not Voldemort, but in his mind it wasn't. Voldemort had been his parents' enemy– they were on opposing sides of the war and they never pretended to be anything but actively hostile towards each other. But Pettigrew... Pettigrew had been James and Lily Potter's friend. Pettigrew had been someone they'd trusted, someone they thought they could depend on and in Harry's mind that made all the difference.

He might have even understood if Pettigrew had been a spy from the beginning; he wouldn't have liked it, of course he wouldn't, but he was far from the naïve child he'd been three years ago and he understood that war was an ugly business and sometimes certain things had to be done. But that wasn't the case– Pettigrew had truly been their friend and he had betrayed them out of cowardice, had chosen to reveal the whereabouts of Lily and James Potter to their murderer in order to spare his own life, which in Harry's opinion was far worse.
If Pettigrew had been fighting for something he believed in, even that Harry could have understood. He wouldn't have forgiven the betrayal, but he could have understood it. But giving up his parents to save his own skin— that Harry could never forgive.

A dark, determined expression crossed his face and Harry knew he had made his decision. "I think it's time." He said, his voice firm and unwavering. Hermione and Tom smiled identical smiles and Harry shivered at the wolf-grins on their pretty faces.

Their mornings had become a ritual, almost; the three of them would dressing, Harry and Hermione usually in the Muggle clothes they found more comfortable and Tom in casual robes, then they would make their way down to the dining room for breakfast. Voldemort was, as usual, already present and reading from the Prophet as he sipped his coffee.

It was, Harry had decided early on in the summer, one of the most surreal sights he'd ever come across. "Good morning." He automatically greeted the Dark Lord and Voldemort looked up briefly and inclined his head before turning his attention back to the newspaper. Harry wasn't offended— that was simply how Voldemort was. If he was a braver man, he'd joke about the Dark Lord not being a morning person. Luckily, he wasn't some stupid, impulsive Gryffindor because he was fairly certain if he had, he was pretty sure Tom and Hermione would be scraping what was left of him off the dining room floor.

Despite the quality of the food served at breakfast every morning— served at every meal, actually— Harry only managed to nibble his richly buttered toast and take a few small sips of the freshly squeezed juice his stomach was churning so much. Hermione's eyes were gleaming with a dark sort of excitement and Tom was lounging back on the chair, a hungry expression on his face that had very little to do with food— and, for once, also had nothing to do with sex. Well, maybe it had nothing to do with sex— Harry wasn't quite sure just what torture did for Tom.

"Fun plans?" Voldemort seemed to have picked up on the unusually tense atmosphere and had placed his newspaper down and was examining them all with shrewd eyes.

"We thought we'd visit Pettigrew today." Hermione said calmly and Harry's stomach clenched with nerves at her words, the breakfast he had managed to swallow threatening to make an unwelcome reappearance. Voldemort turned his ruby gaze on him, expression calculating, and Harry resisted the urge to gulp.

"I see." The Dark Lord said softly, before a smile that contained more then just a hint of sadism crossed his face. "Enjoy yourselves."

"Oh we will." Tom said, the curl of laughter in his voice at odds with the dark promise in his eyes. Harry gave up on breakfast and just worked on not throwing up.

Pettigrew had been shackled in the basement of Riddle Manor that had been converted into a sort of dungeon. He was an unpleasant looking man dressed in shabby robes with watery eyes that were darting around and he let out an alarmed squeak when he saw Harry.

Harry couldn't help but stare— it was the first time he'd ever seen Pettigrew in person. He was a short, very short, barely taller than Harry. His thin, colorless hair was unkempt and there was a large bald patch on the top. He had the shrunken appearance of a plump man who had lost a lot of weight in a short time and there was something very rat-like in the point of his nose, and very small, watery eyes.

"H-Harry!" He gasped, desperation clear on his features. "Harry... you look just like your father..."
just like him... Please, your father would have understood, Harry... he would have shown me mercy..."

"How dare you speak to Harry?" Hermione snarled furiously at him. "How dare you speak to him about his parents, you filthy traitor!"

Pettigrew's trembling worsened as he looked at Hermione. "I– I heard things about you," he told her in a warbling voice, "the Weasleys– they're very close to D-Dumbledore–"

"What are you talking about?" Hermione demanded harshly and Pettigrew squeaked again, his shackles making a clanging sound against the wall as he flinched back. An expression of dawning understanding crossed Hermione's face and Harry was surprised by the short laugh that escaped her.

"The rat– Weasley's rat. You were Weasley's stupid, fat rat that Iago tried eating on the train in our first year! How many years did you spend hiding as their rat, Pettigrew? All thirteen of them? Why, were you scared?" Pettigrew trembled as Hermione stalked forwards. "I bet you were," she said, her voice soft and deadly. "I bet you were terrified– after all, the Death Eaters must all blame you for what happened to their Master... he went to the Potters' that night on your information and met his temporary downfall there... and not all of them ended up in Azkaban, did they? If they'd known you were alive... there wouldn't have been a stone left unturned in their mission to find you and make you pay for what you did to their Lord. Maybe we should invite a few of them over, give them some time to show you the true extent of their... displeasure."

Pettigrew was actually sobbing now and Harry was disgusted as the rat-faced man turned back to face him. "H-Harry, please!" He wailed, "have mercy! J-James would have shown me– Lily would have shown me–"

"Shut up!" he shouted, rage flaring through him at the sound of his mother's name coming from Pettigrew. He took a deep breath and turned to Tom whose eyes were gleaming as he watched Hermione use words to tear Pettigrew to pieces. "I don't know what to do," He admitted and Tom's pretty mouth curved into a sadistic smile as he pulled out his wand.

"Should we start with the Cruciatius, then?" he just about purred and Harry's breathing quickened.

"Y-Yeah," he said, feeling strangely breathless.

"For the Cruciatius to work, you have to want to cause pain. To enjoy it." Tom murmured, circling around Pettigrew in a predatory way. Harry swallowed and watched as Tom raised his wand and pointed it at Pettigrew.

"Crucio." Tom's voice was soft, and Harry could have almost sworn there was a tenderness to it. And then Pettigrew started screaming. The sound was high and shrill and inhumane. The look in Tom's eyes was... breathtaking, almost; a savage elation that captivated Harry.

Tom removed the curse after around a minute and a half and then turned back to him. There were traces of ruby evident in the older boy's burning eyes as he grinned at him, wild and hungry. "Your turn, darling," he coaxed and Harry pointed his wand at Pettigrew, concentrating fiercely on how much he hated the rat and how much he wanted him to pay.

"Crucio!" He shouted.

Pettigrew didn't seem to be in as much pain as he had been under Tom's curse but Harry still panted with elation as the Dark magic hummed through his veins and Pettigrew screamed and thrashed in
front of him. "If you don't ease up on the curse his mind will break." Tom remarked after a few minutes though the older boy did nothing to stop him.

With great effort, Harry lifted the curse, leaving the sobbing Pettigrew convulsing in his shackles as spasms rolled through his short body, flecks of blood splattering the ground beneath him with every wheezing breath and urine dripping down his legs and pooling on the concrete below.

"Can– can you show me more?" Harry asked Tom, his breathing fast and unsteady and his heart thudding unevenly in his chest. Tom's answering smile was a thing of pure sadistic pleasure.

"Of course."

Tom, Harry had to admit, made torture into an art form. Every scream was like music and Tom moved with a fluid grace that made it almost look like some sort of dance. Harry hadn't thought that it was possible for torture to be so hypnotically beautiful and he wondered just how many wires in his head had to be crossed to enjoy such a thing. Then he decided he didn't care and turned his focus on replicating Tom's actions the best he could.

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Hermione's POV:

Hermione wondered if the lust she was feeling right now made her some kind of sick psychopath. The logical part of her knew that it was the Dark magic being used that was influencing her mind, the thick headiness of it flooding the room twisting her desires, but it didn't make it any less pleasurable for her. It didn't make the sight of Tom and Harry coaxing scream after scream out of Pettigrew make her any less wet.

Thin fingers were suddenly digging into her shoulder, nails jabbing harshly into her skin, and Hermione gritted her teeth as she turned to see Bellatrix Lestrange standing behind her with a demented grin on her face, having managed to creep up on Hermione in her distracted state. "Beautiful, isn't it?" the older woman murmured in her rich, throaty voice, the hint of hoarseness turning the words gritty.

Bellatrix was one of the recently liberated Death Eaters from Azkaban and while the woman was thin to the point of being skeletal, she had a crazed sort of beauty about her with her almost waist-length black curls and dark hooded eyes. That's why Hermione didn't try to resist when Bellatrix pushed her against the wall and kissed her– hard. That, and the fact she felt almost drunk on the Dark magic in the room.

Pettigrew's screams certainly made for an... interesting background noise but the intoxicating magic lighting up her nerve ends in tingling jolts of pleasure meant they were easily disregarded and Hermione writhed and moaned desperately in the Dark witch's grasp, her hands clawing onto Bellatrix's shoulders. Bellatrix made a growling noise as she wandlessly vanished Hermione's clothes and, without warning, rammed her fingers inside the younger girl with a certain sort of rough intensity that made Hermione's legs turn to water at the same time as sharp jolts of pain had her hissing between her teeth. Bellatrix knew exactly what she was doing, though, and it only took a few moments for the pain to turn to pleasure and Hermione eagerly rocked herself on Bellatrix's fingers. As the older woman grinded against her some part of Hermione became aware that Tom and Harry were watching and she strived to give the best show possible for her boys, letting the gasps and moans spill freely from her throat, not biting back the whimpers and cries as Bellatrix twisted her fingers roughly.
Bacchanals and orgies were quite common for Dark Arts practitioners and while this was the first time Hermione had been with a woman, Bellatrix had obviously been with more then a few in her time. The Dark witch was skilled at balancing pleasure and pain in a way Hermione hadn't realised she could enjoy so much– Bellatrix was violent, passionate and literally had Hermione crying, leaving her bleeding and trembling with tears streaming down her cheeks as she sauntered out of the dungeon.

Harry dropped to his knees beside her looking concerned and Hermione slumped into him, her body still trembling as he gently wiped away her tears. "Are you okay?" he asked and the smile she gave him was probably as dazed as she felt.

"I'm perfect."

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Hermione wasn't surprised when Harry came to speak to her– alone– after they'd all showered. Pettigrew had still been alive when Tom and Harry were through with him, but the rat certainly looked like he wished that wasn't the case– Tom had been particularly imaginative, especially nearer the end.

As he entered the library where she was lounging across the sofa, boneless and satiated, he looked... well, he looked like he might throw up. "Are you okay?" she carefully asked him and she wasn't even slightly surprised when he started crying; stifled, gasping sobs that made his whole body shake.

She quickly cast a few silencing and privacy wards before standing up and pulling him into her arms, hugging him and murmuring soothing words as she gently rubbed his back. This reminded her of the time after he had shouted the Killing Curse at the Dursleys– he'd been horrified with himself but she'd managed to soothe him then and she knew she'd be able to soothe him now.

"What's wrong?" she asked gently as she steered him onto the couch and curled up half on his lap.

"Am I a m-monster?" Harry croaked, rubbing at his eyes with the back of his hand.

"Do you remember what you told me, after I first told you I'd killed someone?" She asked him and he looked confused for a moment then comprehension dawned on his face and he nodded slowly.

"I told you that you weren't a monster like him," he said.

"Because?" She prompted.

"Because scum like that needs to be put down." Harry's expression was still tortured though, still miserable. "But Hermione, I– I liked it. It felt good." He whispered as if he was admitting to a terrible sin and Hermione reached up to cradle his face with her hands, looking him straight in the eye.

"Am I a monster, Harry?" She asked seriously and he immediately shook his head, his eyes horrified.

"Of course not!" He exclaimed.

"Well I enjoyed it. I enjoyed listening to it and I enjoyed watching it." She told him, her tone steadfast. "Half of that enjoyment came from my hatred for the rat and the other half came from the magic itself."
"The magic itself?" Harry looked confused.

"Dark magic is very... stimulating. It can cause reactions that range from adrenaline highs to almost uncontrollable lust." She explained and Harry blushed slightly.

"So that was why you and Bellatrix... er..."

"Fucked?" Hermione suggested when he searched for a word. He gave her a sheepish smile and she laughed. "Yes." She said before her face then turned serious again. "I want you to listen to me Harry– some people might consider you and I monsters for what we did today, for what we will do in the future and the enjoyment we have and will get out of doing so and that's a fact that we'll have to live with. But Harry, you are... you are my greatest strength," She told him, meeting Harry's gaze with an intensity that seemed to startle him but she desperately wanted him to understand what she meant. "I have– I have so much Darkness inside me and you keep it from dragging me under. You have Darkness and Light in you, Harry, and you're strong enough that you don't let either of them define you; you've stayed you and that's okay. You are allowed revenge and you are allowed to enjoy it. The fact that you still feel like this afterwards? That's what makes you a good person. And the fact that you still enjoyed it anyway? That's just part of what this world has made you into– what it's made us all into."

Harry looked a touch on the dazed side but he no longer seemed to be beating himself up and she nodded in satisfaction. "Good. If you ever feel like this, don't bottle it up inside– you can always talk to me." She said sternly and Harry nodded obediently.

"I promise," he told her and she could see he meant it. "I think what we did today was wrong, but... I'm not sorry we did it." He admitted, after a moment. "I don't think I'll go down to see Pettigrew again. I... there's something else I want to do with him instead."

"Oh?" she asked and Harry took a deep breath.

"After– After obliterating him, I– I want Tom to use the Imperius Curse on him, to make him go into the Ministry and turn himself in for what he did to my parents. I want to clear Black's name, even posthumously. I think he deserves that much– and Pettigrew deserves the Dementors."

"I think you are a much better person then I will ever be," Hermione said quietly which made Harry blush.

"You are the most loyal person I know," he said, surprising her with the sudden ferocity in his voice. "Maybe what you do isn't– isn't always right, but it's always for a reason– it's always for– for me. You saved me, Hermione Jane Granger and I think you're the most amazing person I know. I love you, Hermione."

Hermione's eyes felt wet and she realized she was getting teary. "You sap," she told him, her voice choked. "Get here," she ordered, pulling him to her and wrapping her arms tight around him. They hugged for a long time before she pulled back enough to kiss him– nothing wild or passionate, just soft and warm and, dare she say it, loving.

When they finally pulled apart, Harry gently squeezed her hand before passing her the book she'd been reading before he'd entered the room. She smiled and shifted so that he could lay with his head on her lap while she picked up reading where she'd stopped off. She wasn't too surprised when he fell asleep in a little under fifteen minutes and she lifted the silencing spell with a flick of her wand.

"He accepted that much easier then I thought he would." Tom's voice was thoughtful as he lifted
the Disillusionment charm he'd been under, standing in the doorway. Hermione startled violently then shot him a small glare. Tom smirked at her and loped over, gracefully making himself comfortable on the couch beside her, lifting Harry's legs so that they were draped over his lap. Hermione's lips twitched in amusement at Tom's show of gentleness and he glared at her. "He did well today." He said and Hermione nodded, agreeing with him.

"I didn't think he'd take to the Arts quite that powerfully." She admitted and Tom smiled a predatory smile that held no small amount of satisfaction and anticipation.

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Severus's POV:

Albus and the Order of the Phoenix which had been called together once again by Albus when the reports came through that "Black" had broken the Inner Circle out of Azkaban were all frantic with worry over Harry's disappearance.

A month ago Severus would have been worried sick too; discreetly, of course, but worried sick nonetheless. Not anymore though. Not after what he'd learnt– and carefully kept hidden– from the Headmaster: Harry Potter was in contact with the Dark Lord. He'd killed before and so had Hermione.

Harry and Hermione were on the side of the Dark, of that Severus no longer had any doubt. What had Albus been thinking, sending the boy to live with the Dursleys? It was little wonder that Harry had turned so easily on the Light– not that he particularly cared. His Vow, his Oath was to protect Lily's son. It never mentioned anything about who exactly he was supposed to be protecting Harry from.

Not that Harry needed a protector; Severus thought, with a sort of grim amusement. Not with Hermione by his side.

Hermione Granger was one of the most brilliant witches he'd ever met. Ruthless, calculated, cunning, fiercely loyal to the precious few who'd earned their place in her heart and both powerful and talented beyond measure, she was without a doubt the greatest asset Harry could have ever stumbled across.

She was a puzzle wrapped in an enigma enclosed in a mystery. All the teachers loved her, bar Albus and Minerva who were the only two professors besides himself that she had shown her true self to, the Slytherins all admired her and it seemed that even the Dark Lord himself had a vested interest in her.

And Tom. He had no idea who this Tom was, how the Diary worked and, to be honest, what Tom was. But Severus planned on finding out. All he knew right now was that Tom, Harry and Hermione seemed to be in some sort of relationship (merciful Salazar, teenagers and their love lives were so dramatic) and that the older boy seemed just as powerful and just as skilled as Hermione, if not more so which was concerning in itself but not something he was choosing to worry about right now.

Severus wasn't actually sure why the revelation of Harry and Hermione's loyalties had shocked him like it had. He'd known since their first year at Hogwarts that Hermione in particular had a certain proclivity towards Darker magic and he knew that Hermione was willing to kill for Harry– he also had no doubt in his mind that Harry would be willing to kill for her too. And he knew that they
both had a Darkness in them, a Darkness born of a childhood of abuse and neglect. How could he not recognise it in them, when he carried that same brand of Darkness in himself?

Kindred spirits, Hermione called herself and Harry once in his earshot. He wondered if she would consider him a kindred spirit too.

"You look deep in thought, my friend." Lucius Malfoy commented, peering at him over the rim of his wine glass.

"Dumbledore has been unbearable," Severus sighed in response, "he's had the damned Order running around like a flock of headless chickens trying to find Harry ever since he and Hermione disappeared after the End-Of-Year Feast."

"Did you find out how they managed that?" Lucius inquired and Severus couldn't help but smirk proudly.

"No, and much to his consternation neither has the old coot himself."

Lucius chuckled, shaking his head slightly. "I've found myself growing increasingly fond of those two. They are quite the entertainment, are they not?"

"Once I stopped having heart attacks every time they did something particularly dunderheaded." Severus said dryly.

"I fear that if you hadn't, my friend, then I'm afraid you'd be buried in the ground by this point." Lucius chuckled again. "I don't think anyone's heart could take all that stress!"

"Agreed." Severus grumbled good-naturedly. "Though I must ask, has Draco had any contact with either of them?" he inquired. "It would be a balm on my poor, frayed nerves to know that they're currently doing well."

Lucius nodded. "One of them, and I'm going to venture a guess that it was Hermione, set up wards so that only Harry's owl can deliver Draco's letters to them. Our owls just get confused when he attempts to get them to deliver the letters personally and they end up back at the manor with the letter still attached." The blond sounded amused by this. "Tracking charms won't attach themselves to the bird and the haughty thing won't touch any letters with tracking charms or Portkeys. It was just an experiment, of course, but the owl drew blood when I tried– I would have killed the cursed thing if I hadn't been so certain Harry or Hermione would find a way to make me pay."

"Wise choice on your behalf. And a clever move on theirs," Severus said with a sigh, "but incredibly inconvenient for those of us who they haven't initiated a correspondence with."

"I must confess to a rather foolish thought that crossed my mind earlier," Lucius said with a thoughtful expression, "that perhaps Harry and Hermione sought accommodation with their mutual friend, the mysterious Mr. Dagworth."

"The politician?" Severus asked, surprised. "I would have thought Tom would be the one who came to mind."

"Tom?" Lucius frowned slightly, "oh– the older boy," he realized, before shaking his head, "no, no, there's something there, Severus, something telling me that those two and Dagworth are connected."

"Connected how?" Severus frowned, wondering whether he should be getting concerned.
"I just find it too coincidental that at around the same time that those two entered our world this Mr. Dagworth shows up, a promising, intelligent politician who is completely unknown to the Pureblood circles and yet is pushing forwards all the laws the Ancient and Noble families want passed– and successfully too, I might add."

Severus wondered whether he should talk about what he witnessed at the Shrieking Shack, about what he'd heard. "Lucius," he began hesitantly and Lucius's expression turned curious at the trepidation visible on his face.

"What is it, Severus?" He prompted.

"I know we've talked about this, but... I feel you should know that I recently gained information which I can state on good conscience is genuine. Information regarding the current... welfare of our old friend." Being the Slytherin that he was, it took Lucius less then a second to grasp what Severus meant and the blond's face shone for a moment.

"You mean to say... it's true, then?" he demanded, breathless and reverent. "Our Lord, he has returned to us?"

"Yes, Lucius." Severus agreed, "I do believe so."

So engrossed the two men were in their conversation, both of them had failed to note the movement by the door. A pale, wide-eyed Draco quietly backed away from his father's study, the door left standing ajar.

Mind whirring, the young blond spun around and made his way straight to his room with one thought and one thought only on his mind.
Chapter XXX:

_Hermione's POV:_

Hermione watched with no small amount of pride as Harry's form started shrinking, reshaping before her eyes.

Harry had spent the holidays practicing his Animagus transformation with a stubborn determination that she knew had impressed even Tom, and she was so proud of his achievement.

Hermione knew that she was a genius– she wasn't being conceited when she said that, it was just a fact. Tom, too, was a genius. Understanding magic came so much easier to them. Logic too, which made it easier to shut off their emotions and operate on facts alone. Harry wasn't like them, in that way– he wasn't a genius. But he was clever and out of her and Harry, Harry had far more raw power. The sheer strength and quantity of it was undeniable to anyone who had even the _slightest_ talent in sensing the magic in others and Tom was the same. Hermione didn't have that same power, but what she _did_ have was a clever mind and an excellent instinctual grasp on her own magic– there was no point in having masses of magic if you didn't know how to control it and get the best use out of it, after all.

And Harry was learning that control– his first complete animagus transformation was undeniable, ironclad proof of that.

Harry's animagus form was that of a coyote, and she thought he looked a bit like a small, sort of scrawny German Shepard, with his dark grey fur, large, adorable furry ears and bushy tail with a black tip. She wanted to pull him into her arms and cuddle him and the little coyote looked so stunned she thought she might just get away with it.

When it came to symbolism, the coyote was a strikingly paradoxical creature and difficult to categorize– they were adaptable, playful and jokesters, traditionally known as way-makers; they represented the truth behind illusion and chaos.

But perhaps one of the most interesting and striking characteristics of the coyote was the fact that they mated for life.

The small coyote cautiously set one small paw forwards and then another, stepping cautiously as if he was expecting something drastic to happen. She watched, amused, as Harry quickly gained his confidence, trotting around the room and sniffing everywhere. His little paws made pattering noises against the polished floorboards and his little nose was all over the place as his big, pointed ears twitched and swiveled.

"Harry," she spoke up finally and the coyote looked over to her with bright green eyes. She lowered herself to the ground and patted her lap in invitation. Harry happily bounded over and practically dived onto her, causing her to laugh as she was knocked backwards. A cold nose pressed against her neck and she squirmed, giggling in a most undignified manner. "Harry!" She tried scolding him but she was laughing too much for either of them to take her seriously and Harry licked her chin.
"Down, pup!" She scolded, gently pushing the small coyote off her and sitting back up off the floor. Harry was preening, licking his grey fur with short, quick strokes of his tongue, and she gently stroked his large ears which caused him to make a happy, rumbling sound.

"Is that Harry?" She heard Tom ask and she turned around to smile at the impressed older boy walking through the doorway. She took a moment to appreciate how handsome Tom looked with his slender body draped in black robes with a thin silver chainlet adorning his waist, the loose ends swaying around his hips with every step he took giving his gait a certain sense of sensuality.

"Isn't he just adorable?" She said and the coyote made a disgruntled sound, puffing out his chest and showing her his teeth. Hermione tickled his chin. "Still adorable." She cooed and the little shoulders slumped dejectedly.

Tom carefully lowered himself next to her, his robes pooling out around him. The large, fluffy ears twitched forwards and the coyote tilted his head, questioningly. "She's right, you know," Tom said to the pup, reaching out to scratch behind one of those big ears, "you are adorable, Harry." The coyote made a dejected noise before the rumbling started again and he leaned into the hand scratching behind his ear.

"What animal form do you have?" Hermione asked Tom curiously and he arched an eyebrow.

"What makes you think I have an animagus form?" He asked and Hermione gave him a decidedly unimpressed look. His lips twitched into a smile. "My form is a Great Horned Owl."

"The tiger of the air," she said dryly, "why does it not surprise me that your animagus form is arguably the most vicious owl breed of all?" Tom smirked and she shook her head, smiling. "I can see why you're an owl animagus, though– intuition, the ability to see what others do not, the capacity to see beyond decoy and masks, intelligence, change and, of course, the traditional meaning of an owl is the announcer of death."

The coyote made a disgruntled noise as the fingers scratching behind his ears withdrew, giving both her and Tom woebegone looks. "Sorry pup, it's time to turn back." Hermione apologized.

The look of intense concentration on the little coyote's face was so adorable Hermione wanted to hug him again but she knew better then to interrupt the delicate transformation process. Harry looked dizzy, almost, when he was two-legged again and he swayed in place. Hermione remembered how discombobulated she'd felt after her first few transformations, and reached out to help balance him.

"That was surreal," he said, his eyes wide and bright.


"Thank you," he said, in a voice that was shyer then normal– Hermione was just pleased he'd accepted her praise instead of deflecting or putting himself down. She considered it a sign of progress that he could acknowledge that what he'd just accomplished was something far from what the average witch or wizard was capable of. Harry was far too modest to the point it was unhealthy and she blamed the Dursleys entirely.

"We should all choose nicknames based on our forms," she said suddenly, spotting an opportunity to help Harry connect with his father. She knew that he was fiercely protective of his mother and although he loved his father Harry had never shown the same... protectiveness that he did with Lily Evans Potter.
Hermione thought that what she'd heard about Lily Evans Potter reminded her deeply of Harry. Gifted and uncommonly kind with a way of seeing the beauty in others even—especially—when they couldn't see it themselves; like mother, like son. Of course, Harry and James Potter both shared a love and talent at Quidditch and James Potter had been a member of his House team at Hogwarts too, though he'd been a Chaser, not a Seeker.

"You mean like the Marauders?" Harry asked her, looking as eager at the thought as she'd thought he would be. She nodded.

"I like Tox for me, still— I think it suits my form as well as fitting within the parameters of the names your father and his friends chose." She said, before smiling slyly. "Tom can be be Tweety."

"Absolutely not!" Tom said, sounding appalled.

"Feathers? Cheepy?" She suggested.

"Flighty? Robin? Clucky? Hooter?" Added a grinning Harry. Tom looked at them both with disgust and she and Harry laughed.

"How about Razor, then?" Hermione said when she finally stopped laughing, her suggestion serious this time. "I've read Great Horned Owls have claws as sharp as razor blades."

"Or Tiger," Harry suggested. "You said they were known as the tigers of the air."

"It sounds more like a nickname you use for a lover," Hermione pointed out and Harry laughed, even as his ears went red.

"Talon, then." He said.

"Talon," Tom repeated, thoughtfully. "If I have to join this... juvenile pursuit, then that will be my," he paused, grimacing, "nickname."

"Oh hush," Hermione rolled her eyes at him, "it shouldn't be such a bother to pick a nickname when you're already using one half the time."

Tom looked appalled. "Are you calling 'Voldemort' a nickname?" He demanded. She gave him a singularly unimpressed look.

"Pseudonym, nickname; they're practically synonymous."

"They most certainly are not!" Argued Tom and Hermione rolled her eyes again. Ignoring the spluttering, indignant young Dark Lord, she turned back to Harry.

"Any ideas for yours?" She asked him. Harry looked stumped.

"Er..." He said.

"How about... Tricks," she suggested when it looked like he was drawing a blank. "Our Marauder-esque names will all start with 'T' that way and coyotes are known as tricksters."

"I love it," Harry said, with a big smile.

"I've got another idea. You know what could not only be fun, but give massive misdirection to Dumbledore?" Hermione said with a slow smirk on her face.

"What?" Harry asked curiously and her smirk turned wicked.
"The second coming of the Marauders. I know it's hopelessly childlike but with 'Thaddeus' being more active in the Wizengamot and our recent disappearing trick, Dumbledore will be watching us more closely then ever. And what better to show him then a boy trying to emulate his father and his father's friends? He'll eat it up and so will McGonagall."

"Snape might actually kill us," Harry pointed out, even though his eyes were shining with excitement. "Filch too," he added, after a moment of thought.

"Snape will be fine as long as we obey the rule-- don't get caught. And we can create plenty of havoc without inconveniencing Argus." Hermione pointed out, pleased to see the growing excitement in her best friend.

It hadn't been a lie when she said it would be good misdirection to Dumbledore– because it would be; the old man was the foolish, sentimental sort who would eat this sort of thing up, would see it as evidence Harry looked up to and wanted to be just like his Gryffindor father and friends.

But that was only half the reason. She'd also brought this up for Harry's own sake– the last two years at Hogwarts hadn't been easy for Harry, what with the whole Chamber of Secrets business and then killing Black. More then once he'd woken her during the night when he cried out in his sleep and it hurt her to see him like that. A prank war waged against... well, against the whole school would be good for him. And she could see in the approval on Tom's face that he understood what she was doing.

"This is going to be great!" Harry said, looking positively gleeful.

"The most successful pranks are the ones that are well-planned and innovative," Tom said in a lecturing voice, "you'll have to do lots of research. I refuse to allow either of you to pull off cheap, boring pranks. If you're doing this, you're doing it properly."

"We'll need very good alibis too," she mused. "The professors will likely know we're responsible if we're going to be claiming to be the second rising of the Marauders so we're going to have to ensure there is no way they can trace our pranks back to us. This could be even more useful then I thought," her mind was already racing through different tactics– it was like planning a crime or a con; it had to go perfectly and no evidence could be left behind. This would be even better practice for both her and Harry then what she'd originally thought.

"Well Tox, Talon," Harry said, with a huge, beaming smile on his face, "we better start planning the introductory act of the second coming of the Marauders. It's going to need to be spectacular."

"And utterly unforgettable," Hermione agreed. "To the books?"

"To the books." Agreed Harry with a laugh and Tom shook his head ruefully.

"This is going to be a headache," He said but Hermione could see the traces of excitement on his face along with the beginning of a sadistic grin. "They're not going to know what hit them."

- Severus's POV: -

Minerva had been quieter then Severus was used to this summer whenever they meetings were arranged to discuss Harry and Hermione.
She used to get all fiery and up in arms when it came to his troublesome two; full of such righteous indignation and outrage at whatever Hermione had done lately and pity for Harry, usually for the same reason—whatever it was Hermione had done lately. But this summer, while Albus and the Order had done their best to find the two runaways as well as giving all the members a thorough description of each child, Minerva had barely said a word—she hadn't even complained about Hermione 'leading poor Harry astray' once!

It was actually very disturbing and as such he was genuinely relieved when she finally asked him if she could have a private word as they'd left Albus's office following the latest update on the search for the missing children, his sneaky little snakes.

He led the way to his office with an uncharacteristically silent Minerva following after him. He offered her a drink once they'd both entered and when she accepted he poured them both a glass of brandy— it was her favorite type of alcohol to indulge in which was why he always kept a bottle in stock, should the need to butter her up ever arise.

"What can I help you with, Minerva?" he asked, after taking a small sip, the familiar burn of it sliding down his throat and warming his stomach. Minerva's grip on her glass was white-knuckled and the older witch took an unsteady breath.

"Is it true?" she asked quietly. "The things you said about Miss Granger, are they true?"

Ah, Severus thought. Really, he should have expected this. Minerva's dislike of Hermione was no secret and in a fit of rage the previous school year he'd revealed not only the girl's homeless and orphaned state but her rape at age nine; whether the girl had been forcibly assaulted or had 'consented' to the act, likely in an act of prostitution, it was still rape—children could not legally consent to sex.

But the more he thought about that, the more furious he felt, so he focused his attention back on Minerva. "I looked up the address her acceptance letter was sent to," he admitted, "it was addressed to the empty doorway of a dark alley." Minerva let out a shaky breath and tossed back her brandy, swallowing the entire glassful in three large gulps before setting the glass on the table so she could rest her head in her hands.

"I dinnae ken... I would not have been so hard on her," Minerva's voice was agonized, even muffled as it was. "I should not have been so hard on her! I thought she was a bad influence on Harry, especially when the boy was Sorted into Slytherin and Albus told me the Hat said that Harry had asked to go to your House because she was in it."

Severus silently seethed, biting back the angered words he wanted to fling at Albus after that little revelation. Really, what had the old man been expecting to happen when he told Minerva that? Hermione had never had a chance—Albus had completely biased Minerva against her with that one statement alone.

"She's a bright, talented young girl... but her personality grated on me and I allowed her to do the same as you did, so many years ago," Minerva said sorrowfully. "I let her push away all those who might have been able to help with sharp words and a guarded, vitriolic attitude."

Severus shifted in his seat, taking another sip of his own drink to hide his discomfort with where Minerva was taking the conversation. It was true that he'd been able to draw parallels to his situation with Hermione— with Harry too— but he hadn't expected Minerva to and it unsettled him how astute the Head of Gryffindor house could be.

"Has she ever talked to you about her assault?" Minerva's words were practically a whisper and
Severus shook his head.

"No, she has not. In every conversation we've had, not once has she actually discussed anything truly personal with me." He admitted. Minerva lifted her head from her hands and there was a new fiery determination in her eyes.

"Well I will not neglect my duties as the Deputy Headmistress of this school any longer!" she said heatedly. "Abrasive or not, I will never again overlook a student in pain because I find their behavior with much left to be desired. Perhaps Miss Granger will feel more comfortable talking to a woman. Even if she does not, I shall make sure that she is educated in what it is that has happened to her and other womanly things that she will need to know now that she is growing older and her body maturing. I will make my amends with her so that she will know, so that all my students will know, that my door is always open for them."

"That is an admirable thought, Minerva, but surely you must realize it won't be easy with Miss Granger," Severus pointed out. Minerva lifted her chin and her steely gaze met his.

"I am well aware that Miss Granger does not trust me, nor have I given her any cause to do so. But I accepted the post of Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts so that I could help its students to the best of my abilities and I will help Miss Granger."

Severus looked at her for a long moment and then he nodded. "I believe you, Minerva." He said and she smiled for the first time he remembered this entire summer.

"Thank you, Severus."

-Harry's POV:

Hedwig swooped down through the open window, gliding lazily through the air and landing before him on the post of his bed. His beautiful snowy owl propped out a foot, looking as regal as she always did.

Harry thought it was quite fitting that Tom's animagus form was an owl– not because of all the symbolism that Hermione had gone on about, all her research into what different animals indicated about a person, but because owls were such prideful, haughty creatures. Hedwig clearly knew that she was royalty and absolutely expected to be doted on and served as such– she made sure that he knew she was doing him a favor by carrying his letters and therefore deserved to be thanked on bent knee for her service and provided with owl treats aplenty.

Harry handed over several of said owl treats, which he knew very well to keep stocked, before untieing the letter. He was surprised to realize it was from Draco– there was no fancy Malfoy seal and the writing looked messy and hurried.

Harry,

We need to meet as soon as possible. It's urgent. Hermione too.

Can you make it to Diagon Alley today? If you can then don't bother sending a reply, just meet me in the alleyway next to Eeylops at 3pm.

–Draco
Harry felt worry gnaw at his insides– this was not like Draco at all. Even the knowledge of Sirius Black escaping Azkaban and supposedly been after Harry hadn't had the blond so concerned.

Giving Hedwig another owl treat, he rushed out of his room to find wherever Hermione was. His first guess of the library proved fruitful and Hermione looked up from the thick tome she was bent over with alarm as he burst through the doorway.

"Harry?" she asked, standing up instantly with concern clear on her face. "What is it?"

"I don't know," he told her worriedly. "It's– here, read this." He pushed the crumpled parchment into her hand and watched as she read the message, a frown on her face.

"I can't think of anything that could have worried him like this," she said, looking up to meet his gaze in concern. "Even when the Death Eaters broke out of Azkaban earlier this summer he just asked if we were safe and made sure we were aware of what had happened."

"We need to go meet him," Harry said determinedly and Hermione's mouth turned down, worry in her eyes.

"I agree." She said. "Go get changed into robes and get your spare wand and the Cloak. I'll go find Tom and let him know what's happening. We'll meet back here in ten minutes." Harry nodded and they split up.

Thanks to Voldemort, Harry now had a full wardrobe of expensive, hand-tailored clothes and he quickly pulled on one of the simplest robes he could find, the material dyed a shade of green so dark it practically looked black with gold embroidery on the hems and a black travelling cloak with gold clasps. The Knockturn Alley wand was stashed in his sleeve and he grabbed the Invisibility Cloak.

Rushing back to the library, he waited anxiously for Hermione and Tom and was slightly alarmed when he saw Lord Voldemort approaching with the pair.

"Tom and Voldemort both aren't aware of anything that could have upset or spooked Draco," Hermione spoke first. "I've assured them both that Draco would never put us in danger but Tom is going to be accompanying us to Diagon Alley to make sure we don't come to any harm, though he'll stay in the Diary while we're talking to Draco."

"Sounds good," Harry said even as he worried his lower lip with his teeth, anxious about what had upset Draco, completely unaware of the way the attention of the room was attracted to the movement. "Can we go now?"

"Impatient," Hermione said, but he could see the anxiety in her eyes too and didn't take what she said to heart. "We need to disguise you first."

"Just give him the contacts," advised Tom.

"Contacts?" he asked, confused. Hermione glared at Tom before turning to him.

"You know how we went to the optometrist at the start of the summer," she said and Harry nodded– as well as fully stocking both of their wardrobes, Voldemort as 'Thaddeus' had taken them to an optometrist where Harry had had his eyes tested for the first time ever. He then got to pick out a pair of glasses that were fitted with the correct prescription– again, for the first time ever. He'd been shocked by just how much clearer the world was and how far he could see. He loved his new glasses too– instead of being round with wire frames they were now rectangular with black frames.
"Well," Hermione looked a bit embarrassed, "I ordered you some contact lenses for you-- it was going to be your birthday present." Despite his anxiety Harry still managed to smile brightly at her.

"They sound great, Hermione," he told her excitedly, "playing Quidditch with contacts will be so much easier!" He wasn't at all surprised when Hermione rolled her eyes and muttered 'Quidditch' in a scathing tone, though he was amused when both Tom and Voldemort clearly looked like they agreed with her.

It took a further ten minutes for Harry to learn how to put in the contact lenses but he instantly loved them-- even more then his new glasses. It felt so bizarre not to be wearing glasses; his nose felt sort of... lighter and even though that sounded ridiculous, it was true. Looking in the mirror, he almost didn't recognize his face-- not without the glasses he'd been wearing since he was seven.

But as much as he'd have liked to gape at his reflection, a check of the time said that he'd have to do that later. Hermione stashed the Cloak in her bottomless bag and Tom apparated her to the alley first, before returning for him.

The feeling of disapparation was as nasty as ever and Harry cringed a little when he realised exactly where it was they were meeting Draco-- outside Eeylopes. It wasn't the sound of the owls which were loud enough to make his ears ring that bothered him, nor was it the stench of so much owl waste, but rather the memory of last time he'd stood here, when he'd had an unconscious, bleeding Hermione in his arms, cradling her frantically to him as he waited for Mr. Malfoy to arrive after Greyback had attacked her.

Tom, Harry noted, looked similarly discomforted though there was more anger evident in his crushed violet eyes then the memory of panic that Harry was sure was reflected in his own.

Hermione opened the Diary and Harry watched Tom disappear into the pages, disconcerted as he always felt at the sight. Hermione stashed the Diary in one of the pockets of the light purple robe she was wearing with a sash of a darker shade of purple and a light grey woollen cloak. Instead of a real disguise, like him she'd simply removed the feature she was most well-known for and her wild chestnut curls were now straight, sleek and golden-blonde.

Harry was relieved that Draco arrived exactly on time as he really didn't want to stay in the small alleyway any longer then he had to. Draco looked even more relieved to see him there and Harry was a bit startled to see Blaise was with him as well as Daphne.

"Thank Merlin you came," Draco said, "come on-- Blaise got us somewhere private to talk."

Harry traded bewildered looks with Hermione, but they still followed as Blaise led the way down the Alley, to a part where Harry hadn't been before-- restaurants, cafes and what he thought might be a bar lined the cobbled pathways, and Blaise led them to the most expensive, classy restaurant there, the emblazoned gold letters declaring its name to be *Matrona*.

"Master Zabini!" Blaise was greeted the moment they walked inside, and Harry barely got the time to take in the polished mahogany, the gold-framed art-work or the sparkling, glittering chandelier before they were being hustled over to a private room with a carved wooden table that seated ten, a grand looking fireplace and several lush, red couches. "Can we get you anything, Master Zabini?"

The greeter asked and Blaise shook his head.

"Just privacy." He said and the greeter bowed before exiting the room.

"Nice place," Hermione said and Blaise shrugged.
"Madre owns a number of these all over the world." He said carelessly and Harry saw that Hermione looked surprised.

"Your mother owns this?" she asked and it was Harry's turn to look over at Blaise with wide eyes.

"Madre owns all the Matrona restaurants," Blaise explained, "Matrona means--"

"Matriarch in Italian." Hermione was smiling now and Blaise grinned back at her before his expression turned serious again.

"You might want to sit down for this," he said slowly and Harry felt anxiety churning inside him as he sat down on one of the sofas.

"You're really starting to freak me out," he said hesitantly and Daphne let out a shaky laugh.

"We're all really freaked out too," she confessed. "Draco, tell them what you heard."

"Father left the door to his study open," Draco began and Harry didn't like how pale his friend looked. "I wanted to ask him a question and I knew he was with Uncle Severus out on his study's balcony, so I walked in and I was going over to the balcony door when I-- I heard Uncle Severus say something."

"What did he say?" Harry asked, fear gripping him. Was it about Dumbledore? He thought, wildly. Had Dumbledore somehow figured out what he had done at the end of the term, that Harry had become a murderer? Had Dumbledore managed to track them down to the Manor? Had Dumbledore found out that they'd given the Philosopher's Stone to Voldemort?

"He said-- he said that the Dark Lord's back," Draco rushed his words and Harry actually fell back in his seat as the fear abruptly left him. Draco seemed to take his slumped posture for something else-- defeat, probably-- and started hastily talking again. "Look, I know that- that you're the Boy-Who-Lived, but you're a Slytherin, Harry, and us Slytherins look after our own. The Dark Lord was a Slytherin too-- maybe we can... sort something out? Like some sort of deal-- I know that he killed your parents, Harry, and I know that you'll never follow him but that's why Blaise and Daphne are here," Draco looked so earnest that Harry didn't have the heart to interrupt him.

"The Zabini and the Greengrass families are what are known as Neutral families," Daphne took over explaining, "our Head of Families swore oaths to the Dark Lord during the war that we would not become involved in any of the fighting. We would not support Him but we would not support the Light either."

"So... you think if I swear the same oath to Vol-- the Dark Lord," Harry hastily corrected himself when Hermione elbowed him, "that he won't try to kill me." He was actually impressed that they'd come to the same solution so quickly that Hermione had back in their first year.

"I've spoken to madre," Blaise said, his expression filled with determination, "She is willing to vouch for you, to the Dark Lord."

"As are my parents," said Daphne, firmly.

"But you have to mean it, Harry," Draco said anxiously, "you have to mean to stay neutral. I know that he killed your parents and that he tried to kill you, but please think about this."

"Draco, it's okay," Harry said soothingly. "And thank you, Blaise and Daphne, and thank your families for me, but it won't be necessary,"
"Don't decide now, Harry!" Draco actually looked frantic now, his steel-grey eyes wide and panicked. "I'm begging you, and you know Malfoy's don't beg– just think about it! If you want revenge, take it against those blasted muggles you grew up with, just–"

"Draco!" Harry interrupted the blond, who honestly looked like he was on the verge of tears. "Draco, it's not necessary because it's already sorted!"

Draco looked shocked– as did Blaise and Daphne.

Daphne, the usually perfectly eloquent pureblood princess, was the first one to regain use of her vocal cords and managed to blurt out an incredulous, "What?!

Harry turned to Hermione, not sure what story to use– or if they needed to use a story at all. Hermione pursed her lips, a look of consideration on her face. "Look," she said finally. "I don't want to lie to you, so we can't tell you everything. Actually, we can't tell you most of it. What we can tell you is that the Dark Lord is not going to try and kill Harry. I can swear that on my magic, if you want me to."

Draco's hands were still shaking and he exhaled loudly. "I would be so pissed off with you for not mentioning anything before now if I wasn't so bloody relieved," he said, voice rough with emotion, and Harry was genuinely shocked when the blond walked over to pull him up off the chair and into a hug. "Shut up, this never happened." Draco muttered and Harry obediently didn't say a word. Draco had never hugged him before as hugging was beneath a Malfoy– or something along those lines.

He was even more shocked that when Draco let go Blaise yanked him into a quick hug and he could see Daphne squeezing one of Hermione's hands in her own.

Blaise saw his confusion and the Italian snorted. "You have no idea what you guys mean to us, do you?" he asked, looking amused.

"For being so intelligent, you are quite thick." Agreed Daphne, leaning over to lightly hit Harry's arm. "We're your friends, you morons."

"We like you," Blaise clarified, as if he could see just how confused and lost he and Hermione were. "We care about you. We would be devastated if something happened to you."

"I know that you both didn't have the same upbringing as we did," Daphne said quietly. "And I'm not talking about the fact you were raised by muggles– you were both alone before Hogwarts. Don't bother denying it; I know I'm right. Even if you had 'friends' before you met each other, you didn't have someone who you could be completely yourself with. And before Hogwarts, I don't think you had somewhere where you truly felt safe either. We can't understand that because we grew up the way we did, but you don't understand that for us, true friendship has never had a price. You don't have to earn it. Oh every pureblood knows how to fake a friendship, but true friendships... you're our true friends. So you both listen right now– you don't have to do things alone, just the two of you. We can help you; we want to help you– we can be there for you. We want to be there for you. So both of you get that through your thick skulls, alright?"

Harry sort of just stared. Draco's cheeks looked pink and Blaise was picking invisible bits of lint of his robes. Daphne had skipped the embarrassment the two pureblood boys were feeling at her frank admission and was instead looking at him and Hermione with fierce, tear-shiny, sky-blue eyes.

Hermione looked just as stunned as he felt and she wasn't even trying to hide it. Harry... Harry
didn't know what to say. He barely knew what to think and his eyes were stinging like he was about to start crying.

He'd known that Draco, Blaise and Theo liked him and he liked them. And he knew that Tracey and Daphne were Hermione's favorite roommates; knew that Tracey had always shared her knowledge of Greyer magical arts with them without asking for anything in return and that Daphne used to secretly lend Hermione things back in their first year, when Hermione didn't actually have over half the school supplies on the booklist. He'd even considered his interactions with Daphne and Tracey friendly, though maybe not quite on the same level as the boys—what he hadn't known was that Blaise and Daphne considered him their friend. He hadn't known that Draco valued their friendship so much, valued Harry so much, that his first thought when he learned that Voldemort was back was to find a way to keep him safe.

Hermione looked just as stunned as he did. He knew that before Hogwarts Hermione had had Sting, the boy who she felt she owed for teaching her how to survive on the streets and had a close but complicated relationship with. He also knew that she was fond of Hornet and Glitter and that she was friendly with Pike's crew—Pike, Sledge, Cat, Jackie and Jill— but "friendships" were different on the streets. Everyone had to prioritise themselves in order to survive and in the end the only person Hermione had really been able to fully trust was herself. She had people she was friendly with, and she had Sting who she had been close with, but ultimately, in the end they all fended for themselves—they had to, it was a dangerous life they led after all.

Harry hadn't been in the same situation but he'd certainly been just as alone. Before Hogwarts— or, to be more specific, before Hermione— Harry had had no one. He'd certainly never had any friends, all the kids too scared of Dudley to try talking to the weird skinny kid with broken glasses and secondhand clothes.

This show of support and declaration of friendship from Daphne, Blaise and Draco was... It was humbling and it was breathtaking and Harry was only slightly mollified by the fact Hermione appeared just as unprepared for it as he was, his best friend seeming unable, or perhaps unwilling, to hide away the blatant show of emotions splashed across her face.

"Thank you," Harry blurted out, trying to make his bright red cheeks less red through sheer strength of will. It wasn't working. Daphne was the only one who didn't seem to be embarrassed at all, his pretty Housemate both confident in herself and comfortable in the emotions she'd expressed in a way Harry wasn't sure he'd ever be.

"Really," Hermione added, and Harry was only slightly surprised to see her cheeks looked as red as his. "Thank you."
CHAPTER XXXI:

Hermione's POV:

Hermione looked across at the three Slytherins, having managed to get her expression back under control. Their... support had taken her off guard. As had their firm, if somewhat embarrassed on the boys' part, declaration of friendship.

They were right when they said that before she met Harry she had been alone. She had loved Sting– she still did; she owed him her life, after all– but what they had was complicated, and while she possessed various degrees of fondness towards the other crew members those friendships were ones born out of sheer necessity brought along by a shared set of circumstances.

Of course, she could also point out to herself that her friendship with Harry had started from a shared set of circumstances– and the friendship with Tom had started out of necessity. But both of those friendships had grown into something more then any of her other friendships had; something that could almost be called... love.

Urgh. Using that word always made her feel so uncomfortable and self-conscious.

But back to her year mates... she'd always appreciated the companionship she'd shared with the boys, Tracey and Daphne. Even Greg and Vince on a good day. She just hadn't been prepared for the declaration of a friendship she still wasn't sure she understood.

Oh, she knew the definitions of course; friendship was a state of mutual trust and support between allies, a friend was a person with whom one has a bond of mutual affection. Logically, she understood what it meant perfectly, but... well, was just more used to friendship having more, er, mutual benefits for each party where everyone in a friendship gained something obviously useful from the other.

From Sting she'd gained back-up, a teacher, a mentor and a brother. In return, she'd always given him a share of whatever 'profit' she'd made and, later, the benefits of her magic during winters, before she actually knew what magic really was and just thought it was some sort of odd genetic mutation.

What she shared with Harry and Tom, it was more then friendship; it was a whole separate category of relationship entirely, as relationships often were when sex entered the equation– sex and, in this case, love. Urgh.

A friendship where all that was required was for a person to just be themselves seemed so foreign to her and left her hiding her confusion behind a mask as she tried not to stare at the three Slytherins.

By the knowing look in Daphne's sky-blue eyes, she was fairly certain she wasn't as successful as she'd hoped, or maybe the pretty young woman's intuition was sharper then she'd originally thought. Daphne truly was surprising her today– all three of them were.
"Well, now that I'm no longer in need of a strong calming draught, I can inform you, Harry, that mother is planning you a birthday party." Draco announced. "Your attendance, of course, is expected. Hermione's too."

Hermione couldn't help her smirk of amusement as Harry visibly blanched. "What?" He practically squeaked, his green eyes, not hidden at all by glasses, wide and horrified.

"Oh don't be a baby," Draco scoffed, expression haughty. "You know that mother adores you and Hermione, what were you expecting?"

"I wasn't expecting a birthday party!"

"It's not even going to be a big event," sniffed the blond, "friends and family only– and, of course, the family of said friends."

"My parents look forward to formally meeting you both," Daphne said, with a pretty, prim smile. "Astoria too."

"I've met her already," Harry said weakly, looking overwhelmed by the forcefulness of Daphne's sugar-sweet smile and the steel in Draco's eyes that very clearly stated he was going to be at that party– or else.

"Give up, mate," Blaise advised, before giving a wicked grin of his own. "Madre wants to meet you both, too. And Madre always gets her way– ask any of her six ex-husbands."

"They're all dead." Hermione pointed out. Blaise's grin widened further and his teeth were very white against his dark skin.

"Exactly."

"But– but–" Harry looked like a baby deer in headlights as he turned from one unsympathetic face to the next and Hermione tried not to look so amused. Draco pointed his finger threateningly at Harry.

"No. Buts." He glowered.

"Fine." Harry slumped, defeated.

"What about you, Hermione?" Asked Blaise, turning to face her, a single eyebrow arched. "When is your birthday? You've never told us."

"I know," she said, with a lazy smile. "And you missed it. I'm fifteen."

Well, she wasn't technically fifteen, not yet anyway. She vaguely remembered her actual date of birth being around mid-September but she'd never bothered to confirm it; birthdays had never been a big deal to her and there had been no individual birthday events at the orphanage– the nuns thought it bred entitlement– so when Sting had suggested picking a new date to go with her new name she'd agreed and had lived by it for the past almost nine years. She'd just never really celebrated it– Sting had been the only one who'd even known and it wasn't like it was her real date of birth. It was just another day to survive.

"How are we supposed to buy you birthday presents if you won't tell us when your birthday is?" complained Draco.

"Just combine them with my Christmas present," she suggested with a careless shrug.
"Why won't you tell us?" Draco demanded, with a pout. Hermione just shrugged again.

"It's just not important. I don't celebrate my birthday." She said and Draco huffed.

"Fine," he grumbled. "Harry, Hermione, you're expected at the Manor the day before Harry's birthday."

"If we must." Harry sighed theatrically and Draco turned his pout to Harry instead and she laughed.

"That was surprisingly decent of Abraxas's grandson, warning you like that." Tom mused.

They'd parted ways with the other three, heading back towards the shopping district of Diagon Alley while Draco, Blaise and Daphne used the private Floo in Matrona to return back to their various Manors, Villas and Chateaus.

"Draco's not a bad sort," Harry immediately defended the blond, like Hermione knew he would– if Harry could be considered one thing in this world, it was loyal to his friends and his loved ones.

"It's his mother's influence, then," Tom said, smirking lightly. "The only thing Abraxas cared about more than himself was his money and his reputation, and according to my older and less handsome self, Abraxas's son Lucius is cut from the same mulberry silk cloth."

"Draco might be a spoiled git at times– well, most of the time– but he still cares." Harry said simply and Tom inclined his head in agreement, conceding to the point. Harry's mouth turned up in an embarrassed smile. "I've never had a birthday party before," he admitted. "It's... it's really nice of Narcissa plan one for me. It makes me feel bad that Voldemort hasn't let Bellatrix contact her to say that she's alright. She must be so worried for her sister ever since she heard about the breakout."

"Dumbledore's people are keeping a close eye on the Malfoys since the break out," Tom reminded him sharply, a warning in his voice. Hermione's lips tightened, discomfort making her stomach twinge.

Living with Voldemort, it was far too easy sometimes to forget just who he really was– when she saw him in the mornings sipping his coffee while scowling at the morning paper it was hard to remember he was the same man who'd had a nation cower before him, that people were still too terrified to even speak his name and they thought he'd been dead for over a decade, difficult to even reconcile him with the same man who had so casually tortured one of the very Death Eaters he'd broken out of Azkaban with the Crucius simply because the Death Eater had tried to write to his wife when Voldemort had given them all strict instructions not to contact anyone outside the Manor.

Do not upset him, Tom was warning Harry. Do not forget who he is.

Message received, Hermione thought grimly as Harry ducked his head.

"I want to pick something up from Knockturn Alley I had ordered in," Tom said after a moment's silence and Harry looked back up at him with alarm on his face. Hermione felt herself stiffen too and she could swear that she felt the scar on her shoulder, a set of teeth marking her skin that would never fade, ache slightly. "You will not be accompanying me, obviously." The older boy said, giving them both a stern look and Hermione tightened her lips at being given an order. Harry touched her hand gently, concern clear in his green eyes.
"Greyback could be there, Hermione," her best friend said, his expression beseeching with her to not make a fuss. "I don't want him anywhere near you and neither does Tom."

"Fine." She said shortly. "I don't want to wait out in the open though, in case Dumbledore has any lookouts posted around to keep their eyes open for us."

"You could wait inside Gringotts," suggested Tom. "The building is considered sovereign soil and Wizarding laws aren't applicable within its halls. It wouldn't stop Dumbledore from trying to take you from there, of course, but it would give him enough pause to allow you time to escape and the bank is one of the closest buildings to the Leakey Cauldron– Dumbledore and his people would have no idea how to navigate muggle London."

"I did like the goblins," Hermione said, remembering the entertaining banter she'd shared with the two who had been guarding the magnificent doors to the bank. "They were quite the amusing conversationalists."

"Really?" Harry asked, looking at her doubtfully. "They all seemed kind of... brooding and mean-looking to me."

"I'm mean-looking," she reminded him.

"Not anymore." Harry said and when she gave him a horrified look, he hastened to explain his words. "Well, you're dressed all nice and your hair is done up and you– you look like Daphne does."

"You mean I look like a proper young pureblood heiress?" she asked, aghast.

"Is that such a bad thing?" Harry asked nervously.

"Yes!" She looked down at her hands, examining the elegant French manicure and the sparkling silver bracelets with real diamonds adorning her wrists. The purple robe and sash she wore were dyed mulberry silk, expertly cut and tailored to her form and the grey wool cloak she wore was made from cashmere. Even her shoes, silver strappy sandals with two inch tapered block heels, were completely useless for any sort of running or kicking arse; they were the sort of shoes that she would have scoffed at and never even consider putting on her feet, back when she was twelve and magic was just something she read about in books.

Lifting a hand to touch the straight, shiny curtain of gold spilling like silk over her shoulders and prod the pretty star-shaped diamond earrings in her earlobes with her fingertips, she came to a horrifying realization. "Oh my fucking god," she breathed, her eyes wide with genuine horror. "I've become one of them!"

She'd become one of those girls; with their frills, ribbons and lace and their silly shoes and their showy jewellery. She'd become one of the girls she'd always looked at in the past and thought mark; the type she'd target and then rob blind, ending up a block away before the ditzes even knew she'd robbed them of their useless, expensive fancies and trinkets.

"Hermione!" Harry looked alarmed and Hermione realized her breathing had sped up and her pulse was skittering as she stared at her hands wildly; her soft, scented hands, adorned with real jewels set in pretty rings. The littered knife scars were still evident on her skin but they seemed faded, the sparkling jewellery drawing attention away from them. This– this wasn't who she was! This had never been who she was; she'd never tried to hide the truth of her past, recorded on her skin as a testament to her survival. She'd never tried to disguise her years of homelessness and poverty with expensive fabrics and jewels. She'd never wanted to; she wasn't ashamed of her past. This, this
person she was dressed as, this wasn't her; it was a stranger wearing her skin.

"Calm down, it's not that bad," Harry coaxed her, "think of it as-- a disguise!" She looked up at her best friend, her expression still horrified. "Or you can think of it as dressed to kill?" Harry blanched in the face of her visible distress. "Oh god, please don't kill me Hermione! I swear to Salazar, you are still absolutely terrifying!"

Hermione felt her upset start to abate, even as she narrowed her eyes at him. "You're not just saying that, are you?" she asked, suspiciously.

"You can terrify anyone with just one murderous look," Harry said with a slight shudder, and his face and words were painfully earnest. "I swear, you could be wearing a frilly tutu with pink ribbons in your hair and I'd think the same-- everyone would."

"Now that your existential crisis is over, how about you go wait inside Gringotts so I can go... encourage the shopkeeper to put a rush on my order, if it hasn't already arrived." Tom said dryly, looking annoyingly amused by said existential crisis.

Hermione gave him a dark look before linking her arm through Harry's and dragging him towards the towering white building near the entrance to the Alley. She recognized one of the goblins at the first set of doors and stopped to greet him.

"Stuck on door duty again, Uric?"

"Ah Jane," the goblin said, a surprised smile on his face. "I see you have a wand now-- and several years of schooling under your belt too, I imagine. Have you come for our challenge?"

"I'm fairly well funded at present," she told him. "But should those funds ever dry up, or I feel like a good old hands-on academic challenge, I just might turn my sights back to your lovely bank." She winked at Uric and he laughed, the goblin beside him giving a chuckle of his own, and her answering smile was wide and sincere. She wondered at this, remembering the cynical or darkly amused smiles she used to give; the ones that had been honest or genuine or warm had been so small and so rarely graced her guarded face. Apparently it wasn't just her appearance that had changed in the past few years; she herself had changed and right now she couldn't decide if that was for the better.

That self-analysis, however, could be undertaken later, in the privacy of her room. Right now she was in public and she needed her focus to be on the here and now.

"This is Zaxil," Uric introduced his fellow guard, who gave her a polite nod. "Zaxil, this is Jane."

"Well this handsome fellow is Harry, my companion for the day." Hermione introduced Harry, who was watching her exchange with Uric with a surprised interest. He ducked his head, his cheeks going pink at her comment, and she smirked at her embarrassed friend.


"That is what people seem fond of calling him." Hermione agreed even as Harry winced. Uric looked amused at Harry's discomfort for the title Wizarding Britain insisted on calling him by, reaffirming her opinion that goblins were clever, vicious little bastards with sadistic streaks a mile long– she knew there was a reason she liked them so much.

"Well, what can we at Gringotts do for you both today?" Uric asked.

"Actually, we're just waiting for a friend." Hermione explained.
"And you're waiting here, because Gringotts is so well known for its generous hospitality?" Uric arched an eyebrow.

"What can I say? Sovereign soil is just so very... useful." Hermione showed the goblin her wolf smile and Uric started chuckling again, sweeping a hand toward the giant doorway.

"Then you might want to pass through our doors, as it is inside our halls, not outside our doorway, that is considered goblin nation." He advised.

"Then we will do just that," Hermione nodded her head in thanks and gave a quick bow. "Have a pleasant day, Uric. And you, Zaxil."

"Yourself and your companion too." Uric returned her show of respect with a slight bow of his own.

Together she and Harry passed through the second set of doors without any trouble and Harry finally spoke up. "Please tell me the academic challenge you were discussing wasn't bank robbery." He said, his voice hushed as though afraid to draw any attention to his words.

"Okay, I won't." She agreed, easily enough. Harry looked horrified.

"Hermione! Tell me you're joking!"

"Oh Harry!" She laughed at his aghast and slightly terrified expression. "Ask me no questions and I will tell you no lies."

"Hermione!" he repeated a third time, this time with a hint of a whine.

"Yes, Harry, Hermione is my name." She nodded, sagely, and he made a defeated sound.

"And I have heard a lot about you," a much deeper voice spoke from behind them, "though I have yet to meet either you or Harry face-to-face."

Hermione spun around, her wand now in her hand as she smoothly stepped to place herself between Harry and the man who had spoken. He was tall, thin and handsome with long hair that was worn back in a ponytail. His clothes were certainly not what could be called typical wizarding fashion and probably wouldn't look out of place at a muggle rock concert and his dragon fang earring only added to that impression. Hermione would have considered approving of him for that fact alone, were it not for his particular and entirely recognizable damning shade of hair– bright Weasley red.

"William Weasley, I presume." She said through stiff lips.

William 'Bill' Weasley had been Head Boy, she knew, and from her brief research of the Weasley family back in her second year after Ronald and the twins had landed Harry in the Hospital Wing following their sister's 'abduction' at the hands of the Heir of Slytherin she knew that he was a curse breaker at Gringotts– her immediate thought upon reading this had been that he would likely prove the most challenging out of them all to kill.

Behind her, she heard Harry's sharp intake of breath but she kept her eyes firmly on the Weasley.

The bank was busy enough that no one noticed the small standoff between the three of them, tucked away from the bustling crowd of witches, wizards and goblins as they were. Hermione debated whether the goblins would come to her and Harry's aid if she made a fuss but with a sinking heart she realised it was far more likely that they would side with their favoured, talented Curse Breaker over two school children, which made the whole sovereign soil thing entirely
redundant. Adding the fact all the witches and wizards present would no doubt be more then happy
to turn a runaway Boy-Who-Lived back over to the 'grandfatherly', 'benevolent' and 'understanding'
Headmaster of Hogwarts, the one and only Albus Dumbledore, well... Hermione could feel the
panic settle in her gut, her heart speeding up as blood rushed in her ears.

Shit. This was not good. Her only real consolation was that nobody would likely be willing to
actually try and cast any sort of spell on the Boy Who Lived, so she and Harry might have a chance
of running if she managed to incapacitate Weasley, or at least slow him down in some way, as
Weasley was the only one she guessed would actually try to chase them down.

In preparation to attack, she shifted slightly into a ready position. Weasley's eyes sharpened at the
movement.

"I prefer Bill, actually," the Gringotts curse-breaker said in a steady voice. "And I wouldn't try that,
if I were you. Using magic in Gringotts is against goblin laws and harshly punished unless you are
in their employ."

Hermione could feel her panic growing, her lungs threatening to seize up and refuse to take in air,
and despite the cavernous hall they were standing in it felt like the walls were closing in on her,
trapping her. Bill Weasley simply watched her steadily and she wondered if he could hear the way
her heart was beating in her chest faster then a rabbit's, if he could see the cold sweat under her
expensive robes. She sincerely hoped he could feel the sheer level of hatred she felt for him in this
moment, for the way he had backed her and Harry into a corner. She hated being backed into a
corner; hated it with a desperate sort of rage that made her want to lunge at the man, to strike out
and cause him pain and suffering.

"Any reason you decided to leave wherever it is you've been hiding and take the enormous risk of
entering Diagon Alley?" Weasley asked, and his voice was still so calm that she hated him all the
more for it.

"I don't see how that's your business." She answered, her voice as warm as a corpse and her smile
sharp as steel and twice as dangerous.

"It is my business when an underage Boy Who Lived moves out in the open without any protection
other then his equally underage companion." Weasley countered.

"Well you can certainly rest assured it won't be happening again!" She said through clenched teeth.

"It better not, because I won't be stepping aside a second time." Weasley said, and it was Harry
who spoke up first as Hermione had to take a moment to process what the man had just said.

"You're not going to try and stop us from leaving?" Harry asked in shock, his voice shaking
slightly. Weasley's eyes shifted away from hers, presumably to meet Harry's behind her.

"The Weasley family owes you a debt." He said slowly and sudden rage had her mouth taste like
copper, her grip on her wand tightening to the point where the pointy bones of her knuckles looked
like they might cut through her skin. Her hands ached for her knives, ached to feel the hard bite of
the handle against her palms as she used the sharpened steel to map out the weaknesses of the
human body on Weasley, to extract the payment he owed them in blood, tears, suffering and
anguish, carving it out from his very flesh and bones.

"You think that letting us leave right now could possibly make up for your brothers nearly beating
to death an innocent twelve-year-old?" her voice was pure poison and hatred and Hermione could
feel the adrenaline, hatred and fear twisting in a sickening cocktail that made her veils boil and her
bones tremble.

"No." Weasley said in a matter-of-fact tone. "But it is a start. The two of you have exactly five minutes to leave Diagon Alley or I will personally be escorting you both back to the Headmaster—with force, if necessary."

With that, the still-calm man turned and walked away, his pace even and confident as he not once turned back as he made his way toward one of the tellers.

"Let's go." Harry said lowly and she turned away from the eldest of the Weasley children for the first time since he'd revealed his presence to them both, switching her focus to Harry. Her best friend looked afraid and strained and she grasped onto his hand with the one that wasn't still clenched tight around the handle of her wand. She wasn't sure if the slight tremors she could feel in the hand held tight to Harry's were hers or her best friend's, and she wondered if her expression was as harsh and ugly as it felt.

It was Harry who made her start moving forwards, who tugged her into action. Hermione thought she might be in some sort of shock— it had been a long time since she'd been outmanoeuvred in the way Weasley had just cornered them and it was even more unpleasant then she remembered.

Control was something Hermione valued above almost all else, the exceptions been the precious few relationships she had amassed in her short lifetime. To have it stripped from her left her feeling naked and vulnerable and furious. Bill Weasley had backed her into a corner so thoroughly that she'd only escaped because he'd let her go.

He had beaten her, and she hated it, she hated him even more and she wanted him dead.

She vaguely registered Uric's surprised expression as Harry led her from the bank, her face numb and wand still in hand, but Harry didn't stop to exchange any sort of farewell with the goblin, instead pulling her to where Tom was in the process of cutting his way through the crowd towards the bank.

Tom wasn't holding anything that she could see but his satisfied expression made her think that he'd either got what he wanted or had a thoroughly enjoyable time threatening the shopkeeper into putting a rush on his order. Tom's look of satisfaction faded, however, when he caught sight of her and Harry and he swiftly closed the distance between them, eyes narrowing dangerously. "What happened to her?" he asked Harry sharply and Hermione was first annoyed that he hadn't directed his question to her, before it really registered that her body was so numb and unresponsive that she didn't think she could have answered his question even if she wanted to.

One of Tom's long fingered hands pressed against her cheek and he hissed slightly. "She's freezing," he said.

"We need to leave– now." Harry said, eyes darting around, scanning, she guessed, for red hair or signs that Bill had alerted Dumbledore.

Tom wrapped his hand around her wrist as Harry was holding her other hand already and she had yet to let go of her death grip on her wand, and he apparated them both straight back to the Manor.

The second she regained get bearings, Hermione wrenched both arms free from her boys and half stumbled straight to the room that was hers, for all intents and purposes, shutting and locking the door behind her, ignoring both Tom and Harry.

Finally blessedly alone, she backed herself into one of the corners of her room, sliding to the floor,
drawing her knees to her chest. Her breathing was far too fast, and she was shaking violently. Her whole body felt cold as ice, and a very distant part of her registered that she was either in shock or having a panic attack.

Refusing to make a sound, she bit down on the sleeve of her robe so hard that it made her jaw ache and prepared to ride out whatever this was.

It had been a long time since she'd felt like this. Anger, grief, fear– she experienced all of those on a semi-regular basis at Hogwarts, but this had been different. She had grown arrogant and overconfident and she'd been backed into a corner by someone who'd proved they could play the game better then she did.

There was a saying, that a cornered animal is the most dangerous. Hermione didn't feel dangerous right now– angry and vengeful, yes, but not dangerous. Instead she felt... pathetic; like a scared little girl.

She bit down harder and shut her eyes to prevent tears.

Rationalizing what had happened wasn't helping– she knew that what she was feeling right now wasn't logical. She knew, but she couldn't help it, because irrational or not, all she could think of was the absolute powerlessness she had felt and every time she felt as helpless as she had at Gringotts something terrible had happened; the Dementors, the troll, the boggart, the Heir of Slytherin debacle, the trio of Weasley boys attacking Harry–

Greyback, Jed, the tiny girl with long red hair and hand-shaped bruises on her neck–

*The locked room with no windows and no light*–

(The first time she'd felt this helpless was when she was three years old and trapped in a sinking car listening to her parents die)

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Harry's POV:

Harry stared anxiously at the closed and locked door, itching to pull out his wand to spell it open so he could go to Hermione's side.

He didn't understand what had happened to make her react like she had. They had faced way worse situations then Bill Weasley and Hermione hadn't even batted an eyelid, but today she had freaked out the moment they were away from Bill and the very second that they had appeared back in the Manor she'd ripped her arms so violently from his and Tom's grip so she could lock herself in her room and Harry was worried she'd injured herself. He couldn't hear anything from inside the room but he knew better then most Hermione's ability to suffer in silence– people who grew up like they did learned how to cry without making any sound.

"What set her off?" Tom asked flatly, his eyes burning with a sort of muted fury as he stared at the locked door, spinning his wand between his long fingers in a way that looked very much like a threat.

"I don't know," admitted Harry, running a hand through his hair. "I... can you just watch it in my head?" Tom nodded shortly and one of his hands lashed out to grip Harry's chin, turning his head roughly and tilting it up so that their eyes met. His fingers were pressing in too hard, but Harry just
swallowed and maintained eye contact as the older boy cast Legilimens.

Re-watching the confrontation with Bill Weasley a second time didn't make Hermione's reaction anymore clear to him then when it had actually happened, but Tom looked less furious and more thoughtful– Harry wasn't ashamed to say it was far more terrifying expression on the older boy. He released Harry's chin, expression briefly apologetic for what Harry assumed would be the red marks on his jaw that would be a perfect match to those long fingers.

"I suppose," Tom mused, "it was to be expected that she would have certain... triggers."

"Triggers? What triggers?" Harry demanded, still bewildered but frustrated now too that Tom seemed to understand what had happened but he was still lost as to why his best friend was in pain.

"Weasley was smart. He had you both on the defensive from the moment he revealed his presence and he didn't even need to do so– he could have summoned Dumbledore who would not have had any trouble rounding up two runaways in front of a crowd of witnesses. I doubt even the goblins would have kicked up a fuss at the actions of the Supreme Mugwump. You'd be in Hogwarts or back with your relatives before I'd even be aware you were gone, while Hermione would be sent Merlin knows where. From the moment Weasley opened his mouth, he was in charge and you were at the disadvantage. It's by his goodwill alone that you're both not out of my and my older counterpart's reach."

"You shouldn't call Voldemort that. You're both different people." Harry muttered absently as his mind struggled to understand what Tom was saying. "I still don't get why she freaked out." He admitted.

"All of the verbal sparring aside, I suspect the reason for her distress is much simpler then even she might consider," Tom said simply. "In an unfamiliar environment, a male with negative intentions and superior strength cornered her. This time it was for a verbal spar but last time– well, I think you remember Greyback well."

Harry shuddered, remembering holding a limp Hermione, half naked and wet with her blood, in his arms.

"When was the last time she let down her Occlumency shields?" Tom asked him suddenly.

"I don't know, she struggled a lot with the dementors but the last time I know for sure was when the boggart messed them up." Harry said, after a pause. "And before that, I don't think since our first year, not that I'm aware of at least." His heart sunk in his chest. "That's not good, is it?"

"It's not necessarily... bad, per se, but things will start leaking through. Non-typical reactions to situations, like today, will become more common place and eventually the shields will fall and she'll be faced with everything she contains behind them all at once and in an uncontrolled environment." Tom explained and Harry shuddered, remembering the Mirror of Erised incident vividly as well as the boggart lesson.

"And that would definitely be bad." He said flatly and Tom nodded.

"Yes. She could be sitting in the middle of class, or in the Great Hall or even in the Common Room and be hit with every thought, memory and emotion that she is suppressing. And that is not something anyone wants happening." He agreed quietly.

"Well, how do we help?" Harry asked helplessly and Tom shrugged, an odd movement for the older boy to make– Tom was typically more old-fashioned when it came to his mannerisms, which
was understandable seeing as he'd actually been born and 'raised' in the early 1900's.

"We find a boggart?" the older boy suggested and Harry scowled at him.

"That's not funny, Tom!" He snapped.

"It wasn't a joke," Tom replied, the corners of his mouth curving up into an eerie sort of half smile. His eyes looked... strange, suddenly, glinting with some emotion Harry didn't recognize and he shifted nervously in place without even realising it. Tom stepped towards him and Harry almost stepped back on pure instinct alone and as Tom advanced he had to fight the urge to move away from the older boy.

"Harry," Tom's voice was nearly a purr as he closed the distance between them to less then a foot. One long fingered hand rose to brush away his bangs and Tom pressed his thumb lightly against Harry's suddenly tingling scar, tracing the zig-zag pattern. "I am not a nice person." He said quietly and the crushed violet color of his irises turned a brilliant, vivid crimson, like glittering rubies. "When I made the Diary, I was just a schoolboy and had already opened the Chamber of Secrets and created 'Lord Voldemort'. I do not feel emotions the same way you do or Hermione does, even damaged as she is. If we put a boggart in there, with the vulnerable state she is in I guarantee her Occlumency walls will be broken apart and then she can build them up again stronger then they were before. I see that as a perfectly adequate way of dealing with this situation. Harsh, perhaps, but it will get the job done with minimal fuss."

"Tom," Harry said, suddenly feeling heartbreakingly sad for the older boy. "Oh Tom." They were close enough that all he had to do was reach up on his tiptoes to kiss the other boy. Tom seemed startled but receptive, his mouth hot and wet against Harry's, a slow slide of lips and tongue. There was no heat or passion in the embrace, just Harry trying to convey the emotions he felt for the other boy through touch because he didn't have the words to make Tom truly understand.

Because he couldn't understand, Harry now realized. That wouldn't stop him from loving the older boy, but it did hurt Harry that Tom would never really understand how he felt about him and would never be able to experience those same emotions in return.

He broke apart from the older boy, pulling back and blinking away the tears he could feel building up. "I'll help Hermione," he said quietly, giving Tom a gentle push. Tom caught his hand, lightly pressing the nail of his thumb over his pulse point. "You go plot world domination." Harry told him. "We'll come find you when we're done."

Tom looked mildly amused by his light-hearted teasing and nodded easily enough, letting Harry order him around. Harry gave him a tremulous smile before making his way back over to the door and knocking. "Hermione? I'm going to come in." He called out softly through the wood.

He didn't feel confused or upset or unsure anymore, just calm with the new realization he had. Someone had to be able to deal with the emotions and emotional wellbeing of the relationship the three of them shared and it had become abundantly clear to Harry that neither Tom nor Hermione would be the ones to do so, which left the job up to him.

He also supplied a moral compass for the three of them, another full-time job but one that he had already both acknowledged would be necessary and had agreed to take on.

Hermione didn't reply or unlock the door, so he pulled out his Knockturn Alley wand and tapped the handle. "Alohomora." He muttered and lock clicked open, allowing him to gently push open the door.
Hermione was curled up in one of the corners of the room, her back to the wall and her knees to her chest, and he wasn't sure she'd even realized he'd entered the room. Closing the door behind him and locking it again for good measure, Harry made his way over to her. After the Dementor lessons last year, Harry knew enough about panic attacks and how to deal with them that he didn’t try to touch her or pull her into his arms like he wanted and instead he sat down beside her where she was huddled in on herself next to the wall.

Slowly, Hermione leaned her head against his shoulder, pressing her cheek against it. Harry carefully wrapped his arm around her, gently pressing his palm against the curve between her shoulder blades. At first, he only rubbed her back in small strokes along her spine, from the small of her back to the base. Gradually, as he felt the brittle tension that was keeping her spine stiff ease, her breathing evening out as alertness returned to her eyes, he moved his hand from the nape of her neck, lightly tangling his fingers in her curls before repeating his earlier, soothing motions until she looked up at him. Her expression was ghastly, her face so pale it almost looked white and her red-rimmed eyes hollow-looking, and Harry prepared himself for a long night of getting her to lower her shields and then riding out the resulting emotional overflow. But it would always be worth it and he vowed to always be there for her.

“I fucking hate them,” Hermione broke the silence, her voice little more then a whisper.

“Weasleys or panic attacks?” he asked and she flashed him her knife-smile, eyes dark and glinting.

“Both.”

“Me too,” Harry admitted and she curled closer to him, her hands reaching for his wrists and her fingers encircling them like manacles. Harry ignored the little pinpricks of hurt caused by her nails cutting into the thin skin at the back of his arms; he loved it when she held onto him like this with her hands forming restraints that trapped him in place, binding him to her with the silent promise that she’d never let him go.

“I hate what they make me,” she said quietly, looking away from him as if she was too ashamed to meet his eyes. “I hate how they make me feel like I’m dying. It’s pathetic.”

“It’s not,” Harry argued instantly, because the last word he’d ever use to describe her was weak. Hermione’s past was one riddled by traumas on a scale most people couldn’t imagine; the sort of trauma that shattered a person’s sense of security, that sort that had severe and long-lasting effects and left people feeling helpless and hopeless in a dangerous world. The agony of having those horrible, painful memories triggered was a suffering beyond his comprehension and he loathed that Hermione saw something that was so goddamn normal and understandable as a reflection of how she was lacking when he saw the strength involved in holding herself together and pulling her out of the spiral of panic her brain tried trapping her in when a sight, sound or smell had triggered a past horror in her mind and her brain misinterpreted the trigger and set up a fight or flight reaction–she had been very thorough when explaining the mechanics of panic attacks to him, which was why Harry didn’t understand her self deprecation.

“Tom thinks your Occlumency shields might need redoing,” he offered when she didn’t reply to his fierce denial and Hermione pulled a face but he didn’t miss the way her face seemed to pale further.

“He’s probably right.” She admitted.

“Let’s not tell him that,” Harry replied with a mock-shudder, “he’s insufferable enough.” Like he’d been hoping, his light jesting succeeded in making Hermione grin before the brief lightness on her face faded.
“It’s going to be a long hour or two.” She said so quietly that Harry could barely hear her. “You should probably leave.” Despite her words, her grip on his wrists tightened– Harry wasn’t sure she even realised she’d done it.

“I’m not going to anywhere,” he told her firmly and he meant it.

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Tom’s POV:

"Sometimes," Tom mused aloud, "I forget that they're still children."

He was sitting in the extravagant study across from Voldemort, reflecting on the past few hours. Swirling the wine in the goblet he was holding, he frowned thoughtfully down at the liquor.

"Children you're having sex with." Voldemort pointed out, looking vaguely entertained by it all, and Tom snorted dismissively.

"I've barely touched the boy and the girl is certainly no stranger to carnal pleasure."

He was no stranger to it either, but with the two of them it was something else altogether– kissing them alone filled Tom's world with colours he'd never known before and when he was with the pair all he wanted was to consume them entirely; he wanted to tear into them with his teeth and lick their bones clean, to own every single part of them, to open them up and devour them until not a single particle of Harry or Hermione existed outside of him.

"Hmm," Voldemort looked calmly across at him and Tom made sure that the resentment that rose within him from the knowing look on his older counterpart's face didn't show on his face. "The girl will recover from this mishap as she has done before and you can ensure it will not happen a second time."

"And how will I do such a thing?" drawled Tom, face lightly mocking as he arched an elegant brow. "The last I was aware, I was a Leglimency master, not Occlumency."

"You will ensure it by making her stronger and colder." Voldemort replied, not reacting to the disrespect. "Identify what triggers her and how and why it is so, then use the knowledge to prevent another such event as today from happening by going to the source and assisting her to achieve a sense of closure. You can start by locating the werewolf and getting her to dispose of it."

"You think that will prevent the triggers relating to his assault of her?" Tom asked, skeptical.

"It's certainly a start." Voldemort said, taking a sip of his wine. "The boy, of course, is a different matter altogether."

"Despite everything he has experienced, the boy has stubbornly managed to retain a moral compass and developed an overinflated sense of empathy." Tom said, with a slight shudder of distaste. "He has enormous potential yet does not see that which holds him back as something he needs to rid himself of."

"I may have an idea for dealing with that," Voldemort mused, thoughtful.

"Oh? Do tell."
"The effects carrying one of a Horcruxes on his person would certainly have a specific... emotional effect." Voldemort appeared to be selecting his words carefully.

Tom frowned. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Horcruxes are the sort of Dark magic that bring forth the Darkness in people, feeding it, strengthening it. The boy's birthday is coming up, is it not? Perhaps I should give him a special gift— one that you will advise he wear."

"We should also increase their exposure to Dark magic. Death too." Tom added after a short pause to consider the original soul's idea and Voldemort smiled. It wasn't a nice smile, not even close. Tom felt an answering smile slide onto his own face, one mirrored by the face before him.

"They do both have such potential," Voldemort said softly, "it's time for us to start working towards bringing it out, ridding them both of those ridiculous moral constraints holding them back."

"They will be glorious." Tom murmured, more to himself then to his counter-part, but Voldemort made a sound of agreement anyway.

Harry and Hermione would be glorious and they were his.
Voldemort's POV:

Voldemort idly spun the ring he'd claimed from the wretched waste of space that had been his uncle back before his seventh year at Hogwarts around his finger. He had retrieved it from the shack an hour earlier and was now thinking.

Giving the ring to Harry Potter would be a risk; it would be a piece of his soul, after all, that Harry would be carrying— except he was starting to have his suspicions about the link he shared with the boy and should they prove true then the matter of ensuring Harry's loyalty to him became of even more importance then he could have possibly realised back when he'd originally started to toy with the idea in the boy's first year after the two plucky first years had traded the Philosopher's Stone with him in exchange for immunity.

Entrusting the boy with one of his precious Horcruxes was certainly a risk, yes, but it was one he felt was important to take. The boy both loathed Dumbledore and cared for 'Tom' enough that even in the unlikely case that he learned what it was that had been given him he suspected the very worst the boy would do was return it.

No, Harry would not be a problem; Dumbledore, on the other hand, would be if he recognized the ring. And as much as he disliked the thought of changing his horcrux in any way, until Dumbledore had been dealt with he didn't have a choice.

He left the cracked stone with the Peverell coat of arms as it was— he already knew that it was strangely impervious to any sort of magic; it was the heavy gold band of the ring, after all, not the actual stone that his soul was attached to. Instead, Voldemort charmed the gold band to look thinner and silver in colour with an added spell manipulating the precious metal into forming two snakes, also silver, to form a border that the stone now appeared to be inset.

The result was certainly pleasing to the eye, Voldemort was satisfied to note, as well as being entirely unrecognizable from the ring's original design.

Compared to transfiguring precious metals, creating a box for the ring to be placed in was laughably simple and the horcrux soon lay glittering prettily on black velvet. Voldemort touched the cracked stone a final time before closing the newly conjured mahogany box. An idle thought spurred a final flick of his wand that conjured a deep green ribbon into existence that wound itself around the box, the ends looping themselves into a decorative bow.

There; it was done and ready to be gifted to the boy for his upcoming fourteenth birthday. Only time would tell if the Horcrux would influence the boy the way they intended for it to, but Voldemort was certain he would enjoy watching it unfold.
By the time night began to fall, the sun painting the sky in shades of red and orange as it started to set in the sky, Hermione had drifted off into an exhausted sleep, her head pillowed on his lap. After levitating over several cushions and a thick blanket, Harry had arranged them both as comfortably as possible on the floor before joining her in sleep.

The sun had already risen once more by the time her stirring brought him slowly back to consciousness and Harry tried to hide his concern as Hermione pushed herself up into a sitting position, rubbing her eyes tiredly. As if sensing his staring, she turned slightly to look down at him and her mouth twitched into a small smile. Harry felt relief fill him at the sight and her smile widened.

"Hi." She said and he couldn't help his surprised laugh.

"Hi to you too." He smiled, pushing himself up so he was sitting too and wincing as his back and neck sharply reminded him why sleeping on the floor was a bad idea. Ignoring the stiffness in his limbs, he didn't hesitate in pulling her into his arms and she hugged him back, just as tight as he was holding her. There was a peace to her now, however– while still tight, her grip wasn't the desperate clinging from the night before when she'd clung to him like she was waiting for him to disappear.

"Thank you," she whispered in his ear and he just kissed her cheek in response before letting out a small groan as they pulled apart and his spine sent out angry little stabs of pain at the movement.

"I need a shower," he winced. "My back is killing me."

"I need a shower too," Hermione agreed, before looking at him coyly from under her eyelashes. "Want to save water?"

"Sorry?" He asked, confused, and she laughed. Harry couldn't help but smile in response to the way her whole face seemed to have brightened.

"It means do you want to share a shower, silly boy," she teased and he was too happy to see her happy to be annoyed at her obvious amusement and he let her tug him after her, towards her bathroom. There was nothing overtly sexual about the shower, other then a few interested looks in places that were very interesting to look at all wet and flushed pink from the warm spray of the water, but there was an intimacy that came with washing Hermione's hair and feeling her soapy fingers press against his sore back that felt deeper and more intense then the times he watched her and Tom shag.

Dressing comfortably, Hermione in a bronze dress with a narrow waist, the loose material of the skirt flowing at her hips and brushing against the floor as she walked and Harry in a comfortable pressed shirt and dark green dress pants, they made their way to the dining room where Tom was sitting at the table with a book. The older boy rose to his feet the moment they entered, crossing over to stand between them.

"Sleep well?" he asked, arching an elegant brow.

"Very, actually." Hermione said, and Tom nodded.

"I'm glad." He said, simply, before steering them both away from the table, a hand pressed to the small of each of their backs, and directing them towards the doorway opposite to the one they'd entered through.
"Where are we going?" Harry asked, frowning slightly when Tom continued steering them past the kitchen. Trepidation grew in his stomach as the older boy said nothing. "Tom, where are we going?" he repeated.

"The basement." Tom said. Harry stopped dead in his tracks and then stumbled when Tom didn't stop, didn't even slow down, his firm hand a constant pressure on Harry's back, forcing him back into movement.

"Tom, what's going on?" he demanded. "Why are we going to the basement?" Tom made an exasperated sound.

"If you stop talking, we'll actually get there and I can explain." He said, and Harry bit his lip, staying silent but unable to help the twisting anxiety he was feeling.

The basement had been converted into a dungeon-like set up, which was what he referred to the space as such in his head. The 'dungeon' was then split into four 'cells', all of them drab with stone walls, stone floors, no windows and heavy shackles on the wall. One of the cells, he knew, contained Pettigrew, but that wasn't the one that Tom led them into.

Harry wanted to be sick when he saw who was strung up on the wall: Greyback looked as wild and unkempt as he remembered, only now the werewolf was stripped naked and covered in painful looking welts, and the pure silver shackles he was bound with visibly burned where they touched his skin as he weakly struggled in the restraints, his slow movements suggesting he'd been hanging there for hours now.

Hermione stopped dead beside him, and he heard her sharp intake of breath. Suddenly, he didn't want to be here, because he knew what was going to happen, what Hermione was going to do. He stepped backwards, only to be reminded of Tom's hand on his back, holding him in place. He turned to face the older boy, face pleading, but Tom didn't even look at him.

"I thought a bit of a pick me up might be in order after yesterday," he said, instead, and as Hermione stepped forwards, Harry looked down at his feet, determined to tune out as much of what he knew was coming as he could.

He found himself relieved that Tom had taken them here before they'd managed to get something to eat, seeing as it meant that he wouldn't be sick everywhere like he wanted to be. Ghastly pale and shaking, he desperately wished he was anywhere but here, in this cell, listening to the strung up werewolf scream.

A hand suddenly gripping his shoulders, long nails driving through the material of his shirt and into his skin, had him startle violently, and he turned to see Bellatrix Lestrange, her face inches from his own and her grey eyes boring into his.

"You're upset," she said, in her crooning voice. "Why are you upset, little Princeling? You enjoyed playing with that traitorous little rat, and rumor has it that the mongrel did something very naughty to Princess over there."

Harry quickly translated Bellatrix's little nicknames- the rat, obviously, was Pettigrew, the mongrel was Greyback and Princess was Hermione- before thinking about what the woman was saying. "I don't like torture." He finally admitted to her, voice quiet. Her head tilted to the side, questioningly.

"Why not? He deserves it, doesn't he? He hurt our Lord's little Princess, your Princess."

"I know," Harry said, desperately, "I know he deserves it, but I just– I can't do this, I just can't."
"Then kill him," Bellatrix suggested, her bony shoulders rising and falling in a shrug, "that way you can stop his suffering." Her cracked lips curved into a delighted smile at the sound of a particularly shrill scream. "Ooh, I do like watching her work," the Dark witch said, sounding positively hungry. "It's delicious."

"Oh god," Harry could taste bile in his mouth, and the mad witch suddenly pressed something heavy and cold into his hand. He looked down to see the sharp dagger he was now holding, and his stomach rolled violently again.

"It's pure silver," Bellatrix breathed, licking her cracked lips, and he shuddered. "Well go on, little Princeling," she cooed when he just stood there, looking down at the knife. When he still didn't move she simply dragged him after her, over to the limp form of Greyback. Her bony hand wrapped over the one he had gripping the handle of the knife with a surprising strength, and he let her guide his hand up. "Arteries are the most exciting, even though they bleed fast," she whispered in his ear, before her grip tightened and she drove their hands forward, sinking the silver blade into the werewolf's lower abdomen.

Blood drenched them both, and Harry gagged as he tasted rust. Greyback was screaming and Bellatrix was giggling madly in his ear. "That was the external iliac artery– it makes such a delightful mess, don't you think?" Harry gasped for air, trying not to get any more of the dying werewolf's blood in his mouth. Bellatrix didn't move from where the knife was buried deep in a disgusting mess of muscle, fat and intestine, and Harry was in too much shock to try pulling his hand out of the man's abdomen himself.

For nearly three minutes he just stood there, frozen, watching as Greyback bled to death mere inches in front of him and Bellatrix panted in his ear. The insane witch pulled back suddenly, moving them both several feet away from the mostly dead werewolf, and just in time too. Harry finally managed to look away as Greyback lost control of his bladder and bowels.

He was filthy now, covered in blood that wasn't his, and he was pretty sure he'd moved into shock. Bellatrix eased the knife from his numb fingers, and then pressed her lips against his cheek. They were hot, like she was running a fever. "I'm going to teach you where all the arteries are, little Princeling," she sighed happily as she pulled back and practically beamed at him. "I'm going to teach you everything you need to know." She promised before releasing him, and wandering back over to the corpse.

"Harry?" That was Tom speaking, and Harry felt dizzy and light-headed as he turned to look at the older boy. Part of him wondered if this was like what being drunk felt like as he tried to gather his thoughts into some kind of meaningful order, only for them to scatter away.

Hermione looked as out of it as Harry felt, staring at the corpse with glassy eyes, but Tom's now-crimson eyes were ravenous, and Harry didn't resist as the older boy yanked him forwards into a hungry kiss.

One of Tom's hands tangled in his hair, holding his head tight in place, while the other was digging deeply into his hip, pulling so their lower bodies were pressed hard against each other. A whimper escaped Harry into the older boy's mouth at the delicious frisson of pleasure the lower contact caused. He half registered the wall at his back, the hand from his hip straying, now that Tom had pinned him place.

Long, elegant fingers trailing under his shirt leaving goosebumps in their wake, nails dragging down his skin raising sensitive red welts, grinding hips causing a constant gratifying friction against his erection– and Harry wasn't entirely sure when that had happened.
"Tom, that's enough."

Hermione's sharp voice pierced the haze in his mind, and he made a confused sound, his muddled brain trying to figure out what was going on. Hermione was looking at them both, and the glassy look had faded, leaving her sharp-eyed and disapproving.

"He's perfectly willing," Tom said, emphasizing his point with a sharp twist of his hips that had Harry groaning in response to the friction the older boy's movement caused.

"He's in no way capable of giving any sort of consent right now, so enough." Hermione warned and Tom made a frustrated sound even as he stepped back. Harry whimpered slightly at the loss of touch. His legs were shaking badly enough that he thought he might fall, but a smaller hand then the one that had been touching him before helped balance him.

"He looks good like that, covered in blood," Tom murmured, hunger in his voice.

"Help me get him to the shower, you psychopath, and then I'll help you with your little problem." Hermione said, sounding exasperated now.

"It is certainly not little." Tom hissed, sounding offended, but Harry felt an arm wrap around him, supporting him. He let Tom lead him to his bathroom, where Hermione undressed him, turning the shower to warm before giving him a gentle push so he was standing under the spray.

It took nearly half an hour before his head cleared up, and when it did he released several loud sobs, sinking to the floor of the shower, lifting his shaking hands to examine them. They were cut up and bleeding slightly from the knife– he had never used one before, and even with Bellatrix's help his inexperience showed.

Leaning against the glass wall of the shower he focused on his breathing. His erection had long since sagged, and he was relieved Hermione had stopped Tom before things had gone any further. It wasn't that he was averse to being intimate with Tom, but he wasn't ready, not yet, and he definitely did not want his first time with the older boy to be in the converted dungeon cell of a dead man who he had just helped murder, while covered in said murdered man's blood.

He sat there, under the warm water, until his palms had stopped bleeding. Hermione was waiting for him with a comfortable pair of pants and sweater to change into when he finally exited the bathroom and Tom was sitting with her, an awkward look on his face, something that was very out of place on the confident, charismatic older boy.

Seeing Harry's questioning look Tom made an uncomfortable sound. "Hermione informs me that I owe you an apology." He said stiffly, his mouth twisting into a grimace on the last word.

"Tom," Hermione looked like she wanted to elbow him, and Tom rolled his eyes before his expression turned serious.

"Fine. Harry," the boy paused slightly, before continuing. "Harry, as we are all aware, my mind does not work the same way that most people's do, and there are times that I struggle to recognize what is and isn't... appropriate. I did not recognize earlier that any lustful advances made towards you while you weren't in complete control of your mental faculties was inappropriate, as you were incapable of giving true consent, and I do feel a sense of... regret for my earlier actions, having learned that that was the case, as my intentions never have been to harm you, or Hermione."

That was as close to a true apology that Tom was capable of, and Harry nodded. "I understand," he said, and he did. "You might not love us the way we love you, Tom, but Hermione and I know you
don't ever mean to harm or hurt us, even though sometimes you have and will."

"I am very... fond of you both. I consider you mine, and I am very possessive of what is mine. If anything happened to either of you, I would be very, very angry." Tom's eyes, having returned to their natural color of crushed violets, flashed a bloody crimson again. "I'd kill anyone for you both," he said, his voice a dark promise. "I'd burn Hogwarts to the ground if you so wished it, with everyone inside."

"We know, Tom," Hermione said, and her voice was gentle. "Sometimes we're going to have to remind you when you go too far, but that doesn't mean we won't understand why."

"We're all pretty messed up, anyway," Harry said, with a shrug. "Hermione just tortured someone and then I killed him to put him out of his misery. We all sort of deserve each other."

Hermione laughed in genuine amusement, and Harry couldn't help but join in. Tom just looked at them, the honest confusion on his face just making them both laugh harder.

Harry knew that he'd have nightmares about what he'd done today, that it would take time for his mouth to stop tasting like bile and blood, but he had Hermione and he had Tom and for them he would do anything— if he was to be the one who had to step in to eventually put whatever or whoever they were torturing out of their misery, then for them he would do it. For Hermione and Tom he would do anything.

"And really, so what if you're crazy, Tom," Hermione gave a wicked grin, mischief in her sharp eyes. "Haven't you heard? All the best people are."

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It took several days for things to settle back to normal in the Manor... well, as normal as it had ever been living in Lord Voldemort's home, along with over a dozen recently released Azkaban prisoners who just so happened to be fanatical, unhinged Death Eaters, but things did settle.

Hermione didn't return to the basement again, but if Tom disappeared occasionally and came back to them smelling faintly of blood and hungry for pleasures of the carnal variety, well, Hermione would take Tom to her bedroom, and Harry would go find Bellatrix.

As Harry's birthday approached, he felt closer to fifty then almost fourteen, and he couldn't deny that he was almost desperately relieved that he, Hermione and Tom would be spending the foreseeable future at the Malfoys.

It wasn't that he disliked the Manor and its occupants, bunch of crazy psychopaths that they all were— and yes, he was definitely including Voldemort in that, along with the rest of the crazies that had been broken out of Azkaban. That didn't mean he wasn't extremely grateful to the Dark Lord, of course, as Voldemort had been the sort of surprisingly gracious host that Aunt Petunia would approve of, and then beyond; Voldemort hadn't just supplied 'food and board', he'd also gifted Hermione and him both with new, expensive and expansive wardrobes— the first that either of them had ever had, and Hermione's wardrobe had included several sets of pricey-looking jewellery, the Dark Lord having spared no expenses in his generosity.

No, the reasons Harry wanted to get away from Voldemort's hospitality were both the constant Dark magic used by all within the Manor that clung alluringly to everyone and everything around it, and because cleaning up after Tom was leaving him an emotionally drained and exhausted wreck.
Harry had pretty much always just knew that Tom was... different, and that certain actions of his both could and would be considered by most as evil. He personally tried not to think too hard about it, not wanting to be condemning Tom for what he did to those unlucky enough to end up in the converted dungeon. Instead, with Bellatrix's aid, he focused on what he could do, which was to end their pain and torment once Tom had finished with them.

He hated it, he really did, but he knew that even if he asked him to Tom wouldn't stop, probably even couldn't stop, and putting the victims out of their misery was the kindest and most merciful thing he could do to those who Tom had... there was no easy way to say the word 'torture', no way to soften the blow of the word. Tom tortured people. He tortured them. It made Harry want to cry and made him want to be sick.

He had tortured Pettigrew, he knew that. He understood the satisfaction that hurting the traitor had given him, the high the Dark magic caused... he just couldn't fathom hurting an innocent in the way Pettigrew was hurt, the way Greyback was hurt.

Hermione didn't understand, Harry knew; not entirely, anyway. She asked him, the second time he did it, about why, because they'd have died sooner or later without his help, within him having to involve himself in a way that was so terrible for him. It was hard to explain to someone whose brain wasn't wired quite right when it came to empathy his desire to lessen the suffering of Tom's victims– of any victim. It was hard to explain the need to punish himself for letting it happen when his conscience screamed at him to stop Tom; to stop all the Death Eaters, to stop even Voldemort himself.

It was hard to explain the special sort of self-hatred he felt for choosing his love for Tom over the lives of Tom's victims, and his fast approaching birthday brought with it the sheer relief that he could get Tom away from the Manor– and himself away from his self-appointed duty, to enjoy being an ordinary teenager again (well, as ordinary as he could be considering the truly ridiculous title the Wizarding world had given him), instead of some sort of mercy killer with a growing body count.

- Hermione woke him up bright and early July 31st, something which had become a pattern for her when it came to celebrations, like Christmas, Easter and, of course, his birthday, and gave him a kiss that left him breathless before she dragged him, still in his pajamas, to the dining room.

Tom was already seated at the table, with a large mug of coffee, the only muggle thing he didn't turn his nose up at, and a long-suffering look on his face. He wasn't the only one seated there, though; Voldemort and Bellatrix were also sitting at the table, making Harry thankful that he was wearing the pajamas Voldemort had had tailored for him, instead of his old muggle pajamas.

Breakfast was a grand affair, the house elves all outdoing themselves in his opinion, and Harry was full and content when Bellatrix gleefully presented him with a birthday gift.

Bellatrix was... interesting. 'Insane' would also be a rather accurate description of the woman. He wasn't sure if it was the time she'd spent in Azkaban that had unhinged her, or if she'd always been a sadistic lunatic, but he had grown sort of fond of her, even though she insisted on calling him 'Princeling'. Tom she called 'Lordling', which in Harry's opinion was at least slightly better then princeling, and Hermione she called 'Princess', which Hermione thought was a right laugh.

Knowing Bellatrix had an exceedingly twisted and sadistic sense of amusement, Harry carefully started to unwraped the present, wary of it exploding in his face or sending curses spitting. Bellatrix lost her patience with the care he was taking and snatched the gift back from him and
unwrapped it herself, ripping away the gaudy paper and tossing it to the side.

"Oh my god!" Harry said, eyes wide, as he stared at what Bellatrix was holding. "That's- that's brilliant!" It was a dagger; one on the smaller side, with a curved blade the length of his hand, with a handle made of some sort of smooth white wood.

"It's beautiful," Hermione said, leaning forwards slightly to get a better look at the sleek blade, "what sort of bone is the handle made from?" Harry was pretty proud of how he hid his shock, and he carefully reexamined the blade, with a more wary eye this time– now that he took the time to really notice it, it seemed obvious that the texture of the handle didn't look quite... right for wood. Bellatrix held the dagger up to catch the light, and Harry felt morbidly fascinated by the gleaming bone handle, and the sheer elegance of the curved blade.

"Watch this!" Bellatrix's grey eyes gleamed with delight as she angled the blade so the tip was pointed down at the table, and then released it. Harry's eyes widened as the blade easily sunk two inches deep into the mahogany table-top, parting the expensive wood like it was butter.

Bellatrix gave a disturbingly gleeful giggle, and he leaned across to close his hand around the handle of the dagger, pulling the blade from the table. The bone felt strange to touch, both smoother and lighter then he'd expected.

"I also have a gift for you," Voldemort spoke up, and Harry looked up at the murderer of his parents nervously. The Dark Lord placed a small carved wooden box with a green ribbon tied around it in a bow on the table, a flick of his finger pushing the box down the table to Harry with a neat little bit of wandless, non-verbal magic.

Harry felt even more nervous about opening this present then Bellatrix's, though he was once more pleasantly surprised when he opened the wooden box to see a ring nestled on black velvet. It was a lovely looking piece of jewelry, and Harry was surprised by the instant and almost magnetic pull he felt towards it. He was reaching into the box and picking the ring up before he really even registered his hand was moving.

The band was silver and serpentine in design; an odd black stone set in the coils of two snakes. A closer examination of the stone had him noting a slight crack on the surface, as well as a faded triangular symbol of some kind.

"What does it mean?" he asked, looking up at Voldemort, who was studying him with an unreadable look in his cat-like crimson eyes. "The, er, triangle, I mean." He added.

"It's an old, mostly extinct family's coat of arms," Voldemort said, his mouth curling up in what Harry thought was a satisfied smile. "We have a common ancestor, many generations back, and that is the symbol of the line, although more recently it was stolen by Grindelwald, during the muggle World War II, who used it as his own mark."

"So I... I probably shouldn't wear it around other people then," Harry said, and he was faintly surprised by the dissatisfaction the thought of this brought.

"You forget we have magic, Harry," Tom said, an amused look in his eyes. "A simple charm applied to the band of the ring- the stone itself is magic resistant- will turn any curious eyes away."

"Okay." Harry said, and not wanting to put it off, he slipped the ring over his right ring finger. It fit perfectly, and it felt right. "Thank you," he said, looking up at Voldemort.

"You're welcome." Voldemort said, still with that satisfied look on his face, before rising from his
seat. "I'm afraid I have a session at the Wizengamot I must attend," he said, with a nod. "Enjoy your birthday, Harry."

Bellatrix trotted after Voldemort, pausing for a moment to turn and blow Harry a kiss as she did so, before vanishing after her Lord. Harry, Hermione and Tom wandered back to the wing of the Manor that was theirs, and firmly out of bounds to the released Death Eaters.

"When will we be taking the Portkey to the Malfoys?" He asked. Draco had sent ahead the Portkey to transport them to Malfoy Manor two days ago, and Harry was itching to leave.

"Not before your birthday present from me," Hermione said.

"Well when do I get my present from you?" he asked, with a grin. Hermione gave him a wicked grin in return.

"Now works," she said, lifting her hands to give him a slight push so that his back was pressed lightly to the wall of the living room type space, before leaning forwards to kiss him.

Harry had shared a lot of kisses with Hermione over the summer– and with Tom too. Sometimes the kisses were chaste, all soft and affectionate. Other times they were a slow burn, with nips and licks that sent thrilling sensations through his body. And then there were the times, like now, when he had no time to prepare himself, and the kiss felt like heat and lust, all probing tongues and biting teeth.

As Hermione slid her mouth down from his, switching to sucking and biting lightly at his throat, he first became aware that this wasn't following the usual patterns of their kissing, but he didn't realize Hermione's quick fingers had untied the drawstring of the expensive tailored sleep pants he was wearing until she was sinking to her knees, and dragging his pants down with her so they were pooled at his ankles.

Harry looked down at Hermione, a shocked gasp tearing from his throat, and from her position on her knees Hermione looked back up at him from under her eyelashes. For a moment she looked as fragile and guileless as a porcelain doll there; her waterfall of curls tumbling over her shoulders and down her back framing her sweet face, all rosy-cheeked, doe-eyed innocence. And then her soft lips curled into a smile that was pure sin as she slid both her hands to his boxers, the last barrier of cloth between them, and tugged them down.

"Hermione..." Harry gasped, breathless; he couldn't help but feel self-conscious, as well as shy and slightly awkward, but there was also a thrill rushing through his veins that had him hesitate to ask her to stop. "Hermione." He repeated helplessly instead. He was fully exposed and yet it didn't feel quite as callous or alienating as he thought it would, instead it felt almost... intimate. He wasn't given much time to reflect on any of this, though, as Hermione leaned forwards and closed her mouth over him and Harry dropped his head back against the wall, gasping like he'd just been winded at the feel of her hot, wet mouth working what had to be some type of wondrous magic on him.

He was already half-hard and Hermione licked a stripe up the underside of him before glancing up from under her eyelashes. Her eyes were filled with a dark, shiny desire and it made the blood in Harry's body rush south. "Is this okay? Do you want me to stop?" She asked, her question genuine despite the hint of teasing. Harry shook his head in an embarrassingly frantic manner.

"No, no, please don't stop," he babbled and Hermione flashed him a quick, satisfied grin before
closing her mouth over him again.

Harry couldn't remember ever feeling so flush with pleasure; Hermione's mouth was hot and wet and absolutely perfect and he wanted more, more, more. He gratefully leaned back against the wall for support and his eyes had fluttered closed, his back arching into the warm, hot, exciting new sensations, even as he fought to keep his hips still, not wanting to disrupt what Hermione's lips and tongue were doing.

An achingly familiar long-fingered hand rested briefly on his shoulder and then trailed down his chest, sending more tingling sensations through him, before moving to caress the bare skin of his hip. Harry cried out, his hips automatically jerking forwards as in a sudden movement. Hermione took him deeper in her mouth, swallowing around him, before he forced himself to hold still again, desperately not wanting to choke her. "Look at her, Harry," Tom instructed, voice low and rough, his lips brushing against the shell of Harry's ear. Harry was too lost in sensation to do as Tom said and strong fingers gripped his jaw, tilting his head down with force. "Look at her." Tom repeated harsher this time, a warning in his tone and Harry felt helpless to do anything but obey the order, his eyes fluttering back open.

He automatically let out a low moan, and his hips gave another uncontrollable jerk forwards, at the sight of his kneeling best friend; Hermione's face was flushed, her hair tussled, her eyes darkened with arousal and her lips, wet and red, wrapped around him. Harry thought she looked like some sort of debauched fallen angel.

Harry slipped one of his hands down to her hair, tangling his fingers in the curls, his nails lightly scraping her scalp. Just looking at her– bitten-red lips stretched wide, long eyelashes painting shadows over sharp cheekbones, upturned eyes looking at him with heat– was enough to push him closer to the edge and when he tugged helplessly on her hair without even meaning to, she drew him deep enough to hit the back of her throat.

"Oh god..." he whimpered, dropping his head back against the wall again and moaning, his body swimming with how good her mouth felt on him. His hand slipped away from Hermione's hair but she was quick to grab it, her sharp nails digging into his skin as she moved it back to her head, wrapping his fingers around the wild curls. At her wordless encouragement, Harry met her eyes as he lightly tugged on her hair and he shuddered with pleasure at the way they darkened, at how the dilation of her pupils swallowed up the familiar honey-brown of her irises.

"Beautiful, isn't she?" Tom roughly bit his earlobe, causing him to shiver and moan, the older boy's mouth then moving to the flushed skin of Harry's neck. "You have her on her knees, Harry," Tom murmured against his skin, teeth scraping just hard enough for it to sting. "She's not a marble statue to be adored, she's flesh and blood to be bruised and warmed and ruined."

There was a part of Harry that reminded him he probably shouldn't be taking that sort of mildly ominous-sounding advice from a self-admitted psychopath, but then Tom's hand, still caressing his naked hip, moved across to the small of his back and gave a rough shove that had him thrust forward. When Hermione didn't immediately start to choke or pull away, her enthusiasm instead seeming to increase, Harry finally stopped holding himself frozen in place, more then eager to fall into the freer, thrusting rhythm of this newly discovered act.

It didn't take much more after that, as strung out on pleasure and Hermione as he was and with Tom's voice in his ears, murmuring a steady litany of filthy things. Hermione closed her thin fingers around the base of him, stroking where she couldn't reach with her mouth, her other hand on Harry's hip, her fingers gripping with enough force to leave marks. She took him deep in her throat
a few more times and hummed, looking up at him with upturned eyes full of sin and lust and fierce, fierce adoration and it was that look that sent him over the edge, fingers tangling tightly in her hair as he moaned in pleasure and came in her mouth.

Gasping for breath with his body humming in pleasure, Harry was unable to look away from Hermione's steady, heated gaze as she made a show of swallowing and wiping the back of her hand over her mouth. Tom laughed softly at the whimper he made in response, the older boy moving his lips to the hollow of Harry's throat in an open-mouthed kiss against his gradually slowing pulse.

"Happy birthday," he murmured against his skin and Harry blurted out,

"That- that was a really good birthday present!"

Hermione laughed too at that, the sound rougher then it was normally, before slowly rising back to her feet, tugging his pants and boxer-shorts back up to his hips as she did so. She then kissed him and it was strange to taste himself in her mouth; it was a weird flavour- kind of salty and kind of bitter, but not. Hermione pulled back before he could identify the exact taste and gave him a smug smile that he was of the opinion she more then deserved to feel.

"That was your happy birthday blowjob." She informed him.

"Can every day be my birthday?" he wondered and Hermione laughed again, the sound bright and free. Harry loved it, and instantly decided it was his second best gift today– no need to ask which was the best; he was pretty sure nothing could outdo the happy birthday blowjob. Not even the ring he could feel, heavy but comforting on his finger, or the dagger from Bellatrix– who, he belatedly realised, had never actually confirmed what type of bone it was that the handle of the blade was carved out of, and he really didn't want to think about what that likely implied.

It might only be just past breakfast, but Harry was pretty sure that this was his best birthday yet– and he still had the party at Malfoy Manor to go.
CHAPTER XXXIII:

Severus's POV:

Severus looked grimly down at the letter in his hand. It was from Remus Lupin, which would have been enough to sour his mood in the first place, but he couldn't really complain about that when he had been the one to write to Lupin first. And as it was, the news the letter contained was far more upsetting to him then the one who had penned it.

While Albus and his Order of Flaming Chickens ran around like an Order of headless Flaming Chickens looking for Harry and Hermione, he hadn't been sitting idle. Under guise of searching muggle London for the troublesome two, he had been doing some digging into the past of Hermione Jane Granger— to be more specific, he had been searching for information on her boggart.

It was a thoroughly distasteful task, looking through records of murdered children— Severus had a strong stomach, but he still found it sickening. The information he had, however scarce, came from Lupin— and as much as Severus loathed to admit it the man was very observant to have picked up as much as he had before the boggart had changed, so he owed the man for shortening his task how he had. He knew he was looking for a girl ten years or under with long red hair who had been found been murdered via asphyxiation, as well as having possibly been raped. It was also possible that the body was unclaimed, or still a Jane Doe, because the victim had likely been a runaway/homeless.

After spending far too long searching through both public and private archives of lists of murdered children— lists that were also far too long, he had finally identified the child most likely to be the one Hermione's boggart had turned into. A newspaper article dated six years ago had sent up red flags and he had then stolen the corresponding official police files of the case, files which seemed to confirm his suspicions. He had sent Lupin a clipping of a newspaper article that showed a photo of the girl, as well one of the official crime scene photos he had 'liberated', and Lupin had just written back to confirm that the girl in the photos was the one Hermione's boggart had turned into.

Severus would have felt very satisfied with his investigative work, had it not been for the details of that particular crime. The girl was a seven year old whose name had been Iris Clancy. She had run away from her foster home, following several reports from the school nurse of suspicious bruising. She had been sighted by police, twice; both times in the company of an older girl with frizzy brown hair. Three months after Iris ran away from her foster home, her body was found in an alleyway. She had been raped and strangled. Her case had been solved very quickly, however, due to the fact that her killer had been found dead just several meters from her body.

The man, later identified as Mitchem Cortland's, death had been even more violent then Iris's— the tendons in his legs were severed, the bones in his hands were fractured from repetitive blows, likely by the heel of a boot, one of his eyes had been punctured by a small blade, he'd been castrated— both his penis and his testicles had been removed, and his throat had been hacked open by, the medical examiner had counted, approximately thirty two stab wounds, cutting deep enough to expose bone.

All in all, it was a mess. Cortland's DNA had been matched against the semen found inside Iris, and
the bruise patterns on the murdered child matched Cortland's hands, making the murder an open and shut case– or at least it would have been, if not for the grisly murder of the murderer.

A third person's blood had been found on both bodies and all over the crime scene. It was assumed that the person who attacked and murdered Cortland had cut their hands on the blade/blades they'd used. Severus had no doubt that if a sample of Hermione's DNA was given to the police, they'd be able to match it to the Cortland case– which was a problem. Already the police wanted the brown haired girl in for questioning, and the last thing he needed was a muggle cop who worked the Iris Clancy and Mitchem Cortland case recognizing Hermione.

She would have been nine or ten years old at the time. Nine or ten, and she'd already tortured– because Cortland had been tortured, there was no questioning that– and killed a man.

Salazar, no wonder she was as damaged as she was! He'd known when he saw the details of Iris Clancy's murder that Iris's corpse was Hermione's boggart, and god, he'd hoped that Lupin would write back that it wasn't Iris the boggart had turned into, but it had been a fool's wish. He'd already known what Lupin's answer would be, had known it the moment his heart sunk as he saw the crime scene photo of Cortland's corpse– and the bloody mess of the man's left eye-socket, where a switchblade blade had been left jammed to the hilt, bloody smears on the handle where a small hand had been gripping tight.

Severus had grown up in the muggle world, he knew enough about muggle police proceedings to know that the crime scene was a mess of evidence and DNA and he was going to have to make it all disappear so that nobody could ever trace it back to Hermione– muggle or magical. He was cursing himself now, for sending Iris's picture to Lupin, though he had at least had the foresight not to give Lupin the girl's name, or any other details about the crime scene. He was still going to have to talk to the man about not mentioning anything about Iris to Albus, which left him in the thoroughly uncomfortable position of having to owe Lupin. Hopefully he would be able to bribe Lupin with a monthly supply of Wolfsbane and the assurances that he was helping his student work through the trauma of 'finding a body'.

Hermione was damn lucky he liked her, Severus thought grimly, as he put down Lupin's letter and prepared to swallow his pride and go talk to his childhood bully.

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Hermione's POV:

"I have a gift for you too, Harry, though I'm not sure how it can compare to Hermione's," Tom said to her best friend, the corners of his mouth curled up in amusement at Harry's red cheeks.

"It was spectacular," Hermione agreed smugly, laughing as Harry blushed.

"Very." The dark-haired boy blurted out, before blushing even harder. Hermione wasn't sure why Harry was so embarrassed, seeing as he'd watched her give Tom blow jobs in the past, as well as watching them participate in a multitude of other sexual activities, but put it towards him still being a virgin- well, mostly a virgin.

"Still," Tom said, pulling a folded, cut-out newspaper article from his robe pocket, "happy birthday Harry." Harry accepted the article, a curious look on his face, unfurling the paper and then gasping.
"You- you actually did it?" He asked, in disbelief. "I thought..."

"That I wouldn't?" Tom arched an eyebrow and, curiosity piqued, Hermione peered over Harry's shoulder at the article he was holding in now trembling hands.

It was the front page of the Daily Prophet, dated a week ago.

BLACK INNOCENT! PETTIGREW THE TRUE SECRET KEEPER! The headline screamed, and Hermione's eyes widened.

She remembered how, after the one and only time Harry had tortured Pettigrew with the help of Tom, afterwards Harry had said that he wanted to have Pettigrew obliviated of his time at Riddle Manor so that he could be turned over to the Ministry and Black's name could be cleared, despite the fact that Black was dead- and at Harry's hands.

Hermione was honestly shocked that Tom had remembered Harry's wish when she herself had forgotten. Then again, she supposed that Tom had spent far more time down in the 'dungeon' where Pettigrew had been kept then she had- she could only hope that Tom had seen fit to visit the rat a few more times before obliviating him and putting him under the Imperius to turn himself over to the Ministry.

"Wait, how did you even know I wanted Pettigrew cleared?" Harry asked looking confused now, turning to face her. "Did you tell him?"

"No, Tom was spying on our conversation because he has no concept of such mundane issues as boundaries and privacy. And because he's a nosy bugger." She informed Harry who looked exasperated.

"Honestly, Tom! I swear you weren't this bad before," he grumbled, scowling half-heartedly at the older boy.

"Well he's not being cautious about scaring us off, now." Hermione said, simply. Whether it had been from fascination or self-preservation, or even a mixture of the two, Tom had made sure to slowly but surely worm his way into their affections, to the point now where she didn't think either she or Harry would willingly let the older boy go.

She personally didn't love the older boy any more then he loved her- which was not at all, as Tom simply was not capable of love; but Tom was hers, now, and she held on tight to what was hers.

But Harry... well, Harry's capacity for love took her breath away. He loved her, after all, even as damaged as she was. And even more miraculously then that, he loved Tom, despite who the older boy had grown to be- and despite the terrible things Tom did.

She wasn't unaware of what Harry did, after Ton returned from torturing whatever poor soul had wound up in the 'dungeon' at the time, and she didn't like that Harry was dirtying his hands in such a way, loathed it in fact, but she knew that the younger boy saw it as the most merciful thing he could do for the poor sods- and he was right. She also knew that, for Harry, it was the penance he paid for what he was allowing to happen due to his inaction. Because in the end, he loved Tom more then he valued the prisoners' lives, innocent or not, magic or muggles. She hated his method self-flagellation, but if she took it away from him, she worried about what else he might come up with instead, something that could be even more harmful. So instead she accepted it.

And Tom... well, Tom was unashamedly pleased with the development, the bastard. Torture turned Tom on like catnip, and when he fucked her after he finished with one of his victims, she was
always angry enough at him to make it hurt, make it a fight, drawing blood as she raked her nails down his back and bit dawn on the muscle of his shoulder, venting her frustration at what they were both fully aware he was making Harry do.

Because Tom could just kill the prisoners himself once he was done- he didn't care about drawing out their suffering by keeping them alive; he was only interested in the torture if he could witness it happening. But the older boy liked Harry getting his hands dirty, and the blood on Harry's hands made Tom just as hard as the sight of the blood he spilled himself on those cold stone floors down below.

Harry's love was a priceless gift that neither she nor Tom truly deserved, but she was too selfish to let go of him, of the very best part of her. She loved Harry back fiercely, and even though Tom enjoyed manipulating Harry into committing murder, which they both knew was doing terrible things to the younger boy's conscience, she knew Tom would slaughter anyone except him who dared lay a finger on Harry.

"I should run," Harry commented suddenly, his green eyes showing the weariness of the last few weeks. "Hermione and I should both run, as far away from you as we can get."

Tom's eyes turned a bloody crimson, his expression icing over to something blank and terrible. "I won't let you leave." The older boy said, his voice a cold, dark promise, his hand already twitching to his wand.

Harry groaned. "God, you're such a psychopath!" He complained, throwing his hands in the air in frustration. Hermione was pleased to see tiredness leaving his eyes, even as Harry gave Tom a long-suffering look. "Stop being such a possessive git- if I haven't run by now, I'm not going to, Tom."

Harry's green eyes calmly met Tom's red ones, and Tom narrowed his eyes before slowly nodding, his shoulders losing their tenseness, even though his irises stayed a brilliant red.

"Pettigrew confessed to being the Potters' Secret Keeper in front of the entire DMLE," the older boy said, turning the conversation back to his birthday gift for Harry. Hermione let the tenseness leave her own muscles, though she didn't relax fully.

Like she said, Tom would slaughter anyone who dared lay a finger on Harry- except Tom himself.

"What did he tell them to make them believe he did turn himself in?" Harry asked.

"He said that he was afraid of the Death Eaters who had escaped Azkaban, that they all wanted him dead seeing as he was the one who gave Voldemort the information he needed to kill the Potters, which led to Voldemort's 'death'."

"Which adds to the whole proof of Voldemort being dead thing." Harry said, looking impressed. "That's pretty clever."

"I try." Tom said, dryly.

"Well about how the other Death Eaters broke out of Azkaban?" Hermione asked. "Black was Voldemort's scapegoat, the one who the Ministry could blame the mass breakout on so there wouldn't be any suspicion about Voldemort not being as dead as most claim."

"My older counterpart did say that Dumbledore tried bringing up the possibility that Voldemort was involved in the Wizengamot trial," Tom said, lip curling. "The old fool knows, of course, from Snape's Dark Mark that Voldemort isn't dead, and that he is regaining his strength, but he hasn't got
any proof he can show to the public. And the Ministry is more then happy to deny it all, of course, and Fudge ordered Dumbledore to stop trying to cause trouble. Senior Undersecretary Thaddeus may have lent the esteemed Minister the idea that if one prisoner could escape Azkaban, one who had just officially been cleared of being a Death Eater and therefore would not be involved with Voldemort at all, then it stood to reason that others would be able to escape too."

"Good." Hermione said, with a great deal of satisfaction. "Has 'Thaddeus' started subtly undermining Dumbledore yet?"

"No, he wants to have the Inner Circle all aware of his return before he starts making any big waves, so that the ones with political influence such as Lucius can back his plays." Tom informed her. "And before he alerts the full Inner Circle, he wants any suspicion of their families housing the Death Eaters freed from Azkaban gone, that way they can return to their families. He's going to give them another month, I believe- that's around the same time as when his first major bill should prove to either be a success or a failure."

"Oh?" Hermione asked, interested.

"It's nothing that interesting," Tom said, with a slight shake of his head, "more to make a statement then anything else- it's a decree that all British Wizarding schools must celebrate the traditional festivals of Samhain, Yuletide and Eostre, not the muggle perversions of the holiday."

"I'm not sure why anyone would vote against it," Harry said, looking a bit indignant. "They shouldn't even have to make a law in the first place- Hogwarts is a wizarding school and it should be celebrating the wizarding versions of the holiday, not the muggle ones anyway. Why isn't it?"

"Muggleborns." Tom answered, with a look of disgust. "They're always complaining about our archaic customs, demanding we move out of medieval times. No respect for Wizarding culture or tradition, any of them- and Dumbledore, of course, was more then happy to gain a legion of supporters and worshippers by changing it so Hogwarts celebrated the muggle holidays instead."

"Dumbledore did that? He changed it?" Harry asked, looking shocked.

"After World War II and the whole Grindelwald mess, Dumbledore became a candidate for the Supreme Mugwump position on the International Confederation of Wizards. The ICW is a massive intergovernmental organization that holds enormous power over every magical government worldwide and the Supreme Mugwump is the leader. Dumbledore was one of five candidates. He'd just defeated Grindelwald, who was an international menace, which meant every pureblood and halfblood out there knew his name and were both thankful and in awe of him. The issue was, at this specific period of time, that Muggleborns and witches and wizards with close ties to the muggle community were very upset with and condemning of the Wizarding world, due to the suspected, though never proven, influence Grindelwald had over Hitler and his success. So when Dumbledore proposed bridging the gap between the two worlds, inviting muggle holidays to be celebrated at what was widely considered the most respected school of magic in the world, he gained the full backing of every witch or wizard out there with muggle ties, became the symbol for muggle and Muggleborn rights."

"So this new bill is sort of like flipping Dumbledore off?" Harry asked, with a grin.

"Partially," Tom agreed, easily, with a smirk. "Though I do believe, as does my older self, that we should be proud of our cultural heritage, and that turning our backs on centuries of tradition in trade for cheap muggle festivities is deplorable."

"It really is." Harry agreed. "I mean, I do think the muggle holidays are great, but it's not as if it
would be stopping Muggleborns from celebrating muggle holidays- they can go home over the breaks to their families to celebrate Christmas and Easter."

"Has Dumbledore actually done anything else to 'bridge the gap'?
Hermione asked, curious.

"Other then opposing Voldemort, nothing that comes to mind." Tom said, with derision.

"And yet, he's heralded as the hero to all the underdogs, from Muggleborns to magical beings." She said, exasperated by the sheep-like behaviour of the public.

"And yet he is." Agreed Tom, looking just as distasteful.

"Not that this isn't interesting, because it actually is," Harry said, "but can we save talking about politics for when it's not my birthday?" Hermione looked at his pleading expression and laughed.

"I'm sure we can manage that. Although it does feel like talking with Narcissa and Lucius can be all politics."

"Oh god, don't remind me," groaned Harry, pull a face. "I swear, every question Lucius asks me has at least three different meanings that I need to unpack!"

"And Narcissa is even worse," Hermione agreed, "because with her you don't even realise what she's asking you or tricked you into agreeing with until ten minutes later."

"The Blacks are trained in politics from before they can even talk." Tom said, amused.

"And if Bellatrix and Narcissa are any example, they're also trained to be terrifying." Hermione pointed out.

"Bella's not that scary," argued Harry, "she's a child in a woman's body, more then anything." When she and Tom both stared at him, incredulous, he added, "a very bloodthirsty and mentally deranged child, who loves killing and making others suffer, in a woman's body."

"Such a lovely image." Hermione said, dryly.

"You should have met Walburga." Tom commented. "Bellatrix starts to make a lot more sense."

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Harry's POV:

The Portkey dropped Harry and Hermione off inside the pair of imposing wrought iron gates of Malfoy Manor, on a lane was bordered by curved high, neatly manicured yew hedges. Hermione snorted at the pure-white peacocks strutting majestically along the tops of the hedges and he was unable to help his own grin at the sheer absurdity.

It was a five-minute walk to the front doors of the large manor, the door swinging inward at their approach, no need to physically push it open.

The hallway of Malfoy Manor was large and lavishly decorated, with a magnificent carpet covering most of the stone floor and pale-faced portraits lining the walls. Narcissa greeted them there, her willowy form draped with Egyptian blue silk robes, her grey eyes warm.

"Happy birthday, Harry," she said, leaning down slightly to envelope him in a gentle hug. After a
moment's hesitation, Harry hugged her back. She smelt of something light and floral, and her embrace was tender and caring. He felt his eyes burn with tears as he thought that this was what a mother's hug felt like. He felt... safe in Narcissa's arms; safe and protected.

It took him a long time to let go of Narcissa, and nobody commented when he had to wipe his eyes quickly. Instead Narcissa kissed his forehead, and placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Fourteen years old... you've grown so much since the first time I saw you, dear."

As Harry looked up into grey eyes, the same shade as Bella's but warm and kind in a way that her sister's never were, he wasn't sure how he could ever have thought this woman looked icy and emotionless.

"Harry! Hermione!" Harry turned to see the grinning blonde making his way over to them.

"Hi Draco," he greeted the boy.

"Happy birthday," their friend said, still grinning. "You're officially the second last of us to turn fourteen, now it's only Theo to go, but his party isn't going to be even nearly as awesome as yours!" Draco's normally pale cheeks were flushed a light pink from excitement.

"Thank you, Narcissa, for doing this, for this birthday party." Harry said, turning to the gently smiling woman, blushing, and Narcissa gave him a fond smile.

"Anytime, Harry darling. Now you three go make yourselves scarce so the elves can start with the decorations."

Draco obligingly dragged him and Hermione off to the blonde's massive bedroom. Wide windows showed the sweeping grounds of the manor and its gardens, the floorboards were a polished mahogany, and an expansive green shag rug lay in the center of the room. The magnificent paintings hung on wood-paneled walls, one of a castle set in an area of green pasture on a mountain, surrounded by sweeping and draping expanses of wild forest. The second piece was that of a magnificent dragon with long, curved horns and two sets of wings, and the third and final a portrait of a beautiful woman with soft waves of white-blond hair and bright blue eyes. She looked young too, only around sixteen or seventeen. A small engraving on the frame read 'Clotilda Malfoy'.

The furniture was specifically designed for the room and all handcrafted, from the looking glass that could have been straight out of the pages of Lewis Carroll's books, to the magnificent bed that was big enough Harry could lay side-ways down on it and his hands and feet wouldn't reach the two sides of the bed.

Draco quickly picked up two presents from the bedside table, each wrapped in silver paper with a gold bow and one slightly larger then the other, and proceeded to pass them both a wrapped square.

Hermione looked down at the present in her hands, visibly confused, before looking back up at the blond. "Why did you give me a present?" She asked, her voice sounding puzzled.

"Because you wouldn't say when your birthday is, we all decided that you'll have to share Harry's now. You can expect gifts from Blaise, Theo and Daphne tonight, too." Draco said, looking far too pleased with himself.

"Of course." Hermione said, now looking exasperated.

Harry wondered about her actual date of birth. In the three plus years he'd known her now, not
once had Hermione ever referenced her birthday, other than the occasional comment about her age, usually cheeky quips about being able to boss him around or do things that he couldn't, such as swear, because she was his elder.

He thought about asking her why she wouldn't tell him when her birthday was, before remembering the conversation he'd had with Tom about Hermione's triggers, and he didn't want to go and poke a sleeping dragon in the eye with a pointy stick by upsetting her trying to get answers that she wasn't ready to give.

One day she'd tell him, Harry was confident, but not until she was ready.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Demanded Draco, impatience clear on his pointed features and a hint of a whine in his voice. "Open them!"

"Shouldn't we wait for tonight?" Harry asked.

"No, I want you to open them now." Said Draco, crossing his arms.

"You're a spoiled brat, you know that, right?" Hermione said, sounding amused. Draco smirked back at her.

"But I'm rich, handsome and well-connected enough that I can get away with it." He said smugly, and she laughed.

"Alright, alright," she said. "I'll open the bloody present." Harry watched as her thin, clever fingers peeled away the tape, unwrapping the colorful paper without tearing it, revealing a long rectangular box. Inside the box was a necklace, an old-fashioned looking one. The summer he'd lived with Hermione on the streets had him enough background on jeweler for him to say it looked expensive and vintage, with gold filigree and a dark blue teardrop gemstone that Harry was pretty sure was a real sapphire.

Hermione stared down at the necklace for several long moments, her hair shielding her face from both boys, before she raised her head. "I can't accept this, Draco," she said, quietly. "It's far too generous."

"We've got a thousand more necklaces just like it in the House of Malfoy Vault," Draco said, dismissively. "And even more in Mother's share of the House of Black Vault. Mother saw it when we were withdrawing the money to buy my school supplies when she spotted it and said it would be perfect for you."

"How did I end up friends with a bunch of filthy rich kids?" Hermione wondered aloud, gently teasing the blond, but both he and Draco could see the genuine gratitude on her face, and the slight pink on her cheeks.

"Harry's turn now." Draco said, and the attention was turned to him.

Obligingly, Harry opened the present, trying to tear the bright paper as little as possible but having far less luck then Hermione. The box inside was flat and rectangle, but smaller then Hermione's, and inside were some sort of tickets. Confused, he read the print on the tickets and then gasped, eyes wide.

"Are these--? Are they-- are they real?" he managed to choke out, staring at a smug Draco, though Harry could see the excitement on the blonde's face, and he didn't blame him.

"They are," Draco confirmed, and Harry let out an excited sound that was a lot higher pitched then
he'd intended.

"Well? Don't leave me in suspense," Hermione said. Harry tried to open his mouth to explain but his excitement was so great he couldn't get his mouth to form proper words, so he pushed the box over to her instead.

Hermione scanned the tickets then raised an eyebrow. "Four tickets to the Quidditch World Cup?" she said, and Harry thought he might explode in his sheer excitement. Draco jabbed a finger in Hermione's direction.

"See!" He said, triumphant. "See! That's how you accept a gift!"

"Oh go suck a-" Harry managed to clap a hand over Hermione's mouth before she finished her sentence and gave her a horrified look.

"Hermione!"

Hermione's eyes turned teasing and Harry almost flinched as she dragged her tongue slowly down his palm, remembering very clearly what that same tongue had done earlier, adding a little flick with the tip, and then sucking on the now wet skin of his palm gently. Harry had to fight his entire face turning bright red as he yanked his hand back from her mouth, desperately trying to think of anything but his birthday blowjob. Draco, the git, was thankfully too busy laughing at him, the blond missing the way Hermione's eyes had gone half-lidded in arousal, and he was desperately thankful for the concealing layers of his robes when she slowly licked her lips, her tongue pink and wet.

"I see Draco wasted no time with the presents," an amused voice said, and he took a deep breath, hoping his face wasn't as red as he thought it was, or hopefully Narcissa would mistake his flushed state for embarrassment from her family's generosity when it came to gift giving.

"Thank you so much, Narcissa," Harry said earnestly. "The tickets– they're amazing, thank you so much!"

"It means a lot, you guys thinking of us." Hermione added.

Narcissa gave them both a fond look. "It was our pleasure, darlings."

"Is there something you need, mother?" Draco asked, looking a bit confused about his mother's presence.

"Yes there is, dear. Severus just arrived and he's requested to see Harry and Hermione," Narcissa said, an amused smile on her lovely face. "I believe he wishes to check you're both in one piece following your most recent disappearing act, this time from the very grounds of Hogwarts itself. We were all very impressed to hear about it."

"Thank you," Hermione said, and Harry tried not to laugh at the way his friend seemed to be preening.

"Will the professor be at the party tonight?" He asked Narcissa.

"He will," confirmed Narcissa and Harry tried not to beam too obviously- he'd missed the snarky Potion's Master. Snape had never failed to have his and Hermione's backs, and the gratitude he felt for the man was overwhelming.

"Let's go say hi," he said, happily.
Severus's first thought when he saw Harry was that something was very wrong.

The boy was dressed in better fitting clothes than any he'd seen him in previously, and he looked clean and he was smiling, but there was a brittleness to him that hadn't been there before, and the sort of sharpness in his face that came from skin stretched tighter over bone then it should be, like the boy hadn't been eating properly, and had lost weight.

A scan of Hermione showed similar findings—clean and expensively dressed in what he'd venture a guess to be hand-tailored robes, but with a shadow in her eyes that hadn't been there the last time he'd seen her.

His lips thinned and his eyes narrowed dangerously as his protective instincts moved to the front of his mind. Either whoever had been 'taking care of them' had not done so with the children's best welfare in mind or they were a moronic brain-dead fool—but Severus knew Hermione would not put up with that sort of incompetence, which meant it was the former; whoever had been housing Harry and Hermione had an agenda.

The original fears he'd had when the children had first disappeared subtly wormed their way back into his mind, and he couldn't help but wonder; had Dumbledore scarred the two so badly that the Boy Who Lived and his Muggleborn best friend had sought refuge with the Dark Lord?

He'd initially dismissed the idea as laughable, the product of an overactive imagination following his talk with Lucius that revealed Hermione knew Parseltongue, but the subtle strain on both children's faces reminded him of the faces of the newer Death Eaters, fresh joined to their ranks from Hogwarts, back when the Dark Lord was in power.

Unless you were a complete psychopath, witnessing certain atrocities, even if they weren't committed against yourself or your loved ones, was...emotionally taxing, to say the least. It wasn't unusual for the odd newly joined Death Eater to suffer a break down during what the more experienced Death Eaters somewhat jokingly called the 'desensitization' period, unable to cope with what they were confronted with, day after day.

Grimly, Severus decided he needed to convince Lucius that inviting Harry and Hermione to spend the rest of the holidays at his Manor would get the man in Narcissa's good books, which the fool was always managing to fall out of, and then he needed to come up with a plan for the next summer holidays— he refused to send Harry to the Dursleys, no matter what Dumbledore tried, but he similarly could not in good conscience allow his two snakes to return to what he dearly hoped was not the Dark Lord's place of residence. He wanted to be wrong, he truly did, but he had learned to trust his instincts, because after all, they were what had kept him alive all these years, and would hopefully continue to keep him alive in these difficult years to come— and help him keep Harry and Hermione alive too.

"Miss Granger, Mr. Potter," he greeted them both with a nod, none of his inner turmoil of emotion showing on his face, and Hermione gave him a teasing smile.

"You can call us by our names when we aren't at school, Professor." She said, "And I promise we won't call you Uncle Severus." His godson let out an indignant-sounding squawk, attempting to
elbow her, but she curved her body out of the way, then stepped out of elbow range. He rolled his eyes at the antics of the two, and tried not to see litres of blood splashed on dirty concrete when he looked at down at Hermione.

"I will hold you to that, then... Hermione." It was easier then he thought it would be, saying her name. And he was pleased to see the way the hardness in her eyes softened just that little bit more at the use of her given name.

He was going to take care of these children, because Merlin damn it, they deserved to be taken care of right.

"So what do you think?" Narcissa asked lightly, once Harry, Hermione and Draco had left, heading to the kitchens, her grey eyes having tracked their movements to the now empty doorway, where she had yet to look away.

"Pardon?" He said, arching a brow, and Narcissa turned to calmly meet his dark eyes.

"I may be the Lady Malfoy, Severus, but I am and always will be a daughter of the Ancient House of Black first." She said, quietly. "We are trained to see the things that nobody else sees, and they're different from the last time I saw them, both of them are."

"Yes, they are." Severus agreed, after a brief hesitation.

"It reminds me," Narcissa said, turning back to face the hallway where the three children had disappeared, her voice carefully light, "of two young boys, freshly graduated from Hogwarts, who sat together and drank firewhiskey until they passed out because they couldn't sleep."

Severus winced at the memory of his first Death Eater meeting after his initiation, and how afterwards he didn't sleep for three days straight until Lucius dragged him over to his study and they both drank the blonde's expensive whiskey until they passed out.

"It reminds me of that too." He didn't look at her, but he could hear the soft sigh that escaped her pink lips.

"I suppose it was naive to hope they wouldn't get involved in this approaching mess, or at least not so soon." She murmured. "And yet, still I had hoped."

"It's going to be a shit storm," Severus said, bluntly. One of Narcissa's slim hands brushed against his, and he looked over at the elegant woman who was looking back at him with worried eyes.

"He hasn't summoned you yet, has He?" Her voice was so quiet it was barely a whisper.

"No." He told her and she let out a shaky breath, closing her eyes and looking pained.

"But He will soon." She said, and there was pain in her voice. Severus thought of the way the Mark looked bolder, stronger, each day, and nodded, tired.

"Yes, He will."
CHAPTER XXXIV:

Harry's POV:

At five o'clock, Harry and Draco were sent to go get prepared. Harry was wearing one of his new sets of dress robes, a pair colored a green that was so dark it looked almost black, and he was debating whether or not to put his hair in a pony-tail—because as much as he hated Bill Weasley, the red-head's pony-tail had looked really awesome—when his friend made an odd gargling sound. "Draco?" Harry asked, actually concerned as he turned to look at the blond. Draco pointed wildly.

"You have a— a hickey!" The blonde whisper-yelled.

Harry looked over at himself in the mirror, and saw that with his hair brushed back into a ponytail, the love-bite under his ear from Tom was visible. "I guess that means I should leave my hair down." He sighed. Draco made a choked sound.

"Harry— you have a hickey!" He repeated, and Harry felt his cheeks turn red.

"Um." He said, ever so elegantly. "Er."

"Harry!" Draco repeated his name, and the shock on the blonde's face had turned to something that looked worryingly like awe. "It was Hermione, right?" The boy asked, gleefully. Harry blushed harder.

"Sort of," he mumbled, and his face felt like it was burning.

"What do you mean 'sort of'?" Demanded Draco. "Did you kiss Hermione or not? Or... sweet Merlin, did you go further then kissing?" The blonde's eyes widened.

"Draco!" Harry pleaded, shooting a terrified look at the door to Draco's room. He did not want to know what Hermione's reaction would be to him 'kissing and telling' and he had absolutely no intention of ever finding out.

Draco, however, seemed to have missed the memo. "Come on!" the blond urged, still wearing a gleeful smile. "How far did you go? Did you touch her, you know?" Draco made curved motions with his hands over his chest. Harry groaned, dropping his head to his hands.

"You totally did," Draco sounded giddy, "you totally touched her boobs! Blaise and Theo are going to love this! You have to tell us everything!"

"I'm not telling you anything," Harry scowled at his git of a friend.

"Yes you will!" Sang Draco, ducking back as Harry tried to hit him. "So have you seen what she looks like, under her robe?" he asked, with a leer, and Harry's fine control over his temper snapped, leaving him to let out a frustrated shout and lunge for the blonde.

It was this scene that Narcissa walked into, the two of them rolling around on the floor, and the beautiful witch looked very unimpressed. And then her whole face went white.
"Narcissa?" Harry asked, releasing the headlock he was holding Draco in as he looked over at her, worried. "What is it?"

"I... where did you get that dagger?" Narcissa asked, in a voice that was far too calm to be natural. Harry looked over to his open trunk, propped up against the foot of Draco's bed. His gift from Bellatrix was sitting wedged between a pile of books and his telescope, in clear view, and he cursed under his breath.

"Um, it was a birthday present." He said, lamely. "From a... friend. Well, she's more of a mentor then a friend. She has really strange tastes."

Narcissa actually reached out to grasp onto the doorway with a shaking hand, and mouthed something he didn't catch. "Narcissa?" he repeated, standing up. "Are you okay?"

"I– yes, I'm fine," Narcissa said, faintly. "Yes– better then fine. I'm wonderful, in fact. I– I have to go see if Hermione needs any assistance..." Harry watched, with a sinking feeling in his stomach, as Narcissa hurried away.

"What in Salazar's name was all that about?" grumbled Draco, shuffling over to examine the dagger. "Wicked," he commented, raising his eyebrows. "Is that bone?"

"Yeah. I'm hoping it isn't human, but I wouldn't bet on it." Harry said, with a groan.

"So is Hermione the one who gave it to you?" Pressed Draco, when he didn't say anything else. "Come on," the blonde whined when Harry glared at him, "I can totally see her as your mentor and, no offense, but you have seen that cat of hers– strange doesn't even begin to cover it when it comes to her taste!"

"Leave me alone or I'll tell Hermione you were asking about her boobs." Harry threatened, unable to help the way his cheeks turned pink.

"You totally saw them!" crowed Draco, completely distracted from the dagger, apparently far more interested with Hermione's anatomy.

Still, Harry felt entirely justified throwing a balled-up pair of socks at his friend, before he slammed his trunk shut.

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Narcissa hadn't gone overboard, much to Harry's relief, and he found that he was enjoying himself.

He got to meet Lord Talfryn and Lady Sabine Greengrass, Daphne's parents, as well as Blaise's mother, the terrifying Marchioness Adrienne Zabini– unfortunately, her new husband, the Marquess of Dorset, had been feeling quite poorly of late and had decided to stay home and rest.

Theo was there but his father, Lord Edmund Nott, had not been in attendance– seeing as Nott Sr had escaped being sentenced to Azkaban by the skin of his teeth, Narcissa had apparently decided that inviting him to the Boy Who Lived's birthday party was not the wisest thing to do.

Snape was there, of course, snarking at Lucius, and to Harry's surprise Narcissa had invited Lupin too, who Harry had been keeping up a correspondence with over the summer.

He'd been pleasantly surprised that none of Lupin's letters had any tracking spells on them, seeing as he knew that Lupin was one of Dumbledore's "followers". Lupin had proven to be an absolutely invaluable source of information on Lily and James Potter, and he'd always sent along photos of
them both with his letters.

He’d also been pleasantly surprised to see Snape greet Lupin cordially enough—there was still dislike clear on the Potion Master’s face, but he kept his tone formal, even though he wasn’t technically in an environment where he was required to keep a civil tongue.

Lupin had looked very anxious in his shabby robes, and very uncomfortable with his surroundings, which made Harry feel even more touched that the man had come to his birthday party anyway. He made an effort to stick with him, seeing as the man didn’t know anyone else enough to be comfortable with them.

It was Harry who brought up Pettigrew, though he was immediately sorry he had when Lupin’s face crumpled. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said anything," he said hastily, but Lupin shook his head.

"No, you have a right, it's just..." He shook his head slightly, and his eyes looked very tired. "I had hoped that once he had been officially exonerated Sirius would come out of hiding, but then Peter... he confessed that Sirius came after him once he’d escaped Azkaban and that he killed him. They found the body where Pettigrew said it would be." The crushing grief in Lupin's eyes took Harry’s breath away, and not in a good way.

Harry hadn’t been aware that Tom had set Pettigrew up as Black's killer, but he supposed it was the smart thing to do, and even though he knew Tom didn't care about it at all Harry was glad Lupin at least finally got 'closure'.

"I think it was the merciful thing, almost." Lupin said suddenly, and his eyes were sad but kind now. Harry wondered if his pain was showing on his face, and Lupin was trying to comfort him, not knowing that the cause of Harry's grief was the fact he'd taken Sirius from Lupin. "Your father and Sirius were so close, practically brothers." Lupin sighed. "Utterly inseparable. He lived with your dad after he ran away from home when he was sixteen, and they started at the Auror academy together until they dropped out to be full time Order members. I can't imagine Sirius without James by his side. I'm not sure he could have survived that— and I'm even less sure he'd actually want to."

"What are Order members?" Harry asked, after swallowing past the lump in his throat. The term sounded familiar, and he thought he might have heard Voldemort mention it before. Lupin’s face twitched into a sad smile.

"The Order of the Phoenix is a group founded by Dumbledore to fight You-Know-Who," he explained, his voice much quieter, and Harry understood not wanting to be overheard talking about opposing Voldemort while in Malfoy Manor of all places. Pushing back the instinctive anger at the mention of Dumbledore, Harry instead focused on how Remus hadn't used past tense to describe the Order.

"I really am sorry about Bl- Sirius," Harry corrected himself. "And I'm sorry about Pettigrew too—he was your friend."

"He was." Lupin agreed, quietly. "We were the best of friends, the four of us. I- I got you something, something that we all made, back when we were still at Hogwarts. Filech confiscated it from us near the end of our seventh year, and after I confiscated it from those Weasley twins I thought that it should go to our only legacy."

Harry remembered Tom telling him and Hermione about the Map Lupin had used to find him, that night with Black, and how it had been confiscated from the Weasley twins, but he hadn't given it much thought since.
Lupin pulled a raggedy piece of parchment from his robes pocket and tapped it with his wand. "I solemnly swear I am up to no good." He murmured, and Harry watched, wide-eyed, as lines of ink bled out onto the aged parchment. There were scant few moving dots, each with tiny little labels under them, but Harry guessed that during the term the parchment would be teeming with names.

"Mischief managed." Lupin said, tapping the wand a second time, and the ink faded.

"This is... brilliant," Harry said, wide-eyed, and Lupin smiled at him.

"I'm glad you think so. James... James would be very proud of you. Lily too." He said, and Harry's throat felt blocked up again.

He knew his parents wouldn't be proud of him, but he smiled back at Lupin anyway and pretended that he was right.


The day of the Quidditch World Cup couldn't come quickly enough. Harry and Hermione had been invited to spend the rest of the holidays at the Malfoys, and Harry had happily accepted the invitation. Tom stayed with them, mostly coming out at night and spending the days inside the Diary, 're-charging his energy', to quote the boy himself.

On the morning of the Quidditch World Cup, Harry and Draco were practically vibrating with excitement and they both couldn't stop talking eagerly about the upcoming match. Hermione watched them with fond indulgence on her face, but for once she wasn't dragging her heels about having to attend a Quidditch game.

With the four tickets the Malfoys had given him for his birthday, Harry had invited Hermione, obviously, as well as Tom, who would officially join them. Daphne's family, Blaise and his mother and Theo and his father all already had tickets of their own, so with his last remaining ticket Harry had nervously written to Snape and invited him. Snape had accepted, and by three pm he'd arrived at Malfoy Manor. Tom had also 'arrived', and had been introduced as Thomas Dagworth, a cousin of Thaddeus Dagworth- Harry hadn't missed the sharp, interested looks this had gained them from Lucius and Snape.

A sleek black owl delivered the Portkey around a half hour after Snape arrived, and then it was finally, finally time to go.

Narcissa, Snape, Lucius and Tom were all apparating, so it was just him, Draco and Hermione who got to experience the absolutely lovely sensation of being hooked under their navel and spun around sickeningly.

When the world finally stopped spinning, Harry disentangled himself from a disgruntled Draco, and clambered to his feet. Hermione was already perfectly balanced, having landed on her feet, and looking unbearably smug about it. Harry didn't have much time to be annoyed at her, however, as he was too intrigued by his surroundings.

They had arrived on what appeared to be a deserted stretch of misty moor. In front of them was a pair of tired and grumpy-looking wizards, one of whom was holding a large gold watch, the other a thick roll of parchment and a quill. Both were dressed as Muggles, though very inexpertly: The man with the watch wore a tweed suit with thigh-length galoshes; his colleague, a kilt and a poncho.

A series of cracks heralded the arrival of Lucius, Narcissa, Tom and Snape, and the two wizards
"Ah, Lord Malfoy!" the one on the left hastily bowed, while the other hurriedly started scanning the parchment list.

"Your campsite is about a half mile walk over there, the first field you come to," he said, looking up nervously at their party. Lucius gave a short nod, expression cool. Snape looked bored, while Narcissa was wearing an expression like she was smelling something unpleasant. It always surprised Harry to see them wearing their 'public' faces, as he was used to Narcissa's warm smiles, and Snape's snark and Lucius's exasperation.

They set off across the deserted moor, much to Narcissa's clear distaste, and in the privacy of his mind Harry thought that she probably shouldn't have worn her pointy high-heels, though she was wearing the champagne-colored muggle cocktail dress and smart blazer fantastically, despite her revolted look when Snape presented it to her, with a smirk on his face.

It was difficult to make out much through the mist, though after about twenty minutes a small stone cottage next to a gate swam into view. Beyond it, Harry could just make out the ghostly shapes of hundreds and hundreds of tents, rising up the gentle slope of a large field toward a dark wood on the horizon.

Entering the field, they began to walk through the misty field between long rows of tents. Most looked almost ordinary; their owners had clearly tried to make them as Muggle-like as possible, but had slipped up by adding chimneys, or bell-pulls, or weather vanes. However, here and there was a tent so obviously magical that Harry couldn't help being entranced. Around halfway up the field they passed a tent that had three floors and several turrets; and a short way beyond that was a tent that had a front garden attached, complete with birdbath, sundial, and fountain.

When Lucius stopped outside an extravagant confection of striped silk like a miniature palace, with several live peacocks tethered at the entrance, Harry wasn't surprised in the slightest that this was the Malfoy's tent.

Draco groaned. "Father, why in Merlin's name would you bring the blasted pigeons?" he complained, and Lucius shot his son a haughty look.

"Isis and Osiris are purebred albino peacocks," he said, "the only thing they have in common with a pigeon is the fact they are birds."

"That still doesn't explain why you brought them!" Draco grumbled. Narcissa patted his shoulder.

"Don't pout, dear. You know how much your father loves those birds, he just couldn't bear to leave them behind." Lucius immediately made an indignant sound, and Draco rolled his eyes, turning to face them.

"Come on, mother needs to un-ruffle his feathers, and that's going to take a while." He said, "let's go inside."

Harry, definitely eager to see what the inside of the tent looked like, had no complaints, and he certainly wasn't disappointed.

"This is amazing," he breathed, spinning around in a complete circle. They were all standing in a front parlor that led to a large hallway that served as an entrance area to the adjacent rooms and then flowed into a large, wide staircase leading to a second floor. An exploration of the first floor of the 'tent' revealed three formal rooms with sixteen-foot ceilings, fireplaces and tall windows, as
well as a kitchen and a small sitting room that led off the main hallway. The predominant colors inside the 'tent' was a light tan with gold highlights, as well as trim paintings of ashen pinks, tans, pale blues and dark detailing. The tall, heavy varnished wood doors had panels of colored glass panes of amber, blue and pink, and the ceiling was painted pressed metal with a curved crown molding. The second story contained six bedrooms containing large, four-poster beds, each with its own bathroom set with light blue and white floral tiles.

"I love magic," Harry whispered to Hermione, fervently. Hermione's eyes were shining with honest excitement as she smiled back at him.

"Me too."

A sense of excitement rose like a palpable cloud over the campsite as the afternoon wore on. By dusk, the still summer air itself seemed to be quivering with anticipation, and as darkness spread like a curtain over the thousands of waiting wizards.

Saleswizards were Apparating every few feet, carrying trays and pushing carts full of extraordinary merchandise. There were luminous rosettes– green for Ireland, red for Bulgaria– which were squealing the names of the players, pointed green hats bedecked with dancing shamrocks, Bulgarian scarves adorned with lions that really roared, flags from both countries that played their national anthems as they were waved; there were tiny models of Firebolts that really flew, and collectible figures of famous players, which strolled across the palm of your hand, preening themselves.

Draco and Harry were excitedly perusing the goods, while Hermione and Tom watched on with fond exasperation.

"Which team are we supporting, anyway?" Hermione asked, as she idly examined a small figure of Viktor Krum, the Bulgarian Seeker. The saleswizard looked horrified at her complete disinterest, and Hermione prodded the scowling figure with the tip of her finger, causing it to cross its arms and glower at her even harder.

"Ireland of course," huffed Draco, who was holding a large green rosette.

"Don't even think of buying that hideous thing, Draco," Lucius ordered, giving a light shudder. "I refuse to let you wear something so cheap and tasteless in public!" The saleswizard glared at Lucius, who gave him an icy look in return, and Draco reluctantly put down the rosette and instead wandered over to a cart piled high with what looked like brass binoculars, except they were covered with all sorts of weird knobs and dials.

"Omnioculars," said the saleswizard eagerly. "You can replay action...slow everything down... and they flash up a play-by-play breakdown if you need it. Bargain– ten Galleons each!"

"We'll get four pairs," Draco said confidently, fishing out his moneybag.

Hermione walked back over and Harry gave her a questioning look as he saw the small Krum figure she was carrying.

"It's adorable," she said, as a way of explanation, "look at it." She lifted it up and Harry peered at it as it glared at him. "I also bought the Irish Seeker," Hermione said cheerfully, pulling a tiny green-clad figure from her pocket. "I'm going to get a small, shallow bowl of jello and drop them both in it to watch them fight." Harry gave her a despairing look and she laughed at him as she stashed
both the tiny figures in her pocket. "With the right charms I bet I could vanish the clothes." She added, mischief in her eyes, and he shook his head.

"I give up." He informed her.

A sudden deep, booming gong sounded somewhere beyond the woods, and at once, green and red lanterns blazed into life in the trees, lighting a path to the field.

"It's time!" said Draco, looking as excited as Harry had ever seen him. "Come on, hurry up, let's go!"

Clutching their purchases, with Lucius and Snape in the lead, talking in voices too low for Harry to hear what they were saying, they all made their way into the wood, following the lantern-lit trail. They could hear the sounds of thousands of people moving around them, shouts and laughter, snatches of singing. The atmosphere of feverish excitement was highly infectious; Harry couldn't stop grinning. They walked through the wood for twenty minutes, Harry and Draco talking and joking loudly while Hermione and Tom looked at them with exasperation, until at last they emerged on the other side and found themselves in the shadow of a gigantic stadium. Though Harry could see only a fraction of the immense gold walls surrounding the field, he could tell that ten cathedrals would fit comfortably inside it.

"Seats a hundred thousand," said Draco, spotting the awestruck look on Harry's face. "Father told me a Ministry task force of five hundred have been working on it all year."

They made their way toward the nearest entrance, which was already surrounded by a swarm of shouting witches and wizards, much to Narcissa's clear distaste, and the Ministry witch at the entrance box gave a sort of excited half-bow to Lucius.

"Top box, straight up the stairs as high as you can go, Mister Malfoy," she said.

"It's Lord Malfoy," Lucius said, haughtily, but the witch had already turned away and was conferring with the next batch of wizards.

"Let it go, Lucius," Snape rolled his eyes, "if you make a fuss, we could end up missing the team mascot display."

"Mascot display?" Harry asked, curiously.

"National teams bring creatures from their native land to put on a bit of a show," Draco explained, as his father huffed at Snape, looking put out but doing as the Potion's Master bid.

The stairs into the stadium were carpeted in rich purple. They clambered upward with the rest of the crowd, which slowly filtered away through doors into the stands to their left and right. Their party kept climbing, and at last they reached the top of the staircase and found themselves in a small box, set at the highest point of the stadium and situated exactly halfway between the golden goal posts. About twenty purple-and-gilt chairs stood in two rows here, and Harry was dismayed to see the Weasleys.

Hermione sucked in a sharp breath at the sight of Bill Weasley, and Harry reached out to grab her hand, squeezing it in what he hoped was a comforting way. To his relief, Bill's eyes rested on them both for only a second, before sliding over to the Malfoys.

"...ah, and here's Lucius!" Fudge, the Minister of Magic, spotted them and hurried over, beaming.

"Ah, Fudge," said Lucius, holding out his hand as he reached the Minister of Magic. "How are
you? I don't think you've met my wife, Narcissa? Or our son, Draco?"

"How do you do, how do you do?" said Fudge, smiling and bowing to Narcissa. "And allow me to introduce you to Mr. Oblansk – Obalonsk – Mr.... well, he's the Bulgarian Minister of Magic," Harry peered at the Bulgarian minister, who was wearing splendid robes of black velvet trimmed with gold, "but he can't understand a word I'm saying anyway, so never mind." Fudge said, despairingly. "And let's see who else– you know Arthur Weasley, I daresay?"

It was a tense moment. Mr. Weasley and Lucius looked at each other. "Good lord, Arthur," Lucius said. "What did you have to sell to get seats in the Top Box? Surely your house wouldn't have fetched this much?"

Fudge, who wasn't listening, said, "Lucius has just given a very generous contribution to St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries, Arthur. He's here as my guest."

"How– how nice," said Mr. Weasley, with a very strained smile.

"Yes, and I brought a few guests of my own," Lucius smiled coolly, "Narcissa and I bought Harry some tickets for his fourteenth birthday, he's quite the Seeker for the Slytherin Quidditch team and we thought he'd enjoy watching a professional match."

"Harry– Harry Potter!" Fudge said, eyes popping out with excitement as he noticed Harry for the first time. He rushed over and shook his hand, much to Harry's embarrassment. "Of course, of course, young Draco and Harry are in the same year. Here– Mr. Obalonsk, this is Harry Potter, you know, Harry Potter...oh come on now, you know who he is...the boy who survived You-Know-Who...you do know who he is–"

The Bulgarian wizard suddenly spotted Harry's scar and started gabbling loudly and excitedly, pointing at it.

"Knew we'd get there in the end," said Fudge, looking equal parts satisfied and weary.

As a portly wizard with the look of a powerfully built man gone slightly to seed wearing long Quidditch robes in thick horizontal stripes of bright yellow and black with an enormous picture of a wasp was splashed across the chest charged into the box, Fudge finally let them through and they made their way to their seats and Harry got a look at the view.

It was amazing, over a hundred thousand witches and wizards were taking their places in the seats, which rose in levels around the long oval field. Everything was suffused with a mysterious golden light, which seemed to come from the stadium itself. The field looked smooth as velvet from their lofty position. At either end of the field stood three goal hoops, fifty feet high; right opposite them, almost at Harry's eye level, was a gigantic blackboard. Gold writing kept dashing across it as though an invisible giant's hand were scrawling upon the blackboard and then wiping it off again; watching it, Harry saw that it was flashing advertisements across the field.

The Bluebottle: A Broom for All the Family – safe, reliable, and with Built-in Anti-Burgler Buzzer... Mrs. Shower's All Purpose Magical Mess Remover: No Pain, No Stain!... Gladrags Wizardwear – London, Paris, Hogsmeade...

"Everyone ready?" the wizard with the striped Quidditch robes asked, his round face gleaming with excitement. "Minister- ready to go?"

"Ready when you are, Ludo," said Fudge.

"Ludo Bagman," Draco said in a hushed voice, "he used to be the beater for the Wimbourne
Wasps– people reckon he was the best they ever had."

Bagman had whipped out his wand and now he directed it at his own throat, and said "Sonorus!"
When he then spoke, his voice was louder then the roar of sound that filled the packed stadium, echoing over them all, booming into every corner of the stands.

"Ladies and gentlemen... welcome! Welcome to the final of the four hundred and twenty-second Quidditch World Cup!"

The spectators screamed and clapped. Thousands of flags waved, adding their discordant national anthems to the racket. The huge blackboard opposite them was wiped clear of its last message (Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans - A Risk With Every Mouthful!) and now showed BULGARIA: 0, IRELAND: 0.

"And now, without further ado, allow me to introduce... the Bulgarian National Team Mascots!"

The right-hand side of the stands, which was a solid block of scarlet, roared its approval. Harry watched curiously then enchanted as a hundred women glided out onto the field, except they weren't normal women, they were the most beautiful women Harry had ever seen... except that they weren't– they couldn't be human. This puzzled Harry as he tried to guess what exactly they could be; what could make their skin shine moon-bright like that, or their white-gold hair fan out behind them without wind.

"Of course they brought Veela," Tom sighed, sounding very put-upon, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Block your ears, Harry," Hermione sighed and Harry, trusting Hermione, shoved his fingers in his ears, and Hermione clapped a hand over his eyes.

When she removed her hand, Harry slowly let his hands fall. Whatever the Veela had done, Harry could hear angry yells leaving the stadium, the crowd apparently not wanting them to go. Ron Weasley, he was amused to see, was standing with one of his legs resting on the wall of the box, as though he were about to dive from a springboard, with Mr. Weasley holding a bunch of the end of his robes.

"What are they?" Harry asked, bemused, turning to Hermione and Tom.

"They're classified by the Ministry as semi-human, semi-magical humanoids," Tom explained, and Draco leaned across to hear the explanation too. "Their looks are magically seductive to almost all male beings, and their dance even more so– like the muggle tales of sirens. When they're angry or protecting themselves, however, they undergo a sort of transformation which makes them look harpies, and they can create fire."

"Semi-human?" frowned Harry, "that seems kind of racist."

"Racist?" Draco asked, confused by the muggle term.

"Discriminatory." Hermione said, and Draco shrugged.

"Any magical that isn't a witch or a wizard falls under the category of semi-human." He said, and Harry shook his head.

"It still doesn't sound right," he said, and he remembered Draco's earlier explanation about the National teams bringing 'creatures' from their native lands to put on a show and felt sick.
"And now," roared Ludo Bagman's voice, pulling his attention, "kindly put your wands in the air... for the Irish National Team Mascots!"

Next moment, what seemed to be a great green-and-gold comet came zooming into the stadium. It did one circuit of the stadium, then split into two smaller comets, each hurtling toward the goal posts. A rainbow arced suddenly across the field, connecting the two balls of light. The crowd oooohed and aaaaahed, as though at a fireworks display. Now the rainbow faded and the balls of light reunited and merged; they had formed a great shimmering shamrock, which rose up into the sky and began to soar over the stands. Something like golden rain seemed to be falling from it and Harry realized that as the shamrock soared over them heavy gold coins rained from it, bouncing off their heads and seats. Squinting up at the shamrock closer, Harry realized that it was actually comprised of thousands of tiny little bearded men with red vests, each carrying a minute lamp of gold or green.

"Leprechauns!" said Draco over the tumultuous applause of the crowd, many of whom were still fighting and rummaging around under their chairs to retrieve the gold.

"Idiot," snorted Hermione, looking disdainfully at Ron Weasley who was one of them. "Leprechaun gold is worthless, it disappears after a few hours."

The great shamrock dissolved, the leprechauns drifted down onto the field on the opposite side from the veela, and settled themselves cross-legged to watch the match.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen," bellowed Bagman, "kindly welcome– the Bulgarian National Quidditch Team! I give you– Dimitrov!"

A scarlet-clad figure on a broomstick, moving so fast it was blurred, shot out onto the field from an entrance far below, to wild applause from the Bulgarian supporters.

"Ivanova!"

A second scarlet-robed player zoomed out.

"Zograf! Levski! Vulchanov! Volkov! Aaaaaaand– Krum!"

"That's him, that's Krum!" shouted Draco in excitement, pulling his Omnioculars up to follow Krum. Harry quickly focused his own.

Viktor Krum looked exactly like the figure Hermione had bought– he was thin, dark, and sallow-skinned, with a large curved nose and thick black eyebrows. Harry thought he looked a bit like an overgrown bird of prey, and it was difficult to believe he was only eighteen.


Seven green blurs swept onto the field; Harry spun a small dial on the side of his Omnioculars and slowed the players down enough to read the word "Firebolt" on each of their brooms and see their names, embroidered in silver, upon their backs.

"And here, all the way from Egypt, our referee, acclaimed Chairwizard of the International Association of Quidditch, Hassan Mostafa!"

A small and skinny wizard, completely bald but with a mustache to rival Uncle Vernon's, wearing robes of pure gold to match the stadium, strode out onto the field. A silver whistle was protruding from under the mustache, and he was carrying a large wooden crate under one arm, his broomstick
under the other. Harry spun the speed dial on his Omnioculars back to normal, watching closely as Mostafa mounted his broomstick and kicked the crate open– four balls burst into the air: the scarlet Quaffle, the two black Bludgers, and (Harry saw it for the briefest moment, before it sped out of sight) the minuscule, winged Golden Snitch. With a sharp blast on his whistle, Mostafa shot into the air after the balls.

"Theeeeeeey're OFF!" screamed Bagman.

The World Cup had begun.
CHAPTER XXXV:

Harry's POV:

It was Quidditch as Harry had never seen it played before. He was pressing his Omnioculars so hard to his glasses that they were cutting into the bridge of his nose. The speed of the players was incredible— the Chasers were throwing the Quaffle to one another so fast that Bagman only had time to say their names. Harry spun the slow dial on the right of his Omnioculars again, pressed the play-by-play button on the top, and he was immediately watching in slow motion, while glittering purple lettering flashed across the lenses and the noise of the crowd pounded against his eardrums.

**HAWKSHEAD ATTACKING FORMATION,** he read as he watched the three Irish Chasers zoom closely together, Troy in the center, slightly ahead of Mullet and Moran, bearing down upon the Bulgarians. **PORSKOFF PLOY** flashed up next, as Troy made as though to dart upward with the Quaffle, drawing away the Bulgarian Chaser Ivanova and dropping the Quaffle to Moran. One of the Bulgarian Beaters, Volkov, swung hard at a passing Bludger with his small club, knocking it into Moran's path; Moran ducked to avoid the Bludger and dropped the Quaffle; and Levski, soaring beneath, caught it— "TROY SCORES!" roared Bagman, and the stadium shuddered with a roar of applause and cheers. "Ten zero to Ireland!"

"What?" Harry yelled, looking wildly around through his Omnioculars. "But Levski's got the Quaffle!"

"Harry, if you're not going to watch at normal speed, you're going to miss things!" shouted Hermione over the screaming crowd. Harry looked quickly over the top of his Omnioculars and saw that the leprechauns watching from the sidelines had all risen into the air again and formed the great, glittering shamrock. Across the field, the veela were watching them sulkily.

Furious with himself, Harry spun his speed dial back to normal as play resumed.

Harry knew enough about Quidditch to see that the Irish Chasers were superb. They worked as a seamless team, their movements so well coordinated that they appeared to be reading one another's minds as they positioned themselves, and the rosette on Harry's chest kept squeaking their names: "Troy– Mullet– Moran!" And within ten minutes, Ireland had scored twice more, bringing their lead to thirty-zero and causing a thunderous tide of roars and applause from the green-clad supporters.

The match became still faster, but more brutal. Volkov and Vulchanov, the Bulgarian Beaters, were whacking the Bludgers as fiercely as possible at the Irish Chasers, and were starting to prevent them from using some of their best moves; twice they were forced to scatter, and then, finally, Ivanova managed to break through their ranks; dodge the Keeper, Ryan; and score Bulgaria's first goal.

"Fingers in your ears!" shouted Hermione as the veela started to dance in celebration. Harry screwed up his eyes too; he wanted to keep his mind on the game. After a few seconds, he chanced a glance at the field. The veela had stopped dancing, and Bulgaria was again in possession of the Quaffle.

"Dimitrov! Levski! Dimitrov! Ivanova– oh I say!" roared Bagman.
One hundred thousand wizards gasped as the two Seekers, Krum and Lynch, plummeted through the center of the Chasers, so fast that it looked as though they had just jumped from airplanes without parachutes. Harry followed their descent through his Omnioculars, squinting to see where the Snitch was-

"They're going to crash!" screamed Draco next to Harry.

He was half right– at the very last second, Viktor Krum pulled out of the dive and spiraled off. Lynch, however, hit the ground with a dull thud that could be heard throughout the stadium. A huge groan rose from the Irish seats.

"The moron!" moaned Draco, grabbing his hair. "Krum was feinting!"

"It's time-out!" yelled Bagman's voice, "as trained mediwizards hurry onto the field to examine Aidan Lynch!"

"He'll be fine, he only got knocked around," Hermione said, unconcerned, "which was what Krum was going for. He's ruthless- I like him."

Harry hastily pressed the replay and play-by-play buttons on his Omnioculars, twiddled the speed dial, and put them back up to his eyes.

He watched as Krum and Lynch dived again in slow motion. Wronski Defensive Feint– Dangerous Seeker Diversion read the shining purple lettering across his lenses. He saw Krum's face contorted with concentration as he pulled out of the dive just in time, while Lynch was flattened, and he understood– Krum hadn't seen the Snitch at all, he was just making Lynch copy him. Harry had never seen anyone fly like that; Krum hardly looked as though he was using a broomstick at all; he moved so easily through the air that he looked unsupported and weightless. Harry turned his Omnioculars back to normal and focused them on Krum. He was now circling high above Lynch, who was being revived by mediwizards with cups of potion. Harry, focusing still more closely upon Krum's face, saw his dark eyes darting all over the ground a hundred feet below. He was using the time while Lynch was revived to look for the Snitch without interference.

Lynch got to his feet at last, to loud cheers from the green-clad supporters, mounted his Firebolt, and kicked back off into the air. His revival seemed to give Ireland new heart. When Mostafa blew his whistle again, the Chasers moved into action with a skill unrivaled by anything Harry had seen so far.

After fifteen more fast and furious minutes, Ireland had pulled ahead by ten more goals. They were now leading by one hundred and thirty points to ten, and the game was starting to get dirtier.

As Mullet shot toward the goal posts yet again, clutching the Quaffle tightly under her arm, the Bulgarian Keeper, Zograf, flew out to meet her. Whatever happened was over so quickly Harry didn't catch it, but a scream of rage from the Irish crowd, and Mostafa's long, shrill whistle blast, told him it had been a foul.

"And Mostafa takes the Bulgarian Keeper to task for cobbing - excessive use of elbows!" Bagman informed the roaring spectators. "And– yes, it's a penalty to Ireland!"

The leprechauns, who had risen angrily into the air like a swarm of glittering hornets when Mullet had been fouled, now darted together to form the words "HA, HA, HA!"

The veela on the other side of the field leapt to their feet, tossed their hair angrily, and started to dance again.
Harry stuffed their fingers into their ears, but Hermione, who hadn't bothered, was soon tugging on Harry's arm. He turned to look at her, and she pulled his fingers impatiently out of his ears.

"Look at the referee!" she said, smirking.

Harry looked down at the field. Hassan Mostafa had landed right in front of the dancing veela, and was acting very oddly indeed. He was flexing his muscles and smoothing his mustache excitedly.

"Now, we can't have that!" said Ludo Bagman, though he sounded highly amused. "Somebody slap the referee!"

A mediwizard came tearing across the field, his fingers stuffed into his own ears, and kicked Mostafa hard in the shins. Mostafa seemed to come to himself; Harry, watching through the Omnioculars again, saw that he looked exceptionally embarrassed and had started shouting at the veela, who had stopped dancing and were looking mutinous.

"And unless I'm much mistaken, Mostafa is actually attempting to send off the Bulgarian team mascots!" said Bagman's voice. "Now there's something we haven't seen before... Oh this could turn nasty!"

It did: The Bulgarian Beaters, Volkov and Vulchanov, landed on either side of Mostafa and began arguing furiously with him, gesticulating toward the leprechauns, who had now gleefully formed the words "HEE, HEE, HEE." Mostafa was not impressed by the Bulgarians' arguments, however; he was jabbing his finger into the air, clearly telling them to get flying again, and when they refused, he gave two short blasts on his whistle.

"Two penalties for Ireland!" shouted Bagman, and the Bulgarian crowd howled with anger. "And Volkov and Vulchanov had better get back on those brooms... yes... there they go... and Troy takes the Quaffle..."

Play now reached a level of ferocity beyond anything they had yet seen. The Beaters on both sides were acting without mercy: Volkov and Vulchanov in particular seemed not to care whether their clubs made contact with Bludger or human as they swung them violently through the air. Dimitrov shot straight at Moran, who had the Quaffle, nearly knocking her off her broom.

"Foul!" roared the Irish supporters as one, all standing up in a great wave of green.

"Foul!" echoed Ludo Bagman's magically magnified voice. "Dimitrov skins Moran—deliberately flying to collide there—and it's got to be another penalty—yes, there's the whistle!"

The leprechauns had risen into the air again, and this time, they formed a giant hand, which was making a very rude sign indeed at the veela across the field. At this, the veela lost control. Instead of dancing, they launched themselves across the field and began throwing what seemed to be handfuls of fire at the leprechauns. Watching through his Omnioculars, Harry saw that they didn't look remotely beautiful now. On the contrary, their faces were elongating into sharp, cruel-beaked bird heads, and long, scaly wings were bursting from their shoulders—

"That's so awesome," Harry said, and Hermione laughed, nodding in agreement.

Ministry wizards were flooding onto the field to separate the veela and the leprechauns, but with little success; meanwhile, the pitched battle below was nothing to the one taking place above. Harry turned this way and that, staring through his Omnioculars, as the Quaffle changed hands with the speed of a bullet.

But the cheers of the Irish supporters were barely heard over the shrieks of the veela, the blasts now issuing from the Ministry members’ wands, and the furious roars of the Bulgarians. The game recommenced immediately; now Levski had the Quaffle, now Dimitrov–

The Irish Beater Quigley swung heavily at a passing Bludger, and hit it as hard as possible toward Krum, who did not duck quickly enough. It hit him full in the face.

There was a deafening groan from the crowd; Krum's nose looked broken, there was blood everywhere, but Hassan Mostafa didn't blow his whistle. He had become distracted, and Harry couldn't blame him; one of the veela had thrown a handful of fire and set his broom tail alight.

Harry wanted someone to realize that Krum was injured; even though he was supporting Ireland, Krum was the most exciting player on the field. Draco obviously felt the same.

"Time-out! Ah, come on, he can't play like that, look at him–"

"Look at Lynch!" Harry yelled.

For the Irish Seeker had suddenly gone into a dive, and Harry was quite sure that this was no Wronski Feint; this was the real thing...

"He's seen the Snitch!" Harry shouted. "He's seen it! Look at him go!"

Half the crowd seemed to have realized what was happening; the Irish supporters rose in another great wave of green, screaming their Seeker on... but Krum was on his tail. How he could see where he was going, Harry had no idea; there were flecks of blood flying through the air behind him, but he was drawing level with Lynch now as the pair of them hurtled toward the ground again–

"They're going to crash!" Hermione hissed, face tense.

"They're not!" shouted Draco.

"Lynch is!" yelled Harry.

And he was right– for the second time, Lynch hit the ground with tremendous force and was immediately stampeded by a horde of angry veela.

"The Snitch, where's the Snitch?" shouted Draco, along the row.

"He's got it– Krum's got it– it's all over!" shouted Harry.

Krum, his red robes shining with blood from his nose, was rising gently into the air, his fist held high, a glint of gold in his hand.

The scoreboard was flashing BULGARIA: 160, IRELAND: 170 across the crowd, who didn't seem to have realized what had happened. Then, slowly, as though a great jumbo jet were revving up, the rumbling from the Ireland supporters grew louder and louder and erupted into screams of delight.

"IRELAND WINS!" Bagman shouted, who like the Irish, seemed to be taken aback by the sudden end of the match. "KRUM GETS THE SNITCH– BUT IRELAND WINS– good lord, I don't think any of us were expecting that!"

"What did he catch the Snitch for?" Draco complained, even as he jumped up and down,
applauding with his hands over his head. "Ireland was a hundred and sixty points ahead, he had to know they'd lose!"

"He knew they were never going to catch up!" Harry shouted back over all the noise, also applauding loudly. "The Irish Chasers were too good... He wanted to end it on his terms, that's all...."

"He's incredibly talented, isn't he?" Hermione said, leaning forward to watch Krum land as a swarm of mediwizards blasted a path through the battling leprechauns and veela to get to him. "He looks like shit though...."

Harry put his Omnioculars to his eyes again. It was hard to see what was happening below, because leprechauns were zooming delightfully all over the field, but he could just make out Krum, surrounded by mediwizards. He looked surlier than ever and refused to let them mop him up. His team members were around him, shaking their heads and looking dejected; a short way away, the Irish players were dancing gleefully in a shower of gold descending from their mascots. Flags were waving all over the stadium, the Irish national anthem blared from all sides; the veela were shrinking back into their usual, beautiful selves now, though looking dispirited and forlorn.

"Vell, ve fought bravely," said a gloomy voice behind Harry. He looked around; it was the Bulgarian Minister of Magic.

"You can speak English!" said Fudge, sounding outraged. "And you've been letting me mime everything all day!"

"It vos very funny," said the Bulgarian minister, shrugging.

"And as the Irish team performs a lap of honor, flanked by their mascots, the Quidditch World Cup itself is brought into the Top Box!" roared Bagman.

Harry's eyes were suddenly dazzled by a blinding white light, as the Top Box was magically illuminated so that everyone in the stands could see the inside. Squinting toward the entrance, he saw two panting wizards carrying a vast golden cup into the box, which they handed to Cornelius Fudge, who was still looking very disgruntled that he'd been using sign language all day for nothing.

"Let's have a really loud hand for the gallant losers– Bulgaria!" Bagman shouted.

And up the stairs into the box came the seven defeated Bulgarian players. The crowd below was applauding appreciatively; Harry could see thousands and thousands of Omniocular lenses flashing and winking in their direction.

One by one, the Bulgarians filed between the rows of seats in the box, and Bagman called out the name of each as they shook hands with their own minister and then with Fudge. Krum, who was last in line, looked a real mess. Two black eyes were blooming spectacularly on his bloody face. He was still holding the Snitch. Harry noticed that he seemed much less coordinated on the ground. He was slightly duck-footed and distinctly round-shouldered. But when Krum's name was announced, the whole stadium gave him a resounding, earsplitting roar.

And then came the Irish team. Aidan Lynch was being supported by Moran and Connolly; the second crash seemed to have dazed him and his eyes looked strangely unfocused. But he grinned happily as Troy and Quigley lifted the Cup into the air and the crowd below thundered its approval. Harry's hands were numb with clapping.
At last, when the Irish team had left the box to perform another lap of honor on their brooms (Aidan Lynch on the back of Connolly's, clutching hard around his waist and still grinning in a bemused sort of way), Bagman pointed his wand at his throat and muttered, "Quietus."

"They'll be talking about this one for years," he said hoarsely, "a really unexpected twist, that... shame it couldn't have lasted longer..."

Harry tuned him out as he started talking with the Weasley twins, instead turning to Hermione, Draco and Tom. "That was incredible!" he said, and his voice was on the hoarse side too. "So incredible– I have never seen anything like that before!"

"I will admit," Hermione said, delicately, "that it was an exceptional game of Quidditch."

"I'm never going to forget you said that." Harry told her, with a grin. Hermione smirked and leaned forwards so her lips were practically touching his ear.

"I bet I could make you come so hard tonight that you forget your own name." Harry made a croaking sound as she pulled back and smirked at him. "And that's a promise."

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Hermione's POV:

Although she'd never admit it out loud again, Hermione had actually enjoyed watching the Quidditch game, though she certainly wasn't disappointed to join the crowds now flooding out of the stadium and back to their campsites. Raucous singing was borne toward them on the night air as they retraced their steps along the lantern-lit path, and leprechauns kept shooting over their heads, cackling and waving their lanterns.

When they finally reached the tents, nobody felt like sleeping at all, so the kids parted ways with the adults, heading to the sitting room to chat together, Draco and Harry going over every single second of the game together, while Hermione and Tom read.

When Draco nodded off, Hermione dragged Harry off to the bathroom where she made good on her earlier promise, before leading a now yawning Harry back to the sitting room, as sleeping on the couches gave her an excuse to curl up with Harry, as she didn't think Narcissa would be pleased with her sleeping in Harry's bed.

She wasn't sure when she'd dozed off, though she remembered she could still hear much singing and the odd echoing bang, until Tom shook her shoulder roughly.

A skill Hermione had learned on the streets was being able to go from fast asleep to fully awake, and she was on her feet with her wand out before Tom had to say anything.

She could immediately hear that something was wrong; the noises in the campsite had changed. The singing had stopped. She could hear screams, and the sound of people running.

"Shit," she said, shaking Harry's shoulder. Harry blinked his way slowly back into consciousness, and she'd already crossed over to wake Draco by the time he was sitting up.

"What do we do?" Harry asked, looking pale.

"We need to get out of the tent in case it catches fire," Tom said, grimly. "There are anti-apparation
wards set up inside the campgrounds, but once we exit them I'll take us back to the Manor."

A pale-faced Draco asked, voice shaky, "Where are my parents?"

"They're not here, nor is Snape." Tom said, shortly. "We need to go– now."

The four of them exited the tent, and by the light of the few fires that were still burning Hermione could see people running away into the woods, fleeing something that was moving across the field toward them, something that was emitting odd flashes of light and noises like gunfire. Loud jeering, roars of laughter, and drunken yells were drifting toward them; then came a burst of strong green light, which illuminated the scene. The Killing Curse, she recognized.

A crowd of wizards, tightly packed and moving together with wands pointing straight upward, was marching slowly across the field. Hermione squinted at them... They didn't seem to have faces... Then she realized that their heads were hooded and their faces masked. High above them, floating along in midair, four struggling figures were being contorted into grotesque shapes. It was as though the masked wizards on the ground were puppeteers, and the people above them were marionettes operated by invisible strings that rose from the wands into the air. Two of the figures were very small.

Draco made a soft groaning sound, and as she glanced across at him, recognition dawning on her.

"Those are Death Eater masks," she said slowly. "Draco..."

"I don't know!" Draco hissed.

"What is it?" Harry demanded. Hermione pressed her lips together, giving Draco the courtesy of deciding whether he wanted to answer Harry or not. Tom, however, didn't care.

"Draco's father is likely one of the masked wizards," he said coolly. "That does not, however, make you any safer right now, Harry. You may be a Slytherin, but as far as any Death Eater is aware you are the Boy Who Lived, the one responsible for their Master's fall. We need to avoid them seeing you– I'd hate to have to make a scene by killing them all, and I'm sure Voldemort would not be pleased."

Draco flinched violently at hearing Voldemort's name, but didn't say anything and their small group started moving again, though Hermione glanced back several times. She could see that more wizards were joining the marching group, laughing and pointing up at the floating bodies. Tents crumpled and fell as the marching crowd swelled. Once or twice she saw one of the marchers blast a tent out of his way with his wand. Several caught fire. The screaming grew louder.

"We need to get under cover," she told Tom, who nodded shortly and changed their direction so they were veering towards the wood.

Once they reached the trees, they all looked back. The crowd beneath the figures in the air was larger than ever; she could see the Ministry wizards trying to get through it to the hooded wizards in the center, but they were having great difficulty. It looked as though they were scared to perform any spell that might make the victims fall.

The colored lanterns that had lit the path to the stadium had been extinguished. Dark figures were blundering through the trees; children were crying; anxious shouts and panicked voices were reverberating around them in the cold night air.

"Tripped over a tree root," she heard someone swear from a few meters over to their left. Tom illuminated his wand and directed its narrow beam towards the sound, and she scowled seeing who
it was.

"Well, with feet that size, hard not to." Draco drawled, all traces of his fear carefully hidden away as Ron Weasley turned sharply over to them. He was accompanied by Fred and George, who both had their wands out and pointed towards them.

Ron's response to Draco's taunt was imaginative enough that Hermione was reluctantly impressed. "Language, Weasley," Draco sneered. "Hadn't you better be hurrying along, now? You wouldn't want to be spotted, would you-- after all, blood traitors are barely a step up from Mudbloods." At that same moment, a blast like a bomb sounded from the campsite, and the green light of the killing curse momentarily lit the trees around them. Several people nearby screamed and Draco chuckled softly, and Hermione smiled in a way she knew was particularly unnerving.

"I suppose your daddy told you all to hide? What's he up to-- trying to be a hero? Maybe he thinks he can get a raise?" Draco taunted.

"Well where're your parents, Malfoy?" said Ron, his face red. "Out there wearing masks?"

Draco sneered. "Well if they were, I wouldn't be likely to tell you, would I, Weasley?"

"Let's go find the others," said George Weasley, with a disgusted look at them.

"Yes, you should probably stick together," Draco sniped, "you wouldn't want your parents to lose another one of their brood."

Three curses flew simultaneously towards the blonde, and an exasperated Hermione pushed Draco out of the way, at the same time as Tom viciously responded, knocking the three Weasleys unconscious, leaving a splatter of blood on the surrounding tree trunks.

"You just had to provoke them," Harry exclaimed, visibly frustrated, at Draco, "it's not like we don't have more important things to worry about right now!" Draco's face turned all sulky as Harry turned to face her, still glaring. "And you-- for the love of god, don't kill them! Dead bodies are the last thing we need right!"

"What if I could make the bodies disappear?" she suggested.

"No." Scowled Harry, before turning to Tom. "Which way do we go?"

"This way." Tom said, his eyes glittering coldly in the wandlight, though he paused to cast three quick obliviates on the unconscious Weasleys.

"Please say you made them forget the entire match," Hermione said viciously. Tom smirked.

"Of course."

The Weasleys weren't the only people who had thought of using the woods for cover, and the further they went down the path, the more people they ran into, all of them looking nervously over their shoulders toward the commotion back at the campsite.

A huddle of teenagers in pajamas were arguing vociferously a little way along the path. When they saw Harry, Draco, and Hermione, a girl with thick curly hair turned and said quickly, "Où est Madame Maxime? Nous l'avons perdue--"

"Nous ne sommes pas de Beauxbâtons de, désolé," Hermione responded, easily slipping into French. "Nous avons fait passer un groupe de jeunes femmes parlant en français il y a cinq
minutes."

"Je vous remercie." The girl said gratefully, and Hermione nodded as they continued on, past the girls.

"What did they want?" Harry asked, curiously.

"They're looking for their Headmistress," she explained as they followed the dark path deeper into the wood. They passed a group of goblins who were cackling over a sack of gold that they had undoubtedly won betting on the match, and who seemed quite unperturbed by the trouble at the campsite. Farther still along the path, they walked into a patch of silvery light, and when they looked through the trees, they saw three tall and beautiful veela standing in a clearing, surrounded by a gaggle of young wizards, all of whom were talking very loudly.

"I pull down about a hundred sacks of Galleons a year!" one of them shouted. "I'm a dragon killer for the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures."

"No, you're not!" yelled his friend. "You're a dishwasher at the Leaky Cauldron... but I'm a vampire hunter, I've killed about ninety so far--"

A third young wizard, whose pimples were visible even by the dim, silvery light of the veela, now cut in, "I'm about to become the youngest ever Minister of Magic, I am."

Hermione was actually quite proud that Harry wasn't overcome by the urge to start boasting madly, trying to impress the beautiful women, and she put it down to his Occlumency training, and vowed to show him just how impressed she was later, when they were all safe.

By the time the sounds of the veela and their admirers had faded completely, they were in the very heart of the wood. They seemed to be alone now; everything was much quieter.

"I reckon we can just wait here, you know. We'll hear anyone coming a mile off." Draco said, looking around. Harry was frowning though.

"Can you hear that crying?" He asked. "It sounds like a kid..."

"Harry!" Hermione groaned as her best friend set off to follow the sound. "For the love of..."

Cursing his hero complex, she kept pace with him, barely noticing as they darted past a pale and strained looking Bagman. Rounding a curve in the path, Hermione forgot all of her annoyance with Harry in the span of a heartbeat and her vision went red with rage.

A large man with a stringy beard wearing a shabby set of robes was dragging along a small, struggling girl, one of his beefy hands holding both her thin wrists while the other held his wand.

It took her only a second to place the girl as the one she'd picked out in her second year during the Sorting as a likely neglected child, the one with long wispy, dirty-blond hair who seemed to drift instead of walk. Hermione hadn't kept tabs on her, though she vaguely recalled the little blond might have been friends with Ginny Weasley, and that she'd seen her wandering the halls without any socks or shoes before.

Tears were running down the girl's face, and she was making frightened sobbing noises. When the man lifted her into the air by his grip on her wrists and shook her, snarling at her to 'shuddup!'

Hermione snapped.

"Crucio!"
The man hit the ground hard, making a sound like a trumpeting elephant. The second she was free, the girl fled straight over to them, and Hermione was actually stunned when the girl clung to her, seeing as she was currently in the process of torturing the man.

The waif of a girl sobbing into her robes interrupted her concentration enough that the torture curse faltered, and Hermione lowered her wand slightly, looking down at the girl in honest bewilderment.

"Harry," she said, through stiff lips. Harry seemed to understand what she was saying, and touched the girl's shoulder, attempting to coax her into letting go of Hermione, but instead she just clung on tighter. Hermione was distracted from the highly unnerving situation when a cutting curse flew in their direction, the beefy man back on his feet, and spitting with rage. The curse clipped her shoulder, and she gritted her teeth at the pain.

Tom reacted violently to this, the older boy not taking kindly to people who attacked what he considered his. A spine-breaking curse left the man paralyzed in place, and was followed by a particularly nasty skin-peeling curse.

Draco, who had finally caught up, gagged loudly, and Hermione didn't exactly blame him as she watched the man being flayed alive.

"Messy." She commented. Harry sighed and pulled out the dagger from Bellatrix, which he'd apparently stashed in his pocket, but Tom's hand snapped out, long fingers fastening around Harry's wrist.

"Not this one." He said, voice cold. Harry hesitated and then nodded, putting the dagger away, letting the man slowly die from the agony instead. Draco was watching them, green-faced, stunned and baffled, but the blonde didn't say anything, staying quiet. Hermione turned down to look at the little blonde whose face was still pressed into her robes, and was about to try and extricate herself from the tight grip the slip of a girl had on her when without warning, the silence was rent by a voice shouting an unfamiliar spell.

"MORSMORDRE!"

Something vast, green, and glittering flew up over the treetops and into the sky.

"Oh shit!" gasped Draco, staring with wide-eyed horror at the thing that had appeared. For a split second, Hermione thought it was another leprechaun formation and then she realized that it was a colossal skull, comprised of what looked like emerald stars, with a serpent protruding from its mouth like a tongue. As they all watched, it rose higher and higher, blazing in a haze of greenish smoke, etched against the black sky like a new constellation.

Hermione had only seen one picture of this before, in an old copy of the Daily Prophet she'd found in the library archives, but it was unmistakable– it was the Dark Mark.

The wood all around them erupted with screams, the skull having risen high enough to illuminate the entire wood like some grisly neon sign. Tom swore– loudly– and his face turned fierce with concentration as he twisted his wand counter-clockwise in the air. Hermione felt the magic in the space around them tremble, and then there was a loud cracking sound, like a hundred people apparating all at once. Sudden exhaustion had her swaying on the spot and Draco had to grab her so she didn't fall. Tom had never leached magic from her before, though she had known it was possible. She would have been angry with him if Tom's face didn't look strained and a touch pale, the magic he'd just performed having being equally taxing on him.
"Be safe," He ordered her though, his eyes boring into hers. "I don't have enough magic capacity to take you both, and it will be better for all of us if we get Harry away from here. Wait for one of the Malfoys or Snape to get you, and if anyone else finds you first say that you found the body how it was."

"Wait, Tom--" Harry started saying, but Tom interrupted him, eyes cold and his right hand lashing out to grab Harry's forearm with an iron-grip.

"You're safer away from here, and that's final." He said, voice icy, before apparating them both away before Harry had time to protest.

Hermione exhaled loudly, even as disbelief filled her as she realized just exactly what magic Tom had performed. "Did he just tear down the anti-apparation wards?" Draco asked, voice filled with incredulity. "How the hell- I didn't think that was even possible!"

Hermione shrugged helplessly, hesitantly lifting a hand to stroke the little blonde's hair. She could feel the girl trembling against her, and fought the urge to push her away. "I guess it was possible, after all." She murmured.

It was Narcissa who found them, Narcissa whose eyes were bright with fury and her beautiful face drawn tight with fear and anger with tear tracks on cheeks. Her red-rimmed gaze darted briefly over the fully flayed dead wizard, the forest floor around him soaked in crimson, before turning to her son. "Draco, thank Merlin you're okay," she half-sobbed, drawing Draco into a tight hug. When she released him, her eyes swept over the small clearing again and she sucked in a breath. "Where's Harry?" she asked, sounding genuinely terrified, and the sheer dread on her face took Hermione's breath away.

"Where is he?" Narcissa repeated, urgently.

"He's safe, mother," Draco said, when Hermione couldn't reply. Her throat was thick, and she felt overwhelmed by the emotion the Lady Malfoy was showing for someone who wasn't a member of her family, by how touched she'd felt by the raw relief in Narcissa's eyes when she'd seen that she was safe. "Thomas apparated Harry away, he said that it would be safer for all of us if Harry wasn't here-- he's fine, completely uninjured." Draco reassured his mother, who let out a shaky breath, an actual tear of overwhelming emotion trickling down her cheek. Narcissa hugged Draco again and then went to pull Hermione into a hug too, only to halt when she first noticed the tiny girl still clinging to her like a limpet, her head still buried against Hermione.

"Is that Pandora Alcmena's child?" she asked, and the girl reacted, still not letting go of Hermione, but turning her head away from her robes.

"Pandora was my mother, but she passed away three years ago." The girl's voice was whispery, and Hermione wasn't sure how much of that was shock, and how much of it was just the way the girl sounded.

"Well... you'll have to come along with us, I have no idea where your father could be." Narcissa decided, "we'll send him an owl when we get back to the Manor." The girl nodded, and Narcissa pulled a candleholder made of gold from her robes. "Undetectable extension charm," she said, seeing Hermione's curious look. "I have all my robes custom charmed with them. This is the Portkey we were going to use tomorrow. Everyone touch it, now."

Hermione did as Narcissa instructed, and Narcissa tapped it with her wand. "Portus." She said, and the Portkey glowed bright blue before hooking them and sending them spinning.
She landed on her feet in the parlor of Malfoy Manor, catching the little blonde who had tripped. She was relieved to see Harry there, and after Narcissa released Harry from the tight hug the blonde witch had immediately pulled him into, Hermione tugged the little girl after her to hug him too, then slump into his side. Her whole body felt shaky from Tom 'borrowing' part of her magic, and exhaustion made her eyelids heavy.

Tom rested one of his hands on the back of her neck, holding just a bit too tight for it to be comfortable, but she could see the lines of stress on his face, as well as the tiredness- breaking the wards, which had been set up by the best of the best of the Ministry's experts, had not been simple. It was actually quite amazing that he'd been able to do it at all, and she didn't begrudge him wanting her and Harry close.

Letting out a shuddering sigh, she reached out with her free hand to grab Tom's, holding it tight, relieved that they were all safe.

Except, apparently, Lucius. Who Narcissa was vowing to slaughter with her bare hands.

"I won't need to wand to make him wish he was never born," the Lady Malfoy said, viciously, and Hermione believed her.
CHAPTER XXXVI:

Severus's POV:

"You are a fool!" Snarled Severus, furiously pacing across the room. Lucius, still slightly bleary-eyed, was propped up one of the expensive leather couches in the sitting room of Malfoy Manor, his dark robes rumbled and his long blond hair askew. "I should have left you there for the Ministry to arrest you," he seethed, wand hand twitching dangerously.

"Come on Severus," laughed Lucius, "it was just a bit of fun-"

"A bit of fun? You endangered the lives of three of my students!" Severus shouted, "Harry Potter is the bloody Boy-Who-Lived! Do you think any of the 'old friends' you were with would have thought twice about hitting him with the Killing Curse if you'd stumbled across him? Especially while they were intoxicated?!"

"They'd have attacked him anyway!" protested Lucius, sitting up a bit straighter.

"No they wouldn't have, because they wouldn't have been anywhere near Harry as he would have still been in the bloody tent where he was safe!" Severus roared, slashing his wand in the direction of one of the couches, which exploded with a loud bang. Angry slashes exploded several more sofas as well as two coffee tables, and a piece of the debris managed to hit Lucius in the face. The blond hissed, pressing a hand against his bleeding cheek.

"You are very lucky that we've been friends for so many years, Lucius, or I swear I would kill you for this," Severus said darkly. "As it is, I'm still considering it."

"I'll save you the indecision," a cold voice said, and he turned to watch as Narcissa swept into the room, her pale grey eyes murderous, her dark red lips thinning further as she took in the damaged furniture. In this moment, her resemblance to her sister was frighteningly uncanny, and managed to sober Lucius in a way that none of Severus's threats had.

Her sudden wand movement took both men by surprise and Lucius's wand soared across the room into Narcissa's hand, only for her to toss it to the side where it hit the ground with a clatter and rolled under one of the still-intact sofas.

"Narcissa," Severus said reluctantly, when the beautiful witch pointed her wand straight at Lucius. "You can't kill him."

"Watch me." She said, icily. "Av-

"Expelliarmus!"

Severus caught her wand and lamented his choice of friends as he reflected on the fact that this wasn't even the first time he'd stopped Lucius's wife from trying to kill him. Even though she was usually adept at hiding it, Narcissa was a daughter of the Ancient and Noble House of Black, and the Blacks were... passionate people- especially the women, with Narcissa and her sisters as no exception. Bellatrix's... passion was well-known, of course, but the people who hadn't attended Hogwarts with Andromeda didn't realise just how vicious the eldest Black daughter could be- Severus clearly remembered during the first week of his first year Andromeda, a seventh year at
the time, had cursed a boy's kneecaps backwards for insulting her.

Lucius had always assured him the make-up sex made up for the pants-wetting terror that was an incensed daughter of the House of Black. Personally, Severus often wondered how the Order would react to knowing Narcissa almost did her husband in at least once a year. He thought they'd probably be disappointed.

"Give me back my wand!" Hissed Narcissa through her clenched teeth.

"I can't do that," he told her firmly and she narrowed her eyes and then nodded.

"Fine. I don't need a wand to kill the son of a- let go of me!" Severus caught her by grabbing a handful of the back of her robes when she tried to launch herself at Lucius, getting clawed viciously by her long, painted nails for his trouble, and he swore under his breath at Lucius as he wrestled the furious witch onto one of the leather couches, vowing to claim several of the more expensive bottles of wine in Lucius's collection for this.

Using magic to stick Narcissa in the seat and convincing Lucius not to even try moving with a particularly vicious glare, he pinched the bridge of his nose and took a calming breath. "Right," he said grimly. "This is bloody a mess."

"I'm not the one who lost my temper with the furniture," muttered Lucius, before shrinking back into his seat under the weight of twin murderous glares.

"How could you put our son in danger, Lucius?" Narcissa demanded furiously, her hands clenched in fists at her side and a slight tremble to her voice. "And Harry... surely you must have realised the danger your stupid little reunion would put one of our son's best friends in? If anything had happened to him Draco would never have forgiven you!"

"The boy would have been fine if he stayed in the bloody tent!" Lucius snapped, his tone and posture both defensive and aggravated.

"While the campgrounds were on fire?" Demanded Narcissa.

"The tent's bloody fireproof!"

"Well they didn't have any adults there to tell them that, now did they?" Narcissa hissed menacingly. "Because the utter fool that I am, I took Severus with me and left the tent to go help my worthless husband get away before the Ministry showed up to arrest his drunken arse, only to return to the tent and find my son and his friends gone!"

"What do you want me to say, Narcissa? That I'm sorry?" Demanded Lucius.

"I want you to put your son first, for once in your Merlin-damned life!" Shouted Narcissa, and Severus was alarmed to see tears shining on her face. "This isn't even the first time your foolish actions have put our son in mortal danger- you released Slytherin's monster in the castle while Draco was there and two Purebloods died, Lucius; they died and only one of them was even a blood traitor!"

"I can't be hearing this, Narcissa," Severus cut in, sharply. He'd had his suspicions, of course, and he cursed Lucius under his breath now that they were confirmed and vowed to liberate the blonde of his most prized vintages just to tip them down the sink in pure spite.

"I don't care, go tell Dumbledore so he can arrest Lucius and throw him in Azkaban!" Narcissa spat with a toss of her ice-blonde hair.
"Come on, let's all calm down, Cissy," Lucius had changed his tone from defensive to cajoling, but the poisonous look Narcissa gave him suggested his change of tactics didn't work.

"Do you know how scared I was, Lucius?" She asked, and her voice was alarmingly choked up, and Severus silently cursed the day Lucius had first sat next to him at the Slytherin House table.

"I'm sorry, my love. I was drunk, and I made a terrible mistake," Lucius tried to soothe her. "I swear to you, darling, that it will never happen again." Narcissa closed her eyes for a long moment before opening them again.

"Fine." She said, her chin held up high she looked down at her husband in contempt, "Fine. But you are not welcome in my bed until I say so, Lucius Abraxas Malfoy, so don't you dare set one foot inside my chambers or I will remove that foot from your body! Severus, release me so I can go rest and recover from this horrible mess of a night!"

Severus, satisfied that Narcissa was no longer homicidal, flicked his wand, undoing the spell, and Narcissa rose gracefully to her feet. She smoothed down the skirts of her robe and strode over to where he was standing, holding out an elegant hand. He passed her her wand and she nodded tersely in thanks before storming from the room, the heels of her boots clicking sharply against the mahogany floors.

"Wonderful," Lucius slumped in his seat, his expression gloomy. "She's not going to let me touch her for at least a month now."

"Good." Severus said, giving Lucius a cold look. "Maybe you'll actually learn something from this then."

"Like not to piss off my wife?" Lucius asked, snidely.

Severus made a strangled sound of pure frustration. "I have no idea why I'm friends with you!"

"It's my devilishly good looks."

"No, it's because I look like a Merlin-damned genius whenever I'm standing next to you!"

Lucius pressed a hand to his chest, an expression of mock-pain on his face. "That hurts, Severus."

Severus scowled. "Go fuck yourself, Lucius."

"Only for a month." Lucius smirked at him and Severus narrowed his eyes.

"I've changed my mind," he said darkly. "I'm going to let her kill you anyway."

"You'd miss me," scoffed Lucius.

"I'd replace you with one of your bloody peacocks, and it'd be like you were still right in front of me. A better looking you."

Lucius's indignant squawking was very satisfying.

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_Hermione's POV:_

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Lucius's indignant squawking was very satisfying.
Hermione hadn't wanted to separate from Harry and Tom, but Narcissa had sent the boys away in order to give the little blond girl a check-up.

She was a tiny thing; slender and delicate. Her pale skin was almost translucent-looking, and already bruised around the wrists. She was also still reluctant to release her tight grip on her so Hermione had sat down cross-legged on the floor, that way the little blonde could curl up in front of her. She had even wrapped one of her arms securely around the girl's waist when the little blonde started to tremble again as Narcissa carefully examined her bruised wrists.

In a further attempt to soothe her, Hermione started to comb her fingers through the younger girl's hair, frowning lightly as her fingers kept getting caught on snarls of hair.

"It's hard to brush it all," the little blond murmured, in her soft, whispery voice.

"Doesn't your father help?" Narcissa asked gently, conjuring a hairbrush with a twirl of her wand.

"Daddy is very busy most of the time," the girl whispered, looking down at her hands. Her nails were bitten down to her fingertips and turquoise ink spots dotted her pale skin.

"Well Hermione here will help you brush out your beautiful hair before bed while I go get some bruise paste and send one of our elves to go find your father and tell him you're safe. Is that alright with you, darling?" Narcissa asked, her voice soft and her face gentle. Hermione marvelled at the change in the woman, who acted like such a haughty bitch in public, and yet, when it came to children, seemed to melt.

"Thank you, Mrs. Malfoy," the girl said, shyly. "My daddy worries– I'm all he has left, he needs me." Narcissa's smile tightened, and Hermione knew that the older witch had heard the same thing she had– this little girl needed her father, but instead of caring for his daughter like he should, the man leaned on her for support instead. Grimly, Hermione confirmed her original suspicions that the girl suffered from neglect.

"What's your father's name, darling?" Narcissa asked, doing an admirable job of keeping the cold anger Hermione could see, just barely hidden in her light grey eyes, out of her voice. "Pandora was in my year level at Hogwarts, but I'm afraid I don't recall her being promised to anyone."

"Daddy's name is Xenophilius- Xenophilius Lovegood," the girl said, peeking up through her long bangs.

Hermione didn't miss the way Narcissa's eyes sharpened with immediate interest. "The editor of The Quibbler?" The Pureblood witch asked, her voice light, and Hermione tilted her head slightly, now understanding Narcissa's interest; although it was a fringe newspaper- or magazine, really, anyone with a head for politics would know the importance of the messages the public got through magazines, newspapers, radios, etc. That's why most countries used to apply censorship laws- some still did, in fact, and all countries made good use of propaganda, using those mediums to send their own message to the public.

"Yes, that's him," the girl nodded happily.

"And what is your name, darling?" Narcissa asked.

"It's Luna, ma'am." The girl- Luna- said shyly.

"A beautiful name," Narcissa said approvingly. "Well, I'll be back in a few minutes, dears."

"Thank you," Luna repeated, ducking her head to look down at her hands again, her cheeks pink.
No, it most certainly was not alright! Hermione was alarmed by the idea of having to comfort the traumatised girl alone, without Narcissa's calming presence in the room. Narcissa, the monster, just looked amused by the pleading look she gave her, handing her the hairbrush before exiting the bedroom, her long robes swishing out behind her.

With an internal sigh of resignation, Hermione lifted the hand not holding the hairbrush to trail her fingers down Luna's hair, using the same bit of wandless magic she'd used to help brush her own hair, back before she even knew what magic actually was, to untangle the knots. Luna shivered slightly, and leaned back into the touch.

"Your magic... it feels like a cloud," she said dreamily, her odd silver-blue eyes closing halfway, her expression something like one of bliss. "When you're happy, it's like those lovely, fluffy white cotton candy clouds, and when you're upset it goes heavy and darker and charged, like a cloud in a storm... like it did when you helped me."

"Did you know the man who tried to abduct you?" Hermione asked carefully, as she lifted the brush and started running it through the long, pale-blond tresses.

"I saw him more then once at the campsite." Luna said, quietly. She reached up to fiddle with her necklace, a long silver chain with what looked like a butterbeer cork on the end. "He was watching me. He made me nervous, so I stayed close to daddy, but then daddy thought he saw a shuffling whibblestumper and went to go follow it— he wrote an article about them last year in the double-length August edition, and he wanted to take some pictures of it. After he left, the man came into our tent- I tried to run, but he caught me and was taking me to where he could apparate away with me. I didn't know anything else was happening at the camp until after you saved me and the D—Dark Mark appeared up in the sky."

While the most prominent question in Hermione's mind was what the hell was a 'shuffling whibblestumper', she instead managed to focus on the immediate problem. "Are you going to tell anyone about that man?" She asked, hoping that the girl wasn't planning on reporting the incident to the DMLE— she had no intention of explaining away a dead body and would rather not have to bully a traumatized thirteen-year-old into staying quiet, though she would if she had to.

"I don't want you to get in trouble," Luna whispered, and Hermione gave a satisfied smile, one that Luna couldn't see with her sitting behind the blonde. You caught more flies with honey then vinegar— before he died, that had been one of her father's favourite sayings. Still, she needed to make certain that the dead man could never be traced back to her.

"Do you think you could make a vow then, Luna?" She coaxed the younger girl, "I just need to be sure- I used an Unforgiveable curse on him, and if anyone finds out I could be locked up in Azkaban."

Luna turned so she could face her, and Hermione was pleased to see the younger girl looked horrified at the idea. "What do I say?" The little blond asked determinedly, and Hermione smiled one of her nicer smiles at the girl.

"Just repeat what I say, okay?" She said, and Luna dutifully nodded.

By the time Narcissa returned with the bruise paste and a torn piece of parchment, the oath had been sworn and Hermione had finished brushing out the little blonde's hair. "Our elf located your father in the woods," Narcissa informed Luna, "he was unharmed, and apparently unaware of what had gone down at the campsite. He passes along his love, and his excitement about finding a possible breeding ground for," Narcissa checked the parchment and her lip curled slightly, "a shuffling whibblestumper. He says he won't be home for at least a day."
"Oh, that's very exciting– he must be so pleased." Luna said, and Hermione could almost hear Narcissa grinding her teeth- or maybe it was her own teeth?

"Here," the older witch said, gracefully lowering herself to the ground in order to sit cross-legged in front of them and scooped some bruise paste out of the jar.

Hermione couldn't help staring as Narcissa massaged the paste on Luna's thin wrists- Narcissa had beautiful, elegant hands, with perfectly-shaped nails painted with a pearly coat of polish. The part of Hermione that was still thrilled and heady from the danger and adrenaline; blood pumping hot through her body and a familiar dampness between her thighs, wondered what those beautiful fingers would feel like inside her, if they would feel as satisfying as her sister's had. Hermione then cursed herself, because now she was hyper-aware of how her body was aching to be touched, the throbbing between her legs that made her clench her thighs in an attempt to alleviate the pure need.

Frustrated, she contemplated seducing Luna when Narcissa left them for the night. She knew that she would have no problem convincing the younger girl to help her "scratch" her "itch", but she had enough of a conscience left to know that seducing the thirteen-year-old, especially when she was in such a vulnerable state of mind, was the wrong thing to do. She'd made Tom apologize to Harry when he'd done something similar, after all, though she'd admit that when the person wasn't one she cared about, at least not enough, anyway; it was harder to remember what the "right" thing was to do.

Cursing Narcissa's beautiful hands again for the aching heat, Hermione knew that her boys were likely asleep by now; Tom having had to use a massive amount of magic and energy to tear down the wards at the campgrounds and Harry from such a long day. Any relief she was going to receive was going to come from her own fingers, or perhaps the handle of the convenient hairbrush Narcissa had conjured.

"Do you have a nightdress Luna can borrow?" Narcissa asked, the older witch completely unaware of the twist her thoughts had taken.

"Yes, of course." Hermione said, standing to cross the room, over to where her locked trunk rested against the wall. A quick smear of blood unlocked the trunk and she pulled a nightdress out of it for Luna, as well as one for herself.

Narcissa resized the nightdress for Luna so that it didn't fall awkwardly to two-thirds of the way down the girl's shins, and helped the blond with the laces. Hermione disliked wearing the traditional nightdresses of the Wizarding world; the frilled, embroidered material was flimsy and silly, as well as being old-fashioned and unflattering, and the pulled tight laces uncomfortable. But she always gritted her teeth and bore it when staying at the Malfoys, as the family was the very definition of magical traditionalists.

When Luna crawled into the bed beside her and Narcissa made no move to stop her, instead bidding both girls a good night before exiting the room, Hermione gave a silent groan as any plans to pleasure herself went down the drain. The little blonde still looked so distraught though, even now, that a glance down at the now greenish-yellow bruises around her slender wrists had Hermione folding, and she refrained from asking the girl to move off the bed, or from calling Narcissa in to organise another bed for Luna.

She didn't sleep much for the remainder of the night, maybe an hour and a half at most, restless with the unfamiliar presence in her bed. She was relieved when morning arrived, and with it a Portkey for Luna to take her back to her home.

"It was really nice of you to comfort her like you did," Harry told her softly, after she let Luna hug
her goodbye, even wrapping her arms around the younger girl and giving her a quick squeeze in return. Hermione felt blood rush to her cheeks at the gentle warmth in Harry's eyes, and she cleared her throat of the lump that had formed in it.

"Shut up," she told him, and her best friend just beamed proudly at her instead. Embarrassed but unwilling to show it, despite the fact they were both aware of her discomfort, she narrowed her eyes and seized him by the front of his robes, yanking him forwards into a deep kiss. When they pulled apart for air, Hermione very purposefully stuck her hand down the front of his pants, wrapping her fingers around the familiar weight inside, causing Harry to let out a choked-off groan. "Bedroom, now," she growled, "I've been all hot and bothered all night, and you're about to learn how to eat me out."

"Do I get a choice?" Harry wondered, his face flushed a particularly enticing shade of pink, his lips shiny with spit and his pupils dilated.

"Are you complaining?" Hermione arched an eyebrow, squeezing his rapidly hardening length in her hand, rubbing the pad of her thumb against the tip, and Harry hastily shook his head.

"N-no– definitely not." He choked out to assure her, and she smiled in triumph and satisfaction. She had been out of her depth in that... conversation, and sex had consistently proven to be a way to turn a situation back to one that she had control over; one that was predictable, and where she could call the shots.

Later, when her thighs were locked around Harry's head, her hips bucking as her hands bunched the blankets under her and well on her way to a second orgasm, Hermione questioned herself on why she hadn't taught him how to do this earlier; Harry had a very talented mouth– and an even more talented tongue. The bed shifted slightly as one of his arms moved to rest along the length of her thigh, the other one gripping her hip hard enough to leave white marks on her creamy flesh as his tongue flicked back and forth against her tight bundle of nerves.

The friction warmed the very inside of her thighs, a trickle of her arousal seeping down her leg where his warm tongue slowly licked it away, before his mouth returned to her core and suddenly, without warning, he was so full inside her that her thighs tensed and an upward flick of the tip of his tongue had her biting back a strangled moan. Her breathing hitched, and started to become progressively more rapid as his tongue made small circles while still inside her, bringing her closer and closer to her finish.

She moaned out his name when she came for the second time in less then ten minutes, breathless and unsteady, her fingers tangling uselessly in the sheets. As the pleasure abated, she slumped against the headboard, her stomach warm and her body humming with the quiet, loose pleasure of orgasm, letting a soft, wet exhale escape her parted lips.

Harry was already shoving a hand into his pants, too rushed to wait for her to unscramble her brain, and all it took was a handful of cramped, awkward shoves into his own fist before he was groaning into her thigh, and she gave a quiet hiss of appreciation as he accidentally teeth bit down in a way he hadn't meant to.

"Tom is going to be so disappointed he missed this," she noted, once she'd caught her breath. Harry, lifting his head to look up at her, his face wet with her arousal, started to laugh. -

She and Harry had decided to spend the remainder of the summer holidays at Malfoy Manor, seeing as Tom was mostly confined to the Diary to "recharge", needing to build up his strength
after the incredibly taxing effort of bringing down the wards set up by the British Ministry's experts.

The last of summer seemed to pass far too quickly and the Malfoy's annual Gala, held two days before the school term started, had arrived before they knew it.

Narcissa could not have had a more perfect day for the Gala if she had personally ordered it; windless and warm, not a single cloud in the early evening sky. The inside of the Manor was like a scene out of a fairy-tale. The ballroom was a grand room in itself, with fireplaces on each wall and curved double staircases that wound their way upward; but when illuminated by magnificent looking chandeliers, it was transformed into something majestic. An orchestra was playing light tunes, and pyramids made of crystal glasses full of champagne, bowls of punch and mountains of delicious chocolate truffles could be seen all around as guests exchanged pleasantries and made polite conversation with each other. There was even an area dedicated especially for children, with more sweets than anyone could wish for, mouth-watering pastries, and a large variety of fruit juices.

Naturally, Narcissa had not passed up an opportunity to play dress-up with her, and Hermione hadn't even tried to fight it. Her unruly hair had been twisted into a barely constrained chignon for the occasion, with curls popping out of the pins every few minutes. Her dress was floor-length and made from red taffeta, with long sleeves and a neckline that scooped daringly, but was modest thanks to her smaller bust– Hermione had inherited both her father's trim hips and her mother's small shoulders, and when you added a childhood of malnutrition and periodic bouts of starvation, well, she didn't have much curve to her figure.

Before disappearing from the manor so that he could officially "arrive", Tom had donned a dark blue tailored robe that made his eyes appear even more piercing then they already were, and Harry was wearing dark grey dress-robes with bold green embroidery on the sleeves. He was wearing his contact lenses instead of his glasses, and she had fastened his hair back in a low ponytail for the occasion.

The Lady of the Manor, of course, out-shone them all, dressed in a striking deep blue gown sculptured expertly about her svelte form; curving with her hips, stretching over her breasts and flowing down her long, slender legs. Narcissa's shoulders were white against the deep blue, and her long, ice-blond hair was held up by diamond pins.

Hermione had been trapped by the beautiful woman into helping her welcome the guests, much to Hermione's utter annoyance. Narcissa had declared that being a respectable hostess was a skill all 'proper young ladies' should know, and somehow that had translated to requiring Hermione to learn such skills.

The first hour passed at the same speed of growing grass- or History with Binns- and when one of the waiters holding a tray of wine glasses passed close by, Hermione managed to snag a glass without Narcissa noticing and drain it of its contents in three long swallows. A half hour later and she snagged a second glass, desperately needing more help with acting the gracious hostess. Thankfully, before she had to resort to a third glass, so as to start the process of getting drunk enough she didn't snap and curse the next arsehole who thrust their travel cloak at her, expecting her to trot off and go hang it up for them, Narcissa declared all the guests had arrived.

To Hermione's pleasure, one of the last guests to arrive was the girl from the Quidditch World Cup. She hadn't expected Luna to be invited to the exclusive event, but she supposed it did make sense, seeing as she was the daughter of the man who owned the popular fringe newspaper, The Quibbler. The paper might not be taken seriously, but most households had a copy, just for amusement's
sake, and that meant one very important thing—everyone read it. The trick was making sure that what they were reading was what they—meaning the Dark—wanted to be read; or at least that's what Hermione assumed Luna was here for, to make a connection.

Luna's father accompanied her, but Hermione only spared a brief second to commit his face to memory before turning her full attention to Luna. The little blond looked very pretty in a soft, gold-colored dress that looked like it had been dipped in fairy dust, it was so sparkly, with multiple layers of chiffon forming a floaty skirt and real live daisies sewn on the bodice. The way the hems of the dress were a little frayed and Luna's loose hair on the tangled side made Hermione think of a woodland fairy, even though she was fully aware it had not been an intentional look.

Also, to her displeasure, she noted the small red sores on the nail-beds of Luna's fingers, and the nails bitten down to the quick—things she remembered noticing the night of the Quidditch World Cup. She'd read about a muggle condition before, one called dermatophagia; a habit or compulsion, often anxiety-based, of gnawing on your own skin, most commonly at the fingers. Luna's discolored fingertips were something she vowed to keep an eye on, if she continued to take the younger girl under her wing.

The little slip of a girl looked relieved when Hermione openly acknowledged her, smiling shyly and her eyes shining. It made Hermione wonder how many people in the past had faked ignorance rather then acknowledging her, to make her that happy about a near stranger openly smiling at her. It made a burning anger simmer inside her and Hermione was careful not to let the anger show on her face as she smiled down at her.

"Would you like some help with your hair?" she asked, and Luna nodded shyly.

"Yes, thank you." She said, her whispery voice so quiet that Hermione could barely hear her over the sound of the orchestra.

"Come on, then," She led Luna, who waved goodbye to a father who didn't even acknowledge her as he wandered off, squinting at something up in the air, out of the ballroom and over to one of the closed off staircases. The magic of the wards set up to keep out the guests tingled as she ducked under the delicate silk rope that blocked the way, but they recognized her and let her pass, and when she held the rope up for Luna, the wards let the blonde pass too.

"Is this where you live?" Luna asked, quiet but curious, as they entered the bedroom they had both slept in after the Quidditch World Cup, the room at the Malfoys that Hermione now privately thought of as hers.

"Sometimes." She answered the younger girl. "Sit on the bed, I'll be back in one moment." Luna nodded obediently, and did as she bid. Hermione walked into the bathroom and located the hairbrush Narcissa had bought her, several years ago now. When she exited the bathroom Luna was waiting quietly on the silk sheets, hugging her knees to her chest, the gauzy layers of her skirt strewn around her.

Hermione slid onto the bed, shifting over so she was sitting behind Luna, being careful not to tear either of their dresses. With the aid of a little wandless magic, she made quick work of brushing out the knots in the girl's hair. Once it was tangle free she styled it in a simple but beautiful braided crown, using her wand to summon a handful of pins after a moment of hesitation, deciding not to bother hiding the fact she was using magic outside of school when Luna had seen her use her yew wand far worse spells then a simple summoning charm. "There," she said in satisfaction as she slid the last pin in place.

She'd learned how to braid hair at the orphanage, as it had been one of the only ways to keep her
unruly hair in any sort of order and the nuns had not liked it when the children looked scruffy or disorderly. One of the older girls had taught her before she'd had an accident with her magic and the children had all isolated her as a freak.

"Thank you," Luna said, her eyes suspiciously shiny, and when the smaller girl didn't let go of her hand after she helped her back to her feet, after a brief moment of hesitation Hermione decided to allow the prolonged contact. She wondered why it was she felt so... not protective, as so, but far more tolerant towards the little blonde then she was of most people in this bleak, dull world they lived in.

The orchestra was playing a lovely melody as they made their way back into the ballroom, the sweet music of the violins and flutes washing over the attendees and leaving a warm glow. Couples were dancing together, swaying in time to the beautiful tune, full skirts flaring up as the women were spun around by their partners.

"Hermione!" Draco waved her over. Hermione crossed the floor to where the blond was standing near one of the tables laden with lace cloths, crystal platters and cake stands, and delicious pastries, tugging Luna after her.

Blaise, Theo, Parkinson, Tracey Davis and Daphne, as well as Daphne's younger sister Astoria, were all standing around with the blonde, and Hermione acknowledged the series of greetings that were offered with a nod.

"Who's this, then?" Daphne asked curiously, looking down at Luna.

Hermione was, on average, a head shorter then most of her year level, Daphne included. Luna, however, was nearly a head shorter then she was, which meant the little blonde was practically towered over by Hermione's year-mates, and Hermione didn't exactly blame how she shrank into her side, though when Luna didn't seem like she was going to respond to Daphne's question, she nudged her gently with her hip, giving her hand a quick, comforting squeeze.

Merciful gods above, what was happening to her?

"I-I'm Luna Lovegood," Luna introduced herself, timidly, and Hermione squeezed her hand again in approval.

"She's in my year level," piped up Astoria. "A Ravenclaw. Her father owns The Quibbler."

"Oh, he does?" Daphne's eyes sharpened slightly though she smiled kindly at Luna. "That's quite exciting. Why don't you introduce her to a few of your other year mates, Astoria?"

"Sure." Smiled Astoria. When Luna looked up at her nervously Hermione gave her an encouraging smile. Hesitantly, the blonde released her tight grip and Hermione reached over to bat her hand gently when she lifted it towards her mouth, about to start chewing anxiously on her fingers again.

"I've never seen you like that," Daphne said, as soon as Luna and Astoria were out of earshot. The beautiful pureblood sounded surprised, which succeeded in annoying Hermione. And unlike with Harry, she couldn't fuck the girl to distract her or get her to shut up. Well, if she really wanted to she could probably talk Daphne into it, but there were too many people around.

"I can be caring," she said, irritated and hiding the anxiety twisting in her stomach at discussing this.

"Yeah, suuuure you can." Parkinson said sarcastically.
"Piss off." Hermione said, without even looking in the other girl's direction. Draco groaned.

"At least try not to revert back to a total savage, Hermione." He said, his face exasperated, and Hermione glared at him. "In case it's escaped your attention, after spending any sort of prolonged time away from Hogwarts you have a tendency to be overly blunt, rude and vulgar," he informed her, and Hermione was surprised when the others all nodded in agreement.

"I hadn't noticed." She mused aloud, though a readjustment period did make sense, going from a homeless kid who'd raised herself on the street to sitting with the children of nobles.

"Returning to the original topic, though, I really have never seen you that gentle with anyone other then Harry." Daphne said, and Hermione felt her irritation grow as everyone nodded again.

"Just because you haven't seen me like that, doesn't mean I'm not." She said, her voice harsher then she'd expected.

"I bet you could count the number of people you've let hang onto your hand like you let the Lovegood girl just do with that same one hand." Draco retorted, and Hermione tilted her head slightly as she actually considered it.

She held Harry and Tom's hands, Sting's too. And little Hornet's, though she wouldn't actually be quite so little anymore. And, of course, she had held the hand of the little girl she very purposefully did not think about, who, unlike Hornet, would never not be little... and if she was counting the dead, then her parents would be on the list too.

Eight people. Five who were still alive. One hand.

"Do I count the dead too?" she inquired, genuinely wanting to know, and Draco blanched.

"I-- Merlin, I was joking, Hermione; I didn't actually mean..." He trailed off, face horrified.

"Well, you were right, anyway," she said, lightly. "One hand exactly."

"That's so depressing." Blaise muttered, then-- "Ouch, Daphne! Damn it, woman- keep your bony elbows to yourself!" Daphne looked indignant.

"I do not have bony elbows!"

"You do too--"

"Where's Potter?" Parkinson asked loudly, over the top of Daphne and Blaise's bickering. Hermione gave it a year, two at the most, before one of them snapped and started snogging the other to just make them shut the hell up.

"With Tom, somewhere." She answered Parkinson's question idly while mentally debating whether or not to start up a betting pool about who would kiss who first-- personally, she'd put her gold on Blaise. With a mother like his, he would have learned from a young age to take what he wanted.

"Tom?" Parkinson's face screwed up in distaste. "That's a horribly common name." Hermione instantly forgot about her betting plans as a cold anger swirled up to take its place at the front of her mind, and whatever Parkinson saw on her face had the black-haired girl taking a step back.

"You do not get to call him that," she said icily, her hand slipping through the slit in her dress artfully hidden by the loose skirt to touch the handle of her wand, strapped to her upper-thigh. "His name is Thomas Dagworth, and he is the nephew of Thaddeus Dagworth."
"The Thaddeus Dagworth?" Daphne asked, the pretty girl stepping in front of Parkinson, and Hermione realized she had been stalking forwards towards the pug-faced girl. She stilled her movements and immediately spotted the hastily hidden relief in Daphne's deep blue eyes. A sliver of guilt wormed its way through her, but she easily pushed it to the side, not sorry in the slightest for defending Tom.

"Yes," she answered Daphne's question, voice stiff.

"My father has been singing his praises," the pretty pureblood girl said, looking surprised.

"My father as well," added Tracey, who had been staying silent. Tracey Davis was a quiet girl, but she had sharp eyes and was very good when it came to the offensive spells and curses they learned in DADA. She would have fitted in easily enough in Ravenclaw if she didn't come from a long line of Purebloods who were very much Dark supporters– her older sister was locked up in an asylum for the criminally insane and her two older brothers had both been incarcerated in Azkaban after Voldemort had been 'killed' by Harry, as well as one of her uncles, three of her cousins and an aunt. All of them except the sister been freed earlier that summer when Voldemort had broke his followers out of Azkaban.

Although she hid it well, and she certainly didn't look the part with her pretty moss-green eyes and strawberry blond curls, Tracey definitely took after her family– Hermione could feel the whisper of Dark magic still on the other girl's skin, lingering and seductive, making her want to taste the magic, to trail her tongue along soft flesh.

"I heard that his first bill was passed today," Draco jumped in, more than happy with the change in subject. Hermione turned her focus away from Tracey and the seductive Dark magic and concentrated on what Draco had just said.

"It did?" She asked, surprised but pleased by the news. She hadn't known that today was the day the Wizengamot voted whether or not to approve Voldemort's- well, Thaddeus's- proposed law that it become compulsory for Hogwarts to celebrate the traditional wizarding holidays, not the muggle versions of them. "That's excellent. Dumbledore must have been pissed." She wondered if she asked nicely whether Voldemort would give her a pensieve copy of the court session. She would love to see the look on the old bastard's face when it had been announced that the bill had been passed.

"Is Mr. Dagworth here tonight?" Tracey asked eagerly, her eyes shining in excitement.

"Tom said he would be," Hermione said truthfully, turning to scan the hall. She couldn't see Voldemort, nor could she see Harry or Tom, and she frowned slightly. "He might be talking with Harry and Tom." She mused, aloud. "I think it's about time I go find them."

"Can I come with you?" Tracey asked hopefully. Hermione, not seeing any harm in it, nodded and then focused on locating link she had to Tom that had been created by Voldemort, binding her and her magic to the Diary. If she concentrated hard enough she could isolate the link and, with a nod to Tracey, she followed it to where she was fairly certain it would lead to Tom.

"Can I ask you something?" The strawberry-blond girl asked, as they made their way across the ballroom.

"You can, but I can't promise I'll answer." Hermione said, glancing back curiously at Tracey, whose cheeks were dusted a fine pink.

"You and Harry... well you're dating, aren't you?" She said. Hermione was surprised that Tracey
had picked that up already, but she knew just how sharp the other girl's intuition was and nodded in confirmation easily enough—her relationship with Harry wasn't something she planned on hiding, as she had absolutely no intention or inclination to sneak about Hogwarts, fooling around in broom cupboards and empty classrooms. "Well," Tracey's blush had deepened, intriguing Hermione. "You're the only ones of us who are... together, and I was wondering how your friendship turned into a... well, a relationship?"

"So there's someone you're interested in?" she asked, and Tracey nodded.

"I'm not sure how to tell them I like them that way, though." She admitted. "But I've liked them for a while."

"Well," Hermione said, thoughtfully, "I didn't exactly tell Harry I liked him, so much as I showed him by sticking my tongue in his mouth." Tracey made a squeaking sound, and Hermione, a bit bewildered by the teenage-girl conversation she was having, winked at her. "You could always stick their hand down your robes," she suggested, "you've definitely got the chest for it." The noise Tracey made this time sounded less like a squeak and more like a mouse been trodden on, and Hermione took pity on the girl. "I'm not the best one to ask for advice when it comes to... matters of the heart, Tracey; I'm actually fairly certain that I'm allergic to talking about feelings— it gives me hives."

"Oh." Tracey said, looking a bit disappointed. "Well, thank you anyway."

"Sorry I couldn't be of more help." She said, mostly genuinely. She was saved from any more conversation by someone calling her name.

"Hermione, there you are!" Hermione turned to see Harry hurrying towards her, and her eyes narrowed as she noted how his lips looked swollen and his hair mussed. The self-satisfied smirk on Tom's face, the older boy following after Harry, had her narrowing her eyes further. "Hi Tracey," Harry greeted the other girl cheerfully as he drew closer, and Hermione glared at Tom who slid easily into her space, his long fingers caressing the slim curve of her hip as he moved so he was standing with his chest to her back.

"Now, now," he murmured, softly enough so that only she could hear, "don't look so upset, dear. You were busy with the little blonde, and you and Harry both look so ravishing tonight."

Before Hermione could respond, Tom was suddenly spinning them both around, and the unexpectedness of the movement nearly knocked her off her feet. She was about to demand what the hell he'd done that for when she noticed exactly what had caused the sudden tight expression on Tom's face, the way his grip on her had tightened and his body tensed. Her annoyance flowed away and was replaced immediately with a deep burning anger and she didn't even try to hold back a dark scowl.

Dumbledore's magenta robes were surprisingly tasteful, even with the golden stars embroidered along the hems, and his long white beard had actually been styled. The old man was visibly scanning the crowd, and Hermione felt her entire body stiffen the moment those twinkling blue eyes met hers with a clear recognition.

"Shit!" She swore, breaking the stare and looking up to Tom whose back was now to the aged Headmaster—Tom who was in his natural appearance, which meant he was an exact copy of a sixteen year old Lord Voldemort; the same sixteen year old Lord Voldemort who Dumbledore had taught. "Shit! Tom, you need to get the hell out of here—now! I'll make sure he doesn't get Harry—go!" Tom's lips pressed into a thin line, displeased, but he nodded, releasing her in order to slip away, vanishing into the crowd, careful not to let Dumbledore see his face.
She turned to Harry who had paled, having also spotted the Headmaster. "Go find Lucius," she told him, ignoring Tracey's confusion. Trusting her, Harry didn't wait for an explanation, just nodded and hurried back into the crowd, going to search for the eldest Malfoy. Dumbledore immediately started to cut a path through the mass of people, making a beeline towards Harry, and Hermione steel herself for what she was about to do. Taking a deep breath, she grabbed a glass of red wine from a passing waiter before very purposefully stepping directly into Dumbledore's path.

The weight of the adult wizard knocking into her knocked the breath right out of her lungs, and she didn't fight the momentum that had her tumbling to the ground, instead making sure to tangle her legs with Dumbledore's as she fell and scissor-kicking out the moment her back hit the floor.

The sound of Dumbledore let out as he thudded into the ground was infinitely satisfying, even if a majority of his weight had landed on her. The red wine that had spilled all over the front of his fancy robes was now soaking into her lovely new dress too, and Hermione took vindictive pleasure in jabbing the end of the broken wineglass into the old wizard's side.

When Dumbledore tried pushing himself off her, she determinedly clung on tight, resisting his efforts to untangle them both until two wizards finally got around to pulling him off her and back to his feet while a third helped her up. Hermione was relieved to see that Harry was nowhere in sight, and she turned her attention to Dumbledore, ready for part two of stalling the old wizard in place.

"Professor!" she cried out dramatically, pressing a hand to her heart, "Professor Dumbledore! Sir, are you alright? Did I– did I hurt you? I... ooh!" she went to take a step forward towards the Headmaster and purposefully stumbled, acting as if her ankle had failed to support her, and Dumbledore was forced to catch her lest she fall right into him.

"Miss Granger--" he started to say, and she could hear the absolute fury in his voice. She didn't have to hide her shiver, instinctive fear running through her, but she still forged ahead with her hastily thought up plan and interrupted him– loudly.

"I'm so sorry!" She wailed, blinking out several forced tears. "Oh please forgive me, professor! Please don't be upset, I didn't mean to– somebody knocked into me, and then- then I kn-knocked into y-you, a-a-and--" Her voice cracked, as if she was too overcome with emotion to talk, and she bowed her head, hiding her face from view so no one could see her roll her eyes while still holding onto Dumbledore's robes with in an iron grip.

"It's alright, sweet thing, it was merely an accident," an elderly sounding witch soothed her, and Hermione very carefully didn't flinch when an unseen hand squeezed her shoulder. "It happens to all of us, and Albus isn't angry," oh, 'Albus' was angry– furious, in fact, if the grip he had on her shoulders from catching her was any indication, but at the old witch's words he was backed into a corner, unwilling to be the monster who yelled at a clearly upset and apologetic young witch for an 'accident'.

"There is nothing to forgive, my dear girl," the old man said, ever-so predictably, in his grandfatherly voice. "Now, I really must--" Hermione tightened her grip when he tried to push her away.

"You're not mad?" she interrupted once again in a wobbly voice.

"Not at all," Dumbledore's kind tone sounded more forced, and she inwardly cackled. "But now I need to--" as he tried to push her away for a third time she let him, only to purposefully stumble backwards with a cry, acting like the ankle that she'd "injured" before had just given out again, toppling to the ground with a thud.
When several people gasped loudly, as for all appearances it looked as if Dumbledore had just pushed her over, Hermione bit back her smug smirk as any plans the Headmaster had to fetch Harry were permanently waylaid as he instead had to convince the crowd he hadn't just shoved an injured girl off him, merely because she'd accidentally knocked into him.

Severus's \textit{POV}:

"It's times like these that make me want to adopt that girl," Lucius mused as they both watched the chaos Hermione had wrought. "That was masterfully done."

"The old fool is going to be unbearable for days," Severus grumbled, taking a sip of his wine. He couldn't deny enjoying the sight of a flustered Albus trying to placate the growing crowd around him, although- "Where's Harry now?" he asked, a touch concerned.

"Narcissa escorted him to one of the Floos- by now he'll be long gone from the Manor so Dumbledore can't try to claim that we've kidnapped him, or forcefully accompany the boy back to those loathsome relatives of his. And if the old goat tries to stir up any trouble about the boy disappearing from the Gala, we'll say Harry left with his guardians. Dumbledore won't be able to refute that without revealing to a no doubt horrified public that he allowed the Boy-Who-Lived to be raised by muggles." Lucius looked very pleased with himself and Severus snorted his amusement.

"Clever." He allowed, and Lucius preened like one of those ridiculous birds of his.

"I know." He said smugly.

"I heard the bill was passed today," Severus commented, and Lucius's expression turned serious again, and a touch uneasy.

"Dumbledore was furious, of course. He filed to have the decree lifted immediately, but it was denied by Fudge on the spot." He said, and Severus only barely managed to stop his surprise from showing.

"I see," he said, carefully. "The Minister picked a side politically that wasn't Dumbledore's. That is..."

"Significant." Lucius said, looking away and back over to where Dumbledore was surrounded by the crowd. "And unexpected. I have never felt so... uncertain when it comes to the Wizengamot before." He reluctantly admitted. "Politics is a game I have always played well, but this is particularly delicate situation. And with..." Lucius's eyes darted briefly down to his left forearm, and Severus nodded in understanding.

"You don't want to put your full backing behind Dagworth with the risk of it displeasing our Master."

"I can't see the Dark Lord being pleased about members of his Inner Circle making the political choice to back up an unknown party," Lucius said grimly. "And I don't wish to give him any more reason to torture me when he chooses to summon us."

Severus winced as he nodded his agreement. He could already picture their first summons far too easily, and he was very, very confident in his assumption that the Dark Lord was not going to be
happy with any of them– when he fell they had all renounced him in order to escape Azkaban, and
Severus was fully aware of the fact the Dark Lord would not be pleased that they had all turned
their backs on him so quickly. It almost made him wonder if it would have proved healthier and
more advantageous for him in the long run if he had ended up in Azkaban instead. After all, the
Dark Lord had likely been responsible for already breaking the prisoners out of the fortress– the
Ministry were clearly absolute idiots if they thought all the high security prisoners had managed a
mass break out without any outside help– and yet, he had yet to summon a single one of his free
Death Eaters to his side.

"Azkaban's looking fairly attractive at this time of year," Lucius said, as if the blond had been
reading his thoughts. "Perhaps we should attempt to assassinate Dumbledore? That might earn us
his good grace."

"I can't believe I'm actually considering that," Severus said, after a short pause. "This suspense is a
form of torture on its own."

"I agree." Lucius said, glumly. "More wine?"

"Yes. Lots more wine."

A/N: Why did Luna almost get abducted in this story? Good question- and my answer is the
butterfly effect: one neuron fires, one butterfly flaps its wings, and everything can be completely
different, the small differences making all the difference. Because the Weasleys didn't have Harry
and Hermione staying with them there were two spare places on the portkey, which Luna and
Xenophilius used. This meant the Lovegoods arrived earlier/later then they did in the book, which
lead to them catching the attention of the man who tried to kidnap Luna (actually, it's never stated
in the book if the Lovegoods went to the Quidditch World Cup, but Luna seems keen on
Quidditch- she commentated once, at a Hogwarts match, so I'm going to assume they did. Poetic
license.).

~Cheshire Carroll
CHAPTER XXXVII:

_Hermione's POV:

"You're insane."

"Yes, you mentioned that."

"No, you– you're really insane. The 'they should lock you up in the Janus Thickey Ward'- type insane."

"I don't even know what that is."

"It's a ward for insane people."

"Well yes, that much I gathered."

"Because you're insane."

Hermione massaged her forehead and glared at Draco. "If you don't shut up, I'm going to make you shut up. And it will hurt– a lot." She warned him.

"I'm not surprised," he huffed, "because that's what crazy people do and you're–"

"That's it– _bombarda_!" Draco screamed like a three-year-old girl as a hole the size of a dinner plate was blown into wall behind him. "Next time it's your head!" she growled, and Draco crossed his arms and nodded grumpily.

"Fine. But can I ask why in Salazar's name you tripped over the Headmaster of our school, who also happens to be the chief of the Wizengamot and Supreme Mugwump of the ICW?"

"No you can't ask, because you've _already_ asked about ten times now, and I've already answered– to help Harry get away before Dumble-_dickhead_ could start trouble with your family; or worse, take Harry away because no one would actually risk stopping him, seeing as he is, like you said, the Headmaster, chief of the Wizengamot and Supreme Mugwump of the ICW."

"Yes, I understood _that_ part fine," Draco said, "I just don't understand why you chose to make such a scene– you stabbed him with a broken wine-glass, for Merlin's sake!"

"I _accidentally_ poked him with it when I was trying to push him off me," Hermione corrected him with a sniff.

"There was actual blood. Mother thought it was yours– she looked like she was about to stab Dumbledore too." Draco said. "And then Blaise's mother came over and basically told you that she was impressed with your performance, and said that you were welcome to write to her for tips. And we both know what Blaise's mother does for a living!"

"Own a successful chain of businesses that spread over both the muggle and magical world?"

"Kill people. She kills people. She kills them and makes it look like an accident, and then she plays
the part of the grieving widow so well that even though you know she killed whichever husband she's up to now, because I've honestly lost count, you actually start to doubt that she did it." Draco said, with a slight shudder.

"I like Adrienne," Hermione said truthfully, because she did admire the woman. A black widow who was such a skilled actress that she'd gotten away with murdering six prominent figures, and nobody had been able to prove she'd had any part in their mysterious and tragic demises? That was certainly enough to earn Hermione's respect, but what set Adrienne apart was the even more impressive fact that despite her known track record, the woman still managed to get wealthy and influential men to fall in love and marry her. And that? That was worthy of blatant and shameless admiration.

"You terrify me." Draco told her, and she laughed.

"Hermione," Narcissa entered the small room beside the kitchen where Hermione was... well, not quite hiding, but certainly making herself scarce.

"Er, yes Narcissa?" Hermione asked, feeling a touch guilty. She had just made a gigantic spectacle during the woman's ball, which she knew Narcissa had worked very hard on.

"Mr. Dagworth says he's here to collect you." The blonde woman said, and Hermione could see through Narcissa's mask well enough to pick up both concern and shock– she suspected Narcissa hadn't known how... 'close' she and Harry were to 'Thaddeus'. "Mr. Dagworth also said that Harry is waiting for you there, he and Thomas Flooed back to the house."

"Alright," Hermione nodded, standing up and smoothing down the front of her dress, wincing a bit at the stain from the wine– the material was charmed to be resistant to magic and cleaning charms were doing very little to get the stain out of the red material.

"Hermione," Narcissa stepped sideways, blocking her way. The beautiful woman hesitated. "You and Harry... you are safe with him, aren't you?"

"We are." Hermione said, honestly. "I'm certain it it, Narcissa; Thaddeus can't harm us."

"He cannot harm you? Not will not?" Narcissa said, shrewdly.

"You don't think I'd ever take someone's word for granted?" Hermione said, and although she'd said it lightheartedly, Draco inhaled suddenly, loud enough for any in the room to hear. Startled, she turned in time to see the blond's face turn white. "Draco?" She asked, concerned.

"Darling?" Narcissa stepped forwards, worry clear on her beautiful features.

"It's nothing, mother." Draco said, voice slightly choked, "I just remembered something from earlier." Both Hermione and Narcissa looked at him skeptically, but Hermione decided to leave it to Narcissa.

"I'll go get our luggage," she said, "thank you for having us, Narcissa."

"The elves already gathered your belongings, they're waiting in the Floo room." Narcissa said, and she was looking worriedly between them both. "Are you-- are you sure there's nothing you want to tell me? I... I will not share anything that you tell me in confidence."

"It's nothing, mother." Draco repeated, before turning to Hermione and smiling, though the expression was obviously strained. "I'll accompany you to the Floo room." He said, and Hermione nodded, carefully not looking back at the worried eyes she could feel boring into her back as she
and Draco left the kitchen.

"What in the seven hells was that about?" she asked in a hushed voice, as soon as they were out of earshot.

"Wait a moment," Draco said, voice hushed. He didn't say anything else until they reached the Floo room and he closed and locked the door behind them.

"Seriously, what's going on?" Hermione repeated, her hand twitching towards her wand. Draco took a deep breath.

"When you said you wouldn't just take someone's word for granted, it reminded me of something you said previously." He said, "You told us; me, Daphne, and Blaise, that the Dark Lord... that he isn't going to try and kill Harry. Then—then you just said that you wouldn't take someone's word for granted, and if that's true, then why would you take the Dark Lord's word for granted? And before that... before that you said that Thaddeus Dagworth can't hurt you– not won't hurt you, can't hurt you. Hermione... please tell me that Dagworth isn't the Dark Lord!"

Hermione stared at Draco, honestly shocked. The blond looked pale and slightly terrified, and yet she couldn't help but feel utterly impressed by her classmate. She knew Draco wasn't stupid, but this... she hadn't been expecting this, hadn't expected him to be able to piece together the little bits and pieces she and Harry had been leaving behind in their carelessness and figure out Voldemort's identity. Such was the strength of her shock that she couldn't figure out what to say quickly enough, and her silence had been a dead giveaway.

"Fuck." Draco said, looking horrified. "I'm right. You're not telling me I'm wrong. Fuck– the Dark Lord was in my house, and Merlin's hairy arse cheeks, Tracey has a crush on the Dark Lord! And– and you're living with him! What the fuck– how did that even happen? How– how–"

"Shut up!" Hermione ordered, snapping Draco out of his somewhat hysterical rambling. Draco obediently fell silent, though his grey eyes were still wide with horror. "Shit." She muttered, reaching up to agitatedly tuck the curls falling in her face behind her ears. "Look, obviously you can't tell anyone. There's a reason why Vo– the Dark Lord hasn't let his followers know he's back yet, and he can't hurt Harry or I but he can hurt you, and I'm fond enough of you that I'd rather he didn't. So... just pretend you didn't figure it out, alright? We'll be at Hogwarts tomorrow, and I'm pretty sure that Vo– the Dark Lord is going to summon the Inner Circle before the Yule holidays, so just... just stay quiet and keep it to yourself l."

Draco took a deep breath. "Okay, yeah. Yeah. I can do that." He said, pale but determined, pulling himself together enough to give her a look. "You're insane. And I don't mean because of the Dumbledore thing, I mean because you're living in the Dark Lord's house, with the Boy-Who-Lived!"

"And all the Death Eaters from Azkaban," Hermione said sweetly, in revenge for the 'insane' comment. Draco visibly blanched and she laughed, reaching down to pick up her and Harry's luggage, which one of the Malfoy's house elves had thoughtfully shrunk. "See you on the train tomorrow." She said, tossing a handful of Floo powder in the fireplace and stepping the green flames before Draco had time to pull himself back together.

She was still snickering when the Floo spat her out in Riddle Manor, though she stopped when she realized just who was waiting by the fireplace.

"Voldemort," she said, carefully. He was looking at her in a way she couldn't identify, and it was making her uncomfortable. She shifted uneasily under the burning weight of his red-eyed stare,
wanting to draw out her wand but knowing better. She almost let out an audible sigh of relief when
the intensity of Voldemort's gaze lessened, and a smirk crossed his handsome face.

"Very impressive work this evening, Miss Granger." He said, "Tom and Harry are waiting in your
wing." Hermione nodded.

"Thank you." She said, stiffly, and the smirk grew before the Dark Lord turned and left the room.
Letting out a breath that was definitely on the shaky side, Hermione shook off the feeling of
discomfort and made her way to their wing of the manor.

Like Voldemort had indicated, both Tom and Harry were waiting in the living room area of their
wing, but as soon as she stepped inside, she knew something was wrong.

Harry was sitting on one of the couches silently, his knees tucked up under his chin, and he barely
glanced in her direction, mouth twitching into a weak smile, before turning back to face the second
figure in the room.

Tom was holding himself stiffly, and Hermione knew, even before she walked around the
expensive couch, that his eyes were a burning, bloody crimson. "Shit." She muttered, seeing the
wild, barely constrained look on Tom's face, jaw tight and naked rage and hatred visible on his
handsome face. Obviously, the older boy had not reacted well to having to run and hide from
Dumbledore.

"Tom?" She asked, softly.

"Get out of here. Both of you." Tom said, his voice low and cold. Hermione could feel his barely
constrained magic, reaching out and dancing across her skin, dark and heavy and dangerous.

"I've told you I'm not leaving you like this," Harry said, softly, from his position on the couch.
Hermione took a step closer, and Tom's burning gaze snapped over, pinning her in place. She
couldn't help holding her breath, her heart beating faster in her chest.

"I'm not playing around," Tom's voice was a dark warning. "We all know I have a temper, and I am
far too furious to be in control of it right now." Hermione hesitated for a moment then stepped
forwards anyway, stepping into his space. He stood in a move almost too fast for her to catch and
one of his hands snapped forward, catching her wrist in an iron grip, and squeezing hard enough she
knew it was going to leave a bruise. "Hermione," his voice was a dark warning. "You can't trust
me, not right now."

Hermione could understand where he' was coming from– she could see the way he was barely
holding himself together right now, and she knew that what she was doing was stupid, that chances
were it was going to backfire, but Tom meant something to her, he was hers, the way that Harry
was hers, and she stepped forwards into his space when all her instincts were screaming for her to
step backwards and kissed him, kissing up the tense line of his jaw to his ear.

"Fuck me," she whispered and the way she said it was filthy; Tom had a hand tangled in her hair
and a hand on her hip before she could even think about it any further. She kept talking as he
carried her to bed. "Do what you need to do Tom. I trust you, you won't hurt me. I trust you."

The memory got kind of unclear from there. Clothes were removed eventually, her hands were tied
to the bed posts. He gave her bruises, remembered to use a contraceptive spell, and as he entered
her Tom's hands came to rest on her throat. She could taste blood on her lips and he hesitated, but
she nodded, gave him this, and he pressed fingers into her throat as he fucked her dirty. She kept
murmuring "I trust you" over and over, mouthed it when air left her lungs entirely and her vision
went blurred as she started to slide into blackness.

His hands left her neck when he came, and she came a few ragged breaths after him. He untied her hands as they separated, vanished the mess between their legs with a wave of his hand, and she whispered his name harshly into his chest as they went to sleep.

Harry's POV:

"You... you're not coming with us?" Harry asked, stunned. It was the morning they were to set off to Hogwarts, and he and Hermione had been doing their checks to make sure they had everything, and Hermione had gone to pick up the Diary when Tom summoned it across the room, and told them that he had no intention of returning to Hogwarts with them.

Tom's face was eerily blank, and Harry could feel something lurching in his lower stomach, an emotion he carefully didn't try to label because it felt a lot like rejection.

Hermione's face was just as blank as Tom's, but he could see shadows in her eyes, could see the way she was holding herself too stiffly for it to be natural. He wanted to grab onto her hand but restrained himself, not wanting to show weakness to Tom, to show just how much he needed her support right now. He was pretty sure Tom knew how much he was hurting him anyway, but Harry still determinedly blinked back the stinging in his eyes.

"I have more important things to do then attend classes in one of your pockets, or hang around your dorm room waiting for you to return." Tom says, lip curling slightly in derision, and Harry felt like he'd just been winded. A small sound escaped him, one that was suspiciously close to a whimper. "You're young." Tom said, dismissively. "We had some fun, but it's time for you to go along and play with those your own age. I don't have time to mess about with two children anymore– I'll be moving out of this wing by the end of today and into one of my own. Enjoy Hogwarts."

Harry watched Tom turn and walk away, feeling like a thousand daggers were being thrust into his chest and twisted. His breath came in short, painful gasps that left him dizzy and nauseated as he struggled with the urge to run after Tom and force him to stay, but his feet felt like they were encased in cement. Beside him Hermione, with a ring of purple bruises like a collar around her neck, finally unfroze.

"Fine." She spat coldly at Tom's retreating back, reaching out to grab Harry's hand in a grip that was too tight to be comfortable, but he didn't care, just clung tighter. "Let's go, Harry!"

Harry let her drag him, stumbling after her. He only looked back once, giving Tom, who had turned back to face them, a confused, stricken look. The older boy's face was impassive, his crushed violet eyes emotionless. Harry looked away, unshed tears blinding him.

Their trunks were already by the fireplace, shrunken ready. Hermione dropped them both in her satchel before grabbing a handful of Floo powder, her hand still clenched tight to his. The Floo powder turned the flames a brilliant emerald and she stepped into the fireplace, dragging him after her. "Malfoy Manor!" She snapped, her voice icy, and Harry closed his eyes against the dizzying spinning of the Floo, landing neatly on his feet when the fire spat them out in Malfoy Manor.
Narcissa looked surprised as she entered the Floo room, the elves presumably having summoned her after he and Hermione had arrived out of the blue. Harry could see the concern on her face and he had to look down, the lump in his throat too big for him to talk.

"What's the matter?" The blonde witch asked, her voice gentle. Harry swallowed, still looking at his feet, and the sound was louder then he meant it to be. "Oh Harry," he heard Narcissa say, and then soft arms drew him into a hug. Harry, after a small hesitation, carefully wrapped his arms around Narcissa's slim waist. He felt her lips brush against his head, and she was swaying softly, holding him to her. Harry knew he was crying, but he couldn't make himself stop, the gulping sobs that shook his entire frame escaping him without his permission. "Oh love," Narcissa murmured, "Shh, shh, I've got you. I've got you, Harry."

It took a long time for his tears to dry. Narcissa didn't try to pull away even once, just held him as he choked out sobs. There was a hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach, and it felt like there was this—this hole in his chest, and an invisible hand was wringing his heart and ripping his lungs to shreds.

He just didn't understand. He loved Tom, he loved him so, so much. He had sacrificed his innocence and his morals, for the older boy. One day he had planned on giving him his virginity. And even though she didn't say it, Harry knew that the small part of Hermione still capable of love had loved Tom too. Even last night she had comforted him last night, when Harry had been lost as to what to do, she had opened herself up to him, and Harry already knew what a devastating impact this was going to have on her. He could practically feel her building up her walls, preparing to distance herself emotionally from everyone, so that she couldn't be hurt like this again, couldn't go from feeling so free and so happy to shrinking back into a hollow body, lost, lacking and defeated.

His mood didn't change, even when Draco arrived and gave him a concerned look, even when they once again took the Floo, this time to Kings Cross.

The rain was pouring down heavily as they arrived at Platform Nine and Three Quarters, and they got soaked making the journey from the Floo station to the gleaming scarlet steam engine, clouds of steam billowing from it, through which the many Hogwarts students and parents on the platform appeared like dark ghosts. Harry listlessly followed Draco, Hermione holding his hand once again, as the blond boy lead the way to their usual compartment. By the time they'd stowed their luggage, the pistons were hissing loudly and the Hogwarts Express began to move.

"What the hell happened to you two?" Was the first thing Blaise asked, when he entered the cabin, Tracey and Daphne alongside him. The Italian then neatly dodged Daphne's elbow, hastily sitting in the space between Draco and the window, out of the pretty young girl's reach.

"We received bad news." Hermione said, her harsh voice very, very clear in its message that she did not want to talk about it. Blaise, very wisely, didn't try to push.

Harry spent most of the train journey lying down across the seat with his eyes closed and his head in Hermione's lap. She had her fingers absently tangled in his hair, and he desperately tried not to think about what they might have been doing if Tom were here— he could so clearly remember journeys on the Hogwarts Express reading and laughing and messing around with the older boy while Hermione rolled her eyes at them.

The idea that he may never get to be with Tom like that again, that he might never see the older boy lounge back against a chair and sigh dramatically, watch him genuinely smile (although all his genuine smiles tended to have an underlying emotion— usually triumph or amusement or something that was wicked and filthy), might never touch him or kiss him again... Harry rolled over so he was face down on her lap and none of the others could see him cry.
When the Hogwarts Express slowed down at last and finally stopped in the pitch-darkness of Hogsmeade station, Harry felt more pieced together then before. He still felt the sick, twisting feeling in the pit of his stomach, but he no longer felt so brittle that he might shatter to pieces if someone even looked at him wrong.

As the train doors opened, there was a rumble of thunder overhead and they all left the train with heads bent and eyes narrowed against the downpour. The rain was now coming down so thick and fast that it was as though buckets of ice-cold water were being emptied repeatedly over their heads.

"All righ', Harry?" Hagrid bellowed, and Harry squinted through the rain to see a gigantic silhouette at the far end of the platform waving at him. "See yeh at the feast if we don' drown!"

First years traditionally reached Hogwarts Castle by sailing across the lake with Hagrid, and looking at the torrential downpour Harry found himself thankful that it wasn't him out there as he waved weakly back at Hagrid.

"I would not fancy crossing the lake in this weather," Draco muttered fervently to him, all of them shivering as they inched slowly along the dark platform with the rest of the crowd to where the hundred or so horseless stagecoaches that always took the students above first year up to the castle stood. Harry squinted ahead at them, the shape of the carriages looking odd and deformed through the dark and the heavy rain, and then did a double take.

The coaches were no longer horseless. There were creatures standing between the carriage shafts. If he had to give them a name, he supposed he would have called them horses, though there was something reptilian about them, too. They were completely fleshless, their black coats clinging to their skeletons, of which every bone was visible. Their heads were dragonish, and their pupil-less eyes white and staring. Wings sprouted from each wither– vast, black leathery wings that looked as though they ought to belong to giant bats. Standing still and silent, the creatures looked eerie and sinister. Harry could not understand why the coaches were being pulled by these horrible horses when they were quite capable of moving along by themselves.

"What the hell are those?" he hissed and Blaise made a surprised sound from beside him.

"You can see them?" the Italian asked.

"It's hard not to!" Harry spluttered as he reluctantly walked closer to the things.

"What are you two on about?" grumbled Draco, who looked wet, sulky and now horribly confused.

"The thestrals." Hermione spoke up, and Harry was pretty sure that was the most she'd spoken in the last six hours.

"The what?" He asked her, confused.

"Thestrals." Repeated Hermione. "I'm not surprised you haven't heard about them, they're considered very bad luck."

"Why?" Harry felt even more confused then before she'd said anything, and now he felt extremely wary too about climbing into one of the coaches.

"Because you can only see them if you've seen death," Blaise said quietly, and Harry finally understood the odd looks he was getting. Because now all of them standing there knew that somewhere between the start of the last school year and the start of this one, he'd seen someone die.
Nobody else said a word as the coach door shut with a snap, and a few moments later, with a great lurch, the long procession of carriages was rumbling and splashing its way up the track toward Hogwarts.

Through the gates, flanked with statues of winged boars, and up the sweeping drive the carriages trundled, swaying dangerously in what was fast becoming a gale. Leaning against the window, Harry could see Hogwarts coming nearer, its many lighted windows blurred and shimmering behind the thick curtain of rain. Lightning flashed across the sky as their carriage came to a halt before the great oak front doors, which stood at the top of a flight of stone steps. People who had occupied the carriages in front were already hurrying up the stone steps into the castle. Harry, Hermione, Blaise, Daphne and Tracey jumped down from their carriage and dashed up the steps too, looking up only when they were safely inside the cavernous, torch-lit entrance hall, with its magnificent marble staircase.

"Blimey," Harry could hear Ron Weasley up ahead exclaiming, shaking his head and sending water everywhere, inconsiderate dog. "If that keeps up the lake's going to overflow. I'm soak--ARRGH!"

A large, red, water-filled balloon had dropped from out of the ceiling onto Weasley's head and exploded. Drenched and sputtering, Weasley staggered backwards, smacking into a spluttering Draco, just as a second water bomb dropped--narrowly missing Hermione, it burst at Harry's feet, sending a wave of cold water over his sneakers into his socks. People all around them shrieked and started pushing one another in their efforts to get out of the line of fire. Harry looked up and saw, floating twenty feet above them, Peeves the Poltergeist, a little man in a bell-covered hat and orange bow tie, his wide, malicious face contorted with concentration as he took aim again.

"PEEVES!" yelled an angry voice. "Peeves, come down here at ONCE!"

Professor McGonagall, Deputy Headmistress and head of Gryffindor House, had come dashing out of the Great Hall; she skidded on the wet floor and grabbed Hermione around the neck to stop herself from falling.

"Ouch--sorry, Miss Granger--" Harry was amused by the fact McGonagall seemed to literally pale when she realized who it was she'd grabbed on to. Hermione was massaging her throat, glaring at the woman. Harry hastily stepped forwards and fixed the collar on her robes, as it had been dislodged enough that he could see the collar of purple bruises, bruises shaped like fingers, too old to have been inflicted by McGonagall and too deep.

McGonagall, having recovered, turned her attention back to the poltergeist. "Peeves, get down here NOW!" she barked, straightening her pointed hat and glaring upward through her square-rimmed spectacles.

"Not doing nothing!" cackled Peeves, lobbing a water bomb at several fifth-year girls, who screamed and dived into the Great Hall. "Already wet, aren't they? Little squirts! Wheeeeeeeeewwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwww
"Not you, Mr. Potter, Miss Granger," she said, looking genuinely apologetic. Hermione looked furious, her usually bushy hair plastered against her scalp and her face looked white from the cold.

"I am really not in the mood for this," she said, her voice at a tone Harry recognized automatically as dangerous, her face twisted in an ugly scowl.

Hermione had a whole catalogue of scowls used for a variety of occasions that Harry had decided to try teach himself. So far he'd mastered 'mildly annoyed', 'I'd move now if I were you' and 'you really don't want to mess with me'. He was having trouble with a few of the worst ones, such as 'if I was allowed to maim you, I would' and 'you are going to suffer a prolonged and painful death any second now'. This particular scowl was closer to the latter then the former, and Harry was expecting McGonagall to take points off, but the woman seemed genuinely sorry that she was dragging them, once again, to the Headmaster's office.

"Will Professor Snape be there?" he asked, squeezing Hermione's hand in what was either comfort or a silent plea for her to not make things worse– probably both.

McGonagall drew herself up to her full height, a scowl of her own on her face. "Professor Dumbledore thought his presence wouldn't be necessary, but I pointed out as your Head of House he has the full right to be present. We're collecting him on our way."

Harry blinked at the Deputy Headmistress in shock. Even Hermione had stilled, her face going very blank as she looked across to McGonagall, a sign, Harry knew, of her surprise.

"We'll see you guys later in the hall," he said to Draco, Blaise, Daphne and Tracey, who were all a silent presence behind them. Blaise looked like he wanted to protest but Daphne touched his elbow.

"Of course. We'll save you seats." She said.

"Thanks Daph," he told her, before he and Hermione started to follow McGonagall. She lead them to a room he hadn't been in before, a sort of ante-chamber that seemed to lead off into the Great Hall, near the table where all the professors sat.

"Wait here while I collect Professor Snape," McGonagall instructed, before sweeping through the door.

"She's acting weird." He commented to Hermione, who was looking after the Deputy Headmistress with narrow eyes.

"She is. I don't like it."

"She's been nice to us– and she's helping us, against Dumbledore." Harry pointed out. Hermione scowled.

"I still don't like it." Harry sighed but knew better then to keep going on– when she was upset, Hermione often got angry, and right now she was very upset. There was no point in trying to have a conversation with her while she wasn't in the right headspace to listen.

Of course, thinking about why Hermione was so upset had him sinking back into misery again, a heavy sort of grief that ripped and tore at him, making him wonder if it would ever fade, or if it would at least numb. Was it heartbreak, he was feeling? Or was it loss?

Whatever it was, amidst the grief was an acute sense of betrayal. He felt betrayed by Tom, who he had trusted, who Hermione had trusted, with their hearts and with their love, and who had just
thrown it all back at them. At least he had Hermione— he knew that she would never leave him. Ever.

A furious looking Snape stormed into the antechamber, McGonagall close behind him. His dark eyes swept over them both, then narrowed. A swish of his wand had Harry letting out a relieved sound as the water evaporated from his robes, although his socks were still soaked. "Thanks sir." He said, quietly. Hermione didn't say anything, but her icy expression had thawed slightly.

"I believe we have a visit to the Headmaster's office to make." Snape said, his eyes flicking over them both again. His lips thinned into a displeased line, a reaction Harry guessed to the state he and Hermione were in. He hoped their Head of House would blame it on Dumbledore, but he had a feeling that once their annual start of term yelling session with Dumbledore was over, Snape was going to corner them both and demand to know if they were alright.

Harry didn't let go of Hermione's hand as the four of them made their way up to Dumbledore's office. "Sour lemons." Snape spat at the gargoyles, which hastily jumped aside, likely fearing it was about to be blasted apart by an enraged Snape. Harry almost pitied Dumbledore, because their Head of House was very visibly not happy about the Headmaster trying to leave him out of whatever it was that was about to go down.

He was pretty sure that Snape would have completely disregarded the fact he and Hermione were present and started yelling at Dumbledore, when the man stopped suddenly, nearly causing Harry and Hermione to walk into his back.

"Minister Fudge," Snape said, his voice sounding slightly strangled. Harry's eyes widened and he stepped around from behind Snape and almost started gaping as he saw the Merlin-damned Minister of Magic sitting across from Dumbledore's desk. His stomach sank as he saw the pleasant expression on Dumbledore's face, and he knew that whatever was about to happen wasn't going to be anything good.

He felt slightly better when he saw the quickly hidden annoyance in Dumbledore's eyes when the Headmaster saw how many people had just entered his office, but that feeling drained very quickly when the old man spoke.

"Ah, Severus, Minerva. May I ask what young Harry is doing here?" he questioned with a cheery smile that didn't reach his eyes.

What he was doing here? Shouldn't it be Hermione's presence he was objecting to? Harry thought, anxiously, and Hermione's grip on his hand had tightened to the point where he couldn't feel his own fingers.

"What is this about, Headmaster?" Snape asked, and Fudge gave them all a cheerful smile.

"It's quite the happy occasion!" he said, looking very pleased with himself. "Quite the cause for celebration, what with the you-know-what," he winked at Snape and McGonagall, neither of whom looked impressed, "and now with this exciting affair!"

"What are you talking about?" Snape asked through gritted teeth.

"Albus has decided to adopt young Hermione, here, after learning about the tragic loss of her parents." Fudge said, like he was expecting Hermione to start squealing in excitement, or something. Harry felt cold, and Hermione's expression had turned murderous.

"I don't need to be adopted," she said through gritted teeth.
"It's alright, my girl," Fudge said, with a kind smile, "the paperwork is practically all finished, this is just a formality and I couldn't resist missing meeting the new Dumbledore heir."

"No, I mean I don't need to be adopted, because my family has recently found me." Hermione said, loudly. Harry tried not to let his confusion show, concentrating instead on the intense relief he felt that Hermione seemed to have some type of plan ready. "My mother, it turns out, was a squib, and her brother recently tracked me down." Hermione said, ignoring Dumbledore entirely to look straight at the Minister. "I've been staying with him over the holidays, and he plans on, amongst other things, repaying the school the money for my tuition from when they thought I was an orphan. He hasn't formally applied for custody of me yet, but we were going to have the paperwork filed over Yule— it was going to be a mixed present for Thaddeus and I."

Harry carefully didn't start choking, but it was a near thing when he heard Hermione claim the bloody Dark Lord was going to adopt her. He really, desperately hoped that this was something she had discussed with Voldemort, because he had no idea how the man would react to this if she hadn't.

"Thaddeus? As in Thaddeus Dagworth?" Fudge asked, his eyes looking like they were about to pop out of his head.

"Yes, my uncle." Hermione nodded. "He tracked me down, at the end of last year, and explained everything to me. He didn't learn about my mother's death until his recent return to Britain, which was why he hadn't found me sooner."

"Well... if this is true, then I suppose there's no need for you to be adopted after all." Fudge said, and Harry peered over the Minister's shoulder and tried not to grin at the thunderous look on Dumbledore's face. "I'll need it to be made official before Yule, as legal proceedings have already been put into motion with the Headmaster's generous offer to give you a home, but seeing as Thaddeus is a blood relative, his claim supersedes Albus's, so if the paperwork is filed within eleven days then after three days of processing you'll legally be a Dagworth."

"I'll contact my uncle first thing tomorrow morning." Hermione said, and Fudge beamed at her.

"Yes, marvelous, please pass along my congratulations and let him know that if he hands the paperwork in to me personally I'll make sure to put a rush on it." He winked gaudily at her, and Hermione gave him her sweetest smile.

"Thank you, sir— that's awfully kind of you." She said, ducking her chin 'shyly'. Fudge chuckled.

"Ah, what's a small favor between friends," He said.

"That's so generous— I can see why Lucius speaks so highly of you, sir," Hermione said, oh-so sweetly, peering up at the Minister from under her eyelashes. Harry was amused to practically see Fudge preen, puffing up his chest.

"Well, I must be off— lots of important work to do, running our country," he said, tipping his lime-green bowler hat at them before making his way over to Dumbledore's fireplace. "Ministry of Magic!" he announced, stepping into the green flames and disappearing.

"Well that backfired on you," Hermione said coldly, and all traces of sweet shyness gone, replaced by icy loathing as she glared at the Headmaster. "Anything else you want to try?"

Dumbledore steepled his fingers, resting his elbows on his desk and leaning forwards. "You're walking a very dangerous path, Miss Granger." He said, his voice just as cold as hers had been. "I
am trying to save you, but I'm starting to wonder if that's even possible, or if you're already too Dark."

"Dumbledore!" McGonagall exclaimed, outraged, storming forwards, sweeping Hermione behind her with an arm. Hermione stumbled back slightly, and he shared a stunned look with her. "That is unacceptable!" McGonagall practically snarled at the Headmaster, looking every part as fierce as a lioness protecting her cubs. "As I can no longer trust you to be civilized and impartial around Miss Granger, anything you wish to say to her you will pass on to me and I will speak with her in your place. As Deputy Headmistress of this school, it is my responsibility to protect these students, even if it's from you. Miss Granger, Mr. Potter," McGonagall turned around and nodded sharply at them. "Professor Snape will now accompany you back to the Great Hall, and tomorrow, once classes have finished, you need to meet me in my office."

When she turned back around to face Dumbledore in a clear dismissal of them, Harry wasted no time dragging Hermione after him, back down the revolving staircase.

He felt a keen sense of relief when the gargoyle jumped back into place behind them, locking them from Dumbledore's office—something he was very glad to be.

Snape was the one who spoke first. "As you have just witnessed, Minerva can be a valuable ally."
He said, and Harry glanced up at his Head of House, who looked very grim. "You would do well not to alienate her tomorrow."

"She seems much more tolerable." Hermione allowed, and Snape nodded.

"Indeed. I hope that you were speaking the truth, when you said Mr. Dagworth will file for custody of you. If he does not, Dumbledore can and will gain guardianship over you."

"We have discussed it previously," Hermione said, stiffly. "And he will want Dumbledore as my guardian even less then I want the old bastard as my guardian, so I have no doubt he will back my play."

"Good." Snape nodded, and Harry let out a sigh of relief and hoped that the evening didn't have any other surprises in store.
Part Four: The Goblet of Fire - Chapter XXXVIII

CHAPTER XXXVIII:

Harry's POV:

Harry was glad to finally reach the Great Hall, which looked its usual splendid self, decorated for the start-of-term feast. Golden plates and goblets gleamed by the light of hundreds and hundreds of candles, floating over the tables in midair. The four long House tables were packed with chattering students; at the top of the Hall, the staff sat along one side of a fifth table, facing their pupils. It was much warmer in here. Harry and Hermione walked past the Gryffindors, the Ravenclaws, and the Hufflepuffs, and sat down with the rest of the Slytherins at the far side of the Hall, in the seats saved for them next to Daphne and Tracey.

"You two alright?" Blaise asked, his dark eyes sweeping over them both, as if searching for injuries, or at least any sign that things were amiss.

"Been better." Harry said, taking off his sneakers and emptying them of water. "Has the Sorting started yet?"

"No, McGonagall and Dumbledore aren't here. Sprout's having to look after all the firsties."

"Yes well, they might be a while. When we left McGonagall was tearing Dumbledore a new arsehole." Hermione snorted. Blaise whistled.

"She's changed her tune– I thought she hated you."

"She did." Hermione said, frowning. "I'm not sure what's changed, but something has. We're meeting her tomorrow, so we'll find out then, I suppose. She's set up a new policy, banning Dumbledore from having any contact with me."

"Did he yell at you for stabbing him with the broken wineglass?" Draco asked, causing Blaise to choke while taking a sip of water, and Theo had to whack him on the back. Tracey and Daphne were both laughing, and even Parkinson looked amused.

"Worse," Hermione said, with a genuine shudder. "He tried to adopt me– had Fudge there and everything with paperwork."

"The fuck?" Blaise said, loudly, gaining several glares by the professors on the end of the staff table nearest them who overheard his swearing.

"Don't worry, she already had a plan in place." Harry assured them, when it looked like Hermione was too pissed to explain. "Her, er, uncle is filing for custody."

Their Slytherin friends were all still unaware of the fact Hermione was a muggleborn, a lie that Harry would be very happy if it was never, ever exposed– ever. Despite his quite reasonable anxiety about bloody Voldemort play-acting as Hermione's uncle, he was pleased that Hermione would now have "evidence" that she wasn't a Muggleborn.

"Her uncle?" Parkinson practically pounced on his words, like he knew she would. "I thought you
"He tracked me down. Turns out my mother was a squib. He didn't even know I existed until recently." Hermione said, and Harry was confused by her eyes flicking over to Draco's before she said, almost reluctantly, "Thaddeus Dagworth got into contact with me two years ago."

It was Draco's turn to choke, though he didn't even have the excuse of having been drinking something. Instead he just looked... well, his expression was something between horror, terror and awe. Harry turned to Hermione, raising an eyebrow, while Theo thumped Draco's back and Blaise filled up a goblet with water and pushed it into the blond's hand.

"He knows." Hermione muttered, her voice low enough so only he heard her. Harry's eyes bugged out.

"He knows who 'Thaddeus' really is?" he asked in a strained whisper.

"I didn't tell him, he figured it out." Hermione grimaced. "We weren't careful enough."

"Why didn't you ever say anything?" Demanded Parkinson to Hermione, once Draco had finally stopped coughing and she could talk with having to raise her voice in order to be heard from across the table.

"It wasn't something I particularly felt I needed to pass around." Hermione said, with a frown. "If it wasn't for Dumbledore, you still wouldn't know. So just... don't spread it around, alright?"

"Everyone in Slytherin will be even nicer to you then they've been since they decided you and Harry were the Heirs of Slytherin," Tracey pointed out. Draco started wheezing again, and Harry groaned into his hands. He knew now that to Draco them being the Heirs was as good as confirmed--after all it was common knowledge in Slytherin that Voldemort was the last Heir of Slytherin, and if Draco thought that Hermione was related to him... well, this was a bloody nightmare, and he cursed Dumbledore for creating this mess. He'd spent the better half of the past two years trying to convince his Housemates he wasn't the Heir, and now that was all gone down the drain.

"I can't see a new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher," Hermione said, very obviously changing the subject, and Harry was relieved when everyone went along with it. He even looked up himself to search the staff table-- they had never yet had a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher who had lasted more than three terms, and there was definitely no new face there.

"Maybe they couldn't get one," suggested Daphne, "the track record is awful-- in the past forty years now, they've never had a teacher stay longer then a year without something awful happening to them if they don't retire by the end of the year."

"Forty years?" Harry asked, startled. "So it hasn't just been us that have been so unlucky?"

"My father says he thinks the position has a nasty jinx on it," Parkinson said, leaning forwards eagerly. "When he was in his fifth year at Hogwarts, in 1955, the professor who had taught there for the last decade decided to retire. An old Head Boy had a job interview, and apparently Dumbledore turned him down and the man was livid. The wizard who was given the job disappeared over the summer holidays and nobody ever saw him again. The next one fell off one of the staircases, at the end of the year, and broke his neck. The one after that was trampled by a herd of abraxan that the school used to keep on the grounds to pull the carriages. Father graduated after that, but he said that there still hasn't been a professor who's lasted longer then a year."
"There's only so many people out there even qualified to teach defence," Hermione said, thoughtfully, "and with such an awful track record, I can't imagine any of them actually wanting to. Explains why the first two we had were so pathetic. Lupin was good."

"He was a werewolf," Parkinson said, with a shudder and Harry turned angrily to her.

"And?" he asked, heatedly. "He took wolfsbane every month, and he never hurt anyone! He was the best DADA professor we've had, everyone said that– and he might have been a Gryffindor when he was at school, but he never favored them, or was unfair to us because we're Slytherins! And he's my friend!"

"As a member of the most ostracised House at Hogwarts, I thought you'd be more accepting of werewolves," Hermione said, coolly, looking down at Parkinson, her lip curling in disdain. "I suppose I was... mistaken." Harry gave Parkinson a final glare before pointedly turning away from her.

Blaise was the one who broke the awkward silence that had descended over their group.

"McGonagall and Dumbledore are finally here," he said, sounding relieved. Harry looked up to see that indeed, the two professors had at last entered the Great Hall. Dumbledore sat down at his ridiculous throne-like chair while Professor McGonagall crossed briskly to the three-legged stool where the Sorting Hat had been placed.

"I apologize everyone for the wait." She addressed the school, and Harry could still see two pink spots on the Deputy Headmistress's cheeks that he recognized as signs of her anger, and he was glad that for once that anger wasn't directed at either him or Hermione. "Now, without any further delay, let us begin the Sorting." McGonagall said loudly, and the doors of the Great Hall opened and silence fell. Professor Sprout lead the long line of first years up to the top of the Hall, and if Harry thought that he had been wet before Snape had spelled him and Hermione dry– the older Slytherin students also seemed to have helped the others at their table all dry off too– it was nothing to how the first years looked. They appeared to have swum across the lake rather than sailed. All of them were shivering with a combination of cold and nerves as they filed along the staff table and came to a halt in a line facing the rest of the school– all of them except the smallest of the lot, a boy with mousy hair who looked vaguely familiar and was wrapped in what Harry recognized as Hagrid's moleskin overcoat. The coat was so big for him that it looked as though he were draped in a furry black circus tent. His small face protruded from over the collar, looking almost painfully excited. As he lined up with his terrified-looking peers, he caught the eye of someone at the Gryffindor table, gave a double thumbs-up, and mouthed, 'I fell in the lake!' He looked positively delighted about it and Harry decided he must have been dropped on the head as a baby. He'd be shocked if the boy ended up anywhere other then Gryffindor, with all the other brain-damaged idiots of the school.

Harry clapped along with the rest of the Hall when the Sorting Hat sung its annual song, then glanced over at Dumbledore as McGonagall started reading out names of the first years. The tips of the Headmaster's long, thin fingers were together and the old man was resting his chin on them, staring up at the ceiling through his half-moon spectacles with a calculating expression on his face. Harry glanced up at the ceiling too. It was enchanted to look like the sky outside, and he had never seen it look this stormy. Black and purple clouds were swirling across it, and as another thunderclap sounded outside, a fork of lightning flashed across it. He couldn't help a shudder as he thought about what Dumbledore could be planning now– the old man must be furious that he'd been thwarted, and Harry desperately hoped that Snape and McGonagall would continue shielding them from the Headmaster's machinations.
Malcolm Baddock was the first to be sorted into Slytherin, and Harry clapped along with the rest of his House, fairly certain that he recognized the surname from somewhere. Probably from one of the Death Eaters who had been freed from Azkaban were currently living at Riddle Manor.

When it was his turn to be Sorter, the tiny first year in Hagrid's moleskin coat staggered forwards up to the stool, tripping twice as he did so. At the same time, Hagrid sidled into the hall from the door behind the teachers' table, the one that Harry now knew lead to that ante-chamber. With his long, wild, tangled black hair and beard, Hagrid cut a rather alarming figure— a misleading impression, as Harry was very aware that Hagrid possessed a very kind nature. The large man winked over at him as he sat down at the end of the staff table and watched the tiny kid put on the Sorting Hat. The rip at the brim opened wide to announce Gryffindor, and when Harry noticed the widely beaming kid sit down beside a kid with a camera, he finally recognized why he looked familiar. The kid's brother was Colin Creevey, a weird Gryffindor in the year below Harry who had once asked to take a bloody photo of him.

The Sorting seemed to drag on, boys and girls with varying degrees of fright on their faces moving one by one to the three-legged stool, the line dwindling slowly.

'Pritchard, Graham' was the last student to be sorted into Slytherin, and when the final student—a newly-Sorted Hufflepuff— hurried over to join his new table Blaise let out a sigh of relief.

"Thank Merlin, I'm starving!" he said.

Dumbledore stood then and spread his arms in welcome, smiling around at the students. Harry very carefully looked at a point over the Headmaster's shoulder to avoid accidentally making eye-contact.

"I have only two words to say to you," he told them, his deep voice echoing around the Hall. "Tuck in."

"Wanker." Hermione muttered, loud enough for him to hear even over the chatting that erupted as the empty dishes magically filled. Harry snorted in agreement, reaching for the toasted bread.

Hermione pulled a slight face, leaning away from the grand spread. "I don't think I'm hungry tonight." She said, and with the anger finally drained from her face, Harry thought she looked tired and sad.

"You sure?" he asked, quietly. She nodded and he looked at her unhappily. "Promise you'll eat tomorrow," he said, and she nodded again.

Harry's appetite was weak too, but he persisted in eating a decent-sized portion— he was determined to grow this year, which meant that he needed to eat full meals. He hated how years of being starved by the Dursleys had left him stunted compared to the other boys in his year level, making him short enough that he could be mistaken as a third year, but he had grown an inch over the summer holidays, and he planned to keep eating healthily enough to grow at least another five before the next school year.

The rain was still drumming heavily against the high, dark glass. Another clap of thunder shook the windows, and the stormy ceiling flashed, illuminating the golden plates as the remains of the first course vanished and were replaced, instantly, with puddings.

"Sure you don't want something, Hermione?" said Draco, picking up a plate of treacle tart and deliberately wafting its smell toward her. "You love treacle tart! And there's chocolate gateau and— ooh, is that black forest cake?"
Hermione gave Draco a look so reminiscent of Professor Snape that the blond immediately gave up. Harry shot him a smile when Hermione wasn't watching, grateful for the other boy's attempts to try and get Hermione to eat something. He guessed that Narcissa had asked her son to keep an eye on them both for her, and it made him feel warm inside that she cared. She was the closest thing he had to a mother, and Harry thought that the swell of warmth in his chest when he thought of her was probably love.

When the puddings had all been demolished and the last crumbs had faded off the plates, leaving them sparkling clean, Dumbledore got to his feet again. The buzz of chatter filling the Hall ceased almost at once, so that only the howling wind and pounding rain could be heard.

"So!" said Dumbledore, smiling around at them all. Harry refrained from glaring at his stupid cheerful-looking face. "Now that we are all fed and watered I must once more ask for your attention, while I give out a few notices. Mr. Filch, our caretaker, has asked me to tell you that the list of objects forbidden inside the castle has this year been extended to include Screaming Yo-yos, Fanged Frisbees, and Ever-Bashing Boomerangs. The full list comprises of four hundred and thirty-seven items, I believe, and can be viewed in Mr. Filch's office, if anybody would like to check it."

The corners of Dumbledore's mouth twitched. He continued, "As ever, I would like to remind you all that the forest on the grounds is out-of-bounds to students, as is the village of Hogsmeade to all below third year. It is also my painful duty to inform you that the Inter-House Quidditch Cup will not take place this year."

If Harry thought that he hated Dumbledore before, the feeling practically doubled now. "What?" He gasped in pure horror. He looked around at his fellow members of the Quidditch team. They were mouthing soundlessly at Dumbledore, apparently too appalled to speak. The old bastard went on, "This is due to an event that will be starting in October, and continuing throughout the school year, taking up much of the teachers' time and energy, but I am sure you will all enjoy it immensely. I have great pleasure in announcing that this year at Hogwarts–"

But at that moment, there was a deafening rumble of thunder and the doors of the Great Hall banged open.

A man stood in the doorway, leaning upon a long staff, shrouded in a black traveling cloak. Every head in the Great Hall swiveled toward the stranger, suddenly brightly illuminated by a fork of lightning that flashed across the ceiling. He lowered his hood, shook out a long mane of grizzled, dark gray hair, then began to walk up toward the teachers' table.

A dull clunk echoed through the Hall on his every other step. He reached the end of the top table, turned right, and limped heavily toward Dumbledore. Another flash of lightning crossed the ceiling and Harry bit back a gasp.

The lightning had thrown the man's face into sharp relief, and it was a face unlike any he had ever seen. It looked as though it had been carved out of weathered wood by someone who had only the vaguest idea of what human faces are supposed to look like, and was none too skilled with a chisel. Every inch of skin seemed to be scarred. The mouth looked like a diagonal gash, and a large chunk of the nose was missing. But it was the man's eyes that made him frightening.

One of them was small, dark, and beady. The other was large, round as a coin, and a vivid, electric blue. The blue eye was moving ceaselessly, without blinking, and was rolling up, down, and from side to side, quite independently of the normal eye– and then it rolled right over, pointing into the back of the man's head, so that all they could see was whiteness.
The stranger reached Dumbledore. He stretched out a hand that was as badly scarred as his face, and Dumbledore shook it, muttering words Harry couldn't hear. He seemed to be making some inquiry of the stranger, who shook his head unsmilingly and replied in an undertone. Dumbledore nodded and gestured the man to the empty seat on his right-hand side.

The stranger sat down, shook his mane of dark gray hair out of his face, pulled a plate of sausages toward him, raised it to what was left of his nose, and sniffed it. He then took a small knife out of his pocket, speared a sausage on the end of it, and began to eat. His normal eye was fixed upon the sausages, but the blue eye was still darting restlessly around in its socket, taking in the Hall and the students.

"May I introduce our new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher?" said Dumbledore brightly into the silence. "Professor Moody."

It was usual for new staff members to be greeted with applause, but none of the staff or students clapped except Dumbledore and Hagrid, who both put their hands together and applauded, but the sound echoed dismally into the silence, and they stopped fairly quickly. Everyone else seemed too transfixed by Moody's bizarre appearance to do more than stare at him.

Harry noticed, very quickly, the stiffness surrounding him. Practically every Slytherin at the table looked mutinous, angry and-- and this was most horrifying of all-- afraid.

"Daph, who is he?" Harry asked under his breath to the girl on his left. On Daphne's other side, Tracey was gripping onto her best friend's arm, her body trembling and actual tears welling up in her eyes. Daphne was glaring up at Moody with utter loathing on her pretty face.

"He's Mad-Eye Moody, a retired Auror-- and the reason behind half the cells in Azkaban being occupied before the mass breakout." She said, tightly. "He..." she paused, wrapping an arm around Tracey, who now had tears dripping down her face, and pulling the other girl in closer to her. Tracey made a whimpering sound and buried her face into Daphne's shoulder. "He killed one of her brothers." Daphne said, quietly, and there was rage glittering in her blue eyes. "He killed a lot of Death Eaters, under the farce of attempting to arrest them. Half the people on this table have lost family members to that bastard, either to Azkaban or death."

"What the hell is Dumbledore playing at, letting him teach here?" Harry asked, aghast. Daphne's lips were pressed in a tight, thin line, and she didn't need to say anything, Harry already knew what the answer was-- Dumbledore didn't care about the Slytherins. He never had.

A glance up at the staff table showed that Moody seemed totally indifferent to his less-than-warm welcome. Ignoring the jug of pumpkin juice in front of him, he reached again into his traveling cloak, pulled out a hip flask, and took a long draught from it. As he lifted his arm to drink, his cloak was pulled a few inches from the ground, and Harry saw, below the table, several inches of carved wooden leg, ending in a clawed foot. Harry looked further over to the left and saw Snape looked coldly furious, holding himself stiffly and his dark eyes glittering in rage.

Dumbledore cleared his throat.

"As I was saying," he said, smiling at the sea of students before him, most of whom were still gazing transfixed at Mad-Eye Moody, "we are to have the honor of hosting a very exciting event over the coming months, an event that has not been held for over a century. It is my very great pleasure to inform you that the Triwizard Tournament will be taking place at Hogwarts this year."

"You're JOKING!" one of the Weasley twins said loudly from the Gryffindor table.
The tension that had filled the Hall ever since Moody's arrival suddenly broke. Nearly everyone laughed, even a few Slytherins snorted—Harry included—and Dumbledore chuckled appreciatively.

"I am not joking, Mr. Weasley," he said, "though now that you mention it, I did hear an excellent one over the summer about a troll, a hag, and a leprechaun who all go into a bar."

Professor McGonagall cleared her throat loudly.

"Er— but maybe this is not the time... no..." said Dumbledore, "where was I? Ah yes, the Triwizard Tournament... well, some of you will not know what this tournament involves, so I hope those who do know will forgive me for giving a short explanation, and allow their attention to wander freely. The Triwizard Tournament was first established some seven hundred years ago as a friendly competition between the three largest European schools of wizardry: Hogwarts, Beauxbatons, and Durmstrang. A champion was selected to represent each school, and the three champions competed in three magical tasks. The schools took it in turns to host the tournament once every five years, and it was generally agreed to be a most excellent way of establishing ties between young witches and wizards of different nationalities—until, that is, the death toll mounted so high that the tournament was discontinued."

"Death toll?" Hermione looked intrigued, and Harry could almost hear her already plotting to enter Ron Weasley's name. The majority of the students were whispering excitedly to one another, and Harry found himself leaning forwards eagerly.

"There have been several attempts over the centuries to reinstate the tournament," Dumbledore told them all, "none of which has been very successful. However, our own departments of International Magical Cooperation and Magical Games and Sports have decided the time is ripe for another attempt. We have worked hard over the summer to ensure that this time, no champion will find himself or herself in mortal danger. The heads of Beauxbatons and Durmstrang will be arriving with their short-listed contenders in October, and the selection of the three champions will take place at Halloween. An impartial judge will decide which students are most worthy to compete for the Triwizard Cup, the glory of their school, and a thousand Galleons personal prize money."

Harry could see students with their faces lit up at the prospect of such glory and riches, visualizing themselves as the Hogwarts champions. At every House table people were either gazing raptly at Dumbledore, or else whispering fervently to their neighbors. But then Dumbledore spoke again, and the Hall quieted once more.

"Eager though I know all of you will be to bring the Triwizard Cup to Hogwarts," he said, "the heads of the participating schools, along with the Ministry of Magic, have agreed to impose an age restriction on contenders this year. Only students who are of age—that is to say, seventeen years or older—will be allowed to put forward their names for consideration. This—" Dumbledore raised his voice slightly, for several people had made noises of outrage at these words, "is a measure we feel is necessary, given that the tournament tasks will still be difficult and dangerous, whatever precautions we take, and it is highly unlikely that students below sixth and seventh year will be able to cope with them. I will personally be ensuring that no underage student hoodwinks our impartial judge into making them Hogwarts champion. I therefore beg you not to waste your time submitting yourself if you are under seventeen. The delegations from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang will be arriving in October and remaining with us for the greater part of this year. I know that you will all extend every courtesy to our foreign guests while they are with us, and will give your whole-hearted support to the Hogwarts champion when he or she is selected. And now, it is late, and I know how important it is to you all to be alert and rested as you enter your lessons tomorrow morning. Bedtime! Chop chop!"
Dumbledore sat down again and turned to talk to Moody. There was a great scraping and banging as all the students got to their feet and swarmed toward the double doors into the entrance hall.

Harry walked alongside Tracey and Daphne, helping to shield Tracey from any curious eyes. Hermione was silent beside him, and he could practically see the scheming in her eyes. The boys were all chatting excitedly about the Tournament.

They made their way down to the entrance to the Slytherin Common Room, the prefect announcing the newest password—'Ashwinder'.

While students hurried off towards either the boy or girl dorms, Harry hesitated, turning to Hermione. After spending the entire holidays sleeping beside her, he really didn't feel like being apart from her—especially after Tom had... well, as stupid as he felt thinking it, as it felt like the words didn't properly describe the depth of the relationship they'd shared, Tom had broken up with them.

"I'm coming with you." Hermione said, suddenly, and Harry exhaled in relief, before pausing.

"Er, right now?"

"Let them all talk, I don't care." Hermione sighed, leaning against him. She looked worn, her eyes shadowed, and Harry automatically wrapped an arm around her.

"C'mon, you can wear a pair of my pyjamas." He said.

They did get a few strange looks, but he and Hermione were always next to each other, always by the other's side, and no one actually commented.

Even in his dorm-room, Blaise just raised an eyebrow and when Hermione's back was turned Draco made cupping motions over his chest and winked. Harry dragged a finger across his throat in response, causing Blaise and Theo to quietly snicker. Greg and Vince just looked confused—those two were each two bludgers short of a Quidditch match, and Hermione tended to mutter 'inbreeding' whenever she saw them.

Changing into his pyjamas, Harry drew the hangings closed around his bed and got comfy under the blankets, Hermione curled up against him. She pressed her face against his chest, and Harry could feel the fine trembling as she finally allowed herself to cry, silent tears that gradually soaked through his pyjama top. Harry tried not to cry too, just held her tight until they both eventually fell into an emotionally exhausted sleep.

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Severus's POV:

Severus thought he had never been more glad that Minerva was now on his side then he was in this moment.

Alastor 'Mad-Eye' Moody was glaring at him from one of the hideous chintz sofas in Albus's office, electric blue eye fixed unnervingly on him while Severus did his best to ignore the ex-Auror. Minerva stood beside him, her lips pressed in a thin line as she looked down at Albus, still furious with him about the mess from before the Welcome Feast.

Albus really should have known better then to insult Hermione since the girl had unknowingly
earned herself such a fierce protector.

Of course, thinking of that whole situation made him start feeling furious again. The nerve of Albus, trying to gain custody over his student in order to gain a measure of control over her—Severus had never been closer to killing the Headmaster then he had been in that moment.

Minerva making sure he had been present for that colossal cock-up of a situation hadn't been something he'd expected, but he was annoyingly finding himself more and more grateful towards her, and not just for ensuring he had been available to help Hermione this evening should she have needed it, and for then banning Albus from having contact with Hermione, but for her reaction to Moody when the first thing the ex-Auror did when Severus had entered Albus's office was try to disarm him.

The look she'd fixed Moody with could have stripped paint off walls, and her voice had been a snarl when she told the ex-Auror that if he ever attempted to raise his wand against one of the faculty again, she would personally see him brought up on charges.

Her stalwart protection had honestly stunned him into silence, which was why he had yet to speak while Minerva snapped and snarled at the two other men in the room.

"Now, now, Minerva—" Albus kept trying to placate her, though the old man wasn't having much luck. It took him nearly ten minutes to get her to take a seat, though Minerva had pointedly transfigured her own chair for herself and one for him as well, drawing a clear line across the sand.

The next few hours were spent familiarising Moody with the rules of the school and helping the retired Auror plan his first few weeks of classes. Personally, Severus was of the opinion that this entire situation would be a bloody disaster. Already he'd seen just how angry and upset his House was about having Moody as a professor. He was going to have to have a House meeting, and there were at least thirteen students he could think of off the top of his head that he was going to have to talk to individually to ensure they would actually be able to be taught by the ex-Auror. Tracey Davis had barely been able to even look at Moody during the feast, had actually broke down into tears at the table. Severus knew that Moody had killed one of her brothers in front of her when he and a squadron of Aurors stormed the Davis's manor to arrest her three older brothers and her older sister. His student had been two and a half years old at the time, the Dark Lord having just fallen, and Severus wasn't sure how much the girl remembered, but those sorts of traumas that stayed with a person, and he could already predict a struggle in actually getting Davis in the same room as Moody.

It was nearly midnight before Albus dismissed them, and Minerva had given the aged man a final glare before leaving the office. Severus hissed quietly as Moody barged past him, shouldering him roughly out of the way as he did so. He rubbed the place he was entirely certain a bruise was going to form, before pausing at the top of the spiral staircase when Albus spoke his name. With a sinking feeling in his stomach he turned around reluctantly and made his way back across the office, over to the Headmaster's desk.

"I know you're not going to like this, so I'm going to tell you now to allow you time to move past it." Albus said, looking infuriatingly calm, his blue eyes carefully calculating. "There's a reason I asked Alastor to teach this year."

"Well while we're talking about your reasons, care to enlighten me on just why you chose not to warn me about the man who arrested me living at Hogwarts for an entire year?" Severus demanded, slamming both his hands down on Albus's desk rather then allowing them to betray him by trembling.
He loathed Moody— the man was easily as violent as any Death Eater, and just as unhinged as half of them too. The only difference, in Severus's opinion, was that Moody had the backing of the Ministry to go hunt down, hurt and kill his victims. Severus had immediately surrendered to the ex-Auror after Voldemort's fall, when the man had come to arrest him. Moody had then proceeded to curse his unarmed self badly enough that it took him two days of recuperating in St Mungos before he was fit to stand trial. To this very day, Severus still bore faint scars from the ex-Auror.

"I expect there to be no trouble between you and Alastor," Albus warned him, and Severus had to try and breathe past the anger threatening to consume him entirely.

"What is there you need to tell me that's even worse then the nasty shock of having that maniac teach children?" He hissed, between gritted teeth.

"The reason I brought Alastor to Hogwarts is because I want Harry to bond with a positive role-model. Remus did well, but he is too... soft. Alastor knew Harry's parents and he is a known retired Auror who fought Voldemort himself on several occasions. He will be perfect for the boy." Albus looked pleased with himself, and Severus just felt fed-up and exhausted by it all.

"What makes you think Harry would even want to go near him?" He asked tiredly, already knowing he wasn't going to like this answer.

"Because Alastor is going to tutor him for the Triwizard Tournament."

All Severus's tiredness vanished in an instant and he just stared at Dumbledore. "Tell me that I misheard you," he said, flatly, "and that you aren't planning on entering a fourteen year old boy into the Triwizard Tournament."

"He will be the fourth Champion." Albus said, grandly. "With Voldemort no doubt gaining strength, it is now time for me to actively start ensuring Harry is loyal to the Light, the way his parents always wanted him to be."

Harry's parents wanted him to live, Severus thought furiously. He literally had no idea what to say. This was... this was just unbelievable, and there was nothing he could do to prevent this, not when it would immediately be obvious to Albus he was responsible if he tried to stop it.

"You may hate my decision, but I have always had Harry's best interests at heart." Albus said, and Severus had to turn away, unable to stomach even the sight of the old man.

Without another word, he stormed out of the office and made his way straight to Minerva's.

"You look like you need to get blootered." The Scottish woman said bluntly, after she opened her door and took just one look at him.

"If that means get drunk, then my answer is very much so." Severus said grimly.

"You can join the rest of us." Minerva decided with a nod, and Severus was confused for a moment until Minerva ushered him into her office, locking the door behind him with a tap of her wand and then beckoning him to follow her. She led the way into her private quarters, where he had never been before, and to what looked like a sort living space, with a merrily crackling fireplace, a coffee table surrounded by tartan sofas and armchairs, and a tall carved bookshelf that was stacked high. Poppy and Pomona were already sitting down on one of the sofas, both women with glasses of wine in their hands.

"Ah, Severus," Pomona smiled at him, and he couldn't help but feel a touch awkward. He'd never done this before, never spent time with these women outside of the staff room or up at the staff
table. He wasn't sure how or why, but when Minerva ushered him down onto one of the tartan sofas, he had the strangest feeling that somehow he'd just managed to find himself inducted into their circle.

"Wine or brandy?" Poppy asked, her flushed, rosy-pink cheeks indicating that she seemed to have already had a few glasses of her drink of choice.

"Have you got anything stronger?" He asked, after a short, considering pause. Pomona and Poppy both started laughing, and Severus honestly had no idea what to do about the blatant approval he could see in Minerva's eyes.

"I've got a nice Scotch I think you'll like," the woman said decisively, and she was right. He did, indeed, like the Scotch, and four glasses in he was about at the same stage of tipsy-drunkenness as Poppy. Pomona and Minerva were slightly less sloshed then they were, but not by a lot.

"Okay, Severus," Minerva announced, slopping Scotch on the table as she refilled his glass and then absentmindedly pouring some into her half-full wineglass. "Tell us what Albus has done now so we can do as much damage control as we can."

"Don't worry," Pomona added when he hesitated. She had a wry sort of smile on her face that he hadn't seen her wear before. "We know better then to try and stop whatever daft plan our glorious Headmaster has, but we can and we will limit the fallout as much as is possible."

If he was sober he probably wouldn't have said anything, but Severus was well on his way to becoming absolutely pissed and he needed to share the burden Albus had just dumped on his shoulders with someone, and these three women seemed to be it.

"He's entering Harry in the Tournament." He announced grimly, and Pomona actually dropped her glass, which she had been raising to her mouth. Poppy let out a loud groan, covering her face with her hands, and Minerva looked like she was about to murder Albus—her expression was actually remarkably similar to the one Narcissa had worn when she had attempted to stab Lucius that one time. It was uncanny, really.

"That bloody bawbag!" The Transfiguration mistress hissed and spat like a cat whose tail had just been stepped on. "That clarty dobber! That minky minger! I'm gawn-" what she was 'gawn' do to the Headmaster was so creative and described in such explicit detail that Severus found himself looking up at the older witch in blatant admiration. Both Pomona and Poppy broke out into applause when she finally stopped ranting in order to breathe, and Severus automatically joined in.

"Miss Granger isn't the only one capable of making terrifying death threats," sniffed Minerva, her face pink but undeniably proud. The woman then paused. "She still carries those little knives with her, doesn't she?"

"Yes." Admitted Severus, honestly a little afraid to try and lie to her after that. Minerva sighed.

"Well with everything the old codger is throwing in her and Harry's path, I can't begrudge her need for a way to defend herself, just so long as she doesn't use them against a student."

"What is Albus thinking?" Pomona groaned, shaking her head and looking mournfully at her spilt wine before picking up the almost empty wine bottle and taking a sip straight from the bottle. Severus decided that he would never be able to look at any of these women the same way again, and that he couldn't be more pleased about that fact.

"He wants to get Harry to bond with Moody." He said, unable to help the growl in his voice as he
spat out Moody's name. Minerva reached over and patted his shoulder, a bit harder then he thought she intended too, her body slightly off kilter from all the alcohol she had consumed.

"You tell me if he tries anything with you," she ordered, "if he messes with any of my staff or my students then we'll see how he likes been No-Eye Moody!" Pomona started applauding again, and Poppy nodded along.

"I already see far too much of Harry," the medi-witch scowled. "And now Albus wants to enter the poor boy in a competition with students who are three years his elder? Shame on that man! Next time he wants me to do a favour for him, mark my words I will suddenly find myself very busy!"

"We'll help Harry, of course, the four of us," Minerva said decisively, with a firm nod. "Filius will too, if we ask him– I don't want our lad spending any time alone with that man. Alastor is far too unstable for me to feel comfortable with him being alone with a student."

"Thank you." Severus said, and he was grateful, exceedingly so. He'd left Dumbledore's office wanting to be sick, and now he had people on his side, people determined to help Harry survive Dumbledore's plan for him while keeping him away from the ex-Auror.

Maybe, just maybe, this wouldn't be as awful as he thought it would be.

"Do we know what any of the tasks are yet?" Pomona asked.

"Yes." Minerva said, with a wince. "The first task is to take an egg from a nesting dragon."

Severus pushed away his empty Scotch glass and took a page out of Pomona's book, picking up the decanter and taking a large swallow of the burning alcohol straight from it.

He'd been wrong, utterly, tragically, entirely wrong– this was going to be much, much more awful then he thought it would be, and by Merlin he was already dreading it.
CHAPTER XXXIX:

Hermione's POV:

The storm had blown itself out by the following morning, though the ceiling in the Great Hall was still gloomy; heavy clouds of pewter gray swirled overhead as she and Harry sat at the breakfast table, her with a book while Harry had bundled his cloak on the table to use it as a pillow and was snoring softly into it as the two of them waited for Hedwig to return with a reply.

Hermione had been awake since before five, and had been unable to return to sleep so instead she'd used her time to ink out an explanation of Dumbledore's machinations the previous day to the Dark Lord, and what she had then told Fudge, before sneaking out to the owlery to send it off with Hedwig.

It had been earlier on in the summer holidays, around a week after she and Harry first arrived at Riddle Manor, that Voldemort had summoned her to talk and had brought up her orphaned status, voicing concerns of how it could be used against her—well, to be more precise, he had concerns of how it been used against her could have an impact on him.

It had never actually occurred to her before that, that her lack of parents could be used to gain authority over her—a rather egregious oversight upon reflection. Of course, she had known that Dumbledore was ruthless and had very few limits when it came to getting what he wanted, not that the sheeple of the Wizarding world realized this, but she'd never considered that the pureblood wizard would know enough about the muggle child welfare system to actually have the capability to use it against her. She'd never thought to investigate how it worked in the Wizarding world. If she had, she'd have learned that as soon as she was accepted into Hogwarts she fell under the jurisdiction of the British Ministry—muggle laws no longer mattered.

"Miss Granger," a familiar voice greeted her, and she looked up from 'Rutger: Dark Lord or Revolutionary?' to her Head of House. Snape looked like he hadn't slept well, and he was squinting slightly as if he had a headache.

"Interesting choice of reading materials," he noted, nodding down at the biography. Hermione looked down and shrugged. Dark Lord Rutger had hailed from the Netherlands, in the early eighteenth century. He'd overthrown the government through brute force and ruled the Netherlands for nearly a decade, before his decision to try extending his power had resulted in his death at the hands of the French Ministry of Magic. His rule was considered a controversial one, as his ideas were progressive and radical. He'd been labeled as a Dark Lord, and his government had been entirely dismantled, after his death, but the winners wrote the history books, and some of his ideas contained merit, in her opinion. She wasn't the only one to think so, either, but Rutger's use of Dark magic had him labeled a villain.

"An interesting man." She replied to Snape, and the corner of his mouth twitched.

"Indeed."
Harry, stirred by the sound of their talking, sat up yawning, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"Comfortable, Mister Potter?" Drawled Snape and Harry, the clasp of his cloak having left a red mark on his cheek, squinted blearily at him.

"Not really, sir." Snape looked like he wanted to roll his eyes, but instead he nodded at the floating pile of schedules.

"Potter, Granger," he said, and two of the schedules detached themselves from the pile, flying over. Hermione plucked hers from the air and examined it.

"Wonderful," she muttered, pulling a face. "We're outside all morning. Herbology with the Puffs, and Care of Magical Creatures with– goddamnit, we're still with the bloody Gryffindors."

"My condolences." Snape said, and Hermione was pretty sure he was being sincere.

"Double Arithmancy in the afternoon," she said, cheering up slightly.

"Urh," Harry grimaced, looking about as enthusiastic about that as class with Gryffindor.

"Behave. I expect Slytherin to win the House Cup this year." Snape ordered, before turning and crossing over to the stumbling, yawning Slytherin fifth years who'd just entered the hall, the stack of schedules floating after him.

Breakfast finally arrived as more students started trickling into the Great Hall, plates stacked with food magically appearing on the table.

"I hate Arithmancy," Harry said gloomily as he stabbed a piece of toast with his fork. Hermione pushed a pot of raspberry jam, his favorite flavor, over to him in consolation.

"It's better then Divination, at least." She said and Harry grimaced.

"Just."

"Shut up and eat, Harry."

"Only if you do too," Harry countered. "You promised last night that you'd eat breakfast."

"Fine." She pulled a face but reached across the table to ladle porridge into a bowl. Her appetite wasn't any better then it had been yesterday, but she'd cried all the tears she planned on crying last night, and she'd shoved the hurt from Tom ending their relationship into the small compartment at the back of her mind where she locked away the memories that hurt most. She refused to waste any more tears on him.

Draco, Blaise and Theo had just arrived in the Hall when the rustling sound of hundreds of wings filled the air as the post owls came soaring through the open windows carrying the morning mail, circling the tables looking for the people to whom the packages were addressed.

Hermione easily spotted Hedwig, her snowy white feathers standing out amongst the mass of brown and gray. The beautiful owl landed beside her plate and cooed as she imperiously held out her leg, where a small scroll of parchment was tied. Hermione deftly undid the knot and summoned a miniature sausage from the large tureen a few feet down from where they were sitting with a twitch of her finger, catching and handing it to Hedwig. The beautiful snowy owl puffed out her feathers and clicked her beak in thanks, downing the sausage in three quick pecks and then hopping over to nip Harry affectionately before flying off, presumably to the owlery to go sleep.
Hermione, recognizing the flowing script as Voldemort's, unfurled the parchment and scanned the letter. Voldemort had agreed to file the paperwork with the Ministry to formally adopt her, but on one condition: she didn't have to fight for him, but she did have to publically align herself with him– even if he was exposed as Voldemort, even if he waged war against Wizarding Britain.

"Dramatic bastard," she muttered. Harry, who was leaning over his plate to read what the Dark Lord had written, looked concerned.

"This isn't something to take lightly." He said, worried. "It-- it's huge, Hermione. If he," Harry lowered his voice so only she could hear him speaking, "if he starts a war and loses, even if we don't fight for him if we're publically aligned with him then we'll be considered criminals."

"He only wrote that I have to publically align myself with him, not you." Hermione corrected. Harry glared at her.

"Of course I'll be right by your side-- I'll always be by your side." He said, fiercely. Hermione had to swallow before she could speak again, her throat having blocked up with what felt suspiciously like gratitude and the 'l-word'.

"We, then. Harry... I'm not really seeing that we have a choice." She admitted. "If he doesn't adopt me, then Dumbledore will. And for exceedingly obvious reasons, that just isn't an option."

"What about the Malfoys?" Harry asked, his green eyes worried.

"'Thaddeus' is my 'relative'," Hermione said, snorting slightly at the truly preposterous lie. "Officially, his claim supersedes Dumbledore's because of that. If the Malfoys tried to adopt me, then Dumbledore could challenge them in court, because his claim would be just as strong as theirs-- stronger, actually, considering that as an orphan I'm technically considered a ward of Hogwarts, and he's the Headmaster of it."

"God, I hate him." Harry scowled. "When we graduate Hogwarts, let's move to Australia, or something. Somewhere far away from him, and from the whole bloody Wizarding world."

"What do you want to do when we graduate?" Hermione asked curiously, rolling back up the scroll. They'd never actually talked about it, and she wondered if Harry had even considered their future outside Hogwarts. Harry blinked at her.

"I'm not sure." He said, sounding startled by that fact. "I've never really thought about it. What sort of jobs are there in Australia?"

"Er... the same sorts of jobs that there are in Britain, I'd imagine." Hermione said, after a pause. "Though I don't know if it even has a Ministry of Magic. I'd think it would."

"Well, what do you want to do when we graduate?" Harry asked her, and she smiled at him.

"I want to work as a Curse Breaker for Gringotts."

"Like Bill Weasley?" Harry asked, surprised. Hermione pulled a face at the name and the accompanying flash of hatred it brought with it.

"I wanted to be a Curse Breaker long before we had the... misfortune of becoming acquainted with him," she said, sneering slightly.

"It would be pretty fun." Harry said, thoughtfully. "And Egypt might not be as far from Britain as Australia, but it's still a decent distance. Maybe we should move there."
"It's a plan, then." Hermione said, lightly bumping her shoulder against his. Harry laughed.

"It's a plan." He agreed.

"Of course, Curse Breakers are required to have at minimum an Exceeds Expectations in Arithmancy." She remarked, smirking at the expression on Harry's face, like he'd just trodden on a great big pile of steaming hippogriff dung.

"Urgh. Great."

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Harry's POV:

Hermione seemed to be in a much better mood that morning, though Harry was fully aware of her tendency to abuse Occlumency, and knew that she wasn't actually dealing with her emotions regarding Tom's abandonment of them, and rather she was ignoring them instead. Even though he knew how unhealthy that was for her to do, he couldn't begrudge her that, not when he wished he could do the same.

He was glad for the distraction of classes, as the hurt he was feeling was pushed to the side as he and Hermione made their way across the sodden vegetable patch, arriving several minutes early for their first class, in greenhouse three. As they walked through the doors, Professor Sprout bustled over and beamed at them both.

"Harry, Hermione! It's wonderful to see you both, so nice and early!" she said cheerfully, and Harry blinked, confused by the warm welcome. Professor Sprout had always been nice to them, sure, but it looked like she was moments away from pulling him into a hug. He hastily took a step closer to Hermione, trusting that Sprout would know better then to try and hug Hermione, so if he stayed close enough to her, she wouldn't be able to hug him either.

"Did you have a nice break, professor?" Hermione asked the Head of Hufflepuff House politely. Sprout continued to beam at them both as she nodded.

"Oh, it was lovely, thank you for asking, dear. And yourselves?"

"We definitely enjoyed ourselves." Hermione said, and Harry tried not to think of the heavy stink of fear, of fresh blood spilled across stone floors, and the ease in which flesh parted for the razor-sharp edge of a blade. Not trusting his voice, he just smiled and nodded when Sprout turned to him.

The arrival of the rest of the class distracted the woman away from them, and he and Hermione crossed over to their housemates, ready for class to begin.

A majority of the goodwill Harry was feeling for Sprout disappeared when she showed them all the ugliest plants he had ever seen. Indeed, they looked less like plants than thick, black, giant slugs, protruding vertically out of the soil. Each was squirming slightly and had a number of large, shiny swellings upon it, which appeared to be full of liquid.

"Bubotubers," she told them. "They need squeezing. You will collect the pus--"

"We need to collect the what?" demanded Draco, sounding revolted, and Harry didn't blame him.
"The pus, Mister Malfoy," said Sprout, "and it's extremely valuable, so don't waste it. You'll collect it in these bottles, and make sure you wear your dragon-hide gloves; it can do funny things to the skin when undiluted, bubotuber pus."

Squeezing the bubotubers was disgusting, but oddly satisfying. As each swelling was popped, a large amount of thick yellowish-green liquid burst forth which smelled strongly of petrol. They caught it in the bottles as Sprout had indicated, and by the end of the lesson had collected several pints.

"This'll keep Madam Pomfrey happy," said Sprout, stoppering the last bottle with a cork. "An excellent remedy for the more stubborn forms of acne, bubotuber pus. Should stop students resorting to desperate measures to rid themselves of pimples."

"Like poor Eloise Midgen," said Hannah Abbott, one of the Hufflepuffs, in a hushed voice. "She tried to curse hers off."

"Silly girl," said Sprout, shaking her head. "But Madam Pomfrey fixed her nose back on in the end."

A booming bell echoed from the castle across the wet grounds, signaling the end of the lesson, and the class separated; the Hufflepuffs climbing the stone steps for Transfiguration, and the Slytherins heading in the other direction, down the sloping lawn toward Hagrid's small wooden cabin, which stood on the edge of the Forbidden Forest.

Hagrid was standing outside his hut, one hand on the collar of his enormous black boarhound, Fang. There were several open wooden crates on the ground at his feet, and Fang was whimpering and straining at his collar, apparently keen to investigate the contents more closely. As they drew nearer, an odd rattling noise reached their ears, punctuated by what sounded like minor explosions.

"Mornin'!" Hagrid said, grinning at Harry and Hermione. "Be'er wait fer the rest of the class, they won' want ter miss this– Blast-Ended Skrewts!"

"Pardon?" said Hermione, and Harry turned to her in shock, stunned by her lack of recognition of the name.

Hagrid, in answer to her question, pointed down into the crates.

"Eurgh!" squealed one of the Gryffindor girls, Lavender Brown, jumping backward.

"Eurgh" just about summed up the Blast-Ended Skrewts in Harry's opinion. They looked like deformed, shell-less lobsters, horribly pale and slimy-looking, with legs sticking out in very odd places and no visible heads. There were around a hundred of them in each crate, each about six inches long, crawling over one another, bumping blindly into the sides of the boxes. They were giving off a very powerful smell of rotting fish. Every now and then, sparks would fly out of the end of a skrewt, and with a small phut, it would be propelled forward several inches.

"On'y jus' hatched," said Hagrid proudly, "so yeh'll be able ter raise 'em yerselves! Thought we'd make a bit of a project of it!"

"And why would we want to raise them?" said Draco, in a cold voice, and Harry turned to scowl at him. Hagrid might be a touch... well, touched in the head, but he was Harry's friend, and Harry didn't appreciate Draco poking fun at him.

Hagrid looked stumped at the question.
"Ah, I just meant, is there something they do?" Draco asked, having reluctantly fixed his tone to something more polite. "Is there a specific... er, point of them?"

Hagrid opened his mouth, apparently thinking hard; there was a few seconds' pause, then he said, "Tha's next lesson, Malfoy. Yer jus' feedin' 'em today. Now, yeh'll wan' ter try 'em on a few diff'rent things– I've never had 'em before, not sure what they'll go fer– I got ant eggs an' frog livers an' a bit o' grass snake– just try 'em out with a bit of each."

"First pus and now this," muttered Blaise in disgust.

Nothing but his affection for Hagrid could have made Harry pick up squelchy handfuls of frog liver and lower them into the crates to tempt the Blast-Ended Skrewts, Hermione following his lead with a great deal of reluctance. Harry couldn't suppress the suspicion that the whole thing was entirely pointless, because the skrewts didn't seem to have mouths.

"Ouch!" yelled Ron Weasley after about ten minutes. "It got me!"

"I like them better now." Hermione commented loudly, and Harry bit back his grin as Hagrid hurried over to Weasley, looking anxious.

"Its end exploded!" said Weasley angrily, showing Hagrid a burn on his hand.

"Ah, yeah, that can happen when they blast off," said Hagrid, nodding.

"Eurgh!" said Brown again. "Eurgh, Hagrid, what's that pointy thing on it?"

"Ah, some of 'em have got stings," said Hagrid enthusiastically (Brown quickly withdrew her hand from the box). "I reckon they're the males... The females've got sorta sucker things on their bellies... I think they might be ter suck blood."

"Who'd be thick enough to want to keep a pet that can burn, sting, suck and bite?" Weasley scoffed loudly.

"Shows how idiotic you are," drawled Hermione, giving him a disdainful look. "Dragon blood has amazing magical properties, and you wouldn't want one of those for a pet, would you?"

Harry grinned at Hagrid, who gave him a furtive smile from behind his bushy beard. Hagrid would have liked nothing better than a pet dragon, as Harry knew only too well— he had owned one for a brief period during Harry's first year, a vicious Norwegian Ridgeback by the name of Norbert (unfortunately, Norbert had met his end by Harry and Hermione's hand, something Harry still felt guilty about)— Hagrid simply loved monstrous creatures, the more lethal the better.

"Well, at least those things are small," Harry said encouragingly to his friends, as they all made their way back up to the castle for lunch an hour later.

"They are now," said Daphne, with a delicate shudder.

"Once Hagrid's found out what they eat, I expect they'll be six feet long– at least." Hermione agreed with her grimly.

"Well, that won't matter if they turn out to cure the flu or something, will it?" said Draco, pointedly.

"You know perfectly well I only said that to shut Weasley up," said Hermione, with a groan. "And I'll kill you if you ever repeat this, but for the first and only time in his miserable life, he's right.
The best thing to do would be to stamp on the lot of them before they start attacking us all."

"Want to sneak down there after classes end?" Draco perked up, obviously keen on not having to spend the year raising skrewts.

"Can't– we need to visit McGonagall." Hermione said, pulling a face.

"And we're not killing Hagrid's pets." Harry added, sternly. A collective groan went around their group.

"Great." Said Theo, gloomily. Harry stood firm though– he was already partly responsible for two of Hagrid's pets being killed: Buckbeak the hippogriff and Norbert the dragon. He refused to kill Hagrid's skrewts, even though he very genuinely agreed that they should be destroyed before they grew big enough to be a real threat.

They all sat down at the Slytherin table and helped themselves to lamb chops and potatoes. Harry and Hermione ate quickly, Arithmancy being up on the seventh floor and Harry wanted to get changed before class– his robes were slightly singed, and the front was covered with smudges from soil while the ends of his sleeves were covered in dried bubotuber pus. Hermione looked annoyingly immaculate, but she joined him, by his side like always.

By the time bell rang to signal the start of afternoon lessons, Harry had had a quick shower and was changed into a fresh set of robes, his dirty ones laid out on the end of his bed for the house elves.

Septima Vector, the Arithmancy teacher, had been a Slytherin when she attended Hogwarts, and so had never shown any of the prejudice it seemed some of the other professors just couldn't help. She had given the class, which was blessedly Weasley-free, a brief lecture then assigned several worksheets in a package that they were given the next two weeks to work on in class.

Cheerful about the lack of homework, Harry and Hermione headed down to the entrance hall, which was packed with people queuing for dinner. They joined the line, and were then thoroughly entertained by Draco's taunting of Weasley, as the blond read out an article from the Daily Prophet where one of the reporters, Rita Skeeter, had written an extremely scathing article that involved Weasley's father.

Weasley, predictably, had reacted badly, but one of the twins who was standing near him talked him down before he could try anything– throwing in a remark about Narcissa as he did so. Harry felt anger build up inside him at the attack on Narcissa, who had never been anything but wonderful to him, and he didn't blame Draco at all for trying to curse the twin as he turned his back dismissively on him.

Draco's spell missed, but a second loud BANG echoed around the hall, and a flash of white light hit Draco, sending him flying backwards hard enough to skid the closest wall, colliding into the stone with an audible *smack*.

"HOW DARE YOU!?!"

Harry spun around towards the voice. Professor Moody was limping down the marble staircase. His wand was out and it was pointing right at Draco, the blond boy now slumped against the wall with his arms bound painfully tight against his torso, from shoulder to wrist.

There was a terrified silence in the entrance hall. Nobody but Moody was moving a muscle. Moody turned to look at the Weasley twin– at least, his normal eye was looking at the red-head; the other one was pointing into the back of his head.
"Were you hit, laddie?" Moody demanded. His voice was low and gravelly.

"No," said Weasley, "missed."

"STOP!" Moody shouted.

"Stop? Stop what?" Weasley said, looking confused.

"Not you, boy– him!" Moody growled, jerking his thumb over his shoulder and Harry turned to see Vince kneeling beside the bound Draco, still slumped against the wall, his head lolling forwards in an alarming manner. It seemed that Moody's rolling eye was magical and could see out of the back of his head.

"Cursing someone when their back is turned is a snivelling, disgusting move," growled Moody, as he started to limp toward Draco. "Something expected from your type; pathetic, belly-crawling little cowards..." He lifted his wand, pointing it at Draco again and Harry reacted instantly to the threat towards his unarmed friend, scrambling for his wand. Hermione reacted quicker, her wand already drawn.

"Leave him alone!" she shouted, and Moody turned his wand away from Draco in time to defend himself as she shot a spell at him. Harry instantly rushed across the floor so he was standing defensively between Moody and Draco, his wand out. He needn't have worried, though– Hermione had managed to gain Moody's full attention, Draco forgotten in his anger.

"DON'T YOU DARE EVER ATTACK ME!" roared Moody, slashing his wand violently in Hermione's direction. Harry's heart leapt to his throat and he cried out in horror as a jet of purple light hit Hermione, sending her flying up into the air, her body spinning doll-like through the air before landing on the stone-flag floor in a crumpled heap of tangled limbs.

"Moody, what are you doing?" shrieked a new voice. Harry spun, still standing protectively in front of Draco, his mouth open in horror, to see Professor McGonagall rushing down the marble staircase, the armful of books and parchment the professor had been carrying scattered on the steps behind her as she brandished her wand threateningly at Moody.

"Professor, professor, he cursed Draco too!" Harry said loudly, drawing the Deputy Headmistress's attention over and stepping enough to the side for her to see Draco's limp, bound form.

McGonagall's expression turned horrified and she made a violent whipping motion with her wand, causing the tight ropes binding Draco from wrist to shoulder to disappear. Harry helped seize Draco under the forearm, pulling him back to his feet.

"Thanks," Draco wheezed, swaying on the spot dizzily, the hand he wasn't using to grip onto Harry in order to keep upright lifting to gingerly touch the back of his head, where it had hit the stone wall.

"Moody, we never cast magic on students as a punishment!" said Professor McGonagall furiously, bending over to examine Hermione, who was stirring slightly. "Surely Professor Dumbledore told you that?"

"Oh he mentioned it," confirmed Moody unconcernedly, sneering over at Draco, "but such repulsive behavior needed--"

"We give detentions, Moody!" McGonagall interrupted shrilly. "Or we speak to the offender's Head of House!"

"Now that I am more than happy to do," Moody said with a grim smile, fixing his one-eyed stare
first on Hermione and then Draco with great dislike. Harry was relieved to see Hermione, with McGonagall's help, was managing to stand up, but the way she was leaning heavily against the Transfiguration Mistress for support only made his concern for her grow. He knew better then most just how much Hermione loathed touching people.

Draco, his pale eyes watering with pain and humiliation, gave Moody a malevolent look and hissed, "My father will hear about this!"

"He will, will he?" said Moody, limping forwards toward them, the dull clunk of his wooden leg echoing around the hall, and Harry could feel Draco's whole body tense. "Your father and I are old friends, boy... I'll be more then happy to have a chat with him... Snape's your Head of House, yes?"

"Yes," spat Draco resentfully.

"Another old friend," growled Moody, with a savage, lopsided smile. "I've been planning a good ol' chat with Snape too... Come on, you!"

Harry stumbled back, dragging Draco along with him, as Moody swiped a hand forwards in an attempt to seize onto Draco. He glared heatedly at Moody, twisting slightly so that he was standing between the ex-Auror and his friend.

"Don't you dare touch him!" he said, furiously. "Don't you dare, you sick bastard!"

"Don't you speak to me like–"

"I'll speak to you however I want!" Harry shouted, and his body was actually shaking he was so enraged– or maybe that was Draco trembling, he thought grimly, because he could see out of the corner of his eye the barely hidden fear on the blond's face. "You're insane!" He spat at the professor. "You just cursed two kids, you maniac! I'm not going anywhere with you, and neither are Draco or Hermione! We're going to Professor McGonagall's office where Draco and Hermione are going to contact their legal guardians so we can press charges to get you kicked the hell out of Hogwarts!"

With that, Harry spun furiously around to face Professor McGonagall. McGonagall's face was pale but she nodded sharply.

"Follow me then." She said, voice clipped, before turning to Daphne. "Miss Greengrass, please find Professor Snape and tell him to meet me at my office at once." She instructed.

"Yes Professor," Daphne said, shooting Moody a look of pure malice before hurrying off in the direction of the dungeons.

Moody turned and stumped towards the staircase– to Dumbledore's office, Harry guessed, and he resisted the urge to spit at the man's retreating back.

Hermione, swaying slightly as she let go of McGonagall's supporting arm, managed to half limp, half hop over to him, and Harry hurriedly held out the arm not already supporting Draco for her to grab onto. She leaned into him heavily, and Harry could hear the harsh sound of her breathing. Up close he could see the dark bruise already forming on her cheek.

"Blaise, can you go get Madam Pomfrey?" Harry asked, his voice easily carrying across the silent hall.

"Yeah. Yeah, of course." A pale Blaise nodded, and Harry gave him a weak smile in thanks.
The walk to McGonagall's was silent, and Harry could tell by Draco's hitched breathing that the blond was trying hard not to cry. Hermione was a tense, silent presence beside him, her gait awkward and uneven as she heavily favoured one of her ankles.

It came as absolutely no surprise to Harry that Dumbledore was already waiting inside McGonagall's office. McGonagall, whose lips had thinned into a white line, didn't look surprised either. Harry helped Draco sit down while Hermione hobbled across the room and half collapsed onto the other tartan-print couch, her fingers deftly unlacing her shoe and then pulling down her sock. A hiss escaped her as her swollen ankle was revealed and Harry felt a little bit sick looking at it as the bone looked funny, sort of jutting out. He was certain it was either dislocated or broken, and was quietly stunned that she'd actually managed to walk on it at all, no matter how heavily she'd been leaning on him.

"Please step aside, Albus." McGonagall said stiffly, and Harry looked over and realized that Dumbledore was standing in front of the fireplace, blocking them from the floo.

"Ah, I thought we'd have a little chat before we got parents involved." Dumbledore said, and Harry scoffed loudly.

"You can't cover this up—none of us are going to back down, and we have at least a hundred witnesses who can tell you what they saw that- that maniac do!"

"From what I've heard, it was Mr. Malfoy who started the confrontation." Dumbledore said calmly.

"Yes, and like Professor McGonagall said, you give detentions or speak to the offender's Head of House when a student breaks the rules, you don't use curse them! And when another student tries to stop you from hurting someone, you don't then curse her too!" Harry was shouting by the end, and his hands were clenched in fists at his sides.

"Move, Albus!" McGonagall said, her face thunderous. "You can't push this under the rug. Moody broke the law and assaulted a minor. It is well within their rights to press charges and get their guardians involved!"

"Minerva—" Dumbledore said waringly, and McGonagall stepped forwards, so she was less then a foot away from Dumbledore, and looked him square in the eye.

"I'm not going to ask you again." She said, and Dumbledore sighed and stepped to the side.

"I'm very disappointed in all of you," he said, shaking his head lightly.

"Go stuff it." Harry responded.

"Mr. Potter," McGonagall warned, "that is enough." Harry nodded reluctantly, and settled for alternating between glaring at Dumbledore and giving both Hermione and Draco concerned looks. Hermione looked furious and Draco was looking down, blinking back tears and trying not to sniffle.

McGonagall tossed a handful of floo powder into the fireplace, turning the flames green, and then knelt down to stick her head inside. "Malfoy Manor!" Harry heard her call out.

"Minerva McGonagall," Harry could faintly hear Lucius's voice drawl. "To what do I owe this... pleasure?"

"There has been an incident at Hogwarts involving your son." McGonagall said, stiffly, "we would
appreciate it if you and your wife could join us to discuss what happened."

"Is Draco alright?" Lucius asked sharply, and Harry could hear how the airs had vanished from the elder Malfoy's voice, replaced instead by fear.

"He is." McGonagall confirmed.

"My wife and I will be there in five minutes." Lucius said, grimly, but not even two minutes passed before he and Narcissa stepped from the fireplace, into McGonagall's office.

Narcissa looked frantic and afraid, and she rushed straight over to where Draco was huddled on the couch. "Draco!" she gasped, going to hug him, only for Draco to wince and reach up to cradle his head. Narcissa sucked in a breath as she saw his wrist and, careful not to knock his arm, she rolled back the sleeve of his robe and unbuttoned the shirt, pushing it up to reveal the marks left by the magical rope Moody had bound him in. The red marks were spaced about an inch apart and were each around half an inch thick, starting at his wrist and continuing up his arm until they disappeared under his shirt. They were already starting to form bruises against Draco's pale flesh and when Narcissa turned to face the room her beautiful face was both pale and murderous. "Who did this?" She hissed.

"Moody," Harry said, immediately. "He used some sort of spell on Draco that tied him up and made him crash into a wall, and then he cursed Hermione when she tried to stop him from cursing Draco again when Draco was already disarmed and on the ground and hurt!"

Narcissa made an inarticulate sound of rage, her hands curled like claws. She looked over at Hermione, at her ankle that was swollen at least the twice it should be, and her pink-painted lips curled back in a frightening snarl.

"Miss Granger, how do I contact your guardian?" McGonagall asked hurriedly, before Narcissa could say anything, and the blonde witch looked like she wanted to say a lot. And that she planned to use a very high volume to do so.

"I'll do it." Hermione said quietly. Harry jumped to his feet, rushing over to her side in order to help her walk over to the fireplace without putting any pressure on her ankle.

Hermione sprinkled the floo powder onto the flames but didn't automatically call out the name when they turned green, instead she gave him a significant look. It took Harry a moment to figure out what she wanted him to do and then he hastily started to cough loudly, the sound obviously forced and unnatural, but it covered up Hermione's whispered 'Riddle Manor', so that nobody else in the room could hear it.

Copying what McGonagall had done, Hermione warily stuck her head into the flames. "Bloody hell," he heard her murmur.

"Hermione?" a very familiar voice asked, Harry's heart started beating quicker in his chest and a wave of longing washed over him at the sound of Tom's voice. It was distorted enough by the crackling of the flames that Harry was confident Dumbledore wouldn't recognize it, but he nudged Hermione anyway in warning.

"I'm in McGonagall's office– Dumbledore, McGonagall and the Malfoys are with me." Hermione said, briskly. "I need Thaddeus, my legal guardian. I'm pressing assault charges against that fucker, Moody."

"What did he do?" Tom had lowered his voice, and Harry could only just hear it, even kneeling
right next to Hermione—nobody else in the room would be able to hear the older boy. And by nobody else, he meant Dumbledore wouldn't be able to hear Tom, and possibly connect the voice to the teenage Tom Riddle that he had known and taught.

"Just get my Uncle." Hermione snapped, before pulling her head back out of the fire. Her eyes were dark with anger, though Harry could also see hurt and betrayal lingering on her face.

"Come on," he said quietly, offering her an arm and helping her stand back up and then hop back across the room to sit back down on the couch. Narcissa was sitting beside Draco and gently running her hand over his arm, her touch light enough so not to press against any bruised flesh. Lucius stood on Draco's other side, his expression quietly furious.

Madam Pomfrey arrived before 'Thaddeus' did, with Snape just a few feet behind her.

"Goodness gracious, what happened?" the matron tutted as she saw them.

"Wait," Hermione said, when the medi-witch pulled out her wand. "If we're pressing charges, then we'll need you to make an official examination."

"Pressing charges?" Madam Pomfrey frowned. "Did another student attack you?"

"No, a professor did." Hermione spat. Snape's dark eyes went hard and cold, and he crossed the increasingly crowded office in several brisk strides, making his way over to stand next to the couch that he and Hermione were on, pausing beside Draco to briefly scan the boy, his lips tightening as he saw the state of his other student too.

The fireplace turned green, and two people stepped through—Harry recognized Voldemort, but the other man was unfamiliar to him. Or at least he was, until he crossed straight over to where he and Hermione were sharing the couch and Harry recognised the wand that he was holding—Tom, it seemed, had a new disguise. Hermione's startled breath indicated that she recognized him too, and the light grip she had on his hand tightened as Tom crouched in front of them.

"I'm sorry," he murmured, and Harry stared.

What the hell?!

"What the ever-loving fuck?" Hermione looked at Tom, wearing the same shocked expression Harry knew was on his face.

Harry had never heard Tom apologize. Ever. Never, ever, ever. Zilch, zip, zero, nada, nil, nix, nihil. He hadn't even known that it was possible.

"Not returning to Hogwarts with you both, it was a mistake." Tom said, and he was speaking so quietly that only Harry and Hermione could hear him—possibly Snape, too. "It was a mistake because if I know anything about myself, it is that I am as possessive as a snake guarding its nest. You are mine—both of you are mine, and I will kill anyone who dares lay a hand on you."

Harry swallowed, the maelstrom of emotions in his chest making it hard to breathe, let alone speak, so he turned to Hermione, who was looking at Tom with an inscrutable expression on her face.

"You owe me at least three hours of cunnilingus for dumping us, you inconsiderate bastard," she said at last, "cunnilingus and pegging. And you'll be wearing lacy silk panties while you eat me out."

Harry choked back a sob—sitting in McGonagall's office was not the right place, and it certainly
wasn't the right time, to break down into relieved tears. He still reached out to grab onto Tom's hand with the one not already holding onto Hermione, and squeezing it tight. He felt sort of pathetic, but he honestly just didn't care. When they were alone, just the three of them, he would be demanding answers and a bloody good explanation, but right now he was just relived, beyond relieved, that they were a trio again.

"No to the women's underwear." Tom said, looking disgusted at the idea.

"Don't knock it till you've tried it." Hermione instantly retorted, then paused. "You do know what pegging is, don't you, Tom?" She asked and Tom narrowed his eyes, looking at her warily. Her lips twitched into a smirk. "You don't have a bloody clue."

"I'm going to regret agreeing to this, aren't I?" Tom said, and her smirk widened.

"Looks like you'll just have to find out."

Snape cleared his throat and Harry jumped, his cheeks turning red as he turned to look up at Snape, whose expression was looking strained. Harry desperately hoped that his Head of House hadn't heard what they'd been saying. Hermione cleared her throat, her cheeks dusted a light pink.

"Sorry, what did we miss?" she asked the room.

"I was just introducing my close friend, Basileus Sfor." Voldemort said, gesturing to Tom with a casual wave of his hand and Tom stood back up and nodded to the occupants of the room coolly.

"Tell me what happened to my niece." It was clearly not a request.

"I only arrived at the end of the incident." McGonagall spoke up, voice brisk. "As I was walking down the stairs, into the entrance hall, I witnessed Professor Moody curse Miss Granger. I immediately rushed down to the scene, casting a shield charm between Miss Granger and Moody. I was then alerted by a student to Mr. Malfoy's state, and after I released him from the conjured rope, I went to check on Miss Granger. She was unconscious, and I had to use magic to wake her up. I then demanded for Moody to tell me if Dumbledore had alerted him to the fact that magic was never to be used against students as punishment. He confirmed that he had known this, but that he wanted to give a 'sharp shock' to the students in question. When I told him we assigned detentions or contacted Heads of Houses if a student broke the rules, Moody attempted to physically grab onto Mr. Malfoy in order to escort him down to talk to Professor Snape. Mr. Potter stopped Moody from doing so, and announced his desire to have the legal guardians of the students assaulted by Moody contacted, with both Mr. Malfoy and Miss Granger confirming this was the course of action they wished to take."

Harry was very impressed by McGonagall's recount of the accident, which was mostly unbiased, factual and thorough, and didn't sugarcoat the details at all. Hermione cleared her throat.

"May I give a recount of what happened before you arrived on the scene of the incident?" She asked, using the same formal language that McGonagall had. McGonagall nodded, glaring at Dumbledore when he raised a hand, as if to intervene. "Draco and Ronald Weasley share a level of dislike and hostility." Hermione said, "I also share that... animosity." She added, after a slight hesitation. "When Harry and I arrived in the entrance hall, where everyone was lining up for dinner, Draco and Weasley were exchanging their usual heckling. One of the Weasley twins, I can't tell them apart, stopped Weasley from cursing Draco and then made a particularly nasty comment about Draco's mother, before turning away. Draco attempted to curse him, which Moody witnessed. He responded to this by using a spell on Draco that sent him crashing into a wall and
incapacitating him. Moody then started shouting at any student who tried to even check to see if Draco was alright after having his head hit the wall! And then Moody went to try and curse Draco again, who, I repeat, was entirely defenceless! I tried to use the disarming charm on him and Moody then cursed me." Hermione paused, her eyes narrowing dangerously.

Harry glanced over at Tom to see how he was taking it, and was unsurprised to see that Tom looked absolutely livid. Harry found himself desperately hoping that the older boy would somehow manage to find a way to spend some... quality time with Moody in the basement under Riddle Manor.

"I don't know what curse he used on me," Hermione continued her, Harry could admit, slightly more embellished recount of the events then McGonagall's, "but whatever it was, it was terrifying to be thrown up into the air like I was, fully aware that I was then going to be falling onto the stone floor from that height!" Harry wasn't sure whether that was a lie, but terrified or not the glint in Hermione's eyes as she told the room what happened to her promised terrible things to the person who'd made the mistake of pissing her off. Personally, Harry hoped she gave Moody the 'Greyback-treatment'.

"When I hit the ground, I briefly lost consciousness," Hermione said, lip curling back, "the next thing I remember is opening my eyes to see Professor McGonagall leaning over me."

"I want that man arrested." Narcissa said, instantly.

"Now, now," Dumbledore stepped back into the conversation– Harry was surprised it had taken him so long. "That story was definitely a tad overdramatic. I will admit that Professor Moody did not conduct himself in the fashion expected of the staff of Hogwarts, and I shall personally ensure that it does not happen again, but an assault charge is a very serious thing, not something that should be tossed around lightly."

"I'm not doing anything lightly," Narcissa said, coldly. "I will see Alastor Moody slapped with every charge I can make stick for his assault on my son and his close friend. Lucius," she turned to her husband, "contact our lawyers and the DMLE. Madam Pomfrey," she then turned to the school healer, "if you heal my son and Hermione now, can I expect you to give a full list of the injuries they suffered, as well as testify, if it is later required."

Madam Pomfrey raised her chin. "Of course." She said, frostily. "I am a Healer– I have never broken the Oath I took." With two sharp flicks of her wand she transfigured two quills from McGonagall's desk into floating stretchers. Harry helped Hermione onto one of them, biting back a smile at the look of disgust on her face, while Narcissa helped Draco onto the other. "In these situations, policy requires a second witness who is unrelated to the patient for the examination." Pomfrey informed the room. "Preferably, a male witness for Mr. Malfoy," here she gave Snape a significant look, before turning to McGonagall, "and a female witness for Miss Granger."

"Of course." McGonagall said, and Snape dipped his chin in agreement.

"Excellent," Madam Pomfrey said, briskly, "Let's go. Not you, Mister Potter." She added, when Harry started to follow. "They'll need you here to talk to the DMLE representative."

Harry nodded reluctantly and stepped back, sitting down again on the couch and preparing for a long evening of repeating his version of events, over and over.
So I read a comment in the last chapter, and I just wanted to clarify that Barty Crouch Jr is NOT posing as Moody (hence no bouncing ferret, and the edited version of all the scenes with Moody). The reasons why will become apparent later. I hope you enjoyed the chapter!
CHAPTER XL:

_Hermione's POV:_

It didn't occur to Hermione what a full examination of her body would reveal until it was too late to stop it happening.

When they arrived at the hospital wing she'd insisted Madam Pomfrey look at Draco first, and had then been given a hospital gown to change into. After spending several minutes fiddling awkwardly with the strings on the back of the gown trying to tie them up, she first got a look at just how much the hospital gown exposed– the answer being far too much.

Tense and uncomfortable, she spent nearly twenty minutes laying on the cot dreading what was about to come. When Madam Pomfrey finally entered the curtained off area she was lying down in, McGonagall standing unobtrusively in the corner, and started to wave her wand up and down her body, murmuring diagnostic spells under her breath, Hermione closed her eyes in defeat.

The bruises around her neck had yet to start fading, but they were mostly covered by her hair and were nowhere near as eye-catching as the dark as spilt ink bruises staining her pale skin from where she'd hit the stone floor.

Her whole body felt like a bruise, right now, except for her ankle, which consisted of a much sharper pain. Her whole foot was swollen, and she was fairly certain it was dislocated, though it could just be a bad sprain– either way, it hurt like buggery.

So no, at this point the neck bruises were the furthest thing from her mind. If she really had to, she'd think up some sort of excuse for them that didn't involve unplanned breath-play during sex–and they'd believe her, because they wouldn't want to believe that it could be anything else. What she was actually worrying about were the other marks on her body, the older and more permanent ones that couldn't be played off as anything other then what they were.

Madam Pomfrey's sharp inhale alerted her to the fact the woman had just located one such mark and Hermione let out a quiet sound of resignation escape her.

"Please roll over, Miss Granger." Pomfrey said, voice was strained. Hermione considered protesting, but in the end just did as the Healer had asked, closing her eyes as Pomfrey carefully pushed up the hospital until she revealed–

"What is that?" McGonagall asked, her Scottish accent thick in her horror. Hermione didn't say anything, just kept her eyes tightly closed.

She'd been five years old when Sister Bernedice had held that red-hot poker against the back of her thighs, under the excuse of 'exorcising the devil from her'. Obviously, it had left a scar, and a nasty one at that; thick and shiny pink, stretching across the backs of both of her thighs.

Hermione kept her eyes closed, even face down in the pillow as she was, as Madam Pomfrey
carefully undid the fiddly ties on the back of the hospital gown, revealing her bare back, and all of the marks that were on it.

The nuns had always been very liberal with the use of the bamboo canes they carried everywhere, and the Mother Superior had always kept her heavy leather strap well-oiled.

With her unexplainable bouts of accidental magic, Hermione had always been a target for the caretakers of the orphanage. For three years she had suffered at the hands of the Sisters of Saint Agnes' Home for Orphaned Children, before escaping and fleeing the orphanage to live on the streets, never once looking back.

Hermione would never forget the decision she made during the icy, freezing hell of her first winter on the streets of London, when she'd vowed to herself that she'd die of exposure before ever setting a foot back in the hell that was Saint Agnes', living every day in fear of the beatings, the starvation, and, worst of all, being locked up in the Black Hole; that tiny, awful, hell-hole of a room- no food, no light, no bedding- nothing but herself and the voices.

Hermione's memories of the Black Hole were some of the most vivid of the years she'd spent at Saint Agnes'. Even now she remembered in horrifying derail those endlessly long days and nights. When locked in there, first she'd sleep as much as possible, escaping the situation through unconsciousness, until she just couldn't sleep anymore. Then she'd be left with nothing to do but stare into the darkness until she started to see shapes, to see shadows in the pitch-black; shadows that were, in actual fact, her own eyes, the grey shapes of her own cornea, iris, sclera... It would start as harmless, but as more time passed, days creeping by, it would become more noticeable, her retinas tearing, creating the streaks of light she could see due to the strain. And as she'd sit there, the darkness gouging into her vision, her brain would begin to substitute for the absence around her. It would seek stimulation and so created it, and that was... disastrous, because for a human being, coping in the darkness when all you'd known was light was... there were no true words to explain how that fear of what came with the darkness had a way of... changing the landscape.

And if she was in that hell-hole long enough, with no food, barely any water, only stale air... that's when the shadows started to talk to her. Oh Hermione had always known that the voices were in her head, but they were impossible to shut out. Always there, whispering. Swallow your tongue... bash your head in... come on, you can do it...

It took her over a year of living on the streets before she stopped hearing those voices when she was alone.

Unlike the burn on the back of her thighs, the whipping scars from the beatings had faded over time, paling to thin, raised white lines; what they were was undeniable, but they were far more discrete now then they had been, years ago.

"Hermione," a soft touch on her arm made her flinch, and she realized that she'd spaced out, momentarily lost in memories she'd rather she never, ever have to revisit again.

"It was a long time ago," she said, stiffly. She took a moment to be thankful that the parseltongue glamour hiding the bite mark from Greyback couldn't be detected by Madam Pomfrey's spells, like normal glamours could.

"When did it happen?" McGonagall asked. Hermione was still facedown on the cot, and she very determinedly did not turn towards the professor's voice, instead staying face-down with her eyes tightly closed.

"Between the ages of three and six," she muttered into the pillow. "I ran away on my sixth
birthday."

Her time on the streets had given her new marks, of course– it was a rough lifestyle. Mostly her hands were lightly scarred, faint marks that were almost imperceptible. Her knees were more roughed up, and the soles of her feet definitely had their fair share of permanent marks. The most obvious scars from her time spent as homeless, though, were the pale pink and white raised lines on her palms, some of them slightly crisscrossed– contrary to popular belief, stabbing someone was much harder then 'the pointy end goes into the squishy bits'. When a knife hit bone, or other resistance, the abrupt stop often caused the hand gripping the knife to slide across the blade, cutting into the palm. This, of course, would then make the knife handle slippery, which further reduced gripping ability– a lesson that she'd learned the hard way.

"Where did you run to?" McGonagall asked, the professor's voice now sounding very strained.

"Nowhere," Hermione said. "Or everywhere, I suppose. Factories, alleyways, abandoned buildings, homeless shelters sometimes– when I was younger I tried not to stay alone, whenever I could."

"How did you eat? How did you– how did you go to school?" McGonagall asked, her accent thickening, like it did when she was upset. Usually when her accent got this strong, it was when the professor was furious at her. Hermione honestly didn't know what to make of this different McGonagall– she liked knowing where she stood with people, it gave her control over the conversation, as she could predict what their responses would be to different scenarios. She didn't like this unpredictability from the deputy Headmistress; not even slightly.

"I didn't go to school," she answered the question honestly enough. There was no real harm in revealing bits and pieces of her past, not now that she had a 'guardian' so there was no risk of being returned to an orphanage. "I did spend a lot of time in libraries– free heating and bathrooms. And most of what I ate I stole, or someone else stole."

"Six years living like that." McGonagall whispered.

"Better then the alternative." Hermione said, jaw tight.

The night she had decided to flee the orphanage, if she'd known what her life would be like as a runaway she would still have made the exact same choice. Even with everything that had happened, everything she had lost, her decision to run was one she had never regretted.

Like she's said– she'd die before going back to Saint Agnes'.

The rest of the examination passed mostly in silence, with Hermione answering questions asked by Madam Pomfrey with either an affirmative or a negative. The medi-witch healed her ankle– she was right, it had been dislocated– and the deeper bruising, as well as giving her a tub of bruise paste to apply twice a day. When she was finally told she could leave, she dressed quickly and fled the hospital wing without looking either witch in the eye.

Not sure where Harry would be, she returned to where she'd last seen him, which was in McGonagall's office. It was empty, but there was a slip of parchment with writing she recognized as Snape's sitting on the desk.

Granger– we're in my quarters. I trust you know the location. The password is 'Veritaserum'. S.S.

Not sure who 'we' was, but confident that Snape would, at least, be able to point her in the right direction of Harry if he wasn't there, Hermione made her way down to the dungeons, taking care to avoid the other students as she did so. She could only imagine the rumors going around the castle
after the altercation in the Entrance Hall, and she just did not feel like dealing with all that: what she did want was food, sex and sleep— and not necessarily in that order.

Also— 'Basileus'? Tom had better still be around, because unless there was a really good reason behind his choice of name, then she was never going to let 'Basil' hear the end of it.

"Veritaserum," she told the portrait of the Runespoor that hung in front of the stone wall she knew Snape's quarters lay behind— no Slytherin worth their salt didn't know where their Head of House's quarters were, even if Snape had actually never told them. It just wasn't the Slytherin thing to do, not to know.

The Runespoor hissed an affirmative (:correct: it told her, and she was honestly impressed by whoever had painted the three-headed snake— she hadn't been expecting it to be able to use actual, genuine parseltongue) and the painting swung to the side, the entire wall it had been hanging on rippling. Hermione stepped forwards, through the now intangible wall, into the personal quarters of her Head of House.

It was... exactly what she was expecting, actually. A space that was elegantly but sparsely furnished; favouring neutral, dark colours. As she stepped in, the attention of the living room-esque area turned to her.

The three Malfoys were present, as were 'Thaddeus' and 'Basileus' and Harry— Blaise, Theo, Daphne, Tracey, Parkinson and the two perfect examples of human inbreeding (Vince and Greg) were also present. Snape looked like he was regretting having invited people into his quarters, judging by the sour expression on his face, and Hermione didn't blame him at all.

"Hermione!" Harry rushed over and pulled her into a hug. She let him, even though she certainly wasn't in a hugging sort of mood, because he was Harry— he would always be her exception. "How was it?" he asked, stepping back to look her up and down worriedly, his hands staying lightly rested on her hips.

"My ankle was dislocated, but other then that just bruises." She said, and Harry made a growling sound that was reminiscent of his animagus form.

"Dislocated?" 'Basileus' looked similarly displeased. Hermione shrugged.

"I've had worse." Which, she would be first to admit, didn't exactly lighten the atmosphere of the room, so she hastily tried to turn the attention away from herself. "How about you, Draco?" She asked.

"Lots of bruises— including to my pride." Draco said, with a grimace.

"Don't worry, you've got enough to spare." She said teasingly, which worked far better to remove the tension from the room. Harry laughed, along with the rest of their housemates, Blaise lightly elbowing Draco.

"She's got you there, mate." He said, amused. Draco lifted his chin and sniffed, a mock-snooty expression on his face.

"Malfoys don't have pride, we are pride." He said, in an overly affected voice.

"Prideful, you mean." Tracey snorted.

Hermione left them to their lighthearted bickering, shaking her head at Harry when he tried to follow her. "I'll just be a moment." She murmured to him, before making her way over to Snape.
"What's happening about Moody, professor?" she asked, quietly. Snape's jaw tightened, and Hermione immediately knew it wasn't good news.

"Dumbledore got him off the assault charge," Snape said, and Hermione could hear the barely restrained fury in his voice. "Moody is no longer allowed to assign or supervise detentions. He also owes you and Mr. Malfoy an apology," Hermione waited for Snape to continue, but when he didn't say anything else she almost started trembling she was so furious.

"An apology?" She repeated, teeth gritted. "He owes us an apology?! That psychopath can take his bullshit apology and shove it up Dumbledore's--"

"Miss Granger," Snape interrupted her sharply, and her mouth clicked shut. She gave Snape an apologetic look and then worked on taking several deep, calming breaths.

"Is there any way to keep pushing this, sir?" She asked.

"Unfortunately, no such way as revealed itself." Snape said, sourly, and Hermione readjusted her previous thinking– the sour look on Snape's face when she'd walked in hadn't been because of his rather... uncharacteristically full quarters, but because he was as disgusted by this situation as she now was.

"Brilliant. Bloody brilliant." She said, furiously. "I hate that man– both of them, in fact!"

"Niece." The sudden pressure of a long-fingered hand closing on her shoulder had Hermione very carefully making sure that none of her discomfort showed on her face, though she couldn't help tensing at the touch. The grip tightened.

"Uncle," she said carefully, as she slowly turned to face Voldemort. He nodded towards the small kitchenette.

"We need to talk."

He clearly wasn't asking, so Hermione didn't waste her time nodding, just let him steer her firmly to the empty space, far enough away from everybody else to give the illusion of complete privacy.

"Is there a problem?" she asked carefully, noticing how Voldemort had positioned both their bodies so nobody could read their lips. Voldemort flicked one of his long fingers and a ripple of magic washed over them both– a charm to prevent eavesdropping, Hermione guessed, when he didn't bother to lower his voice as he next spoke.

"Tom will be staying with you." He said in a tone that left no room for arguments. Hermione didn't bother trying to ask why, just nodded.

Tom, on the other hand... She certainly had questions for Tom– questions she was expecting bloody good answers to, and if those answers weren't good enough then Tom better hope that god had mercy on him, because she certainly wouldn't.

"I was pleased to find that you agreed to my conditions." Voldemort said, interrupting her morbid thoughts. She was confused for a moment, before she realized what he was referring to.

"Do you need it in writing, my agreement to publically align with you?" she asked, a touch reluctantly. She still wasn't pleased by the idea of a public alliance, but Voldemort was right– by summoning him here today to act as her 'uncle', she had agreed to his conditions.

"I think we both know that won't be necessary." Voldemort said, with a much-too pleasant smile.
She nodded again, because of course she knew that—honestly, who could possibly be thick enough
to go back on a promise given to a Dark Lord?

Oh, Voldemort couldn't harm her or Harry, of course, but Hermione had grown to care for more
people then just Harry—something Voldemort was, no doubt, very aware of. And each and every
one of those people could be used by him against her.

"That isn't a threat." Voldemort interrupted her grim thoughts, and Hermione looked at him,
startled and wary. "Your face isn't hard to read, child," he said, looking amused by her
guardedness. "And I don't need you to make a vow to me, or sign a magical contract, because one
day you will fight for me. So will Harry. Not today, you're not ready yet, but you will."

Hermione didn't know how to respond to that—her automatic instinct was to deny everything
Voldemort had just said, to tell him that he was wrong, so very and completely wrong, but the
absolute certainty in the Dark wizard's voice had her hesitating. And in that moment, to both
Voldemort and her, her silence spoke more then any words she could possibly say.

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Severus's POV:

Severus watched Thaddeus Dagworth steer Hermione towards the kitchenette with a frown, not
having missed the way his student had tensed at Dagworth's touch. Narcissa moved over to him,
also watching the pair with a frown.

Dagworth had cast a privacy ward, and he and Hermione were both positioned in a way that he
couldn't see either of their faces, which meant he couldn't see the expressions they were wearing. It
made his wand hand itch, made him want to go make sure that his student wasn't under any sort of
distress.

"Severus," Narcissa said quietly, from beside him, "how much do you know about Mr.
Dagworth?"

"Not enough," he told her honestly, turning reluctantly away from the pair to face her. Narcissa's
expression was concerned.

"I," Narcissa hesitated, her eyes flicking over to where Harry was standing, talking with the other
Slytherin fourth years. She sighed, turning back to him. "When Harry was staying with us, I saw
something in his trunk. He was fooling around with Draco, and the lid was open when I walked in.
I saw..." Narcissa shook her head slightly, "I thought I had to be wrong, but I know I wasn't." She
said, firmly.

"What makes you say that?" He asked quietly, not wanting either of them to be overheard.

"I," Narcissa hesitated, her eyes flicking over to where Harry was standing, talking with the other
Slytherin fourth years. She sighed, turning back to him. "When Harry was staying with us, I saw
something in his trunk. He was fooling around with Draco, and the lid was open when I walked in.
I saw..." Narcissa shook her head slightly, "I thought I had to be wrong, but I know I wasn't." She
said, firmly.

"What did you see?" he pressed.

"I saw something from my family's Vault." Narcissa said, so softly that he could barely hear what
she was saying. "Not the Malfoy Vault," she clarified, "the Black Family Vault."

"What?" Severus asked, stunned. "How is that even possible?"
"The only person other then me to have access to that Vault is Bellatrix, Severus." Narcissa said, quietly. "When I asked Harry where he got it, he told me it was a birthday present from a friend, who was more of a mentor then a friend. He said that she had strange tastes— she, Severus."

Severus felt a headache coming on and he reached up to pinch the bridge of his nose. "You're saying," he stated, slowly, "that Harry has been in contact with your sister long enough for her to grow fond enough of him to give him a birthday gift. And that he considers her a mentor. I... I don't even want to think about what she could be teaching him. Bellatrix was unhinged enough before Azkaban, Narcissa. I'm not saying that to be cruel, she was."

"I'm not denying that, Severus." Narcissa pointed out, and he let out a heavy sigh.

"And you're sure it was the dagger from your Vault?" he asked, with a sinking feeling in his stomach.

"It was one of a kind, Severus." Narcissa said, with a sigh of her own. "The handle is carved from unicorn bone; I'd recognise it anywhere."

"Unicorn bone?" Severus gave her a horrified look.

"It blesses the dagger," Narcissa explained, with a careless shrug. "That blade will never miss its mark. Though I can confirm that Harry, at least at the time, didn't know what sort of bone it was— I was listening in on them when he told Draco he suspected it to be human bone."

"I feel it says something for the situation," Severus said darkly, "that I'd actually prefer it to be human bone." Narcissa laughed quietly before her face turned serious again.

"Severus, if Harry is in close contact with Bellatrix, then we can assume that Mr. Dagworth is too. And the only reason Mr. Dagworth would have something to do with Bellatrix, or any of the other Death Eaters the Dark Lord broke out of Azkaban, would be if he was a Death Eater himself."

"You're right," Severus agreed, grimly. "Have you talked to Lucius about this?"

"No," Narcissa shook her head. "He's already having trouble with the Wizengamot, trying to decide to what degree he should back Mr. Dagworth politically. The last thing I feel I should do is add a whole new variable to the equation. If the Dark Lord hasn't told Lucius and the other Wizengamot members that support Him that Mr. Dagworth is a Death Eater, then He doesn't wish for them to know it yet. When He does want them to place their full support behind Mr. Dagworth, He will tell them. Until then, Lucius and the others should continue to act as they are."

Severus nodded. "You're right." He said, and a faint smile crossed Narcissa's face.

"Of course I am," she said, lightly. Her gaze flicked over to Hermione as the girl left the kitchenette and Dagworth, crossing over to where her other Housemates had gathered, slipping her arm around Harry's and leaning in to him, tilting her head back slightly and laughing at something Draco said. "I underestimated Dumbledore," Narcissa said darkly, "and I underestimated the degree to which Moody's war-hero status still protects him." Severus felt his jaw clench, and he nodded.

"Moody as a professor is going to be a disaster," he said grimly. "Albus had Minerva and I assist in creating a lesson plan, and Moody plans on demonstrating to the third years and up the Unforgivable Curses."

Narcissa hissed through her teeth. "You're joking." She said, flatly.

"I wish I was joking." He said, and she shook her head.
"As if reinstating the bloody Tournament wasn't enough," she muttered and Severus considered telling her about Albus's plan to enter Harry, but decided not to. Narcissa had enough to worry about, without him adding more.

An idle thought struck him, and he turned to face the blonde witch again. "I already know I'm going to regret asking you this," he said, his face twisting into a grimace. "But do you happen to know what 'pegging' is?" Narcissa gave a surprised laugh.

"It's funny that you bring that up now of all times," she said, her light grey eyes amused, "just after we've been talking about my dear sister. Bellatrix was the one to tell me, back when I was a teenager, just what that term referred to."

"And?" he prompted when she didn't say anything else. Narcissa just laughed again, and reached up to lightly pat his cheek.

"Trust me, Severus," she said, amused, "you really don't want to hear it from me. Ask Rodolphus, when the time finally comes that we get to see him and the others." She paused, and then added, "or Rabastan. He should know too– he always was very close to Bella and Rod." Severus grimaced.

"It's related to coital acts, isn't it?" he stated more than asked– from the context he'd heard it in, he had already guessed that was the case, but Narcissa's words had practically confirmed it.

"Well it certainly has nothing to do with pegs." Narcissa said, still amused. Severus rolled his eyes.

"Of course." He sighed, and vowed to cast a muffliato on Hermione the next time she started whispering to Harry, and that 'Basileus Sfor' person who he'd think was far too old for her to be discussing the sexual acts that she wished to engage with him in if it were not for the fact that he had recognized the wand 'Sfor' had been holding. He was an observant man, after all, and that night in the Shrieking Shack where he had witnessed Harry killing Black was very firmly imprinted into his memory– and that included the strange boy who had emerged from that Diary; the strange boy whose name was 'Tom' and whose wand was identical to every last detail to the one 'Sfor' held now.

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Hermione's POV:

"Why did you do it?"

The dorm-room was silent, save for the soft snores of the boys in the six four-poster beds and the quiet breathing from her and Tom. The hangings around Harry's bed were drawn shut in case any of the other boys wake up, hiding the occupants of the bed from the room; three bodies where there should really only be one.

Tom didn't ask for her to clarify what she was referring to. He didn't have to.

"Do you know," he mused, "that not once in my life have I ever loved someone? I won't ever love someone, either. You understand that, of course. Harry doesn't, and I doubt he ever will."

"You're changing the subject. Don't." She warned.

Tom laughed, softly, his grey-purple eyes amused. "I'm really not. I'm not capable of love, or
empathy, or remorse."

"You're a psychopath." Hermione said, not accusing, simply stating the facts. Tom smiled. It wasn't a very nice smile; there was something hungry and predatory in it.

"Exactly. And I decided to end our little... arrangement, because I not only set no value in any life but my own, but I have a temper. And I am self-aware enough to know that the aftermath of my... 'not-quite' encounter with Dumbledore could have gone very differently. I've done very bad things when I've lost my temper, Hermione, and that night I came very close."

"But you didn't." Pointed out Hermione. "You didn't hurt either of us. Well, not in a way we didn't consent to." She amended, after a brief pause.

"Hermione, darling, for someone to be like me, they don't just have to lack empathy, they have to enjoy hurting people." Tom said, and there was edge of cruelty in his expression. "I enjoy hurting people. Do you think I've never thought about what your heart would look like, bleeding out in my palm?"

"Well why haven't you?" Hermione asked, raising an eyebrow at him, not intimidated by his words. "It's not like you haven't had the opportunity. The vow we have with Voldemort doesn't affect you, we've all figured that out. You could kill us both right now, so why don't you?" She gave him a challenging look.

"Because I'd miss you," he said, meeting her challenging look with one of his own. "But you do realise that, one day, that might not be enough. Really, deciding to keep you at arms length is possibly the only selfless thing that I have ever done in my life."

"Tom, you lasted less then thirty-six hours." She pointed out, drolly. Tom smirked at her.

"Clearly being selfless is the type of skill that takes practice. Sadly, I have no intention in doing so."

"You were lying when you told us you were sorry, weren't you?" Hermione asked after a pause in which she considered what he'd said, though she already knew the answer to her question.

"Obviously." Tom drawled, giving her a look that clearly questioned her intelligence. "I wasn't lying when I admitted to making a mistake, though– someone left bruises on you, someone other then me. And that's just not acceptable." Hermione felt her breath quicken as she saw the darkness creep into the gaze Tom pinned her with. "You're mine, Hermione," he said, his voice was deceptively soft. "You and Harry are both mine. Mine to hurt, mine to fuck, mine to kill. Your lives belong to me, and the only hand that you'll ever die at will be mine."

"You," Hermione said, unable to help her exasperated tone, "are such a dramatic bastard."

"And yet, you didn't deny it." Tom said, with a sly smile that made her want to both bite him on the underside of his jaw, and to keep pushing him, to find that sharpness underneath.

And so she smiled back at him, reached across over Harry's sleeping form to trail her fingers across the pale skin of his throat and let her fingertips linger over where she could feel his pulse fluttering. "Oh Tom," she said; softly, sweetly, "what makes you think that only goes one way?"

Tom lifted a hand to catch hers, tilting his head slightly in order to trap her palm against his cheek.

"You see?" He said, a soft curl of laughter in his voice. "This, darling, is why you're alive." There was something sharp and knowing in the eyes that met hers, a dare in the curve of his smile, and Hermione laughed too, the last of her anger drain away. Still laughing, she leaned over Harry's
sleeping form to kiss Tom.

Tom released her trapped hand to tangle his fingers in her hair and then use the grip to yank her in closer. The kiss became something harder, less tidy; all teeth and tongue. Hermione clung to his shoulders, her nails digging into the flesh there, and the hand in her hair tightened hard enough to hurt, sending sharp jolts of pain through her scalp.

An unwilling sound escaped her when they broke apart to breathe, catching in her throat and dying in something dangerously close to a sob.

"I'll kill you if you leave us again." She said harshly, because when he'd left her, left them, a part of her had shattered like glass. And yet, there was a certain degree of pride to be had, in having broken glass where bits of heart should be, so that, if need be, she could wrench them out and use them as weapons.

"The only way we'll ever leave each other again is over our lifeless corpses." Tom promised. Hermione knew she really shouldn't find so much relief and contentment in his dark words, and she took a brief moment to wonder about how many wires must be crossed in her brain. She had long since accepted, though, that the parts of her that had broken when her parents had died, when they healed they had healer up wrong. And so, to acknowledge Tom's words, she bit his neck, digging her teeth into the skin and sucking hard enough to leave a mark. If she was going to wear his bruises, then he was going to wear hers. Because he was hers, and she didn't let go of the things she had claimed.

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Harry's POV:

Waking up with a full bed, with a warm body on each side of him, it was like the past two days never happened, and the three of them were still in their grand bedroom Riddle Manor.

Tom returned to the Diary as he and Hermione dressed, and Harry wasn't sure when but at some point in the last twenty-four hours Hermione's trunk had appeared in the boy's dorm beside his. He wondered if this meant she planned on permanently moving into his dorm, and if she did how long it would take Snape to find it out.

"Let's go visit Argus before breakfast," Hermione suggested, as they exited the boy's dorm, Blaise, Theo, Draco, Greg and Vince still asleep— those lot never woke up until eight at the earliest, and it was still a bit before seven.

Harry agreed because he'd missed Hermione's mangy fleabag of a cat, not that he'd ever admit it. That thing was mean, vicious and ugly, but Iago also happened to be Hermione's oldest companion, so he felt he owed the old tomcat for being by her side for so many years.

Filch greeted them when they knocked on his office door, and Harry was a little disturbed by how genuinely happy the man looked. Filch, it was widely acknowledged, was a grouchy who hated children— all children except Hermione and, by proxy, Harry.

Hermione and Filch had bonded over their love for their cats and their mutual disdain for the rest of the student body. Hermione had left Iago with the caretaker over the summer holidays, to keep the man company after Filch's cat had been petrified by the basilisk in their second year. Hermione had then had to burn down the greenhouse with the main ingredient for the cure to the petrifications in
order to frame one of the professors for the whole Chamber of Secrets mess, and Harry knew she felt regret for it.

"I've got something to show you two," Filch said, looking very pleased, Harry followed the old caretaker's lead a touch on the warry side. For all he knew, Filch could have polished off the old chains that used to be used to hang students upside down by their toes and hung them up in his office in order to scare the pants off the misbehavers who ended up in his office. That certainly seemed like the sort of thing to put him in such a good mood.

But instead, Filch lead them to a large cardboard box that was padded with cushions and contained- "Oh my god, she had the kittens!" He blurted out.

Mrs. Norris, finally unpetrified, looked up at him with her lamp-like eyes and let out a rusty-sounding purr. Iago, who had been sitting beside her and grooming her ears, leapt out of the box and clawed his way up the front of Hermione's robes in order to rub his chin against her cheek. Hermione laughed, hugging the grouchy tomcat against her chest and scratching under his chin.

"I missed you too," she crooned, and Iago's rough tongue darted out to lick her cheek before he unhooked his claws and jumped back down, returning to the box Mrs. Norris was curled up in, along with four small, furry bodies.

Harry kneeled down to get a closer look. Two of the kittens had the same dust-colored fur as Mrs. Norris, one had light brown fur with reddish overtones, and the final kitten was a mix of orange and black. They were... very odd looking, with their scrunched up faces and tufts of fur that stuck out from their bodies like they'd just been given an electric shock. They did have their charm, though, Harry decided. Sort of, anyway. And honestly, should he really have expected anything different from the offspring of Mrs. Norris and Iago? They'd all grow up to be little monsters that stalked the corridors of Hogwarts looking for troublemakers, just like their mama, loathed by students breaking rules and out of bed after dark.

"They're perfect," Hermione said, with a small smile, having kneeled down beside him. Mrs. Norris purred even louder at her words. "What are their names?" She asked, glancing back up at Filch.

"The cinnamon," Filch gestured to the kitten with the reddish light brown fur, "is Duke Norris. He's our only laddie. The two greys are Princess Norris and Duchess Norris. Thought I'd leave the tortoiseshell for you to name."

"Hm," Hermione hummed, reaching into the box and, when neither Mrs. Norris or Iago reacted negatively, gently stroking one of the little tortoiseshell's ears with the tip of her finger. "Sycorax." She decided. "She's a Shakespeare character, a witch."

"An evil one?" Harry wondered, because the kitten would definitely be suited to being named after an evil witch- because yes, it really was that ugly. It looked cross-eyed and like it had run into a stone wall at full speed.

"Yes, an evil one." Hermione said, amused. "All Shakespeare's best characters were villains. We need to go to class, but we'll be back after dinner, if that's alright?" She turned to Filch and asked. The old caretaker nodded, a slight smile on his face.

"My office is always open to you." He told her. "You too, Potter." He added, looking over at Harry. Harry blinked, a touch startled- he was well aware that Filch put up with him because he was Hermione's best friend. He hadn't realized that the taciturn man had grown to hold at least a degree of fondness for him.
"Thanks." He blurted out, trying to fight the reddening of his cheeks, and he was grateful to flee the office. Hermione was visibly amused by his embarrassment, and he spent the entire walk to Transfiguration scowling at her.

The next two days passed far too quickly, like time usually did when you were dreading something. Their first class with Moody was on Thursday, and Harry had never wanted to skip a class more– not even Lockhart's lessons.

The only real thing of note that occurred was Longbottom melting his sixth cauldron in Potions, and the subsequent nervous breakdown the Gryffindor had suffered. Harry actually felt a great deal of sympathy for the poor boy– Snape had been in an absolutely foul mood and even the Slytherins hadn't been spared, though they hadn't suffered as much as the other three Houses.

"You know why he's been so awful, right?" Blaise said gloomily as he tried to stretch the essay Snape had assigned to its required length of two feet– he was still seven inches short.

"Same reason as Hermione." Harry slumped back against the leather couch. "Moody."

"Moody." Blaise agreed, glum.

Draco and Theo, who were also sitting in the common room slugging their way through Snape's essay, both shuddered. It was common knowledge in all the Houses that Snape really wanted the Defense Against the Dark Arts job, and Snape had very much disliked all of their previous Dark Arts teachers, and shown it. He was wary, though, Harry had noted, about displaying that same animosity to Moody.

"I think he's scared of him." Blaise said, after carefully checking the room to make sure Snape wasn't there to overhear him– Harry shuddered to think about how Snape would react to that in his current mood. They'd be disemboweling barrels of horned toads next to Longbottom for weeks.

"Moody hates Death Eaters, and Snape was a Death Eater." Pointed out Draco, sensibly. "I know that father is nervous enough around Moody that he didn't keep pushing to have Moody charged after the incident when Dumbledore got him off the assault charges." They all traded scowls at that. It was ridiculous that Moody had gotten away with cursing two students, and Harry was certain that if it hadn't been Slytherins that Moody cursed then the reaction to the whole incident would be very different. "Mother isn't afraid of Moody, though," Draco said, cheering up.

"It's because your mama's got balls to put all of us to shame." Blaise said, with a grin.

"I've never understood that saying."

"Argh!" Blaise jumped so violently as Hermione leaned over the back of the couch he was on that he knocked the coffee table he was writing his essay on, causing his inkwell to tip and spill its contents over his essay. "Merda!" He swore.

"I read it over your shoulder, it was rubbish anyway." Hermione said, patting Blaise's shoulder as the boy looked at his ruined essay in horror. Blaise just groaned, slumping back on the couch and pulling one of the green silk cushions over his face. Harry could hear him muttering more curses in Italian and patted his shoulder consolingly.

"What don't you understand about the saying?" Theo asked, far more interested in what Hermione had to say then Blaise's ruined essay.
"Why do people say that someone's got balls? Or that they should grow some balls? It's ridiculous, and it doesn't even make sense—balls are weak and sensitive." Hermione explained, with a snort. "If someone really wants to be tough they shouldn't grow some balls, they should grow a vagina. Now those can really take a pounding."

Harry started choking he was laughing so hard. The three Purebloods looked stunned, like they didn't know whether to laugh or to gape at Hermione in horrified bemusement. Hermione just looked very satisfied with the chaos she had caused.

"Have you finished the essay Snape set?" He asked, after wiping actual tears of laughter from his eyes.

"Of course," Hermione said. Harry was about to ask if he could borrow it— he still had five inches to go on his— when he was distracted by a small, fluffy head sticking out from under Hermione's hair.

"What in Salazar's name is that thing?" Draco demanded, having spotted the same thing he had. "It looks like the unholy spawn of that cat of yours and Filch's menace!" Harry started snickering again as Hermione narrowed her eyes dangerously at Draco, who quickly realized his mistake. "Oh bloody hell, it is their spawn, isn't it?"

"Draco, meet Sycorax." Hermione said, and the smile she gave him was pure poison. "She'll be living in our dorm for a while. Try not to leave your things lying around— kittens can be very... destructive. I wouldn't want her shredding your essays, shedding fur on all your robes or using your favourite pair of dragonhide boots as her personal kitty litter."

Draco slumped back into his seat as Hermione turned and stalked away. "I'm doomed, aren't I?" He moaned.

"God yes."

"Absolutely."

"You are so screwed." Harry, Blaise and Theo all spoke at the same time. Draco slumped back even further into the couch, the picture of perfect misery. Harry tried not to laugh, he really did— he just didn't succeed.

At the end of Thursday lunchtime, Harry and Hermione reluctantly joined the queue outside the classroom. All the Gryffindors seemed to have arrived early and were chatting excitedly amongst themselves. Weasley smirked over at them when he saw them and Harry could feel the bones in his hand grinding together as Hermione tightened her grip on his hand as she glared coldly back at Weasley.

While all the Gryffindors rushed to the front of the classroom when the bell rang, he and Hermione found seats at the back, and were gradually joined by the rest of their housemates. Tracey, Harry noted, wasn't present.

The class was unusually quiet waiting for the ex-Auror, which meant they easily heard Moody's distinctive clunking footsteps coming down the corridor. He entered the room, looking as strange and frightening as ever, and Harry could just see his clawed, wooden foot protruding from underneath his robes.

"What I wouldn't give to have been the one to curse his leg off." Hermione muttered under her
breath to him, and she was glaring so hard at the professor Harry was surprised Moody didn't burst into flames.

"Put your books back in your bags," Moody growled as he stumped over to his desk and sat down, "they'll only get in our way."

Harry returned his copy of *The Dark Forces: A Guide to Self-Protection* in his bag, a great sense of foreboding washing over him.

Moody took out the class roll, and began to call out names, his normal eye moving steadily down the list while his magical eye swiveled around, fixing upon each student as he or she answered. Harry noticed the way Moody's magical eye seemed to fix on him and he shifted uneasily in his seat.

"Professor Lupin," Moody said gruffly, when the last person had declared themselves present, "wrote to me to say you've covered Dark creatures, but didn't start on Dark curses; is that right?"

There was a general murmur of assent.

"Well, I've only got one year here to teach you what a wand can do to you in the hands of your enemies, so you better pay attention," warned Moody. "What you learn in this classroom could one day save your lives."

"What, aren't you staying?" a dismayed Weasley blurted out.

Moody's magical eye spun around to stare at Weasley, who looked extremely apprehensive, but after a moment Moody smiled- the first time Harry had seen him do so. It made his heavily scarred face look more twisted and contorted than ever, but to Harry's disappointment Weasley looked deeply relieved– he was pretty sure that if Moody had kept staring at Weasley like he had, the boy would have wet himself.

"Your Headmaster asked me for a favour," Moody said. "He thinks you lot need to be able to defend yourselves from Dark wizards and wanted an Auror to teach you how. Now, most Aurors are too busy but my plans for retirement coincided nicely so we've got one year together to pack your skulls full of what you'll need to survive then I'll be off to go enjoy retirement."

Personally, Harry hoped that Moody didn't end up retiring at the end of the year, with the jinx on the DADA position leaving him horribly maimed or causing him to suffer some sort of tragically fatal accident instead.

Moody smiled at the class, and most of them cringed back into their chairs at the sight. "The Ministry of Magic dictates that at your age you should be taught counter-curses. You're not supposed to be shown what illegal Dark curses look like until you're in the sixth year, as they consider you not to be old enough to deal with the truth till then. My opinion is that the more you know the more likely you are to survive– how can you defend yourself from something if you haven't seen it before? A wizard casting illegal curses in your direction isn't about to enlighten you of what he's about to do and Professor Dumbledore, he's got a much better opinion on what you lot can handle. So tell me– which curses are most heavily punished by wizarding law?"

Several hands rose tentatively into the air, including Weasley's. Harry knew the three curses Moody was referring to, of course, but he was too shocked by where he thought Moody could be going with this to actually put up his hand himself. Moody gestured in Weasley's direction and the boy cleared his throat nervously.
"Er," he said, tentatively, "my dad told me about one... Is it called the Imperius Curse, or something?"

"The Imperius Curse," said Moody, with a nod. "Now that one gave the Ministry a lot of trouble back in the day. Nasty bit of magic, that."

Moody got heavily to his mismatched feet, opened his desk drawer, and took out a wire cage. A large grey rat was scampering around inside the cage, its twitching pink nose poking through the gaps in the thin bars.

Moody opened the top of the cage and fished it out by its tail and dropped it onto the desk. Before it could bolt, he pointed his wand at it and muttered, "Imperio!"

The rat rose up onto its back legs and seemed to be trying to hop on just one leg. Moody then jerked his wand and it curled up and started to roll in circles around the desk.

Most of the class was laughing, but Harry stayed quiet, very aware of the dark look on Moody's face.

"How funny do you think it would be," the ex-Auror growled, "if you were the one under that curse?"

The laughter died away almost instantly.

"No free will," lectured Moody, gesturing to the rat. "The caster has complete control over their victim's body. I could make the rat do whatever I want. Chew off its own paws, claw out its own eyes, run into a wall over and over until its skull bursts..." Harry shuddered, sickened, and felt Hermione's hand brush against his, and he linked their fingers together, needing her grounding presence.

"Years ago, there were a lot of witches and wizards going about under the Imperius Curse," lectured Moody, and Harry knew he was talking about the days in which Voldemort had been all-powerful. "And there were even more claiming to be. The Ministry had a hell of a time trying to figure out the liars— and they didn't always get it right." Harry didn't miss the way Moody's magical eye turned to Draco and his jaw clenched.

"Now unlike the other two, the Imperius Curse can be broken if the individual it's been cast upon has a strong enough will which makes it unique among the Unforgiveables. I'll teach you how to do it, but I can tell you right now that most of you won't be able to do it— it takes a special sort of strength and the best defence you've got is to avoid getting hit by it in the first place. Now, who else can give me another Unforgivable?"

Harry was surprised when Longbottom's hand rose into the air. The only class in which Longbottom usually volunteered information was Herbology, which was easily his best subject. Longbottom honestly looked surprised at his own daring.

"Yes, boy?" said Moody, his magical eye rolling right over to fix on Longbottom.

"There's one— the Cruciatus Curse," said Longbottom in a small but distinct voice.

"You're Longbottom, aren't you?" Moody said, suddenly. Both his eyes had turned to fix intently on Longbottom, who cringed back into his seat and nodded, looking frightened.

"Good people, your parents," Moody said, giving a short nod that seemed almost respectful. "Right then." He lifted the Imperius curse from the rat but it remained motionless on his desktop,
apparently too scared to move.

"The Cruciatus Curse," Moody lectured them, "is a very nasty one." Harry, who was fully aware of just how nasty the Cruciatus was, having used it himself more then once, felt his stomach lurch as Moody raised his wand again, pointed it at the spider and muttered, "Crucio!"

At once, the rat started screaming; a high-pitched and unending squeal that raised the hairs on the back of Harry's neck as the rodent's spine seemed to flex back to the point he thought it would surely break. Its tail thrashed from side to side, whipping against the desk hard enough for Harry to hear it from the back of the classroom, pungent yellow urine soaked its fur and stained the desk and its legs twitched and jerked in violent spasms.

Harry thought he might be sick. Somehow, it was worse seeing the rat suffering like this then it had been watching Pettigrew, Greyback or that man in the clearing at the Quidditch World Cup writhing under the torture curse. It was probably, he thought, because the rat was innocent and so defenceless against the cruelty.

"I can see that you're certainly enjoying that!" Hermione said, loudly enough for the whole class to hear. "Is that what you were picturing doing to Draco and I, on Monday?"

Harry turned to her, actually shocked by her bold, harsh words. She met his eyes dead on before nodding slightly over to the right of the classroom. Harry followed her gaze and was shocked to see the anguished expression on Longbottom's face; eyes wide and horrified, fixed on the tortured rat.

Moody raised his wand. The rat's back relaxed, but its body continued to twitch.

"Twenty points from Slytherin." Moody growled. Hermione lifted her chin, her expression unrepentant as she met Moody's glare challengingly. Moody's magical eye never leaving Hermione even as he turned to sweep his gaze over the rest of the shell-shocked class.

"Absolute agony," he said, roughly. "The very worst there is. Think every single pain receptor in the body activated at once and you've got a vague idea of what the Cruciatus is like. It's known as the torture curse for a damn good reason and was as popular as the Imperius."

Harry turned to Hermione and whispered to her under his breath, "what the hell was that about? Why did you bait him like that?"

"I might not be a good person," Hermione murmured back. "But I do try not to be needlessly cruel. Especially to kindred spirits."

Harry clearly remembered Hermione using the phrase 'kindred spirits' to describe their likenesses when they first met on the Hogwarts Express, back when he was eleven years old. She'd used it on only four occasions since to describe people— Luna, who suffered from neglect by her father; Tom, who had been abused by the caretakers of the orphanage he grew up in; the Carrow twins, who suffered at the hands of their rich Pureblood mother and uncle; and once in an offhand manner in regard to Snape, who she theorised had likely been abused to some extent as a child.

She'd never mentioned anyone in their year level being a kindred spirit before, though, and Harry gave her a very confused look. A corner of her mouth quirked up and she nodded slightly in Longbottom's direction again whose hands were still clenched on the table in front of him, his knuckles white and his shoulders hunched forwards, as if he was curling up to protect himself.

Harry's mouth tightened and he gave Hermione a significant look that demanded she explained after class. She rolled her eyes but nodded.
"Potter! Granger!" Barked Moody, causing him to jump and turn back to face the front. Moody was glaring at them both and Harry tried not to cringe. "If you seem to know enough that you don't have to pay attention, why don't one of you tell me what the last Unforgivable is?"

Harry's throat felt dry, but he spoke before Hermione could. "The one that killed my parents." He said, loudly. The class started to whisper loudly and the hand not gripping onto Hermione's was clenched in a fist on his lap. Harry looked straight at Moody, meeting the rough gaze with his own challenge in his eyes. "Avada Kedavra."

Several people looked uneasily around at him, even some of the Slytherins, but Moody's mouth twisted into a lopsided smile.

"The Killing Curse." He said softly. "The last and the worst. Instant death." Harry felt sick at his words and he couldn't help the dread he felt building inside his stomach as Moody turned his gaze to the rat, still weakly twitching on its side. Moody raised his wand and Harry felt a thrill of foreboding wash through him. He had never seen the Killing Curse in action before. He had never seen the last thing that his parents would have seen.

"Avada Kedavra!" Moody roared.

There was a flash of blinding green light and a rushing sound, as though a vast, invisible something was soaring through the air- instantaneously the rat stopped twitching, unmarked, but unmistakably dead. Several of the students stifled cries; Weasley had thrown himself backward and almost toppled off his seat as the dead rat skidded toward him.

Moody swept the dead rat off the desk into the trash can next to his desk. Morbidly, Harry wondered just how many dead rats were heaped inside the bin.

"The Killing Curse," he said calmly. "There's no way to block it. No counter curse to undo it. No way to defend yourself against it except dodge. In our entire world-wide recorded history of thousands and thousands of years, there has only ever been one known person to have survived it and he's sitting in this classroom."

Harry felt his face redden as Moody's eyes (both of them) looked into his own. He could feel everyone else looking around at him too and he stared fixedly at the blank blackboard as though fascinated by it, but not really seeing it at all.

Moody was speaking again, from a great distance, it seemed to Harry. With a massive effort, he pulled himself back to the present and listened to what Moody was saying.

"The Killing Curse is a very powerful piece of magic. Even if you all waved your wands in my direction and screamed the curse, I'd say the worst I'd get is a headache."

"I would love to test that theory." Muttered Hermione.

"But that doesn't matter," continued Moody. "I'm not here to teach you how to do it, it's to teach you to survive someone who can; that's what this class is for. You want to live? Then you better practice non-stop, relentless CONSTANT VIGILANCE!"

Harry actually jumped in his seat, as did the whole class, when Moody roared at them. As if satisfied by their reactions, Moody's grizzled face twisted into that horrible parody of a smile again. "You've all got to know. You've all got to appreciate what the worst is. Because as someone who's talking from experience, I'm going to pass on this– you don't want to ever find yourself in a
situation where you're facing the Unforgivable Curses, but if you do then you're going to need every single advantage you can get to stay alive. Now who can tell me why they're known as Unforgivable?"

"Because they're illegal?" Parvati Patil said, in a wavering voice.

"More then just illegal." Moody said, darkly. "To use any of those curses on a fellow human being is unforgivable. You use an Unforgivable then it doesn't matter who you are because you've just earned yourself a life-sentence in Azkaban and I will be the first person lining up to take you down. Don't you ever forget that. Now get out your quills and start copying this down..."

They spent the rest of the lesson taking notes on each of the Unforgivable Curses. No one spoke until the bell rang- but when Moody had dismissed them and they had left the classroom, a torrent of talk burst forth. Most people were discussing the curses in awed voices – "Did you see it twitch?" "–and when he killed it, just like that!"

They were talking about the lesson, Harry thought, as though it had been some sort of spectacular show but he hadn't found it very entertaining.

Maybe it was because he was dragging his feet that he noticed it– or rather, he noticed him.

Longbottom was standing alone, halfway up one of the side-passages, staring at the stone wall opposite him with the same horrified, wide-eyed look he had worn when Moody had demonstrated the Cruciatius Curse.

The same look Harry imagined that he had worn on his own face when Moody demonstrated the Killing Curse.

He didn't realize he'd stopped walking until Hermione paused beside him. "Ah," she said, looking where he was.

"Why'd you say it was cruel?" He asked her, speaking quietly so they wouldn't be overheard. "You know, about Longbottom when Moody was torturing the rat?" Hermione's mouth twisted a bit, and Harry was startled to realize the expression on her face was one of sympathy– it wasn't something he saw on her very often.

"You know Longbottom lives with his grandmother," she said quietly, and he nodded- it was common enough knowledge in their year level. "Well, his parents were tortured by Bellatrix, her husband, brother-in-law and another Death Eater, one who died in Azkaban, with the Cruciatius curse until their minds broke." Harry sucked in a shocked breath.

"What?" He breathed.

"You know Longbottom lives with his grandmother," she said quietly, and he nodded- it was common enough knowledge in their year level. "Well, his parents were tortured by Bellatrix, her husband, brother-in-law and another Death Eater, one who died in Azkaban, with the Cruciatius curse until their minds broke." Harry sucked in a shocked breath.

"What?" He breathed.

"It was after Voldemort fell. They were trying to get information, and..." Hermione trailed off and shrugged. Harry looked at her, horrified, then glanced back over at Longbottom.

"Right," he muttered, "wait here."

"Harry? What are you– oh for god's sake." Harry ignored her as he walked over to Longbottom.

"Er, you alright, mate?" he asked. Longbottom jumped then paled seeing him.

"Oh hello," he said, his voice much higher than usual. "Interesting lesson, wasn't it? I wonder what's for dinner, I'm– I'm starving, aren't you?"
"It was a horrible lesson." Harry interrupted gently, but with a firm voice. "I hated it. I mean, it wasn't like we didn't already know what happened to our parents, but seeing it was... something else. Something horrible." Longbottom's face turned the color of porridge.

"You– you know?" he whispered, his expression dreading.

"I'm not going to tell anyone," Harry said, honestly. "I swear to you, Lo–Neville." He corrected himself and Longbottom–Neville–looked at him with wide eyes like he'd never seen him before. Then his whole face crumpled, and Harry realized that the other boy was about to start crying. "C'mon, there's a secret passage up here," he said hastily, remembering seeing it on the Marauder's Map.

A familiar clunking noise behind them, though, had Harry turning to see Moody limping toward them. When the Moody spoke, Harry was shocked to hear it was in a much lower and gentler growl than they had yet heard.

"Your parents were good friends of mine," he said to Neville. "Real good people, the both of them, and some of the best Aurors I knew. Your mum was one of my trainees and Alice would turn me to No-Eyed Moody if she thought I'd left you alone after that lesson. I've got some tea and shortbread in my office, why don't we have ourselves a little chat?"

Neville looked even more frightened at the prospect of tea and biscuits with Moody. He neither moved nor spoke. Moody turned his magical eye upon Harry.

"How are you feeling, Potter?"

"Fine," Harry said, unable to help his glare, and the way his whole body stiffened, hands clenching in fists at his sides.

Moody's blue eye quivered slightly in its socket as it surveyed Harry. Then he said, "There's no point in tip-toeing around it. You kids need to know what's out there. And maybe it's rough on you, but it isn't my job to make you comfortable–it's my job to make sure you come out of an encounter with a Dark wizard still intact. Now, come on Longbottom."

Neville looked pleadingly at Harry, who moved sideways, so that he was standing in between Neville and Moody. "Thanks, but Neville and I have somewhere to be." He said challengingly, meeting Moody's stare and daring him to object. Moody narrowed his normal eye, but then nodded shortly. He didn't say anything else, just stumped off, and Neville made a wet, relieved sound behind him. Harry turned to see the other boy wiping at his eyes. "I lied," he told the other boy, quietly. "I'm not alright. Want to go down to the kitchens and get some hot-chocolate? I really don't feel like sitting in the Great Hall right now."

The shocked, grateful look Neville gave him made Harry feel about two feet tall. He'd never really looked twice at Neville before, other then to laugh about his continued failures during potions. And know that he thought about it, he'd never seen Neville with anyone before, and it made him wonder if the boy was lonely. The fact that none of his Housemates had approached him to comfort the boy after the lesson made Harry think that he was right in his guess.

Harry steered the other boy out of the side corridor and Neville cringed slightly when he saw Hermione. Harry knew that his best friend hadn't missed his reaction but Hermione seemed to be in an uncharacteristically sympathetic mood because she cleared her throat and said, "If it's alright with you, Harry, I think I'll go back to the dorm and lie down. Weasley's obnoxious voice has given me a headache." Harry snorted, and nodded.
"Okay. Thanks." He told her and she shrugged, but smiled at him.

"Come find me after, alright?"

"Yeah, I will." He promised. He watched her leave, before turning back to Neville again. "Let's go see if the House Elves have any snickerdoodles." He said and Neville gave him a confuse look.

"What are snickerdoodles?" He asked and Harry gave him a mock-horrified look.

"I have so much to teach you, Neville." He said, solemnly, and almost started grinning with triumph when Neville smiled shyly at him. It wasn't much, but it was a start.

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A/N: Let's face it, Iago and Mrs. Norris would not have pretty kittens. They'd definitely be more adorably ugly then anything:

*I couldn't resist putting in my favourite quote ever. It's by Betty White: "Why do people say grow some balls? Balls are weak and sensitive. If you wanna be tough, grow a vagina. Those things can take a pounding"
~Cheshire Carroll
CHAPTER XLI:

Harry's POV:

Neville, it turned out, had never been to the kitchens before. Harry was half convinced that the other boy thought he was luring him down into the dungeons to be ambushed until Harry stopped in front of the painting of the fruit bowl and tickled the pear, opening the entrance to the kitchen.

Several house elves rushed over to happily provide tea for Neville, hot chocolate for Harry and a plate of bite-sized muffins for them both, as well as ushering them over to a small table for them to eat at.

Harry was on his third mini-muffin before the other boy spoke up. "My parents stay in the Janus Thickey ward at St Mungos," Neville said, his voice so quiet Harry barely heard him. "They don't really speak– I don't know if they recognize me or not." He pulled something out of his pocket and smoothed it over the table top with trembling fingers. It was an empty sweets wrapper. "Mum," Neville's voice cracked slightly, "mum gives me these, whenever I visit."

Harry's throat felt thick, and he wasn't sure what to say. He wasn't sure what you could say to something like that.

"What are their names?" he asked, finally.

"A-Alice," Neville said, his mouth turning up in a weak smile. "And Frank."

"Tell me about them?" he said, and he knew it was the right thing to say when Neville's shoulders finally fully relaxed.

It was dinnertime when they parted ways– Neville returning to the Gryffindor Tower, while Harry went down to the Slytherin common room. It was empty, and Harry headed for the boys dorms, only to stop short in the entrance to his dorm-room and let out a sigh.

He wondered whether to face-palm or not as he then stepped into the room and shut the door firmly behind him. The noise had Tom and Hermione, both naked on his bed, turn towards him, and he gasped, eyes widening.

It wasn't that the scene on the bed was particularly shocking– if anything, given the propensity Tom and Hermione had towards engaging in bedroom activities, he was actually surprised he hadn't been woken up the first night of Tom's return by the two of them going at it; full dorm or no. No, what shocked him was the mark on Tom's neck, well below the collar– it couldn't be called a hickey, not really; the impression of (presumably Hermione's) teeth stood out in vibrant purple and red against Tom's pale skin, looking closer to the mark left by Greyback on Hermione's shoulder then any love bite he'd seen.

The idea of Hermione having given it to Tom wasn't even the shocking part– Hermione could be just as possessive as Tom, though she usually hid it better then the older boy, and she was, to use the crude term, a 'biter'. It was the thought that Tom could be marked, could be bruised, that had him feel hot and cold all over.

"Well? Are you going to get on the bed or not?" Tom asked, not even waiting for an answer before
turning his attention back on Hermione and shoving three fingers inside her easily.

Hermione let out a sound that was more pleasure then pain, her entire body arching gracefully, and Harry's body moved without permission, crossing the dorm and climbing up onto the bed. He was closer to them then he usually was during their shagging, his four-poster not nearly as big as the bed they'd shared at Riddle Manor, or even the one at Malfoy Manor, but Harry found that he didn't really care. He was too focused on the way Hermione was riding Tom's fingers with abandon, emitting sounds of pleasure every time Tom moved his thumb so a buck of her hips had his nail roughly grazing the sensitive external bundle of nerves.

Listening to the sounds Hermione was making, choked back whimpers and moans of need and pleasure, Harry let out a soft groan of his own, low in his throat.

Tom's eyes flicked over to him and the older boy smirked, withdrawing his fingers swiftly, yet before Hermione could make any sound to protest the loss he was grasping her hips and shoving into her roughly. As her head flung back, a cry wrenching from deep in her throat, Tom reached towards him, slipping those same three digits between his lips, pressing down on his tongue– hard.

Harry froze at the breaking of the unspoken rules of his participation– or rather, his non-participation. His hands snapped up to grab Tom's in both his own, and he fully intended on shoving the older boy's hand away, out of his mouth– and then probably moving off the bed for good measure– when he... hesitated. Just for a moment he wondered what it would be like if he... didn't move away. And then he realized he didn't have to just wonder.

So instead of moving back, he held on to Tom instead, and tentatively started to suck on the fingers in his mouth.

Tom's fingers tasted like Hermione, slick and sweet, which was enough to coax a hungry moan from him and he started to suck harder, as if he could lift that flavor right off of the older boy's skin.

He barely noticed Tom pulling out of Hermione, he was so consumed in his task, but he did notice when the older boy pulled his hand free. Tom murmured something to Hermione and she rolled over, moving up onto her knees and forearms, shuffling around so she was facing him as Tom pushed back into her.

Harry almost stopped breathing when he realised the reason behind the change in positions, realised just how close Hermione's mouth suddenly was to him as she looked up and licked her lips, her eyes blazing in a clear invitation.

He undid his own pants with shaking fingers and Hermione wasted no time in lowering her head and taking him into her mouth. Her thin hands moved to grasp onto his hips while she swallowed him down, her hooded, lust-blown eyes never leaving his, her body jolting every few seconds with Tom's thrusts.

"Hermione," he choked out, his voice wrecked and his fingers tangling uselessly in her hair. She hummed in response, and Harry could have sworn his vision turned white for a moment.

Meanwhile, Tom had closed his hands around Hermione's hips in a bruising grip, pounding up into her savagely as she held herself in place between them. Harry didn't last longer then a minute or two before crying out and coming hard down her throat. He was still gasping through the aftershocks of his climax when Hermione moved her mouth to his inner thigh, biting down on the sensitive flesh as she moaned out her own release. The unexpected pain made him cry out and with a final thrust, Tom came too, pushing deep into Hermione as he did so.
As they all heaved for breath afterwards, Harry more out of shock then exertion, Hermione grabbed him by the collar, pulling him forwards into a lazy kiss. Her mouth tasted salty. Tom, vanishing the mess with a lazy wave of his hand, looked over at them.

"You should join in more often," he said. Harry felt his cheeks flush red, but he didn't say no. And if the smirk on Tom's face was any indication, the older boy had certainly noticed.

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Hermione's POV:

Feeling pleasantly sated and in a much better mood then she'd been in all week, Hermione helped Harry with their homework assignment for Ancient Runes, an essay on linking at least two runes together, and then slept in the girls' dorm for the first time since returning to Hogwarts.

The next couple of weeks passed by quietly. There were no new confrontations between her and Moody, other then snide remarks on her part that he reacted to by taking House points– her fellow Slytherins were dismayed but accepting. Tracey had yet to go to a single DADA class, but Hermione had the feeling that all the Dark curses Moody demonstrated for them Tracey was already quite familiar with.

The anomaly in her routine was the little blonde girl; the Ravenclaw, Luna Lovegood. Hermione had watched, confused and slightly bewildered, as Luna failed to approach her, instead sending longing looks in her direction when she thought Hermione wasn't watching. It was an exasperated Daphne who alerted her to what was going on-- "She thinks you won't want to be her friend, here where everyone can see you talking with her." Daphne had informed her, looking like it was taking great effort not to roll her eyes. Hermione had sort of just stared at Daphne until the other girl really did roll her eyes. "She's shy and she's scared, now go make the first move for Salazar's sake!" She ordered, and Hermione did as she said, bowing down to the other girl's superior knowledge when it came to interacting with other people on a more then mainly superficial level.

And then there was Neville Longbottom. Now that was an interesting situation– and had the potential for quite the interesting decision on Harry's part too. Hermione didn't think the boy had any actual worth that made a friendship worth cultivating, not like Luna with her connections to the Quibbler, but Harry seemed quite taken with the other boy, which left them a choice to make– or, to be more precise, left Harry with a choice to make.

Without wanting to sound dramatic, Hermione had very bluntly told Harry that the best way to have the Gryffindor's friendship would be to just own the boy altogether. Harry had given her the 'normal people are not capable of following your current thought patterns, likely due to that pesky thing called a conscience' look and she had explained.

If Harry wanted to be open about his friendship with Neville– and that was if Neville reciprocated the friendship in the first place too– then the boy would become the Gryffindor pariah. As a pariah in his own House, any and all positive interaction with his peers would come from Harry– and by extension, the Slytherins that Harry was associated with. If Harry was the only positive thing that Neville had going for him at Hogwarts, then Harry would as good as own the boy– he'd be grateful for the smallest scraps of attention and kindness offered, and desperate to do whatever he could to earn more. Harry would own him.

"I can't do that– that's horrible!" Harry had predictably exclaimed, face horrified. "I just want to be his friend!"
"It's not as simple as that." Hermione had told him, honestly. The politics between the Houses didn't allow for it to be as simple as that. "But if it makes you feel any better, I know that you'd never make him beg. And he's already lonely— you'd be giving him a friend."

"I'd be taking too much," Harry had, again predictably, protested.

"I'm not sure he really has that much to lose." Was her simple and honest reply, and the situation was currently at a standstill. Harry would sometimes snuck away after DADA with Neville to go down to the kitchens and Hermione didn't push— she knew that sooner or later Harry would make a decision, one that she could easily predict, and when he did she'd start to groom Neville.

She always believed in being prepared, after all, and Neville already had such low self-worth that it wouldn't be hard to shape him in the image she was after.

The calm atmosphere broke when Snape summoned all the third year and above students to a House meeting to make a rather horrifying announcement.

"Sir, did you just say Moody is going to be putting us under the Imperius Curse?" One of the sixth year girls asked, incredulous. Snape looked like he had a headache, and Hermione could sympathize.

"Unfortunately," her head of house said, through gritted teeth, "the Headmaster has managed to get the Ministry of Magic to agree that it would be a worthwhile learning experience."

"This is insane!" Draco said, loudly. "I am not letting Moody," he spat out the ex-Auror's name, "cast an Unforgiveable on me!"

Hermione was holding herself frozen in place, so still that she was barely even breathing. The idea of having her control being stripped away like that, and especially by that piece of shit Moody...

"We are allowed to refuse, right?" Harry asked, his face unsettled.

"Yes you are, and Moody has been given strict instructions that no student is to be penalized in any way for refusing to have the Imperius cast on them." Snape confirmed, and Hermione let out a small sound of relief. "However," Snape continued, giving them all a serious look, "as horrified as I'm sure you all are, after you have taken a moment to process consider the benefits of allowing it to occur."

"We get to know what it feels like?" offered Parkinson, which Hermione thought was rather astute of the pug-faced girl.

"You get to learn how to fight it." Snape corrected. "The problem with being taught how to fight the Curse by a family member, as I'm sure a fair few of you either have been or will be, is that you don't have the same..."

"Hatred?" Tracey offered when he paused, searching for a word. "Loathing? Revulsion? Disgust?"

"Abhorrence," Snape said, "that gives you more will to fight back."

"We won't be able to actually throw off the curse, though, will we?" Parkinson asked.

"I would be very surprised to learn if any of you had." Snape said, quietly. "It takes a very specific sort of focus to be able to cast off the Imperius."

He left them on that grim note, and most people went to bed that night uneasy and unsettled. Harry
tossed and turned beside her, and she eventually gave up trying to sleep, instead drew Tom out from the Diary.

"I'm afraid for him," she admitted to the younger Dark Lord, as she glided her fingertips over Harry's collarbone. His skin was slightly sweaty from his restlessness.

"You're not afraid for yourself?" Tom asked, raising an eyebrow. "You know it's likely that Moody will use this as an opportunity to humiliate you."

"I have thick skin," Hermione said. "And I know you're going to kill him, which gives me far more patience then I'd have otherwise for the fucker."

"Oh?" Tom said, looking surprised and slightly entertained. "And what made you come to that conclusion?"

"I didn't come to any conclusion," she told him, "you told me– he bruised me, after all."

"I am planning on teaching him a very permanent lesson," Tom acquiesced, easily enough. "Though not until the end of the school year."

"Oh?" Hermione said, unable to help showing her disappointment at that.

"Don't sulk, dear," Tom admonished, tapping her nose with his pointer finger. Hermione playfully snapped her teeth at the finger in response, and he looked at her, amused. "After the werewolf, he is the best Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher you've had. You may not like him, but you can't deny that." He said, and Hermione grimaced but nodded. "After, though, I'll let you help." Tom promised, and Hermione smiled at him, sharp as one of her knives.

"I'll hold you to that."

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The Gryffindors, it became obvious, had not been warned ahead, and Hermione gained a great deal of amusement from the assorted looks of horror on their faces when Moody announced he would be putting the Imperius Curse on the class to demonstrate its power and to see whether they could resist its effects.

Tom had wanted them to bring the Diary to the class, but Hermione had refused, citing that she didn't know if Moody's eye picked up Dark magic. Tom had then slipped up to her when he very confidently said that it wouldn't pick up the magic he'd used for the Diary– when Hermione had asked how he could be so certain, the older boy's eyes had flicked in Harry's direction; or, to be more specific, in the direction of Harry's left hand.

Hermione had drawn Tom aside afterwards, when Harry had gone to sneak off to the kitchens to meet Neville. "So," she'd said, giving him the same bland smile she gave Moody whenever she was wondering how many holes she could poke in him with a very sharp knife before he stopped twitching. "I wondered what sort of magic it was on that ring. I knew it couldn't technically harm Harry, but you and I and your elder counterpart do have very different ideas of what constitutes as 'harm'."

Hermione had appreciated that Tom didn't try to insult her intelligence by claiming not to understand what she was talking about, instead giving her a calculating look.

"What did you notice?" he'd asked instead.
"I didn't notice, so much as I felt it," she had corrected him, honestly. "Even just sleeping next to it, the magic of the ring latched onto my magic, and I could feel it trying to influence my mind through my Occlumency shields." Tom's eyes had then narrowed dangerously.

"You 'could'? What did you do to the ring?" he'd asked, and there had been a very real threat in his voice when he asked that. Hermione's smile had turned much sharper in response.

"It's safe. It was a gift, after all. Somebody helped me transfigure a look-alike, and no; I'm not saying who it was. Harry still isn't aware of what you and Voldemort tried– I never told him, and I won't. But if either of you try something like that again..." She'd paused, her smile turning sweet and cloying– poisonous. "Well, you can see where trying to change us has gotten Dumbledore."

Tom's expression had gone very blank, but after a pause the older boy'd nodded. "Will you return the ring?" was all he'd said in response to her not-so subtle threat.

"But Tom," she'd replied, her eyes widening in mock-indignation, "it was a gift!"

"Brat." Tom'd sighed, and there'd been enough fondness in his voice for Hermione to recognise that the incident had been put behind them for now– that didn't mean she'd forgotten, of course; and she knew better then to think that either Tom or Voldemort would desist in their now interrupted plans simply because she'd told them to.

But that was fine– Hermione had always liked a challenge, even if Harry had never been the battle ground before. She'd only had one more question for him.

"There isn't going to be a third one of you running around, will there?"

"Don't worry." Was Tom's amused response. "I don't share."

Broken from her thoughts by a shrill Gryffindor– Patil– loudly pointing out that the Imperius curse was called a forbidden curse for a reason, Hermione enjoyed Moody's knock-back, even though she certainly had no fondness for the man– personally she'd be more then happy if Patil left. The girl was loud and annoying, and Hermione shuddered at the thought of the possibility of having to share a dormitory with Patil– if she'd been sorted into Gryffindor, she'd probably have committed mass-murder by now.

Thinking about it like that, it was almost a shame she hadn't. She was fairly sure she'd have been able to get away with it for a while too– nobody would expect the twelve-year-old to be the one holding the knife (or wand), after all.

Moody cleared away the desks with a sweep of his wand, leaving a large clear space in the middle of the room. "Dumbledore wants you all to know what it feels like," the man announced gruffly, "I agree– better to learn it in here then the hard way, when someone's putting it on you so they can make you cut open the throats of your sleeping family."

"How in the seven hells is that man a teacher?" Hermione muttered to Harry. Unfortunately, Moody heard her and she felt her whole body stiffen, threatening to go into fight or flight mode as the ex-Auror stumped forwards, his wand pointed straight at her.

"It looks like Granger just volunteered to go first." He growled, and Hermione barely had time to grit her teeth before he shouted "Imperio!" and she flinched, ready and resigned for the worst– only it didn't come.

Out of everything she'd been expecting when she heard about the Imperius curse, it hadn't been this; it was, without doubt, the most wonderful feeling she'd ever experienced. A floating
sensation filled her body as every thought and emotion and worry in her head was gently brushed away, leaving nothing of the mess behind but a vague, untraceable happiness.

The last time she'd felt anything like this, she'd been nine years old and Sting had handed her a lit joint and urged her to keep sucking in lungful's of the smoke until she couldn't even feel her face, and her body felt like a foreign three-dimensional concept. She'd felt like she was floating then too, the fresh, raw grief from the loss of her young charge, Nymph, blurred by the fog of the drug to the point of being unrecognisable.

Later, once she'd come down from the high, Hermione remembered thinking it would be so very easy to get addicted to that sort of high, even after having spent the three years she had on the streets stepping over more bodies of gaunt-faced men and women aged beyond their years by their drugs of choice then she'd care to remember, their forgotten corpses slumped in empty corners and street gutters with needles in their arms, or foam in their mouths, but she'd never touched a drug again.

She'd known far too well the consequences of addiction if she had decided to go down that road and she'd made herself turn away from drugs, but she couldn't make herself fight the Imperius; she couldn't make herself do anything that could risk ruining the wonderful, carefree bliss.

Even Moody's voice, echoing in some distant chamber of her empty brain, wasn't enough to stop her hungrily committing to basking in every second she spent floating.

*Imitate a chicken, imitate a chicken...*

How childish; a very distant voice murmured.

Does it really matter, though? A much stronger voice countered; why shouldn't we just imitate a chicken if it means we get to feel like this?

Hermione wasn't sure how long she spent clucking, her arms moving awkwardly at her sides like wings. Eventually, she thought she heard someone-- Harry, probably-- demand that Moody lift the curse, and the ex-Auror lowered his and. Finding herself in sudden control of her full faculties, Hermione went very, very still, her jaw clicking shut with an audible snap in the near silent classroom.

The sudden crushing weight of the maelstrom her emotions was like a physical blow, almost making her stumble. The sharp pain in her chest was like a red hot poker (and she knew what one of those felt like), and if she tried to talk now, she thought she'd probably end up screaming instead. It was all she could do not to claw at the skin over her heart, as if trying to dislodge the invisible weight that was making it hard to even breathe.

"I had much higher hopes for you, Granger," Moody said, and Hermione looked up very slowly. She didn't know what Moody was expecting to see in her eyes, but the pain and grief and horror she felt like she was drowning in after coming off that blissful cessation from the finely managed emotions she struggled with every day now so crushingly sharp and raw and overpowering, obviously wasn't it.

The man's normal eye widened slightly, and for the first time in the very short space of time they'd been unfortunately acquainted he didn't keep going at her, instead he turned to a random point of the loose circle that the class had gathered into and smiled-- it wasn't a nice smile. Hermione couldn't even remember the last time she'd seen a nice smile. "So," Moody said, his mouth twisted in a terrible parody of a grin, "who wants to go next?"
Harry gently tugged her back out of the circle, and she curled into his side. Painstakingly trying rebuilding her Occlumency walls before she shattered into thousands of pieces, each piece more broken then the last, she watched Moody cast the curse, over and over, and pretended she didn't desperately wish he was using the curse on her, not on her classmates; all those ungrateful shits who had no appreciation for just how precious, how *precious*, those few minutes of empty, echoing bliss were.

Harry was the last to be put under the Imperius. Hermione wondered if the reason for that had been because Moody's magical eye had been watching her, the man waiting for the moment when she stopped leaning so heavily on Harry. The small kindness, if it was that, was appreciated. She still planned to gladly torture the man by Tom's side when the end of the year arrived, but maybe not for quite as long as she'd originally planned– she'd been intending on making his death drag out for *days*, so if he didn't do anything else to piss her off (unlikely), then maybe she'd let him have a faster, more merciful passing.

Then again, there were a great many Death Eaters in Riddle Manor who held grudges against Moody– when it came down to it, in all likelihood his death wasn't going to belong to her anyway.

Oh well. Certainly not her problem.

Hermione fiercely shoved down the jealously that reared its head when Moody pointed his wand at her best friend as Harry shuffled hesitantly into the center of the circle, instead focusing on the uneasiness she felt.

"*Imperio!*" Shouted the ex-Auror and Hermione watched, tense, as Harry bent his knees, preparing to do some sort of gymnastic move– only, when he did attempt to jump off the ground, he also seemed to try to stop himself from jumping, and ended up smashing face-first into the stone floor of the classroom instead.

"Atta boy!" roared Moody. "First of the class to fight it!" Harry let out a groan as he pushed himself back up, cradling his nose with one hand– Hermione could see flecks of blood on his chin and she scowled at the sight. "Alright Potter– let's go again!" Moody ordered, and Harry gave the professor a dismayed look.

"Again?" He echoed.

"You're not leaving the circle until you can throw it off completely." Moody growled, and Harry visibly wilted.

Moody only had to put her best friend under the Imperius another four times before he could throw it off altogether, but Harry had hit the floor with his face twice more and there was a steady stream of blood streaking down his chin and neck from his nose that Moody seemed to be ignoring completely.

"Guess that's two out of three for you, Potter!" Moody said, giving Harry an approving nod. The man honestly did look pleased, which was the only reason why Hermione resisted the urge to start shouting at him for his truly tasteless comment.

"Led go to da ho'pital wing." Harry grumbled to her as the bell rang, trying– and mostly failing– to stem the blood flow with one of the sleeves of his robe. Hermione nodded soundlessly; she hadn't spoken since Moody had put her under the Imperius, and she felt too simultaneously raw and yet numb to start now.

She was aware of the anxious looks Harry was giving her the entire walk to the hospital wing, but
she was so disjointed that she didn't really give them any thought. She missed the expression Madam Pomfrey face altogether, and was almost pathetically grateful to finally return to the Slytherin Common Room.

Snape was already standing in there, along with around half of the House– third years and up. Harry mumbled an apology for being late– Hermione hadn't even been aware there was a House meeting planned in the first place– and she just let him steer her over to one of the couches, Blaise and Draco shifting over so that they could sit down. She brought her knees up to her chest and leaned into Harry, looking up at her head of House and waiting for him to talk.

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Severus's POV:

Severus looked down grimly at his quiet students, his gaze flicking over to one of them in particular. Huddled and hollow-eyed, Hermione was a grim flashback to the used-up pawns of the Dark Lord; too damaged by the repeated and prolonged use of the Imperius to have any sort of will to live without it.

He shouldn't have let her go to that class. He knew he shouldn't have, should have just ignored Albus's orders to actively encourage all his students to participate. He'd felt a sick, crawling sensation in his stomach all day, and the sight of Hermione had made his heart sink, his worst fears confirmed.

When a person has suffered a significant amount of emotional trauma, the Imperius Curse could end up being as deadly as the Killing Curse. The Imperius curse induced a state of mind comparable to the high of muggle drugs– the abrupt transition from the temporary erasing of the emotional trauma to experiencing it all again, and all at once, was known to cause anything from panic attacks to complete emotional shut-down and detachment, as well as a craving to go under the curse again.

This whole situation was a bloody nightmare.

"Right," he spoke up, not letting any of the anger and upset he was feeling show in his voice. "I'm here to debrief you all on your lesson with Moody," he couldn't help the way his mouth twisted in distaste as he spat out Moody's name. "Was anyone injured in the class?" Six students raised their hands, including Harry, and his lips tightened into a thin line.

"Did you all get checked by Madam Pomfrey?" He demanded, and was pleased to see them all nod. "Good. Did Moody make any of you do anything inappropriate?" One of his sixth years, Higgs, raised a hand. "Yes?" He prompted.

"What qualifies as inappropriate, sir?" Higgs asked and Snape resisted the urge to roll his eyes at the boy.

"Did Moody force you to do something that made you uncomfortable?" he clarified.

"He mostly just made us do embarrassing things, sir," Marcella Moon offered up. Snape tried not to grind his teeth together. "He didn't single any of us out, though," the girl added. "One of the Ravenclaws asked him what the purpose of embarrassing us was, and he said it was to give us stronger motivation to fight the curse."

"He wasn't wrong." Snape admitted, grudgingly. "Does anyone have any questions?"
"I do," Agnes Bulstrode said, lifting her hand, "did anyone actually manage to fight it?"

"Potter did," Pansy Parkinson said, instantly. Snape lifted an eyebrow, turning to Harry. The boy looked uncomfortable and embarrassed, shrinking back into the couch.

"So did Flora and Hestia," Astoria Greengrass piped up. Snape glanced over at the twins, who were both very blank-faced.

"Well," he said, "that's three more then I expected."

That wasn't entirely the truth– he couldn't say he was altogether surprised that the Carrow girls could throw off the Imperius. Alecto Carrow's daughters didn't have a father who was in the picture, and lived with their mother and their uncle, Alecto's twin brother Amycus– both Carrows had been Inner Circle Death Eaters, and, if he was to be blunt about it, sadistic fucks at that. Severus would have been more shocked if the twins hadn't had experience under the Imperius, and he guessed that the twins must have been continuously cursed with the Imperius throughout their childhood until they'd eventually learned how to throw it off. He loathed that he couldn't do anything to help the girls, other then provide healing potions at the start of the term, but the Carrows might not be an Ancient House, but they were rich– very rich– and money bought silence.

But Harry... Harry he honestly hadn't been expecting. And that was nearly as concerning as Hermione's reaction.

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*Harry's POV:*

After Snape left, Harry tried and failed to get Hermione to go to dinner. The evening dragged on, with Harry growing more and more concerned about his best friend. She barely spoke and wouldn't look him in the eye. Tom wasn't in the castle, the older boy having left a folded note on the pillow stating he'd needed to leave Hogwarts as there was an urgent matter that needed to be discussed with Voldemort, and while Harry cursed the other boy for his very conveniently timed 'urgent' matter, he wasn't exactly surprised that Tom had decided to avoid the emotional mess Hermione currently was– strong emotions made Tom very uncomfortable, especially as he struggled to even understand half of them, though Tom would never admit to that.

When bed time arrived, he was almost relieved as he steered Hermione to the dorm room. He stripped her down for bed in the privacy of the bathroom before tucking her into his four poster and drawing the hangings shut before lying down beside her and pulling her into his chest. She curled even tighter into him, and wrapped her arms around him. When he went to chastely press his lips against her cheek, she turned her head and caught his lips in a kiss and didn't let it end.

He made a confused sound when she started pawing at him in earnest, and she ground her hips into his and bit at his jawline in response. Harry realised with a jolt exactly what she intended on doing when one of her hands got the drawstring of his pants undone, and he was about to push her away when he heard the hitch in her quiet breaths, the zombie-like state she'd been in since the Imperius finally starting to crack around the edges.

He knew he would be beyond mortified about what they were about to do later, but the room was dark, the hangings were drawn tight shut around his bed, and Hermione's cheeks were wet and her mouth desperate against his, and so he loosened and gave in, his hand slipping under the waistband of her panties, finding where she was hot and wet.
Harry didn't know how much the others in the dorm room could hear, but no-one said a word. Hermione lost her panties, fumbled with his sleep pants a tad too desperately and when Harry curled his fingers inside her as she rocked against him he almost started to laugh because he was about to lose his virginity having sex in a room full of people.

Hermione hitched a leg over his waist, shifted her hips forward and down and Harry groaned at the new sensation of tight, wet heat clenching around him, and then bit his lip to keep quiet.

Hermione obviously didn't care about their audience, and while Harry knew he was going to be horrified in the morning, he suspected she wouldn't care anymore about it then then she did now.

She twisted her fingers into his hair and held on, and he moved his hands to her hips and kissed her hard. They rocked silently together until Hermione was shuddering as she came undone around him, biting at his neck with her sharp teeth hard enough to nearly break the skin, and then Harry was gasping into her mouth with just as much pain as he was pleasure as he saw stars.

"You'll be okay," he promised her, when he could breathe properly again, still holding her tight to his chest. Hermione held onto him, just as tight, and together they feel asleep.
Harry's *POV*:

It took nearly a week before Hermione was back to how she'd been before going under the Imperius, though it wasn't until the day of the foreign school's arrival– October 30th, to be exact– that her mood actually lifted to something resembling an actual enthusiasm for life.

Waking up after losing his virginity in his dorm-room, Harry had been so mortified that he hadn't wanted to face Blaise, Draco, Theo, Greg and Vince ever again– ever. It was only the fact that Hermione had started talking after nearly sixteen hours of silence that had made him decide it had been worth the unbelievable embarrassment he was still feeling – not to mention it actually had felt pretty bloody brilliant too – and he managed to force himself out from hiding in bed.

The boys didn't say anything until Hermione was in the shower– they weren't suicidal, after all– but Harry had then had to put up with all the knowing smirks and pointed comments. Greg and Vince, at least, seemed to have slept through it all. Small mercies, maybe, but he was taking them.

Either way, Harry had practically glued himself to Hermione's side in order to avoid anything worse, as well as finding himself spending more and more time with Neville.

The Gryffindor boy was quiet and gentle and one of the most genuinely kind people Harry had ever met, which he really did appreciate after spending all his time with his cutthroat, calculating housemates, no matter how much he liked the lot of them. Even Hermione struggled to turn off her cynicism, and the less said about the still-absent Tom the better.

Neville was easily as shy as Harry had been before Hermione got her claws into him– and he'd never be able to thank her enough for choosing him that day on the train– and Harry wanted to help the other boy improve his self-confidence and build up his sense of self-worth, but both of them were hiding their developing friendship from their Houses, Hermione's warning uncomfortably loud in his ears.

He could see what she meant now too– Neville was so starved for friendship and approval, and his gratitude towards Harry for every ounce of kindness that he showed him was so great that Harry knew it would only be too bloody easy to take advantage of the boy– he was shocked nobody had thought to until now, though he guessed it was because they didn't see any worth in Neville. He did, though, but all Neville's vulnerability did was make him want to protect the Gryffindor. If he did, though, then that would be making a move neither of them would be able to take back, and Harry honestly just didn't know if Neville would be able to survive the ruthlessness of Slytherin House.

The morning of the thirtieth of October, the Great Hall had been decorated overnight. Enormous silk banners hung from the walls, each of them representing a Hogwarts House: red with a gold lion for Gryffindor, blue with a bronze eagle for Ravenclaw, yellow with a black badger for Hufflepuff, and green with a silver serpent for Slytherin. Behind the teachers' table, the largest banner of all bore the Hogwarts coat of arms: lion, eagle, badger, and snake united around a large letter H.

"They're really going all out," Hermione commented. Harry thought of the extra-thorough cleaning
the castle had been undergoing the last week— and the absolutely foul mood it had put Filch in— and nodded. The portraits had been scrubbed much to the displeasure of their subjects, the suits of armor were gleaming and moving without squeaking, and Filch had actually reduced a pair of first-year girls into hysterics when they forgot to wipe their feet.

The other staff had been no better then Filch— much to Harry's anger McGonagall had actually snapped at Neville at the end of one particularly difficult lesson, when Neville had accidentally transplanted his own ears onto a cactus, demanding that he not reveal to anyone from Durmstrang that he couldn't even perform a simple switching spell.

Still, the excitement of the whole thing was starting to catch up to him now that Hermione seemed over her slump, and there was a feeling of great anticipation throughout the day.

Nobody was very attentive in lessons, being much more interested in the arrival that evening of the students from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang. When the bell rang a half hour early for the last class, Harry hurried down to the dungeons to deposit his bags and books as they had been instructed, chatting eagerly with Draco, Blaise and Theo as they all pulled on their cloaks, and rushed back downstairs into the entrance hall.

The Heads of Houses were ordering their students into lines. Harry could hear McGonagall barking at her Gryffindors, and Snape was fixing them with a truly vicious glare that promised terrible, terrible things to anyone who dared do anything to embarrass Slytherin House.

Gryffindors were the first House to file down the steps and line up in front of the castle, followed by the Hufflepuffs, the Ravenclaws and finally the Slytherins.

It was a cold, clear evening; dusk was falling and a pale, transparent-looking moon was already shining over the Forbidden Forest. Harry, standing between Hermione and Draco, could just make out Neville in the fourth row from the front looking equal parts excited and frightened (or, as Hermione would put it, 'scared shitless').

Blaise cast a quick tempus charm. "It's nearly six o'clock," he said in a low voice.

"How do you think they're getting here?" Theo asked eagerly. "They wouldn't be taking the express, would they?" Draco scoffed.

"A train wouldn't be even nearly flashy enough." He said. Theo rolled his eyes.

"Yeah, you'd know." He said, and Harry snickered quietly but otherwise ignored Draco's indignant response and the ensuing argument between the two boys in favor of scanning the darkening grounds for any sign of the arriving students.

It was Dumbledore, who was standing annoyingly close to where they were lined up in the back row, along with the other teachers, who alerted them to the first approaching school.

"Aha!" He said, loudly. "Unless I am very much mistaken, the delegation from Beauxbatons approaches!"

"Where?" said many students eagerly, all looking in different directions.

"There!" yelled a Ravenclaw sixth year, pointing over the forest.

Something large was hurtling across the deep blue sky toward the castle, growing larger all the time.
"It's a dragon!" shrieked one of the Gryffindor first years, losing her head completely.

"Don't be stupid... it's a flying house!" said another Gryffindor first year, a boy.

The boy's guess was closer– as the gigantic black shape skimmed over the treetops of the Forbidden Forest and the lights shining from the castle windows hit it, they saw a gigantic, powder-blue, horse-drawn carriage, the size of a large house, soaring toward them, pulled through the air by a dozen winged horses, all palominos, and each the size of an elephant.

The front three rows of students drew backward as the carriage hurtled ever lower, coming in to land at a tremendous speed– then, with an almighty crash that made Harry startle slightly and then wince when he saw it had caused Neville to jump backward onto a now-cursing Gryffindor fifth year's foot, the horses' hooves, larger than dinner plates, hit the ground. A second later, the carriage landed too, bouncing upon its vast wheels, while the golden horses tossed their enormous heads and rolled large, fiery red eyes.

Harry just had time to see that the door of the carriage bore a coat of arms (two crossed, golden wands, each emitting three stars) before it opened.

A boy in pale blue robes jumped down from the carriage, bent forward, fumbled for a moment with something on the carriage floor, and unfolded a set of golden steps. He sprang back respectfully. Then Harry saw a shining, high-heeled black shoe emerging from the inside of the carriage– a shoe the size of a child's sled– followed, almost immediately, by the largest woman he had ever seen in his life. The size of the carriage, and of the horses, was immediately explained. A few people gasped.

Harry had only ever seen one person as large as this woman in his life, and that was Hagrid; he doubted whether there was an inch difference in their heights. Yet somehow– maybe simply because he was used to Hagrid– this woman (now at the foot of the steps, and looking around at the waiting, wide-eyed crowd) seemed even more unnaturally large. As she stepped into the light flooding from the entrance hall, she was revealed to have a striking, olive-skinned face; large, black, liquid-looking eyes; and a rather beaky nose. Her hair was drawn back in a shining knob at the base of her neck. She was dressed from head to foot in black satin, and many magnificent opals gleamed at her throat and on her thick fingers.

Dumbledore started to clap; the students, following his lead, broke into applause too, many of them standing on tiptoe, the better to look at this woman.

Her face relaxed into a gracious smile and she walked forward toward Dumbledore, extending a glittering hand. Dumbledore, though tall himself, had barely to bend to kiss it.

"My dear Madame Maxime," he said. "Welcome to Hogwarts."

"Dumbly-dorr," said Madame Maxime in a deep voice. "I 'ope I find you well?"

"In excellent form, I thank you," said Dumbledore.

"My pupils," said Madame Maxime, waving one of her enormous hands carelessly behind her.

Harry, whose attention had been focused completely upon Madame Maxime, now noticed that about a dozen boys and girls, all, by the look of them, in their late teens, had emerged from the carriage and were now standing behind Madame Maxime. They were shivering, which was unsurprising given that their robes seemed to be made of fine silk, and none of them were wearing cloaks. A few had wrapped scarves and shawls around their heads. From what Harry could see of
them (they were standing in Madame Maxime's enormous shadow), they were staring up at Hogwarts with apprehensive looks on their faces.

"'As Karkaroff arrived yet?'' Madame Maxime asked.

"He should be here any moment," said Dumbledore. "Would you like to wait here and greet him or would you prefer to step inside and warm up a trifle?"

"Warm up, I think," said Madame Maxime. "But ze 'orses—"

"Our Care of Magical Creatures teacher will be delighted to take care of them," said Dumbledore, "the moment he has returned from dealing with a slight situation that has arisen with some of his other– er– charges."

"Ten galleons it's those bloody skrewts," Blaise muttered.

"My steeds require– er– forceful 'andling," said Madame Maxime, looking as though she doubted whether any Care of Magical Creatures teacher at Hogwarts could be up to the job. "Zey are very strong...."

"I assure you that Hagrid will be well up to the job," said Dumbledore, smiling.

"Very well," said Madame Maxime, bowing slightly. "Will you please inform zis 'Agrid zat ze 'orses drink only single-malt whiskey?"

"It will be attended to," said Dumbledore, also bowing.

"'I'd like some single-malt whiskey," Hermione murmured, and Harry was pretty sure she wasn't joking.

"Come," said Madame Maxime imperiously to her students, and the Hogwarts crowd parted to allow her and her students to pass up the stone steps.

"I think I have a second cousin that goes to Beauxbatons," Blaise said thoughtfully, as they watched them file through the large door.

"You're a pureblood," Hermione said, dryly. "Of course you do."

"Well, that's just discrimination! I feel very discriminated against, now!" Blaise said, pressing a hand to his chest, an expression of mock-distress on his handsome face.

"Please accept my most gracious apologies." Hermione said, voice completely flat.

"I've got a cousin at Durmstrang," Theo said before Blaise could carry on. "Two, actually– Gheorghi started this year. He wrote to me about how excited he was to be at the same school as Krum."

Harry spun around to face Theo, a look of disbelief on his face that was reflected by Blaise and Draco, who had spun around just as abruptly. "Did you say Krum, Viktor Krum, is a student at Durmstrang?" He demanded. Theo blinked.

"Er, yeah?"

"And you wait until now to tell us that?" Squawked Draco, lifting his hands to smooth his sleek blond hair and then brush down the sides of his robes. "You– you idiot! You utter blithering idiot!"
"Relax, princess, you look fine," Blaise said, giving Draco a firm nudge, before turning to give Theo a blistering glare. "He's right-- you are a bloody idiot."

Before Harry could continue to berate Theo for not warning them that Viktor bloody Krum was a student at Durmstrang and would probably be part of the Durmstrang delegation, a loud and oddly eerie noise drifting toward the crowd from out of the darkness caught his attention. It was a muffled rumbling and sucking sound, as though an immense vacuum cleaner were moving along a riverbed....

"The lake!" yelled Lee Jordan, the pain-in-the-arse, completely biased Gryffindor who commentated Quidditch matches, pointing down at it. "Look at the lake!"

From their position at the top of the lawns overlooking the grounds, they had a clear view of the smooth black surface of the water-- except that the surface was suddenly not smooth at all. Some disturbance was taking place deep in the center; great bubbles were forming on the surface, waves were now washing over the muddy banks-- and then, out in the very middle of the lake, a whirlpool appeared, as if a giant plug had just been pulled out of the lake's floor....

What seemed to be a long, black pole began to rise slowly out of the heart of the whirlpool and then Harry spotted the rigging

"It's a mast!" he said breathlessly.

Slowly, magnificently, the ship rose out of the water, gleaming in the moonlight. It had a strangely skeletal look about it, as though it were a resurrected wreck, and the dim, misty lights shimmering at its portholes looked like ghostly eyes. Finally, with a great sloshing noise, the ship emerged entirely, bobbing on the turbulent water, and began to glide toward the bank. A few moments later, they heard the splash of an anchor being thrown down in the shallows, and the thud of a plank being lowered onto the bank.

People were disembarking; they could see their silhouettes passing the lights in the ship's portholes. All of them, Harry noticed, seemed to be built along the lines of Vince and Greg... but then, as they drew nearer, walking up the lawns into the light streaming from the entrance hall, he saw that their bulk was really due to the fact that they were wearing cloaks of some kind of shaggy, matted fur. But the man who was leading them up to the castle was wearing furs of a different sort: sleek and silver, like his hair.

"Dumbledore!" he called heartily as he walked up the slope. "How are you, my dear fellow, how are you?"

"Blooming, thank you, Professor Karkaroff," Dumbledore replied. Karkaroff had a fruity, unctuous voice; when he stepped into the light pouring from the front doors of the castle they saw that he was tall and thin like Dumbledore, but his white hair was short, and his goatee (finishing in a small curl) did not entirely hide his rather weak chin. When he reached Dumbledore, he shook hands with both of his own.

"Dear old Hogwarts," he said, looking up at the castle and smiling; his teeth were rather yellow, and Harry noticed that his smile did not extend to his eyes, which remained cold and shrewd. "How good it is to be here, how good... Viktor, come along, into the warmth... you don't mind, Dumbledore? Viktor has a slight head cold..."

Karkaroff beckoned forward one of his students. As the boy passed, Harry caught a glimpse of a prominent curved nose and thick black eyebrows. He didn't need Draco grabbing his arm tight enough to cut of the circulation in his hand to recognize that profile.
"That's him!" Draco hissed.

"Obviously!" he whispered back, yanking his arm free, though he still stared at the international Quidditch star in amazement.

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Hermione's POV:

Hermione watched with exasperation as Harry, Blaise, Draco and Theo whispered eagerly amongst themselves as they all filed back up the steps behind the party from Durmstrang. Honestly, they were acting like eleven-year-old girls with their first crush.

The five of them walked over to the Slytherin table and sat down. Krum and his fellow Durmstrang students were gathered around the doorway, apparently unsure about where they should sit, while the students from Beauxbatons had already chosen seats at the Ravenclaw table. They were all looking around the Great Hall with glum expressions on their faces and three of them were still clutching scarves and shawls around their heads.

"The change in temperature must be a bitch." She murmured to Harry, who didn't appear to have heard her in his excitement at the fact the Durmstrang students had apparently decided to sit at the Slytherin table.

Draco looked adorably smug about this, and Harry practically had hearts in his eyes.

"Shove over," Theo ordered, nudging people across in order to make room and waving over one of the Durmstrang students. Much to Harry's obvious delight, Krum and two other students followed the one Theo was waving to. "Guys, this is Sashko Dachev," Theo introduced the dark-haired boy, "he's my mother's cousin. This is his betrothed, Nikolina Borisov."

"A pleasure to meet vith you," the girl, Nikolina, said with a polite smile. "This is my brudder, Yosef, and I am sure you all recognize Viktor?"

"I'm certain there's not a witch or wizard in Britain who doesn't." Hermione said, dryly, not ignorant of the look this earned her from the famous Quidditch star himself. Nikolina laughed, a rich, throaty sound.

"Vell said!" she praised. Theo went around introducing them, and Hermione nodded politely at the Durmstrang students when he gestured in her direction.

When all the students had entered the Hall and settled down at their House tables, the staff entered, filing up to the top table and taking their seats. Last in line were Professor Dumbledore, Professor Karkaroff, and Madame Maxime.

When their headmistress appeared, the students from Beauxbatons leapt to their feet. A few of the Hogwarts students laughed. The Beauxbatons party appeared quite unembarrassed, however, and did not resume their seats until Madame Maxime had sat down on Dumbledore's left-hand side.

Dumbledore remained standing, and a silence fell over the Great Hall. In the spirit of maintaining a united front in front of all the foreign guests, Hermione didn't glare at the old fool like she usually did when he spoke.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, ghosts and– most particularly– guests," he said, beaming
around at the foreign students in that disgusting 'I'm a harmless, eccentric old man' way of his that everyone always bloody fell for, much to her infinite disgust. "I have great pleasure in welcoming you all to Hogwarts. I hope and trust that your stay here will be both comfortable and enjoyable."

One of the Beauxbatons girls still clutching a muffler around her head gave what was unmistakably a derisive laugh and Hermione looked over at her with interest—anyone who didn't immediately worship Dumbledickhead was certainly worth taking a second look at. Her curiosity of the French girl was further piqued by the ever-so subtle way she was sitting slightly apart from the rest of the Beauxbatons delegation—it wasn't something overly obvious, but there was a small space between her and the two girls on either side of her, something that seemed subconscious on the behalf of all the Beauxbatons pupil. Something Hermione found intriguing.

Almost as if sensing her gaze, the girl turned and Hermione almost raised an eyebrow in surprise.

The girl—no, the young woman—was beautiful; stunningly beautiful, in fact. She had large, deep blue eyes, dark pink lips and flawless skin. Dressed in pale-blue silk Beauxbatons robes, her hands, still holding her muffler, were slim and elegant, and she sat straight-backed and proud, like a queen amongst her subjects. If there was ever an example of genetic favoritism, this young woman was it, though Hermione had a feeling that her beauty wasn't entirely natural.

As if the young woman could read her thoughts, those rosy lips curved into a smile that was half teasing, half challenging, and she slowly removed the muffler and shook out a long sheet of silvery-blonde hair that fell almost to her waist. Immediately, all the Ravenclaw boys within several meters of her practically started drooling, and Hermione finally placed what the...

unnaturalness, but the something more the young woman had—Veela blood. She was fairly sure the French girl wasn't a Veela herself, but her mother or grandmother must have been.

Interesting. Or, in the immortal words of Lewis Carroll—curiouser and curiouser.

The plates suddenly filling with food caught her attention and, after dipping her chin in the part-Veela's direction in acknowledgement, she turned back to face the table. Unsurprisingly, half the table seemed to be bombarding Krum and she gave the poor guy a sympathetic look. He glanced toward her suddenly, as if sensing her glance, and she nodded at him too before turning back to the table, far more interested in the greater then usual variety of dishes in front of her, some definitely foreign, then in some sort of sport celebrity.

To someone who'd spent the greater part of their childhood hungry, the diverse spread was actually quite amazing.

"Does anyone know what that is?" she asked curiously, pointing at a large dish of what she guessed was some sort of shellfish stew that stood beside a large steak-and-kidney pudding.

"Zat is ze bouillabaisse," said a sweet, heavily accented voice. Hermione turned her head sharply to see the part-Veela young woman now standing behind her.

She was even more stunning up close; a lustrous young woman who held herself with elegance and class. Clearly the most lovely creature in the room, both exceptional and unforgettable, the young woman not only knew that but she reveled in it, and it was that careless confidence, that casual arrogance in her breathtaking beauty, that drew Hermione to her more then the enticing curve of her lips, or the faint, silvery glow of her hair.

"Is it any good?" She asked, angling her body towards the young woman and letting her eyes linger on those pouty lips for a moment before looking back up to meet those deep blue eyes that sparkled in delight in response to Hermione's unspoken challenge: 'are you any good?'—the girl obviously
talked a good game in the sense that she was utterly breathtaking, but Hermione liked someone with brains behind their beauty. The calculation in the young woman's eyes was promising, though, her pink lips curling into a coy smile.

"It is l'eau à la bouche."

"It certainly looks mouthwatering," Hermione agreed, and the young woman's eyes lit up in obvious appreciation at the knowledge Hermione spoke French.

"I certainly plan to." Hermione said, unable to help herself, and the girl laughed, causing many boys' heads to turn in her direction.

"Tu es drôle," She murmured, smiling again. "I weell certainly be seeing you around."

"What's that saying?" mused Hermione as she watched the young French woman turn and make her way back to the Ravenclaw table. "Something along the lines of 'I hate to see her leave, but I love to watch her go'."

"Don't be vulgar." Harry said, rolling his eyes and she turned to grin at him, unabashed.

"You want vulgar?" she asked, teasingly. "How about 'check out the arse on that one'?"

"You are so bloody shameless." Harry said, but he was grinning so Hermione took it as a win.

"Well she's definitely got Veela blood in her, that's for sure." Observed Blaise, tactfully not mentioning her not-so-subtle flirting with the Beauxbatons girl. Draco, however, didn't possess that same sense.

"You like girls?" he asked, confused. "I thought you and Harry were--"

"I like both genders, Draco." She interrupted him before he announced to the whole table that she and Harry were fucking. That night in the dorm room hadn't quite been a mistake, per say, as she certainly didn't regret finally getting to have sex with Harry, but it hadn't exactly been the time and place for it to have happened. Purebloods could be funny about sex– purity before marriage, especially amongst traditionalists, was treated as very important, though after marriage celebrations such as bacchanals weren't exactly uncommon, nor was inviting others into your bed, as marriages between purebloods were often arranged before the intende who were out of diapers.

Draco was very much from a traditionalist family, but he didn't seem to have a problem with it, though Hermione guessed that the reason for that was that he expected her to marry Harry anyway– he wasn't wrong, either. While marriage had never been a concept that was particularly attractive to her, Harry was the only person she'd ever consider binding herself to like that. And seeing as she was officially the 'niece' of 'Thaddeus Dagworth' when that knowledge came out she could certainly expect Voldemort to start receiving requests for her hand. Obviously she would never marry any of those people, but to stop all the requests she'd have to announce she was already promised to someone– and, like she said, Harry was the only person she'd ever consider binding herself to.

"Oh." Draco mumbled, his cheeks going pink. Hermione tried not to be so obviously amused by his embarrassment– trying to be a good friend and all that– and instead turned to the staff table, where two more wizards had just arrived.

"Ludo Bagman's the fat one, and Bartemius Crouch is the grump." Blaise murmured to her, quietly
enough that the other Slytherins didn't overhear. Hermione nodded her appreciation. She recognized Bagman from the Quidditch World Cup— he had been the commentator— but she'd only heard of Bartemius Crouch by name. A cold-hearted bastard from all accounts who'd had his own son locked up in Azkaban. From that alone Hermione had admire him— it took a special brand of stone-cold arsehole to do something like that, and Hermione fully accepted the fact that she was the exact sort of bitch who found appreciation in that.

The second course arrived, and with it a number of unfamiliar desserts. Hermione, at the prompting of Nikolina Borisov who noticed her interest in the foreign dishes, tried the baked apple with walnuts and one of the funny little fried dough pastries she called 'mekitzi', as well as a crepe drizzled with chocolate sauce.

Once the golden plates had been wiped clean, Dumbledore stood up again. A pleasant sort of tension seemed to fill the Hall now, and despite herself Hermione felt a stirring anticipation for what was coming.

"The moment has come," said the bane of her existence, smiling around at the sea of upturned faces. "The Triwizard Tournament is about to start. I would like to say a few words of explanation before we bring in the casket—"

"The what?" Harry whispered to her. She shook her head slightly at him, having no more idea as to what Dumbledore was referring to then he did.

"–just to clarify the procedure that we will be following this year. But first, let me introduce, for those who do not know them, Mr. Bartemius Crouch, Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation"– there was a smattering of polite applause– "and Mr. Ludo Bagman, Head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports."

There was a much louder round of applause for Bagman than for Crouch, who acknowledged it with a jovial wave of his hand. Bartemius Crouch did not smile or wave when his name was announced– Hermione liked him even more.

"Mr. Bagman and Mr. Crouch have worked tirelessly over the last few months on the arrangements for the Triwizard Tournament," Dumbledore continued, "and they will be joining myself, Professor Karkaroff, and Madame Maxime on the panel that will judge the champions' efforts."

At the mention of the word "champions," the attentiveness of the listening students seemed to sharpen. Dumbledore, of course, noticed their sudden stillness and smiled in his 'harmless old man' way as he said, "The casket, then, if you please, Mr. Filch."

Argus, who had been lurking in one of the far corners of the Hall, now approached Dumbledore carrying a great wooden chest encrusted with jewels. It looked extremely old (and valuable). A murmur of excited interest rose from the watching students.

"The instructions for the tasks the champions will face this year have already been examined by Mr. Crouch and Mr. Bagman," said Dumbledore as Argus placed the chest carefully on the table before him, "and they will be joining myself, Professor Karkaroff, and Madame Maxime on the panel that will judge the champions' efforts."

At this last word, the Hall was filled with a silence so absolute that nobody seemed to be breathing. Hermione was oh-so very tempted to break it, but restrained herself in what she considered a shining example of expert self-discipline.
"As you know, three champions compete in the tournament," Dumbledore went on, "one from each of the participating schools. They will be marked on how well they perform each of the Tournament tasks and the champion with the highest total after task three will win the Triwizard Cup. The champions will be chosen by an impartial selector: the Goblet of Fire."

Dumbledore now took out his wand and tapped three times upon the top of the casket. The lid creaked slowly open. Dumbledore reached inside it and pulled out a large, roughly hewn wooden cup. It would have been entirely unremarkable had it not been full to the brim with dancing blue-white flames. Hermione actually leaned forwards slightly, curious now. She hadn't seen magic like this before, hadn't even read about it.

Dumbledore closed the casket and placed the goblet carefully on top of it, where it would be clearly visible to everyone in the Hall.

"Anybody wishing to submit themselves as champion must write their name and school clearly upon a slip of parchment and drop it into the goblet," said Dumbledore. "Aspiring champions have twenty-four hours in which to put their names forward. Tomorrow night, Halloween, the goblet will return the names of the three it has judged most worthy to represent their schools. The goblet will be placed in the entrance hall tonight, where it will be freely accessible to all those wishing to compete. To ensure that no underage student yields to temptation I will be drawing an Age Line around the Goblet of Fire once it has been placed in the entrance hall. Nobody under the age of seventeen will be able to cross this line.

"Finally, I wish to impress upon any of you wishing to compete that this tournament is not to be entered into lightly. Once a champion has been selected by the Goblet of Fire, he or she is obliged to see the tournament through to the end. The placing of your name in the goblet constitutes a binding, magical contract. There can be no change of heart once you have become a champion. Please be very sure, therefore, that you are wholeheartedly prepared to play before you drop your name into the goblet. Now, I think it is time for bed. Good night to you all."

"It vos a pleasure to meet you all," Nikolina Borisov said as she pulled back on her fur cloak.

"You as well." Harry said politely from beside her, and Hermione opened her mouth to say her own goodbye when Karkaroff bustled up to them.

"Back to the ship, then," he said loudly. "Viktor, how are you feeling? Did you eat enough? Should I send for some mulled wine from the kitchens?"

Krum shook his head as he pulled his furs back on, and Hermione caught the quickly hidden annoyed look on his face– any Slytherin worth the name would.

"Professor, I vood like some vine," said one of the other Durmstrang boys hopefully.

"I wasn't offering it to you, Poliakoff," snapped Karkaroff, his warmly paternal air vanishing in an instant. "I notice you have dribbled food all down the front of your robes again, disgusting boy–"

"Talk about double standards." Hermione said, just loudly enough for Karkaroff to hear. Harry groaned softly beside her even as the indignant headmaster turned around, only to freeze– not when he saw her, but when he saw who she was holding hands with.

Hermione felt every protective instinct she had rise up as Karkaroff stared at Harry like he couldn't believe his eyes, his gaze moving slowly up Harry's face to fix on his scar. She automatically tugged Harry behind her, and he fell back easily enough, Blaise who was on her other side moving across to block Karkaroff's view of Harry entirely.
"I see you've noticed Harry Potter," said a growling voice from behind them, and Hermione tried not to grit her teeth at the presence of another loathed presence. She didn't move from her position in front of Harry, just turning her head to see Moody standing, his magical eye glaring unblinkingly at the Durmstrang headmaster who had actually spun around at the sound of Moody's voice.

"Rumor was Karkaroff was a Death Eater," Blaise practically breathed the words he murmured them so softly, his lips brushing against her ear slightly. Hermione's eyes widened slightly in surprise and comprehension as she saw the color drain from Karkaroff's face, a terrible look of mingled fury and fear coming over him.

"You!" he said, staring at Moody like he was unsure that he was really seeing him. Moody chuckled lowly.

"Stop wasting my students time and get yours back to your ship." He ordered. Without another word, Professor Karkaroff swept his students away with him. Moody watched him until he was out of sight, his magical eye fixed upon his back, a look of intense dislike upon his mutilated face.

Hermione didn't wait for Moody's attention to turn back to them, tugging Harry after her, off towards the dungeons.

"Fucking hate them all," she muttered viciously. "Dumbledore, Moody, Karkaroff– I hate the whole bloody lot of them!"

"Yeah," Harry said, his face glum. "I'm starting to get the feeling this tournament isn't shaping up to be as fun as I thought it would be." Then, as if to cheer her up, he added encouragingly, "you did like that girl, though."

Hermione did find herself cheering up at the reminder of the Beauxbatons student who had caught her eye. "She was fun," she agreed. "I hope we get to speak to her again soon."

"She looked very keen to see you again," Harry said, with a grin and a gentle elbow to her ribs. Hermione laughed then paused.

"We haven't really... discussed this." She said, with a frown.

"Discussed what?" Harry asked. Hermione glanced to see who was near them– only Blaise looked close enough to be paying attention, and she didn't have a problem with him knowing the more intimate details of her relationship with Harry. With his mother being who she was, Hermione knew Blaise wouldn't judge the rather atypical relationship she and Harry had. As if proving her point, Blaise very purposefully met her eyes and then looked away from them, giving a veneer of privacy.

"Well we have each other," she murmured, "and we have Tom. But there was also that one time with Bella and I. That didn't seem to bother you."

"It didn't," Harry said, honestly. "I don't know why. Maybe it was because she was a girl?"

"Would you be bothered if I did anything with the Beauxbatons girl?" She asked. Harry looked considering.

"No, not really." He said, after a brief pause. Hermione frowned at him.

"I need you to be really, really honest with me, Harry." She said. "That's how polyamorous relationships work– one hundred percent honesty."
"I swear I am being honest," Harry said, earnestly. "The thought doesn't bother me. Though you should probably talk to Tom about it too, before doing anything."

Hermione automatically scowled. "When he bothers showing his face again," she snapped. Harry looked similarly disgruntled at Tom's disappearing act.

"The least he could do is send us a note to say he's alright." He grumbled, and Hermione nodded.

"Bastard." She said, and Harry nodded.

"Absolute wanker."

"Oh wanking's all he's going to be doing for the foreseeable future," Hermione said grimly.

-Fleur's POV:-

Feeling eyes on her was nothing new to Fleur. She'd been stared at for as long as she could remember— in lust, in appreciation, in envy, in hate... the list went on. It was second nature for her to be aware of the stares, to know who to avoid and who to be careful of. Her casual glance towards the gaze she'd felt when she'd been unable to hold in her derisive laughter at the headmaster of Hogwarts's stupid little speech (she never let herself get her hopes up, and fully expected to be about as comfortable at Hogwarts as she was at Beauxbatons) and met the eyes of a girl over at the green and silver table.

The girl was pretty enough, with an understated sort of beauty; her rather wild, bushy hair framed a sharp, likeable face and her eyes, a fetching shade of honey-brown with a certain intelligence present in them. Her front teeth were a touch oversized and she was almost a head shorter then the students she was sitting around, bar the black-haired boy directly next to her, but her teeth were white and she was appropriately proportioned for her petite height and thin build.

When the girl's only reaction to seeing Fleur was to raise a single eyebrow, her sharp eyes sharpening further, Fleur felt... not quite indignant at the lack of envy or lust on her face, but certainly surprised. Even the girls and boys she'd been around since she was eleven at Beauxbatons when caught off guard would show signs of one or the other— or resentment.

Curving her lips into a deliberately teasing smile that was a touch more challenging then she'd anticipated it been, she slowly removed her muffler and shook out her long hair. The reactions around her were automatic, muted gasps, staring, speechlessness, etcetera. The girl, however... Fleur honestly wanted to gape when the plates suddenly filling with food seemed to distract her entirely, the little brunette giving a nod in her direction before turning back to the feast in front of her.

Practically nobody could just— just blink and then turn away when first seeing her! Not a single student in the entirety of Beauxbatons had ever not reacted to her— not one!

Fleur was on her feet and crossing over to the silver and green table before she even really registered she was doing so, and by the time she did actually think it through it was too late to turn back.

"Does anyone know what that is?" the peculiar brunette was asking the students around her, pointing at one of the French dishes on the table. Fleur pounced on the opportunity to insert herself
into the conversation.

"Zat is ze bouillabaisse," she said, toning her Allure up to almost full blast, and the brunette turned her head sharply. Fleur was somewhat gratified to see the blatant appreciation in her honey-brown eyes, but there was still no sign of the girl being affected by her Allure like the students around her were, all slightly stunned, with about half of them going all glazed-eyed, either speechless and lustful (the boys) or angry and envious (the girls).

The appreciation was mixed with interest, and the brunette turned slightly in her seat, angling her body toward her. Honey-brown eyes lingered on her lips before meeting hers again, and Fleur was honestly delighted by the teasing challenge evident there.

This– now, this was exciting. Oh, there was blatant invitation present in the brunette's body language, but the girl was teasing her, instead of Fleur teasing her like how these sorts of games had always gone previously. Fleur could feel an excitement thrumming inside her that she carefully kept from showing so blatantly on her face.

"Is it any good?" the brunette asked, the words heavily laced with very pointed heated undertones.

"Mouthwatering." She responded, falling automatically back to her own language when no English word came to mind– the girl was positively mouthwatering.

"It certainly looks mouthwatering," the brunette said, and Fleur felt a moment of surprise and then a stab of pleasure– she liked that the girl spoke her language. She also liked the girl's admiration– it was delicious, in a way that admiration usually wasn't. Usually she wanted to claw out the blatantly staring glazed-over eyes. It was the complete clarity in those honey-brown eyes that drew her.

"It eez unforgettable." She told the brunette. I am unforgettable. "I 'ope you enjoy it." I'm not finished with you yet– we're going to talk again.

"I certainly plan to." The brunette said, and Fleur laughed in genuine delight at this strange, intriguing girl.

"You're funny." She said in French, smiling again. "I weell certainly be seeing you around."

As she walked back to the blue and bronze table, she realized belatedly that she'd forgotten to 'borrow' a dish from the green and silver table, but she was so pleased with the conversation that she couldn't really bring herself to care.

"What was all that about, Fleur?" demanded Albertina. "Who was that girl?"

"No one to concern yourself with." Fleur dismissed, with a small toss of her head that had half the male population of the blue and bronze table gaping at her, with the girls sitting near them either scowling, nudging or– in the case of one particularly unimpressed girlfriend– slapping them. Fleur hid her smirk, scanning the table for the bouillabaisse she was suddenly craving. Much to her annoyance, there was none in sight.

Both courses were delicious, she would admit, even though she did prefer the lighter foods favored by the French elves then the British ones, and the Hogwarts Headmaster's introduction of the goblet of fire had certainly raised her heart rate– she certainly intended on entering, and proving that she was more than just a pretty face, and certainly not trading sexual favors in order to get her high grades like the more vile rumors suggested, the vile rumors that spread more the older she got then her legs the way they all claimed (like she'd ever spread her legs for any of the detestable teachers who couldn't control themselves any better then the students they taught).
It had been a long day, though, and she would admit to being relieved when it was time to return to the carriage, though she couldn't help but glance back over to her intriguing little brunette one last time. Her curiosity was piqued by the suddenly defensive posture the girl was in, moving so that her body was blocking her black-haired friend from the Durmstrang headmaster. Purposefully slowing down, Fleur nearly tripped over her own feet when she heard the black-haired boy being introduced as Harry Potter.

Harry Potter!

Even in France, there wasn't a witch or wizard who didn't know that boy's name. Harry Potter the Boy Who Lived; the boy who survived the un-survivable, and killed the un-killable. Fleur's brunette girl had just become even more interesting— and much more complicated.

Not that Fleur minded— she'd always loved a challenge.

A/N: In Australia, the end of the school year is approaching and I'm absolutely flat out with both the increased homework load and revising for exams. My apologies, but unfortunately my education does have to take priority over my writing (much as I wish it was the other way around!) Still, I hoped you enjoyed the chapter, and that you didn't feel it was too rushed!

~Cheshire Carroll
Part Four: The Goblet of Fire - Chapter XLIII

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER XLIII:

Harry's POV:

As the next day was Saturday, most students would normally have breakfasted late. Harry and Hermione, however, were not alone in rising much earlier than they usually did on weekends. When they went up to the Great Hall Harry saw about twenty people milling around it, some eating toast, all of them examining the Goblet of Fire. It had been placed in the center of the hall on the stool that normally bore the Sorting Hat. A thin golden line had been traced on the floor, forming a circle ten feet around it in every direction.

The decorations in the Great Hall had changed overnight. As it was Halloween, a cloud of live bats was fluttering around the enchanted ceiling, while hundreds of carved pumpkins leered from every corner.

"Anyone put their name in yet?" Harry asked one of the sixth-year Slytherins, who was already sitting at the table.

"All of the Durmstrang students," the girl replied. "Haven't seen anyone from Hogwarts yet."

"Bet some of them put it in last night after we'd all gone to bed," Harry said. "I would've if it had been me... wouldn't have wanted everyone watching. What if the goblet just gobbed you right back out again?" Hermione snorted before groaning suddenly.

"Oh fantastic," she said sourly, looking at something over his shoulder. Harry turned and saw the Weasley twins and Lee Jordan entering the Hall, all three of them looking extremely excited as they stood next to the age line.

"Aren't they all underage?" He asked, as he saw they were all holding a slip of parchment, and Hermione nodded. One of the Weasley twins walked right up to the edge of the line and stood there, rocking on his toes like a diver preparing for a fifty-foot drop. Then, with the eyes of every person in the entrance hall upon him, he took a great breath and stepped over the line.

For a split second Harry thought whatever they'd done had worked— the other twin certainly thought so, for he let out a yell of triumph and leapt after— but next moment, there was a loud sizzling sound, and both twins were hurled out of the golden circle as though they had been thrown by an invisible shot-putter. They landed painfully, ten feet away on the cold stone floor, and to add insult to injury, there was a loud popping noise, and both of them sprouted identical long white beards.

The entrance hall rang with laughter. Even the twins joined in, once they had gotten to their feet and taken a good look at each other's beards.

"I did warn you," said a deep, amused voice, and Harry scowled automatically as he turned to see Dumbledouchebag coming out of the Great Hall. The oh-so illustrious headmaster was surveying
the twins with twinkling eyes. "I suggest you both go up to Madam Pomfrey. She is already
tending to Miss Fawcett, of Ravenclaw, and Mr. Summers, of Hufflepuff, both of whom decided to
age themselves up a little too. Though I must say, neither of their beards is anything like as fine as
yours."

As the twins set off for the hospital wing, accompanied by Jordan, who was howling with laughter,
Hermione scowled into her toast. "Imagine if they were Slytherins," she said darkly, "how many
points do you think would be taken off?"

"Think happier thoughts," Harry encouraged. "There's no point in being miserable when there's
nothing you can do about it."

"I could kill him," Hermione said. Harry was only half sure she was joking.

"Maybe wait until the visiting schools have gone so it doesn't become so much of an international
spectacle." He advised, not actually sure that he was joking either. "Less chance of getting caught
that way."

The students from Beauxbatons, then, were coming through the front doors from the grounds,
among them the veela-girl that Hermione had been intrigued by.

Madame Maxime entered the hall behind her students and organized them into a line. One by one,
the Beauxbatons students stepped across the Age Line and dropped their slips of parchment into
the blue-white flames. As each name entered the fire, it turned briefly red and emitted sparks.

"What do you think will happen to the ones who aren't chosen?" he asked Hermione, who was
watching the veela-girl drop her parchment into the Goblet of Fire. "Reckon they'll go back to
school, or hang around to watch the tournament?"

"They stay," Hermione told him, absently, attention only half on him. "It's part of the whole
experience– the students join some of the Hogwarts equivalents to the classes they take; we won't
see any of them, they'll all be seventh years. And Madam Maxime, of course, is staying to judge."

When all the Beauxbatons students had submitted their names, Madame Maxime led them back out
of the hall and out onto the grounds again.

Harry proposed following them out to the grounds and going to visit Hagrid, but Hermione begged
off the social interaction. Instead, they took a walk around the grounds until the rain that started
falling sent them hurrying back inside where they spent the rest of the day in the common room;
Hermione mostly reading while Harry played chess and exploding snap with the other boys.

Dinner couldn't arrive fast enough, really, and yet the Halloween feast itself seemed to take much
longer than usual. Perhaps because it was their second feast in two days, Harry didn't seem to fancy
the extravagantly prepared food as much as he would have normally. Like everyone else in the
Hall, judging by the constantly craning necks, the impatient expressions on every face, the
fidgeting, and the standing up to see whether Dumbledore had finished eating yet, Harry simply
wanted the plates to clear, and to hear who had been selected as champions.

Harry was sitting near Theo's cousin from Durmstrang, Sashko Dachev, again, as well as Sashko's
betrothed Nikolina Borisov, her brother Yosef Borisov, and the international Quidditch star Viktor
Krum. Harry, knowing how much he loathed it when someone went all fan-boy over him, tried to
act like Krum was just another one of the Bulgarians to make the older boy more comfortable. The
others seemed to try and follow his example and although he didn't join in the conversation
eventually Krum stopped looking so stiff and his expression stopped looking so, well, constipated.
Of course, with all the different conversation topics around the Hall, there was one subject that kept coming up consistently— the Champions. The Bulgarians were no exceptions.

"Vich Hogwarts student do you think vill be champion?" Nikolina asked, leaning forwards slightly, causing her long, dark hair to swing.

"Cedric Diggory," Daphne said immediately.

"We're supposed to be supporting Warrington," Draco reminded her and Daphne rolled her eyes disdainfully at the blond boy, while Hermione actually shuddered.

"I really hope he doesn't," she said. "Merlin, that would be an embarrassment."

"An embarrassment?" Sashko questioned.

"I play on the same Quidditch team as Warrington," Harry explained. "I'm pretty sure he's part sloth."

"Part sloth?" Nikolina looked confused.

"част леност," Theo translated for them.

"Either that, or a sloth who is part human," Harry added, amidst the laughter.

"So vich vun is Diggory?" Nikolina asked them, after she'd stopped laughing.

Daphne nodded her head over at the Hufflepuff table. "See that utterly gorgeous male specimen surrounded by fawning housemates? That's him." She said.

"A Hufflepuff," Draco said disdainfully, as if it was the greatest of insults.

"Don't be an arse," Harry said, elbowing Draco lightly. "Hufflepuffs are the best." Then, before Draco could try retorting, he asked; "Does anyone here have an idea who the Beauxbatons champion might be?"

"From what I've heard from my second cousin Audra, a seventh year with Veela blood has the best chance— her name's Delacour something; she's the beautiful blonde Hermione was flirting with last night." Blaise said, smirking at Hermione. Hermione gave him a poisonous look as the others laughed, before suddenly smiling slyly.

"Tease me all you like," she said, in a voice thick with honey, "but I'm the one who's going to see her naked."

Harry laughed, along with the Bulgarians— even Krum cracked a smile— while his fellow Hogwartsians looked a touch stunned. Wizarding Britain, he had learned, was far more traditional then Wizarding Bulgaria when it came to the whole 'sex before marriage' issue. Of course, when it came to sex after marriage, well, that was a whole different thing altogether; purity to orgies. Harry just didn't understand Purebloods.

When dinner winded down to a close the excitement in the Hall swelled. There was a sharp upswing in the level of noise, which died away almost instantly when Dumbledore finally stood up from his ridiculous throne-like chair. On either side of him, Professor Karkaroff and Madame Maxime looked as tense and expectant as anyone. Ludo Bagman was beaming and winking at various students. Mr. Crouch, however, looked quite uninterested, almost bored. Harry really wasn't surprised that he was Hermione's favourite out of the five judges.
"Well, the goblet is almost ready to make its decision," said Dumbledore. "I estimate that it requires one more minute. Now, when the champions' names are called, I would ask them please to come up to the top of the Hall, walk along the staff table, and go through into the next chamber" – he indicated the door behind the staff table– "where they will be receiving their first instructions."

He took out his wand and gave a great sweeping wave with it; at once, all the candles except those inside the carved pumpkins were extinguished, plunging them into a state of semidarkness. The Goblet of Fire now shone more brightly than anything in the whole Hall, the sparkling bright, bluey-whiteness of the flames almost painful on the eyes. Everyone watched, waiting... A few people kept checking their watches...

"Any second," Theo whispered.

The flames inside the goblet turned suddenly red again. Sparks began to fly from it. Next moment, a tongue of flame shot into the air, a charred piece of parchment fluttered out of it– the whole room gasped and beside him even Hermione had tensed slightly.

Dumbledore caught the piece of parchment and held it at arm's length, so that he could read it by the light of the flames, which had turned back to blue-white.

"The champion for Durmstrang," he read, in a strong, clear voice, "will be Viktor Krum."

Harry gave Krum, across from him, the brightest smile he could manage as a storm of applause and cheering swept through the Hall. Sashko was clapping Krum's back, clearly delighted, while Nikolina surprised Harry by sticking two fingers in her mouth and whistling like an umpire at a muggle footy game.

Krum gave them all a sort of awkward, jerky half-nod, half-bow of acknowledgement and thanks before he slouched up toward Dumbledore; he turned right, walked along the staff table, and disappeared through the door into the next chamber.

"Bravo, Viktor!" boomed Karkaroff, so loudly that everyone could hear him, even over all the applause. "Knew you had it in you!"

The clapping and chatting died down. Now everyone's attention was focused again on the goblet, which, seconds later, turned red once more. A second piece of parchment shot out of it, propelled by the flames.

"The champion for Beauxbatons," said Dumbledore, "is Fleur Delacour!"

"It's her!" Harry turned to smile at Hermione as Fleur Delacour got gracefully to her feet, shook back her sheet of silvery blonde hair, and swept up between the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables. "Disappointed" was a bit of an understatement, Harry thought. Two of the girls who had not been selected had dissolved into tears and were sobbing with their heads on their arms.

When Fleur Delacour too had vanished into the side chamber, silence fell again, but this time it was a silence so stiff with excitement you could almost taste it. The Hogwarts champion was next...

And the Goblet of Fire turned red once more; sparks showered out of it; the tongue of flame shot high into the air, and from its tip Dumbledore pulled the third piece of parchment.
"The Hogwarts champion," he called, "is Cedric Diggory!"

"Bollocks!" said Draco, sourly, but nobody heard him except for those who were sitting close by him; the uproar from the Hufflepuff was too great. Every single student wearing a black and yellow tie had jumped to his or her feet, screaming and stamping, as Cedric made his way past them, grinning broadly, and headed off toward the chamber behind the teachers' table. Indeed, the applause for Cedric went on so long that it was some time before Dumbledore could make himself heard again.

"Excellent!" Dumbledore called as at last the tumult died down. "Well, we now have our three champions. I am sure I can count upon all of you, including the remaining students from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, to give your champions every ounce of support you can muster. By cheering your champion on, you will contribute in a very real—"

But Dumbledore suddenly stopped speaking, and it was apparent to everybody what had distracted him.

The fire in the goblet had just turned red again. Sparks were flying out of it. A long flame shot suddenly into the air, and borne upon it was another piece of parchment.

Automatically, it seemed, Dumbledore reached out a long hand and seized the parchment. He held it out and stared at the name written upon it. There was a long pause, during which Dumbledore stared at the slip in his hands, and everyone in the room stared at Dumbledore. And then Dumbledore cleared his throat and read out—

"Harry Potter."

Harry sat there, aware that every head in the Great Hall had turned to look at him. He was stunned. He felt numb. He was surely dreaming. He had not heard correctly.

There was no applause. A buzzing, as though of angry bees, was starting to fill the Hall; some students were standing up to get a better look at Harry as he sat, frozen, in his seat. A gentle, familiar hand gently turned his chin so he was facing Hermione— and beyond her, the long Slytherin table, all watching him, open-mouthed.

"I didn't put my name in," Harry said blankly. "You know I didn't."

"Of course you didn't," Hermione's words were so quiet they were barely a whisper. "I was with you all night."

That was right, Harry thought with relief. He had proof— proof that he hadn't put his name in the Goblet, that this was all some sort of terrible mistake (he and Hermione would probably end up in detention for the rest of the year for sharing a bed, but it would be worth it not to have to compete in this— this death match).

"Harry Potter!" Dumbledore called again. "Harry! Up here, if you please!"

"I'm going to kill everyone involved in this." Hermione breathed in a voice that was actually terrifyingly calm but he could see the whites of her eyes. Harry tried to make the world around him make sense again, like his name hadn't just been called out of the bloody Goblet of Fire, and gave his best friend a somewhat desperate look.

"I can't deal with this on my own," he whispered frantically to her. "And god, I really don't know much about wizarding law or— or about the Triwizard Tournament!"
"Oh believe me," Hermione whispered, grimly, "I'm not letting you out of my sight, you damn danger magnet." Harry ignored the insult and just grabbed onto her arm gratefully as she stood, then pulled him to his feet.

"Besides," she added under her breath to him as they approached the front of the Hall. "As a minor you're allowed legal representation at any legal proceedings."

"You're a minor, too," pointed out Harry. "And you're not qualified as any sort of legal representation."

"Entirely beside the point." Hermione dismissed, with a sniff.

Dumbledore's expression had gone colder, something barely perceptible to most in the Hall, not unless they were standing as close to the aged Headmaster as he and Hermione were.

"What are you going up here, Miss Granger?" he asked, tightly.

"I'm Harry's legal representation," she answered with a very unfriendly smile that showed all her teeth and made Harry have to fight the urge to shudder. Dumbledore looked like he wanted to protest, but the glint in Hermione's eyes promised one hell of a scene if he even tried to separate them.

"Very well... go through the door, then," the old man said, frowning his disapproval.

Once they passed through, Harry saw the other three champions were grouped around the fire. They looked strangely impressive, silhouetted against the flames. Krum, hunched-up and brooding, was leaning against the mantelpiece, slightly apart from the other two. Cedric was standing with his hands behind his back, staring into the fire. Fleur Delacour's long, silvery hair spilled freely down her back, swishing as she looked around when they entered, spotting them first, and Harry watched warily as her azure-blue eyes sharpened in interest.

"What is it?" She asked in her rich accent. "Do zey want us back in zee hall?"

"No, we're not here as messengers." Hermione said when Harry found he couldn't say anything at all. Fleur arched a perfect eyebrow.

"Zen what are you doing back 'ere?" She asked. Harry, who was starting to feel genuinely shaky on his legs at this point, slumped down on one of the seats. With the way he was still holding onto Hermione's hand in an iron-grip, he accidentally managed to pull her on top of him while doing so, but Hermione didn't seem to mind, instead shifting herself slightly to rest comfortably between his thighs. He let his chin rest on her shoulder and tried to take deep, calming breaths.

"Harry is a victim of fraud and at the center of a plot that intends to puts his life in terrible danger." Hermione said bluntly, which made him both grateful to hear and also cringe. "I'm one of the smartest people he knows, so I'm here to try and get him out of it."

Harry had to admire her complete lack of modestly, he really did– it even made a weak smile cross his face. "Well, you're definitely the sanest smart person I know." He told her.

"Er, Harry, would you mind going back to the bit where your life is in danger?" The very concerned-looking Hufflepuff prefect asked, while Krum and Fleur Delacour looked as if they didn't know whether to take him seriously or not.

And then Ludo Bagman burst into the room and proclaimed that Harry was a champion as well and Harry wanted to stab the man with his dagger from Bellatrix– or at least remove his vocal cords.
with the blade. He blamed his murderously bloodthirsty state on the fact that Dumbledore had arrived too, along with McGonagall, Snape, Sprout, Karkaroff, Madame Maxime, Crouch and, for only bloody Merlin knew why, Moody.

"Madame Maxine," Fleur said, her voice genuinely confused. "Zey are saying zat zis little boy is to compete also!"

"I'm not that little," Harry complained quietly to Hermione over the noise in the room. Hermione's smile turned very sly.

"No, you're pleasantly above average sized." Harry had to fight back his inappropriately-timed blush.

"Harry, I must ask you," Dumbledore said very gravely, turning the attention of the room—including Harry's—back to him. "Did you enter your name into the Triwizard Tournament!"

"No I did not," Harry said, feeling like he wanted to scream at Dumbledore, all traces of momentary calm gone. Hermione's entire body had gone very, very tense, and Harry knew without asking what her suspicion undoubtedly was— that it had been Dumbledore himself who'd entered his name.

"Did you ask an older student to put it into the Goblet of Fire for you?" Pressed the headmaster.

"No!" said Harry vehemently.

"Ah, but of course 'e is lying!" cried Madame Maxime.

"Madame, I'm not lying," Harry said, turning to look the giant woman straight in the eye. She looked momentarily startled at having been addressed directly by him, but her dark eyes then narrowed. "I will easily admit that I'm not exactly the top student in my classes— I'm both underage and under-qualified for this competition! Trying to compete would only lead to public humiliation and, in all likelihood, injury! And personally I'm getting really, really sick of the hospital wing, so why would I enter a competition that kills people?"

"All my students 'ave been been 'oping to be chosen for weeks and weeks! Ze 'onor for their schools! Ze eternal glory! A thousand Galleons in prize money— zis is a chance many would die for!" Madam Maxime declared.

"All of your students are of age," Harry pointed out, squeezing Hermione's hand gently, not missing the way she'd tensed up when the French headmistress had called the Tournament a chance to die for. "And Madame, do you know my name? From before the Goblet got me into this mess, I mean?"

The woman looked a touch surprised by the question. "Oui, but of course."

"Why?"

"Everyone knows who you are, 'Arry Potter," Maxime said.

"Well I think I have 'glory' down, then," Harry said, patiently. "And," —loathe as he was to admit it— "having Professor Dumbledore as Headmaster gives Hogwarts plenty of glory too. And as for the prize money, when my parents were murdered they left me all their worldly belongings. I have no need for the galleons, I have enough of my own. I have no desire whatsoever to risk my life for three things that I can honestly say are more trouble then they're worth."
He didn't miss the upward twitch of Snape's lips and Hermione was shaking slightly against him in barely concealed amusement at his subtle dig at Dumbledore.

"Be that as it may, Harry," Dumbledore spoke up again, lips a thin line of displeasure. "I'm afraid you have no choice but to participate in the Tournament." The amusement left Harry instantly.

"Why does he?" Hermione asked, her voice sharp, no traces of laughter now present. "I heard this tournament was voluntary. Was that what you heard, Harry?"

"Yes," Harry nodded. "Completely voluntary."

"And," Hermione continued forcefully, "it was supposed to be anonymous, so if you weren't chosen no one had to know you entered."

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure all our housemates are going to pretend that they never wanted to be part of the tournament anyway now that a Hufflepuff was chosen," Harry said and looked over at Cedric. "No offence, mate," he added, because he genuinely liked the Hufflepuff. "You should have seen some of their faces when they heard your name."

"None taken," Cedric assured him, an odd sort of look on his face. "Besides, with you in the tournament, all the Gryffindors will stop licking their wounds about none of them being chosen and come out to support me." He added, with a sort of half smile.

"But I'm not in the tournament," Harry reminded him, jaw clenching slightly in frustration.

"I'm afraid there is no way around it Harry," Dumbledore said, firmly. "You have to compete."

"But why?" He demanded again.

"Because the Goblet of Fire chose you." Dumbledore said.

"Mr. Crouch... Mr. Bagman," said Karkaroff, his voice unctuous, though there was a touch of furious... not quite desperation, but close. The Durmstrang headmaster was wearing a steely smile, and his blue eyes were like chips of ice. "You are our— er— objective judges. Surely you will agree that this is most irregular? Two Hogwarts champions? I don't remember anyone telling me the host school is allowed two champions— or have I not read the rules carefully enough?"

He gave a short and nasty laugh.

"C'est impossible," said Madame Maxime, whose enormous hand with its many superb opals was resting upon Fleur's shoulder. "Ogwarts cannot 'ave two champions. It is most injust."

Bagman wiped his round, boyish face with his handkerchief and looked at Mr. Crouch, who was standing outside the circle of the firelight, his face half hidden in shadow. He looked slightly eerie, the half darkness making him look much older, giving him an almost skull-like appearance. When he spoke, however, it was in his usual curt voice.

"We must follow the rules, and the rules state clearly that those people whose names come out of the Goblet of Fire are bound to compete in the tournament."

"Well, Barty knows the rule book back to front," said Bagman, beaming and turning back as though the matter was now closed.

In Harry's opinion it most certainly wasn't. Karkaroff seemed to agree with this, and most vehemently at that.
"I insist upon resubmitting the names of the rest of my students," he practically growled. He had dropped his unctuous tone and his smile now. His face wore a very ugly look indeed. "You will set up the Goblet of Fire once more, and we will continue adding names until each school has two champions. It's only fair, Dumbledore."

"Fair?" Hermione asked, sharply. "So having five students who are all of age competing against a fourteen-year-old is fair now?" Bagman broke the awkward silence that followed her cutting words.

"Karkaroff, the Goblet of Fire doesn't work like that," said Bagman. "It's just gone out and it won't reignite until the start of the next tournament--"

"--in which Durmstrang will most certainly not be competing!" exploded Karkaroff. "After all our meetings and negotiations and compromises, I little expected something of this nature to occur! I have half a mind to leave now!"

"That's an empty threat, Karkaroff." Harry's head jerked slightly as he turned to look at Snape, who had stepped forward. His dark eyes were glittering dangerously as they fixed upon a suddenly nervous looking Karkaroff. Remembered both men's past as Death Eaters, Harry thought that he'd bet his broomstick that at some point during that time the two had crossed paths and when they had, despite the fact Karkaroff was now a Headmaster and Snape just a Professor, Snape had held a higher position of authority and Karkaroff just couldn't shake that off.

The Durmstrang headmaster tried to stand tall, but there was a slight trembling in his hands that Harry could pick out immediately.

"You can't abandon your precious champion," Snape continued, in one of his softest voices-- the quieter Snape was, the more afraid Harry knew to be. Karkaroff seemed to know this too, and the man swallowed loud enough for the entire room to hear. "He's been Chosen to compete, trapped in a binding magical contract. Just like someone has trapped my student!" The sudden flash of unguarded fury on Snape's face was staggering, but Harry felt breathless for an entirely different reason-- though he would easily admit that his Head of House's temper was something both aweing and terrifying (much like Hermione's).

What had his blood run cold in his veins, had his breath catching in his chest as his lungs refused to cooperate and expand properly, were the horribly damning words 'binding magical contract'. He knew very well what a binding magical contract did to someone who broke it-- he'd either die, or worse; be stripped of his magic forever.

More people around the room had paled now, including Madam Maxime, though Harry noticed that Hermione's furious gaze was fixed firmly on Dumbledore.

"You believe zis is a plot to 'urt zee boy?" Maxime asked, voice much quieter now.

"Possibly," Snape allowed, before brandishing something. It took Harry a moment to recognize it as the scrap of paper that had flown out of the Goblet-- the scrap with his name on it. "As Mr. Potter's Head of House and as one of his professors, I can tell you with one hundred percent certainty that this is most definitely not my student's handwriting."

"'Ow can you be so sure?"

"It's legible," Snape deadpanned.

"He could have had someone else write his name for him," argued Karkaroff, who Harry noticed
seemed to have regained some of his nerve as he scowled furiously at Snape. "Competing in the Triwizard Tournament is a chance many would die for!"

"Maybe someone's hoping Potter is going to die for it," growled Moody from near the door. An extremely tense silence followed these words and Harry felt Hermione turn as motionless as a statue between his legs.

Bagman, who was looking very anxious indeed, bounced nervously up and down on his feet and said, "Moody, old man... what a thing to say!"

Harry tuned out the barbs all the adults started tossing around and instead leaned his head forward so that his forehead was pressed to the back of Hermione's thick hair.

"Is this some kind of nightmare?" he mumbled into the chestnut curls.

"I wish." Hermione whispered, squeezing gently with the hand he was still holding onto. "I'm going to find out who did this Harry, I swear to you," she said, voice low and furious. "I'm going to make them regret it."

Harry listened to the cold menace of her words, the underlying threat of violence and pain and blood, so much blood. And he didn't cringe. Instead, his jaw tightened and he nodded slightly, just enough so that she would feel the motion.

"That sounds really good right now," he muttered– and he meant it.

"How this situation arose, we do not know," said Dumbledore loudly, speaking to everyone gathered in the room. Harry concentrated back on the old man he loathed and wondered if Hermione was right, if it was him responsible. "It seems to me, however, that we have no choice but to accept it. Both Cedric and Harry have been chosen to compete in the Tournament. This, therefore, they will do..."

"But Dumbledore–!"

"Igor, my dear fellow, if you have an alternative, I would be delighted to hear it."

Dumbledore waited, but Karkaroff did not speak, he merely stood there mutely and looked utterly livid.

Bagman, however, looked rather excited.

"Well, shall we crack on, then?" he said, rubbing his hands together and beaming around the room. "Got to give our champions their instructions, haven't we? Barty, want to do the honors?"

Mr. Crouch seemed to come out of a deep reverie.

"Yes," he said, "instructions. Yes... the first task..."

He moved forward into the firelight. Close up, Harry thought he looked ill. There were dark shadows beneath his eyes and a thin, papery look about his wrinkled skin.

"The first task is designed to test your daring," he told the room, though his cold eyes were focused on the four champions, "so we are not going to be telling you what it is. Courage in the face of the unknown is an important quality in a wizard... very important....The first task will take place on November the twenty-fourth, in front of the other students and the panel of judges. The champions are not permitted to ask for or accept help of any kind from their teachers to complete the tasks in
the tournament. The champions will face the first challenge armed only with their wands. They will receive information about the second task when the first is over. Owing to the demanding and time-consuming nature of the tournament, the champions are exempted from end-of-year tests."

Mr. Crouch turned to look at Dumbledore.

"I think that's all, is it, Albus?"

"I think so," said Dumbledore, who was looking at Mr. Crouch with mild concern. "Are you sure you wouldn't like to stay at Hogwarts tonight, Barty?"

"No, Dumbledore, I must get back to the Ministry," said Mr. Crouch. "It is a very busy, very difficult time at the moment... I've left young Weatherby in charge... Very enthusiastic... a little overenthusiastic, if truth be told..."

"You'll come and have a drink before you go, at least?" said Dumbledore.

"Come on, Barry, I'm staying!" said Bagman brightly. "It's all happening at Hogwarts now, you know, much more exciting here than at the office!"

"I think not, Ludo," said Crouch with a touch of impatience.

"Professor Karkaroff, Madame Maxime– a nightcap?" said Dumbledore.

But Karkaroff was already beckoning to Krum, exiting the room in angry silence. Madame Maxime hesitated, then shook her beautiful head.

"Zank you, Dumbly-dorr," she said, "but not tonight. I must speak wiz my Champion."

"Very well," Dumbledore bowed to the massive woman as she put her arm around Fleur's shoulders and lead her out of the room. Harry could hear them both talking very fast in French as they went off into the Great Hall. He also didn't fail to notice the azure-blue eyes of the French Champion, flicking back behind curiously to look at him and Hermione one more time.

"Harry, Hermione, Cedric, I suggest you go up to bed," said Dumbledore, smiling at both of them. "I am sure Slytherin and Hufflepuff are waiting to celebrate with you, and it would be a shame to deprive them of this excellent excuse to make a great deal of mess and noise."

Harry glanced at Hermione, who nodded, and they left together, Cedric a few steps behind them.

The Great Hall was deserted now; the candles had burned low, giving the jagged smiles of the pumpkins an eerie, flickering quality.

"So," said Cedric, with a slight smile. "We're playing against each other again!"

"I s'pose," said Harry. He really couldn't think of anything to say. The inside of his head seemed to be in complete disarray, as though his brain had been ransacked.

"So... tell me..." said Cedric as they reached the entrance hall, which was now lit only by torches in the absence of the Goblet of Fire. "How did you get your name in?"

"I didn't," said Harry, staring up at him. "I didn't put it in. I was telling the truth."

"Ah... okay," said Cedric. Harry could tell Cedric didn't believe him. "Well... see you, then."

"Wait!" Harry said, a bit desperately. "Please- do you really believe that? That I'd put my name in?"
Cedric hesitated.

"I don't want to believe you put it in." He said, finally, and Harry slumped in place as Cedric gave him an apologetic look then turned to leave. Hermione stepped in front of him, though, before he could go anywhere. Her eyes were chips of ice in her face.

"You know how so many of the Houses view Hufflepuff as the leftovers?" she asked, her voice the same dangerous soft as Snape used when he was really pissed. Cedric's jaw tightened.

"Of course I know about it." He said, stiffly.

"I don't care," Hermione said, coldly. "I never will. But Harry– every time someone says something negative, he's always the first to remind that person of the exceptional witches and wizards your House has produced. He's always the first to defend you, to defend all the other Houses– even Gryffindor, on occasion. And why would he need money? Or glory? Can you even tell me that, before this year, you knew who the winners of any past Tournaments were? Of course, there's the Age Restriction too– are you genuinely suggesting that Harry managed to defeat it? Managed to outsmart and overpower the Albus Dumbledore? And," she stepped even closer, so that she was less than a foot away from the older boy. Despite the large difference in their heights, Hermione had enough presence to drown whoever she was facing. "And, if none of that is good enough for you, then maybe this will be– I swear on my magic that Harry did not leave my side last night."

Cedric made a shocked sound, paling. Harry imagined his face had gone white too, but Hermione just flicked her wand, producing a fountain of sparks from the tip. "And, as you can see, I'm still very much in possession of my magic." She said, icily. "Is that enough proof for you, Diggory?"

Cedric didn't speak– maybe he couldn't. He just nodded soundlessly and the moment Hermione stepped to the side, so she wasn't blocking his path, he practically fled for the door to the right of the marble staircase. Harry waited until the older student was gone, out of earshot, before rounding furiously on Hermione.

"What were you thinking?" he demanded. "What the fuck were you thinking?"

Hermione looked a touch stunned in the face of his anger. "I– I wanted him to try and stop the rumors, the bullying, before it gets bad." She said, carefully. Harry let out an angry, shaky breath.

"For fuck's sake, I don't care if everyone in Hogwarts hates me– I care that you're alive and that you have your magic! If you ever do that again, ever, I swear I will..." Harry trailed off, running his fingers agitatedly through his hair, now long enough to rest against his shoulders. "You can't do that, Hermione– you can't!"


Harry nodded stiffly, working on taking a few more deep breaths before moving forwards and pulling her into a tight hug. She wrapped her arms lightly around him and they just stood there, for a long, long moment.

Eventually, the gong-ing sound of the clock tower had them reluctantly making their way back to the Slytherin common room.

Harry knew everyone was going to think he'd entered the Tournament. It was going to take days– weeks, even, to repair the damage, and that was just in his House. And he already knew that some
people still wouldn't believe him—after all, despite his continued denials there were those in Slytherin who still believed he was the Heir and was responsible for setting free a basilisk in the school in his second year. Actually, come to think of it, Harry was pretty sure too that the only Slytherins who didn't believe he was responsible were the ones ones believed it was Hermione who'd opened it.

They were going to think he'd put his name in, but how, how could anyone think that? How could anyone think he'd entered his name when now he was going to be going up against competitors who'd had three years more magical education than he had, when he was now facing tasks that not only sounded very dangerous, but which were to be performed in front of hundreds of people? Yes, he'd thought about entering the Tournament, the whole school had, but it was an idle sort of dream and he'd never really, seriously considered entering— even if he was of age he wouldn't have.

But someone else had considered it... someone else had wanted him in the tournament, and had made sure he was entered. Why? To give him a treat? Somehow, he didn't think so.

To see him make a fool of himself? Well, they were likely to get their wish....

But to get him killed?

Could Moody just be paranoid? Might someone have put Harry's name in the goblet as a trick, a particularly malicious practical joke? Did anyone really want him dead?

He repeated these thoughts out loud to Hermione, who looked a mix of furious and thoughtful.

"I have a feeling," she said. "That we're coming at this from the wrong angle."

"What other angle is there?" Harry pressed. Hermione's lips thinned into an unhappy line.

"I don't know, Harry." She said. "But I will find out."

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Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the long wait for the update, but my exams are finally over (halle-fucking-lujah!) and I hope you enjoyed the chapter!
~Cheshire Carroll
Hermione's POV:

Hermione was unsurprised by the party currently going on in the Slytherin common room as she and Harry spoke the password to open the entrance.

Harry was a miserable presence at her side, had been since leaving the Great Hall—hell, since his name had been chosen—and Hermione wasn't much better, except her reaction was leaning towards anger; a burning, simmering fury low in her stomach, just waiting for the wrong words, the wrong action or movement to turn it bright and sharp.

The blast of noise that met her ears when common room opened, loud enough it felt like it almost knocked her backward, was enough to do just that. Her fingers twitched dangerously, and she landed a murderous glare on the cretin who tried to drape a Slytherin banner over Harry's shoulders like a cloak as everyone cheered and eagerly approached them.

"How'd you do it?" a pale, dark-haired, underfed-looking Slytherin boy in sixth year demanded. Hermione was pretty sure his name was Quentin something. Runcorn, maybe, or Rowle.

"Come on, Potter, tell us!" one of the Quidditch players cheered, approaching with a plate of food he all but shoved in their direction.

She wasn't surprised when Harry pretty much exploded beside her, just that he'd done it before she had. "I didn't!" he exclaimed, angered and frustrated. "I didn't enter my bloody name in the bloody Tournament! For Merlin's sake, I don't fancy going around and tempting fate—why would I go to all the effort of making trouble when I can just wait for trouble to find me?"

"Come on you two," Blaise hastily shepherded them to a quieter area of the common room in one of the further corners of the large room, close to one of the many fireplaces burning like red jewels in the bland grey. Hermione sat stiffly on one of the common room's leather armchairs, pulling her wand from her pocket to cast several silencing charms that thankfully subdued the ear-splittingly loud music around them, at least to a degree.

Harry sat down next to her, packed tight in the small place so that they were touching, a comforting presence at her side, their bodies pressed together, shoulders to hips, thighs to ankles. Around them, Blaise, Theo, Draco and Daphne had settled. From all four faces, Hermione was pleased to see the appropriate levels of concern the others around them lacked.

"Moody thinks someone's trying to kill me." Harry said bluntly, and Hermione felt something
inside her twist violently at the words. "Reckon he's just being his usual paranoid arsehole self?" her green-eyed best friend asked the others hopefully.

"Well can you think of anyone who wants you dead?" Daphne suggested sensibly, her pretty face creased with worry.

"Surprisingly, no," Harry admitted, with a frown. "Well, any Death Eaters who, you know, don't know about the whole Truce deal might want me dead, but not enough to break into Hogwarts to enchant the Goblet so my name was guaranteed to come out. Hermione?" he turned to her, and she could see the strain on his face. "Can you think of anyone?" he asked earnestly.

She tilted her head thoughtfully. "Select members of the Weasley family may hate you enough to actually want you dead, but I don't think any of them have the guts to actually do something about it. Nor are they capable of enchanting the Goblet– we all saw the twins fail to enter themselves. Other then that, I can't think of anyone you've pissed off enough to want you dead. Which gives more credence to my theory."

"Yeah, that Dumbledore's involved." Harry grumbled.

"Well he's certainly an interfering old bastard who can't leave anything alone," Blaise agreed. "But I don't think he actually wants you dead, Harry."

"Entering Harry might not be about wanting to kill him," pointed out Daphne, "Dumbledore could be testing him. Or trying to get Harry to rely on him, somehow. Regardless, you don't actually have to attempt the Tasks, Harry– the binding just requires that you show up on the day. As soon as the Task has begun, if you're there then the binding has been fulfilled and you can forfeit."

Hermione actually snorted at Harry's expression in response to Daphne's reasoning, amusement curling inside her. "Daphne, what in Morgana's name have you been drinking? Actually, more important question, why the hell aren't you sharing it?" she asked. Daphne laughed too, along with the boys, while Harry looked a touch disgruntled but mostly sheepish.

"Well, I knew that was long-shot. Harry's got too much pride." The golden-haired girl said with a mock-sigh.

"And the rest of us don't?" Hermione pointed out, amused. Daphne just smirked. Hermione then sighed. "I'm going to need to research the Tournament," she said, grimly. "I didn't bother before, not outside of finding out about the foreign schools attending and the policies surrounding that."

"I know a bit about the actual Tasks themselves through history," Blaise said, his dark eyes grim as they met hers. "Entering Harry might not be about wanting to kill him," pointed out Daphne, "Dumbledore could be testing him. Or trying to get Harry to rely on him, somehow. Regardless, you don't actually have to attempt the Tasks, Harry– the binding just requires that you show up on the day. As soon as the Task has begun, if you're there then the binding has been fulfilled and you can forfeit."

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"I know a bit about the actual Tasks themselves through history," Blaise said, his dark eyes grim as they met hers. "And I really hope they've changed in modern times, since the Tournament hasn't been held for so long." Hermione felt something in her stomach sink.

"Hell," she muttered, with a low groan. "Alright, please tell us what you know."

"Well the point of the First Task was usually to obtain a certain object." Blaise said. "Sometimes, the champions would have to fight a dangerous creature for it– in 1714, I think it was, three werewolves escaped and wreaked havoc, killing and turning numerous people. The Second and Third task was usually the champions having to get through trying obstacles, like Fiendfyre, for example. In 1630 two champions burned alive during a task with Fiendfyre; the final champion won by default, but was disfigured for life." Hermione wondered if she looked as sick as she felt. "The Tasks are all about challenging the Champions," Blaise said. "Sometimes they can even just be plain disturbing, like ones with champions having to get through narrow spaces swarming with small and seemingly non-dangerous creatures, such as spiders, cockroaches or rats, which are
designed to from their sheer numbers alone make the Champion panic and fail to reach their goal.”

"Fucking hell," Hermione swore bluntly. She wanted to get up and pace, to scream, to break something. Anger and fear were twisting inside her, making her feel nauseous.

"Well there's nothing we can do now," Daphne said sensibly. "Let's enjoy the party now, and worry about the Tournament tomorrow."

"I'm tired," Harry said, apologetically. "I really just want to go to bed."

"That's fine too." Daphne said, with a light shrug.

Hermione followed Harry through to the boy's dorms and quietly got ready for bed alongside him. She still felt sick, still felt a numb, seething anger pulsing through her, and she held onto Harry tighter than she meant to, tight enough to leave stark white marks on his already pale skin, but he didn't complain. The slow curling grief and shock of the situation seemed to have hit Harry tighter than she meant to, tight enough to leave stark white marks on his already pale skin, but he didn't complain. The slow curling grief and shock of the situation seemed to have hit Harry, and he was covering his face with a hand, trying to stifle the tears and the muffled melancholic noises attempting to escape his throat.

"At least they believe me," he said, finally, voice hoarse. "Blaise, Draco, Theo and Daph. And you, of course."

"You'll speak to Longbottom tomorrow, and he'll believe you too. He's loyal like that." Hermione sighed. "And of course I believe you. Even if we hadn't slept in the same bed that night, I know you. And they know you too."

"The House is going to be suffocating in their approval and support," Harry winced. Hermione shrugged, not actually minding that one.

"You know Hufflepuff and Gryffindor– Gryffindor especially– are going to be the utter opposite, so take the support." She advised. "Don't alienate anyone." Harry winced again.

"Good point."

They were quiet for a few minutes, lying there together. Harry broke the silence again. "Do you really think it was Dumbledore?" he asked softly. "Do you really think he could have done this?" Hermione felt her hands clench into fists.

"I think Dumbledore needs to die," she said, through gritted teeth. "Preferably screaming, but right now I'll accept an Avada and be fine with it."

"Hermione," Harry rolled over so he was looking worriedly at her. In the dim light of the empty dorm room, his eyes looked very green, almost glowing in the intensity of the color. "Hermione, we're not ready to take on Dumbledore." Hermione felt the corners of her mouth turn down unhappily.

"I know," she said, sourly. "Doesn't make me not want to try, though– especially when he goes and pulls something like this. Because who else is not only powerful enough, but has both the opportunity and motive to pull something like this off? He needs to die, because he's putting you in danger, Harry, and that's not acceptable!"

Her words were very nearly a shout by the end, and she had to focus on Harry's presence beside her, press herself against the warmth of him, laying on his back, half under her now. "Hermione," Harry breathed, and she buried her face into his neck.
"I love you, Harry," she said, mouth moving against the pale skin there as she spoke. "I love you and if he gets you killed, I swear I will die in the flames I use to burn him to the ground, to nothing."

"It's okay, I'm okay," Harry said, soothingly, lifting a hand to run his fingers through her hair in a soothing, repetitive motion. They stayed quiet again for a while, Harry stroking her hair while she felt the steady beat of his heart against her chest, felt the confident thrum of his pulse against her lips. "Of course," Harry said, suddenly, "just because I don't want to murder him, doesn't mean I don't want revenge on Dumbledore for this."

Hermione blinked once as she lifted her head up to look down at him. "Oh?"

"Humiliating Dumbledore in front of as many distinguished guests as possible would go a long way to improving my mood, I feel," Harry explained. Hermione's lips curved into a smirk, the curve of it just shy of bloodthirsty, as she rolled off him, propping herself up on one elbow to look across.

"You're talking about a prank." She said. Harry grinned.

"Yes, I am. We haven't had a chance to pull out Tox, Talon and Tricks yet, this year." He said.

"Any ideas, then?" she asked.

"I actually did think of one," Harry said. He was smiling at her, eyes bright with mischief, as he said, "I thought maybe we could make the banners come to life!"

"The banners?" Hermione asked, a touch confused. "What do you mean?"

"The banners over the House tables," explained Harry, "the ones that they've replaced with silk. I thought we could make the mascots on them come to life, you know– become 3D and all."

"That... could be very entertaining," admitted Hermione, cheering immensely at the idea of a full-sized lion attacking Ron Weasley.

"Do you have any idea how we could do it?" Harry asked eagerly. Hermione smirked at him.

"Oh I've got a few ideas," she said. "We're going to need Tom's assistance, though."

"He better get back here soon," muttered Harry, mouth turning down at the reminder of the absence of their third.

"He'll be back soon now. Possibly even tonight." Hermione said, confidently. "After hearing the news... Well, he'll want to talk to us."

"I guess maybe one good thing will come out of this Goblet fiasco then." Harry said, with much more cheer than she felt. She still wanted to curse the older boy for ditching them for so long, and bloody disappearing when they actually needed him.

Hermione's prediction proved correct. It was satisfying to get something right, after the chaos of the evening, and it was a bit past two in the morning when Tom climbed onto the bed, sitting cross-legged at the foot of the four-poster, robes pooling around him, somehow managing to look classy and elegant.

"Tom, darling," she greeted the older boy, a saccharine-sweet smile on her face. "It's been a while."
"We missed you," Harry added, genuinely, before smiling thinly. "To counter this, we placed a plank of wood on a chair and wrote 'Tom' on it. He said we could use your stuff." Tom gave Harry an unamused look and Hermione's own smile started feeling less like a smile and more like she was baring her teeth threateningly at the older Slytherin. Beside her, Harry shifted nervously.

"Care to tell us where the fuck you've been, Tom?" she asked in a manner that very firmly pointed towards refusing to do so wasn't actually an option.

"I did not intend to stay away for so long," Tom admitted, chin dipping slightly in apology. "Voldemort asked me to do something for him, and it took longer then I expected."

"And?" She arched an eyebrow, silently demanding a better explanation then the bullshit one he'd just given her.

"And the moment I heard about Harry being entered in the Tournament, I returned." Hermione narrowed her eyes at him, frustration coiling around inside her like a nest of angry snakes.

"Not good enough," she said, tightly.

Harry placed his hand on her wrist and squeezed lightly. "Hermione," he said, soothingly. "Give Tom a chance to explain first, alright? Then you can curse him." Hermione looked at Harry's calm face, concentrating on the hurt in his green eyes, then nodded, turning back to Tom. The handsome older boy looked back at her calmly.

"You recall the Quidditch World Cup," he said, and she snorted.

"Bit hard to forget." Tom gave her a narrow-eyed look for interrupting.

"Voldemort was very interested in the Death Eater who cast the Dark Mark in the sky. The caster was apart from the mob of masked Death Eaters, and after it was cast, the Death Eaters dispersed." Hermione frowned.

"Did you find out who it was?"

"Eventually." Tom sighed, actually allowing tiredness to show on his face as he leaned back against the bed frame. "You've seen Bartemius Crouch here, I presume– one of the judges?"

"Yeah, the grump. Hermione likes him the best out of the lot because he's a stone-cold bastard." Harry said helpfully.

"More then you realize," Tom said, dryly. "You know about his son?"

"Barty Crouch Junior, convicted Death Eater. Crouch sent him to Azkaban. He died there." Hermione easily recalled, before tilting her head slightly as she took in Tom's expression. "Or," she said, slowly, "That's the official version of what happened."

"Unofficially, Crouch broke the boy out. His wife died in Crouch Junior's place, and Junior was kept locked in Crouch Manor under the Imperius Curse." Tom said.

"What the hell?" Harry said, aghast. Hermione's face felt cold. There was a part of her that was quietly admiring of the lengths Crouch had been willing to go, but the vast majority of the emotion she was feeling was a fury that burned ice-cold. "That's... god, that's just horrible!" Harry exclaimed, angered and disgusted.

"It's certainly not pleasant," Tom agreed, his lips curled back in disgust. "As a reward for his good
behavior and obedience, Crouch took Junior to the World Cup as a treat. Junior fought off the curse briefly, during the aftermath of the Quidditch match, and cast the Dark Mark in the sky using a stolen wand. His father tracked him down after. I did find him eventually, at his father's, under the curse, and my counterpart and I were deciding the best way to take advantage of the situation when we learned from an informant that Harry had been picked by the Goblet. From there we made a new plan entirely, waiting until Crouch Sr returned home then ambushing him. He's imprisoned at Riddle Manor, and Junior will be taking his father's place with the aid of polyjuice."

"He's not dead?" Harry asked, sounding surprised.

"They need him around for the polyjuice, I'd guess," Hermione said, her mind racing. "And for what I suspect is a bit of revenge on Junior's behalf– what comes around goes around, and all that."

"I'd probably want some revenge too," muttered Harry. "Being locked up by my own dad for nearly fifteen years..." his voice trailed off and he looked sickened.

"Crouch is, well was, one of the judges," Hermione corrected herself, "does that mean he knows what the three Tasks are?"

"It didn't take much to loosen his tongue," Tom smirked, oil slick and sharp, looking quite satisfied in himself.

"And?" She pressed impatiently.

"And this year, all three Tasks are focused on an object that needs to be located and retrieved from a designated arena." Tom said. "For the First Task, the first object is a golden egg that needs to be stolen from a nesting dragon." Hermione could actually feel the blood drain from her face. "The Champions are allowed their wands only and aren't actually supposed to know what the Task is," Tom continued. Hermione made a vicious, dismissive sound.

"Harry's already facing a handicap," she said darkly. "Any advantage we can get is one we're going to take."

"God," whispered Harry, suddenly looking very, very pale. His face, as he looked at her, was blatantly afraid. "If that's the First Task..." his voice trailed off, but Hermione knew exactly what he hadn't said– if stealing an egg from a dragon was the First Task, then just how terrible were the other two going to be?

"The Second Task is retrieving a personal possession, a precious one, from the mer-village in the Black Lake." Tom clarified.

"The mer-village," Harry repeated, weakly. "As in, the underwater mer-village? I've never even had swimming lessons!"

"That Task, actually, is far simpler then the first one." Tom said thoughtfully. "There are several spells and potions out there that will enable you to breathe underwater. The main issue will be teaching you non-verbal magic to defend yourself from the creatures that live there. But we have months to do that."

"As long as I'm not eaten by an angry mother dragon," pointed out Harry, but he looked calmer at Tom's reassurance.

"Dumbledore said they've worked hard to make sure no Champion finds themselves in a life-threatening situation," Hermione said, her mouth set in an unhappy curve.
"Yeah, but the Champions were all supposed to be of age." Harry pointed out, somewhat despondently.

"The Third Task, the final one, is a maze." Tom said, quietly. "There's a cup at the center. The first Champion to touch the cup wins."

"And I'm guessing the maze is more complicated then just a bunch of hedges." Harry said, sourly.

"They just gained permission from the Egyptian ministry to import a sphinx," Tom agreed with a wince, "amongst other creatures. I believe the list so far includes Acromantula, boggarts and hinkypunks."

"Great. Just great. I'm going to die and I'm not even going to be able to play a Quidditch game again before I do." Harry groaned.

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Severus's POV:

"I honestly don't know what Albus hopes to achieve by this," Severus said grimly. He was back in his quarters, a large glass of something strong in front of him. He wasn't sure exactly what it was—Minerva had brought it along with her. "This whole situation is destined for some form of disaster. This ploy... systematically abused and degraded children do not suddenly turn into well-adjusted members of society, they just don't, even if they've been removed from the abusive situation, which Harry has not—nor do they tend to be very trusting of others, or forgiving."

"You really think Harry was abused?" Minerva asked, quietly.

"Even if the Dursleys never laid a hand on Harry, which, no matter how much it pains me to say, I highly doubt, twelve years of verbal abuse would have left just as many scars as physical abuse, even if they were invisible to the naked eye." He said darkly. "Not that it's currently relevant to this conversation." Because he really did not feel like talking about that.

Abuse was... not a subject he was fond of. At all. And even in the days that he'd followed the Dark Lord, Severus had despised the more animalistic behavior as some of his comrades reveled in—rape, the torture and murder of the young and innocent; those were the pleasures of morons, people who had no understanding of true power. Of course a girl would plead for mercy if you were raping her; a starving man would beg for food, would he not? Humans were creatures with a strong survival instinct, and a remarkably low pain threshold. He had always been disgusted in those who took pleasure in such absurdly natural and predictable reactions, causing him to question the intelligence of his compatriots.

"You were the one who brought it up, Severus," Minerva chided, gently.

"Only to point out the foolishness of Albus's plan to try and get Harry to form a bond with Moody," Severus said. "This is going to end in blood, Minerva."

Because he knew Hermione suspected Dumbledore, anyone who knew what to look for could have seen it on her face in that ante-room, and he knew that there was no way Hermione was seeing Harry being entered into the Tournament as anything other than an attack on Harry, and the countless students—mostly Gryffindors— who'd ended up in the hospital wing after attacking Harry could contest to the fact that Hermione did not take those lying down. That girl had a vicious streak of red in her, and if Dumbledore hadn't crossed the line when he tried adopting her at the start of
the term, then he'd certainly crossed it today.

He'd seen Hermione's report from the hospital wing, after Moody had assaulted his two students—burns, whip marks, broken bones, knife wounds, sexual abuse; some monsters weren't born, he knew, they were created. That's not that he thought Hermione was a monster, just that there was something very damaged about the girl, and Dumbledore was sending her towards a dangerous and unstable spiral.

There was good in Hermione, so much good that Dumbledore appeared incapable of seeing, because she could see right through the old man, right through his manipulations. He couldn't handle that, couldn't handle her derailing all his carefully laid plans of the last decade and a bit, and Severus knew that he was going to have to talk to her, because Dumbledore was going to start getting desperate. And desperate men? They were far more dangerous then their controlled counterparts.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry new chapters are taking a while, but life, you know? It’s a busy thing. I hope you enjoyed this chapter, I wanted to put out a new one, even though it's shorter then usual.

~Cheshire Carroll xxoo
CHAPTER XLV:

Hermione's POV:

The Monday morning following Harry's name coming out of the Goblet had been just as terrible as they'd predicted.

The Slytherins, of course, were all still ecstatic, and as she and Harry had entered the Common Room all the students who'd already finished their breakfast broke out into applause again. The prospect of going down into the Great Hall and facing the rest of the Slytherins, who were all treating Harry as some sort of hero, and the rest of the school, who no doubt were going to treat him as a pariah, was obviously about as appealing to Harry as it was to her. Their year-mates, however, had rallied around them, and as they stepped out of the Slytherin Common Room, Harry had a protective entourage of Blaise, Draco, Daphne, Tracey, Theo, Vince, Greg, and even Pansy Parkinson, Millicent Bulstrode and Lilyan Moon.

It was clear the moment they entered the Hall that despite Harry's protests to the contrary the previous evening, the rest of the school believed he'd entered himself into the Tournament and unlike the Slytherins they were not impressed. Hermione could understand the Hufflepuffs' attitude, even if she didn't like it; they had their own champion to support. She expected nothing less than vicious insults from the Gryffindors– Harry was highly unpopular there. But she had thought the Ravenclaws might have found it in themselves to support Harry as much as Diggory. She had been wrong, however– most Ravenclaws seemed to think that Harry had been desperate to earn himself a bit more fame by tricking the goblet into accepting his name. It was also very clear to her that despite the Oath she'd made to him, Diggory had put to have put in very little effort in convincing his fellow Hufflepuffs otherwise– if he'd even mentioned it at all. Just one Herbology lesson was enough to demonstrate this.

It was plain that the Hufflepuffs felt that Harry had stolen their champion's glory; a feeling exacerbated, perhaps, by the fact that Hufflepuff House very rarely got any glory, and that Diggory was one of the few who had ever given them any, having beaten Slytherin once at Quidditch. And while she could understand them supporting their champion instead of Harry, it angered her to see them treat Harry with such coldness.

Macmillan and Finch-Fletchley, the Hufflepuffs she and Harry had had the misfortune of being partnered with in that one Herbology lesson, and who normally were at least polite to him, even if they were very wary of Slytherins, did not talk to them at all as the four of them repotted Bouncing Bulbs– though they did laugh rather unpleasantly when one of the Bouncing Bulbs wriggled free from Harry's grip and smacked him hard in the face. At least Professor Sprout had seemed her usual friendly self.

After that awful Herbology lesson, Hermione had hoped that seeing Hagrid next would cheer Harry up. Then she remembered that while under normal circumstances it might have, Care of Magical Creatures meant seeing the Gryffindors too– the first time face-to-face since Harry had become champion.

Predictably, Ron Weasley arrived at Hagrid's cabin with his familiar sneer firmly in place.
"I'm surprised to see you here," he said, the moment he got within earshot of them, "and not at some photoshoot somewhere. They better get the pictures done soon, because I doubt you're going to be around much longer....Half the Triwizard champions have died... how long d'you reckon you're going to last? My brothers are organizing the betting pool– I put down five minutes into the first task."

"We're talking about Harry here, Weasley, not you," she spat, icily.

"Are you joking, Hermione?" Draco sneered at the bristling red-head, "Weasley here wouldn't even last thirty seconds." Vince and Greg guffawed sycophantically in response to Draco's quip, and Weasley, now with a face as red as his hair, didn't have a chance to respond before Hagrid emerged from the back of his cabin balancing a teetering tower of crates, each containing a very large Blast-Ended Skrewt. The skrewts were now over three feet long, and extremely powerful. No longer shell-less and colorless, they had developed a kind of thick, grayish, shiny armor. They looked like a cross between giant scorpions and elongated crabs and still had no recognizable heads or eyes. They had become immensely strong and very hard to control. To the class's horror, Hagrid proceeded to explain that the reason the skrewts had been killing one another was an excess of pent-up energy, and that the solution would be for each student to fix a leash on a skrewt and take it for a short walk.

Hermione took advantage of Hagrid's attention being drawn away from the class at large as Weasley started arguing with him.

"I'm going to tear that sniveling, cowardly worm to pieces!" She said darkly, fixing Weasley's back with a particularly venomous look.

"Don't even think about it." Harry said, sternly.

"Too many witnesses." Blaise added casually, causing Harry to turn his glare to the Italian instead.

"Exactly how many pieces are we talking here?" Draco questioned her, looking sadistically cheerful at the idea.

"...Several... large ones, though– come on, Harry!" she urged her best friend to reconsider. Harry crossed his arms and glared.

"I don't need you fighting my battles." He said, angrily. "I don't your pity."

"Of course you don't need pity." Blaise said, with a roll of his eyes. "Everyone who's ever hurt you, they're the ones who need pity for what we're all going to do to them."

Hermione showed her teeth in a lethal smile. "And they won't be getting any," she said, voice practically a purr.

"And why should they? They deserve it." Blaise added, with a shrug.

"You're all as terrible as each other." Harry groaned. "No cursing them." He added, though. "I mean it. There's no point. Sticks and stones may break my bones–"

"But words can also hurt you." Hermione interrupted. "Especially now," she added, thoughtfully and slightly amused at the thought of it, "now that words are how spells are cast. At least until you've mastered casting non-verbally."

They didn't have time to talk after that, though, because Hagrid had instructed everyone to start, and as the class got to work trying to attach a harness around the skrewts' middles he called her and
Harry over, supposedly to 'help' him with one of the bigger ones. His real intention, however, was to talk to them away from the rest of the class, waiting until everyone had set off with their skrewts before turning very seriously to them.

"So– yer competin', Harry. In the tournament. School champion."

"One of the champions," Harry corrected the very large man.

Hagrid's beetle-black eyes looked very anxious under his wild eyebrows. "An' both of you 'ave no idea who put yeh in fer it?"

"You believe I didn't do it, then?" said Harry, and Hermione could easily see through the effort he put into concealing the rush of gratitude he felt at Hagrid's words.

"Course I do," Hagrid grunted. "Yeh say it wasn' you, an' I believe yeh– an' Dumbledore believes yer, an' all."

Hermione very determinedly kept her mouth shut at that– she still suspected that the reason Dumbledore believed Harry was because the old fool had entered Harry's name himself.

"I wish I did know for sure who did do it," muttered Harry bitterly.

The three of them looked out over the lawn; the class was widely scattered now, and all in great difficulty. "Look like they're havin' fun, don' they?" Hagrid said happily. Hermione assumed he was talking about the skrewts, because her classmates certainly weren't; every now and then, with an alarming bang, one of the skrewts' ends would explode, causing it to shoot forward several yards, and more than one person was being dragged along on their stomach, trying desperately to get back on their feet.

"Ah, I don' know, Harry," Hagrid sighed suddenly, looking back down at them with a worried expression on his face. "School champion... everythin' seems ter happen ter you, doesn' it?"

And wasn't that the truth? Hermione thought grimly.

Their extremely trying day had ended with her, Harry and Tom sneaking out of the dorms at nearly midnight, her and Harry under the Invisibility Cloak and Tom under a disillusionment charm, the two of them following the older boy to a bizarre room Tom had called 'The Room of Requirement'. It was, he'd explained to them, something he'd found while searching for the Chamber of Secrets, back in his school-boy days.

The Room was an utterly fascinating piece of magic, located on Hogwarts' seventh floor, across from a tapestry of a wizard called Barnabas the Barmy. To 'open' it you had to walk past the area where the door was concealed three times, thinking of what you needed. Tom had demonstrated for them, and of course the room had turned into something as extravagant as he was. Vast and magnificent, elegant drapes with gold linings hung around the room, various antique-looking adornment placed with care on splendidly crafted tables, exquisite paintings were placed strategically around the room and armchairs were situated in a tasteful arrangement around a grand fire-place that crackled with warmth. And above them hung a beautiful crystal chandelier lined with elegantly carved ivory-colored candles.

After spending a few seconds just blinking, taking in the room in surprised but appreciative silence, Hermione moved over to one of the chairs and perched on the arm, while Harry trailed after her and sat in the seat. Tom left briefly, returning only a few minutes later with a very nervous-looking young man in tow– a man she recognized just barely from black and white pictures published in...
the old, archived copies of the Daily Prophet in the library as Barty Crouch Junior.

Her first thought on Barty Crouch Junior was that there was something wrong with him, besides the obvious. He was a little bit like a kid, with something inside of him that was just broken.

Barty was a young blonde man with a pale freckled face and an odd little tic where the tip of his tongue darted out of his mouth to lick his upper lip. Looking at him, she was reminded of a saying she'd once heard– 'some monsters aren't born, they're created'. Oh, there must have always been a capacity in Barty for violence and anger, but it was Barty's life that had made him into who he was. Specifically, his life with the man he had the misfortune to call Father.

If there was ever another person she and Harry could call kindred spirit, this broken, abused young man was it.

And Voldemort had taken Barty under his wing, shaping the wounded, impressionable young man to his image, with his cause consuming every good part of him left until Barty was left even more broken then before, but held together then by twisted devotion and absolute loyalty.

And Barty Crouch Junior was certainly an asset to the Dark– Hermione wasn't sure about what he was like as a wizard, but the Crouch family was an old one and a very wealthy one at that. No one knew the exact extent of the Crouch estate, but primogeniture would ensure once Bartemius Crouch passed away (or was murdered) Barty would inherit a vast fortune that consisted of multiple unplottable, highly warded houses, manors and even a small castle which was the center of the family's wealth, and the only property commonly known, as it was used to host galas– Bartemius hadn't lived there, of course; he had been a much too paranoid man, and although Hermione knew now it was because of the fact he'd been keeping his son locked away and under the Imperius curse, most assumed it was either his position as a Head of Department in the Ministry, or because of his actions in the War against Voldemort.

His inheritance wasn't the only reason Barty was such an asset, though; as a dead man, Barty was also perfect for committing the sort of crimes and undercover spy work that Voldemort's other followers couldn't, due to their public visibility– undercover work like posing as Bartemius Crouch for the duration of the Tournament, making sure that Harry, the underage fourth champion, had the best possible chance they could give him to come out of the Tasks unharmed.

"So," she said, once Tom and Barty were seated across from her and Harry, "dragons. Fucking, real-life dragons. How the hell are we getting past them?"

"Just the one," Barty corrected her nervously, tongue tip darting out again to wet his lips. "One dragon per champion. They're nesting mothers, and each will have a clutch of eggs that they'll be guarding. One egg will be fake, though, made of gold instead. That's the egg the Champion will need to retrieve, in a test that's supposed to test the Champions daring."

"A Gryffindor designed this. Only they could possibly be this stupid and reckless," Hermione muttered scathingly. "Fine– what breed of dragon will be used?"

"Four different breeds are being imported from a dragon sanctuary in Romania," Barty explained, "a Common Welsh Green, Swedish Short-Snout, Chinese Fireball and Hungarian Horntail." Hermione winced.

"A Hungarian Horntail? That breed is at least twice as vicious as a Common Welsh Green. How is it decided which Champion faces which breed?" She asked.

"Miniature replicas that the Champions pull out of a bag," Barty said. "They're actually kind of
cute," he added, with a nervous smile. "The spell-casting department created them– they can breath tiny sparks and little puffs of smoke."

"They're animated?" Tom asked, sharply. Barty flinched slightly as Tom's full attention turned focused on him.

"Y-yes, my Lord," he stammered slightly. Tom's lips curved into a satisfied smirk.

"Excellent."

"I think you're forgetting the part where Barty said they were miniature replicas." Hermione pointed out dryly.

"Are you a witch or not?" Tom countered, arching a dark eyebrow. Hermione narrowed her eyes at him, even as her mind raced. The answer, when she arrived at it, was obvious enough she almost blushed.

"Enlargement charm," she said. "If Harry makes it big enough, the replica becomes a threat to the dragon. A big one – one much more obvious and threatening to her nest then a small human would be."

"Exactly." Tom said.

"We still need Harry to be able to move fast– he can't outrun a dragon, and once it realizes the replica is a diversion, or that something is disturbing its nest, it's going to turn on him instantly." Pointed out Hermione.

"I, ah, I had a small idea about that," Barty spoke up, tongue wetting his lip again nervously when they all turned their attention to him. "See, the Champions are supposed to play to their skills, use the magic disciplines they're most skilled at, because the judges want a show. The better it is to watch, the higher the scores."

"I don't have any particular magical fields where I stand out," Harry said, gloomily. "Definitely not compared to seventh years, anyway."

"That's not, ah, quite what I've heard." Barty fidgeted with the sleeves of his robes, slightly too long for his thin build, as they were designed to fit his father, not him. "I've heard you're very skilled at Quidditch."

Harry's cheeks went pink at the praise and Hermione hid a smile– Harry was incredibly modest and shy about praise for pretty much everything except his talent at Quidditch.

"I– I am good on a broom," he said, which was an understatement, if anything, "but that doesn't really help me when I don't have my broom."

"No," she said, slowly, "but you do have your wand." Harry looked confused for a moment before his eyes widened.

"A summoning charm!" he exclaimed, and she smiled.

"A summoning charm." She confirmed.

"I might actually survive this after all," Harry said, actually looking a bit stunned. Hermione couldn't help her laugh, and even Tom snorted.
"Don't worry— we wouldn't let the dragon get you." She said, "You're far too pretty for us to risk being disfigured or incinerated."

"Thanks Hermione." Harry said, voice thick with sarcasm. She smiled sweetly at him.

"Oh you're welcome Harry. But you do know what this means."

"Oh yes," Harry said, expression going grim. "I'm going to have to do a lot of practicing, aren't I?"

"Summoning charms, enlargement charms and dodging practice." Tom confirmed, with a very sadistic smile in response to the pained expression on Harry's face. "And that last one, at least, is going to be fun."

Which was in no way reassuring to Harry at all, she knew— because Tom had very different ideas of what constituted as 'fun'. It was going to be a very long few weeks for poor Harry.

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Her prediction had been correct, and Harry's misery wasn't solely caused by the torture otherwise known as Tom's training either. The rest of the school were still awful to him, some of the worst it had been during her time at Hogwarts – the closest she could remember it being like this was during those months back in their second year when a large part of the school had suspected Harry of being the Heir of Slytherin and attacking his fellow students.

There were a handful of students outside of Slytherin who believed Harry, though— Luna, for one, and Fleur too. And Longbottom, who much to her surprise had taken the whole thing quite well. The boy had just shrugged when he and Harry met up and said he didn't care if Harry had chosen to enter himself in the Tournament or not— "Though I didn't really think you would have," the Gryffindor had added with another shrug. "It didn't really seem like something you'd do. I'd expect it more from you, Gra– Hermione," he'd corrected himself, a touch of pink to his cheeks as Harry gave him an encouraging look, "to be honest."

"Really?" Harry asked doubtfully, giving her a teasing look. "Well, I suppose you haven't heard all her rants about the Tournament, and how the magical schools are using their students as unpaid diplomats, competing in dangerous tasks to foster mutual goodwill between antagonistic ministries."

"Oh not to compete," Neville clarified, "so you could embarrass Professor Dumbledore by publically outsmarting him." Hermione hadn't been able to hide her amusement there.

"I don't hide it well, do I?" She said, referring to her intense loathing of the headmaster.

"Neither of you do, not really anyway." Neville shrugged in response. "If you know what to look for, it's there."

Later, she commented to Harry that Longbottom could be shockingly insightful. "Makes me think there's hope for him outside an extra body between you and anyone who wants to hurt you."

"You're terrible." Sighed Harry.

"Guilty as charged." She agreed.

But despite those that supported Harry, the rest of the school's attitude had gotten so bad that Snape had actually asked them to stay behind after Double Potions.
"How are you both coping?" he'd asked, clearly concerned, and from where he was standing at her right Harry had given a huffed laugh.

"Well, I haven't been cursed, and Hermione hasn't killed anyone yet, so I suppose we can count that as a victory."

"Oi," she'd said, elbowing him gently in the ribs.

"The feat of not killing anyone is indeed a victory, I suppose," had agreed Snape, who no doubt considered killing multiple people, multiple times a day. "Just remember you can always come to me, if there's anyone making you feel particularly... homicidal. Slytherins stick together."

"Thanks sir," Harry had said gratefully. She herself hadn't said anything, because she didn't want to lie to her favorite professor and she very much doubted that she was going to get through this rather trying time without cursing someone.

Snape's long-suffering look as he had dismissed them both had told her that he was fully aware of why she hadn't answered. Though with Harry refusing to let her maim anyone, she'd had to turn to alternate means of getting revenge, which made her remember an earlier conversation she, Harry and Tom had had. After all, she blamed Dumbledore for this current mess they were in, and while she couldn't curse the headmaster, she could at least embarrass him in front of the other schools. And what better way to do that, then to pull a very public prank?

Harry had turned out to actually be rather keen on his idea, and with Tom's help, they started planning some truly epic mischief.

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It was nearly a week after their conversation with Snape that the preparations for the prank had been completed. Dumbledore often made announcements on Fridays at the start of dinner, so they'd planned their prank for then.

Sure enough, Friday evening as everyone congregated at dinner Dumbledore stood up to address the school.

"Students," he said, that damnable gentile smile on his face, "I would--" he paused suddenly, and Hermione could barely keep the vicious smile off her face at the sound of a loud thud over on the Hufflepuff table, followed by screaming and scrambling.

The badger, which had fallen off the silk banner hanging over the table and grown from a two-dimensional shape to three-dimensional, was huge, nearly six feet long and looking rather miffed, making odd barking, growling noises as it shuffled forwards, knocking over bowls and platters as the students in black and yellow panicked-- loudly-- and threw themselves away from it.

The Gryffindor table was next to start screaming, as the embroidered lion peeled off the banner and grew to larger then life-size, the letting out a bellowing roar as it landed on all four feet. Its paws were the size of the dinner plates, and even standing on all fours its head was level to a grown man's.

Ravenclaw's mascot wasn't even half as scary, seeing as everyone was used to birds flying around the hall, but Slytherin's mascot... well, even her fellow Slytherins were scrambling away from the pissed off snake, stunning as it was with its shining silver scales and gleaming emerald eyes.

::Stupid mudbloods! Who dares awaken me?:: the huge serpent, over twelve feet long and thick as a child's torso, demanded. Hermione made an amused sound at that-- trust Salazar Slytherin's snake
to be a blood purist.

The snake turned its head from side to side, hissing ferociously. She was a touch startled when the vibrant, iridescent green eyes turned to her direction and fixed themselves unnervingly on her ::*You have unclean blood*:: the serpent declared.

::*And suddenly I'm glad nobody else speaks Parseltongue*:: Harry hissed quietly beside her, the sibilant sounds lost to all but those closest to him in the bedlam. Hermione agreed, but didn't have time to reply, because what happened next happened very quickly.

The snake lunged at Hermione, fangs bared, and she barely had time to throw herself out of the way, before the snake was striking at her again. She bit back a cry of pain as long, curved fangs dug into the skin of her shoulder– several inches over and the bloody serpent might have ripped out her throat. Her shoulder felt like it was on fire and could feel something burning in her veins– the venom she was guessing. She fiercely blinked back the tears threatening to spill and grabbed onto the snake still attached to her shoulder by its gangs, fastening both her hands around its thick girth and digging her fingers in as hard as she could in a move that turned out to be useless, as the snake's scales were too hard to pierce.

Her mouth tasted like copper.

::*STOP*:: she demanded, furiously. ::*STOP NOW!*::

She could hear Harry's panicked shouts, but her attention was focused instead on the snake that had stilled in its attempts to murder her. It drew back slowly, pulling its fangs from her shoulder, and fixed its sight on her, staring unblinkingly with far too-intelligent iridescent eyes.

::*You speak the noble tongue*:: it hissed slowly.

::*I speak the noble tongue*:: Hermione agreed, warily letting go of her hold on the snake now it didn't seem like she was about to be attacked again, moving her hands to instead press against the wound on her shoulder leaking hot, wet crimson. The snake drew back on the table now, apparently satisfied.

::*I am yours to command, Mistress*:: it hissed happily.

::*Go fuck yourself*:: Hermione hissed back grimly as she sat back down heavily on the bench.

"Hermione?" Harry asked frantically and Hermione turned to see him staring at her, white-faced.

"What?" She asked, frowning in confusion. Harry reached forwards and gently touched her cheek. It was wet and Hermione was confused– she thought she'd managed to hold back the tears– until he pulled his hand back and she saw the blood. She was crying blood. Well, she was leaking blood from her eyes anyway.

"Ah. The venom must have contained a hemotoxin." She said. Her mouth did taste suspiciously copper-ish. Picking up one of the folded napkins she pressed the cloth against her mouth and spat in it. Pulling the napkin back, she was unsurprised to see blood.

"What the hell is a hemotoxin?" Demanded a somewhat panicky Harry. Before Hermione could answer a rush of dizziness had her leaning forwards and bracing herself against the table and blinking away the reddish fog.

She didn't remember a whole lot after that, just a whole lot of shouting. Her next really solid memory was blinking awake in a white room she quickly recognized as the hospital wing.
It took her a few moments to remember what had happened, and why she was laid out in one of the cots. She'd been attached by a snake with hemotoxins in its venom. Hemotoxins destroyed red blood cells, disrupted the clotting process and caused tissue and organ degeneration, all of which caused massive hemorrhaging to ensue.

"Fantastic." She muttered, which caused the half-asleep figure slumped over her bed to jerk back into full consciousness.

"You're awake!" Harry exclaimed, looking adorably tousled and very relieved.

"Awake and embarrassed." She said, with a grimace. "I was defeated by a snake."

"Well... yes." Harry admitted, and she appreciated him not sugarcoating it.

"A fucking snake!" she repeated unhappily. She supposed that 'pride cometh before the fall' and all that– she had been getting too confident, and this had been her wake-up call.

"When you think about it," Harry rushed to try and soothe her, "snakes can move up to eight times their own body length in a second– that means the snake that attacked you had the potential to be able to move nearly a hundred feet in a second. There was no way you could have reacted in time."

"That's not exactly how it works- the body weight and mass of the snake would have to come into consideration too. And that really doesn't make me feel any better about what happened," Hermione muttered darkly, though privately she did feel a touch mollified. Still– "god, how embarrassing." She groaned.

"Oh, I don't know," Harry said. "The Durmstrang students were all very impressed by your Parseltongue. Plus, you had a very concerned visitor." He gestured to what was either a glass or crystal vase on her bedside table, filled with different flowers all in shades of pink. "I know it's a lot of pink." Harry said. "But Fleur Delacour does strike me as the sort of person to like pink."

Hearing the flowers were from Fleur, Hermione examined the bouquet with increased interest, and it was the presence of peonies that gave her the hint. "Le langage des fleurs," she murmured, looking at the flowers closer in an effort to identify the separate types present. "I'm pretty sure she used floriography here."

"Floriography?" Harry asked.

"Because of their fragrance, color and impermanence, flowers have been used for centuries as a way to convey emotions without words," She explained. "The exact emotions being represented vary from culture to culture, and sometimes from person to person. I'm assuming this one is Victorian Era flower language, developed mostly in the nineteenth century."

"How the hell do you know these things?" Harry asked her and she laughed.

"The libraries I used to linger in when I was younger, for their warmth or air-conditioning. I read a lot of books during those times, and the more obscure ones were usually the more interesting ones– one of those was a floriography dictionary called 'Le Langage des Fleurs'. It was published in France in the early nineteenth century and one of the books I read when I was teaching myself French. Here," she motioned to the peonies, "see those ones? They're peonies, and they're for healing. The gladiolus signify strength of character, the hydrangeas perseverance, the pansies affectionate thoughts and the pink roses admiration and appreciation."

"That's actually really sweet– and flattering too." Harry said, impressed.
"It really is," she mused, examining the flowers. They had been arranged beautifully, and even though she wasn't exactly a huge fan of pink, or of mostly useless things, she was quite touched by the gesture, and she could certainly appreciate the beauty of the arrangement.

"You actually really like her," Harry said, suddenly. There was a big grin on his face as he declared that and she rolled her eyes fondly at him.

"Well, maybe. But she's even cleverer then I first thought, you know. When I was in the library working on that Runes extra credit Babbling assigned me last week, she came over and all she had to do was just look at it and she figured it out like that." She snapped her fingers.

"You're probably going to have to talk to Tom," Harry said. "I mean, I can't see him being against it, but it really sounds like it's going somewhere serious."

Hermione nodded. "I will." She said. "Now how long do you think it will be until I can get out of here?"

Harry laughed. "Not until Snape has the chance to yell at you for scaring him, I'm guessing. He saved you, you know— he summoned a bezoar and pushed it down your throat. Madam Pomfrey said that if he hadn't been so quick, you could have suffered severe damage— that snake was really poisonous."

"Venomous," she corrected absently, before lowering her voice. "Does he know it was us?" she asked quietly. Harry shook his head.

"The professors think it was a seventh year because the magic used was really advanced." He whispered back. "They also think it was probably a Gryffindor, because you were attacked. And we sort of got our wish— you getting so badly hurt at the dinner must have really humiliated Dumbledore."

"Then one good thing came out of it, at least." Hermione said, immensely satisfied by that. Harry nodded.

"Yeah, it did. But we're never doing something that could get you hurt like that again."

"Deal," Hermione agreed.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry it took so long to update. I'll definitely make an effort to ensure it doesn't take so long again.
~Cheshire Carroll
Part Four: The Goblet of Fire - Chapter XLVI

CHAPTER XLVI:

Severus's POV:

Severus was pacing around his private quarters when Minerva came knocking. He'd been in a bad mood since Hermione ended up in the hospital wing, one that had yet to improve despite her finally waking up.

He had no way to prove it, nor did he want to, but he was certain that Hermione and Harry had been responsible for the prank in the Great Hall that had ended with the girl's hospitalisation, and while he was furious with them for having done something so stupidly risky he held onto the hope that the disastrous way it had gone wrong would prevent them from doing something so dunderheaded again—paired, of course, with the way he'd yelled at them both for about ten minutes straight in the hospital wing after he'd gotten word Hermione was conscious, threatening them each with a month of pickling slugs and de-boweling toads in detention if they ended up in the hospital wing again.

Harry, looking sheepish and guilty but thankfully smart enough not to say anything about if the prank had been their fault, had promised to try, but the boy had then added that he couldn't really make any guarantees, what with the First Task approaching.

Hermione had taken this comment about as well as Severus had—which, was to say, very, very poorly. She'd been glaring hard enough to set something on fire with her eyes alone at the time he'd left, while Severus had stormed through the rest of the day acting like 'a rapid bear with a thorn in its paw', according to a whispered comment passed from Rolanda to Septima during dinner.

Needless to say, this had done nothing to improve it.

He considered turning Minerva away, not particularly feeling in the mood for any sort of company, but he had a question first he thought the Head of Gryffindor might be able to answer.

"What are the rules regarding staff assisting the champions in the Tasks?" He asked briskly the moment he swung open the portrait that guarded his quarters, not giving her time to speak first.

The Scottish woman blinked, apparently surprised, and he gestured impatiently for her to step inside. She did so, and his question seemed to register her expression tightened, her mouth forming a thin line. "We are forbidden from discussing anything to do with the Tasks with them." She said, then added, eyes narrowing dangerously as she did so, "though I have no doubt Maxime and Karkaroff will not hesitate to tell their champions everything they know."

Severus scowled even harder at that. "Harry's underage," he snapped, "he didn't sign up for this and he isn't a willing participant. Surely there has to be something in the rules that allows for there to be exceptions in special circumstances?"

"I've read the entire rulebook back to front after learning we were hosting the Tournament this year," Minerva said grimly, shaking her head. "There are no exceptions to the rules, Severus. And if we break them and are caught, it would likely cause an international incident. Having an extra
Hogwarts champion alone is bad enough. We cannot talk to the poor boy, or pass along any hints to him."

Severus looked at her sharply, an idea striking him as his brain picked apart what she'd just said. "So," he said, slowly, "the rules say we cannot talk to Harry, or pass along any hints to him. I don't suppose they talk about not discussing anything to do with the tasks with the annoying, reckless bookworm friends of the champions, do they?"

"Severus?" Minerva said, warily. Severus guessed it was the sudden smirk on his face that had her looking unnerved.

"I borrowed several books from the library, about dragons and the Tournament." He told her, smirk growing wider. "Perhaps I should give them to Miss Granger with the instructions to return them for me."

He waited cautiously for Minerva's reaction to his idea, and felt a smug stab of accomplishment when the Deputy Headmistress laughed, her lined face brightening slightly.

"Perhaps you should forget you have several bookmarks marking the chapters discussing nesting dragons and the first tasks," she said, and Severus raised an eyebrow, appreciation washing through him.

"Sometimes I believe you're wasted in Gryffindor," he said. Minerva laughed again, and the sound was undeniably pleased.

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Hermione's POV:

Returning from the hospital wing back to the Slytherin dorms, Hermione was met by an unpleasant surprise as she pulled back the hangings around Harry's bed.

"Harry dear," she said, her tone poison-sweet, "please enlighten me as to why there is a very venomous, very familiar, snake on my bed?"

"Ah, right," Harry said, sounding appropriately sheepish. The iridescent-silver serpent coiled lazily on the bed lifted its head, its emerald-green eyes opening to fix almost unnervingly on her own.

::Mistress has returned:: the reptile hissed, sounding as pleased as she assumed a snake was capable of sounding.

"Tom wanted to keep it," blurted out Harry, "I know it hurt you and stuff, but in the confusion when you fainted and then had some kind of fit and were bleeding everywhere, it kind of just disappeared and no one could find it, and then later I came down to the dorms to get changed and saw it on the bed with Tom... and that sounds wrong, I mean that Tom was sitting on the bed reading and the snake was around his shoulders. He insisted that since his adult counterpart apparently has a snake familiar now, he should get one too."

"And of course he wanted this particular one," Hermione grumbled. Then-- "So Voldemort got a snake?"

"Yeah," Harry confirmed, "I haven't seen it or anything, but apparently its huge and terrifying and called Nagi– something. He says it can swallow a human whole."
"Great. So now Tom and Voldemort have some sort of fucked up sibling rivalry going on." She muttered, disregarding the bit about swallowing people whole, other then to consider if it would be a good method for body disposal.

"Could be worse?" Harry offered. "Apophis really likes you– he keeps asking where you are. And he didn't try eating Iago or Sycorax when the cats came looking for you."

"Apophis?" Hermione asked, cursing the fact the bloody thing was already named– that meant she definitely wasn't getting rid of it any time soon.

"It's Greek, I think– means personification of evil, or something along those lines. Apparently in the myths Apophis appeared as a giant snake." Harry said.

"Does Tom ever come across a stereotype he doesn't try to fill?"

"What can I say?" A new voice slid smoothly into the conversation. "Stereotypes amuse me."

Hermione turned to Tom, who had just pulled off the Invisibility Cloak. His hair was slightly windswept, and he had an air of smugness about him that made her want to laugh. "You're in a good mood," she said, instead. Tom smirked and tossed something small in her direction. She caught it and immediately understood.

The small model dragon was a perfect replica of a Common Welsh Green except miniature, carved from stone and animated by magic. The charms animating the stone model had it acting incredibly lifelike, reminding her of the ones that animated portraits. Then it bit her finger, its sharp little fangs like the points of needles, and she let out a hiss of pain, immediately dropping it on the bed where it started to stalk across the emerald green sheets.

"Fierce little shit," she muttered, looking at the small dots of blood on her finger before putting it in her mouth and sucking the blood off. Harry pulled a face as he looked down at the animated miniature stone dragon.

"That doesn't give me a lot of confidence," he said, voice strained. His hands were trembling a bit as he reached out to poke it. It sent a puff of smoke and a few sparks in his direction in retaliation. "Did it just try to burn me alive?" He demanded.

"Let me edit my earlier words slightly." Hermione said dryly. "It's a vicious and bloodthirsty fierce little shit." Harry wilted beside her.

"I'm so doomed." He said miserably. Tom made a disapproving noise.

"What do you think I've been doing with all my spare time?" He drawled, arching an imperious eyebrow.

"Sleeping?" Harry provided unhelpfully.

"Try again."

"Thinking up of ways to torture– I mean, train me?"

"A worthy pastime, but don't flatter yourself thinking bothering you is all that I think about." Tom said, with a roll of his eyes. "In my spare time lately, amongst other things I've been working on perfecting these," he gestured at the animated stone dragon model. "They're as life-like now as I can possibly get them. Once you make yours bigger, there will be a few other spells you'll need to apply, but it should do its job nicely. It'll take practice, and there's a spell to shield yourself from
dragon fire I want you to learn, now that I've perfected a way to get the models to breathe fire, but with this as your secret weapon there's no possibility of you not succeeding in the Task."

"On one hand, you would not believe how relieved I am to hear you say that." Harry exhaled, looking very relieved. Tom raised an eyebrow again.

"Only on one hand?"

"Yeah, well, on the other hand– hell training." Harry said, shoulders slumping miserably again, the younger boy actually shuddering slightly.

Hermione laughed, and Tom gave Harry a particularly evil smirk that was filled with the sort of promise for great future suffering that had Harry shuddering all over again.

"Well, darling boy," Tom said, smirk widening, "there's no time like the present. And seeing as you have a replica of a dragon that can grow life-sized and breathe fire, it seems a shame not to utilise that resource for you to practice your dodging."

Hermione wasn't sure which was louder– Harry's protests or her laughter.

She waited until later, until they'd returned to Harry's dorm after going to the Room of Requirement so Tom could train Harry, to speak to the older boy. Harry had fallen asleep in his bed pretty much the moment they'd returned, exhausted from his aptly named 'hell training'. She and Tom were sitting at the foot of the bed, hangings drawn closed in case any of Harry's dorm-mates returned and silencing charms in place, and Tom raised a questioning eyebrow at her when she cleared her throat to speak. She paused slightly, thinking about how the best way to break the news about Fleur would be, then decided to just go with blunt.

"I want to fuck the blonde Champion. Would that be an issue for you?"

Tom actually snorted at her words. "Of course not. I'm not going to get petty about you not being suited for, nor desiring, hetero-normative, monogamous relationships." He said, looking annoyedly amused.

"Progressive vocabulary for the 'twenties boy." She noted. Tom gave a lazy shrug.

"The only thing I care about is the one simple fact that you are mine. I don't care how many people you fuck, or if they're male or female or not even fully human, and I certainly don't give a damn if you have feelings for any of your little conquests, because I know you will come back to me at the end of the day. For in the end, the only ones who really matter to you, the only ones you'll ever put first, are Harry and I."

"You are a frustrating, presumptuous arsehole." Hermione grumbled and Tom just smirked, crushed-violet eyes flashing in wicked challenge.

"Tell me I'm not right, then, darling."

"Unbelievably fucking annoying is what you are, Tom!" She retorted. She didn't even see Tom move then– she only felt the grip on her shirt, the impact as her back hit one of the bedposts, and the bar of Tom's arm across her throat.

"Humans," he said, tone conversational and like he wasn't currently half-strangling her, "are messy, complicated creatures, and my interactions with them generally leave me disgusted, at best. And most of them are so one-dimensional that I feel as if their very existence is a waste of space. There are a very limited number of people I view otherwise– you are one of them, Hermione Granger,
and I will never let you go."

His eyes, the irises now a bloody crimson and the pupils slit like a cat's, were burning with emotion as they looked down at her. Part of it was a familiar hunger, part of it possessive rage, and part of it was something she couldn't quite identify. This, Hermione thought breathlessly—literally breathlessly, actually—was one of those occasions where being aroused was highly inappropriate. She didn't really care. Right now, trapped against the wall, air supply cut off, Hermione looked through watering eyes into Tom's cat-like ruby ones and found herself almost overwhelmed with the urge to bite him, to dig her teeth in and make him bleed, mark him up and make him remember, always remember, that he was hers, was Harry's, as much as they were his.

She wasn't a victim in this. If she was afraid of Tom, if his insane possessiveness and propensity for violence and sadism had scared her, she would never have allowed herself to have gotten so close emotionally. Their relationship wasn't one that would work for everyone, not one that would work for most people, really; there were lines between them and broken bits, fragile edges and glass shards, but somehow it worked out okay. They weren't Harry; the sort of 'love' they shared was not a kind one. It knew no law, no pity, and crushed down remorselessly all that stops in its path.

Everything considered, Hermione knew the sort of man Tom was; she had known exactly what she was getting into when she opened herself up to him, opened her heart and let him carve a place into it. That was why she only relaxed in his chokehold, tilting her head back and looking up at him from under her eyelashes in blatant invitation as he strangled her against the bedpost.

Tom's eyes continued burning into hers and the corners of his mouth curved up as the pressure on her throat increased, his lips tugging up into a smirk as a now-familiar spark of sadism flashed in the crimson irises. The world faded at the edges, darkness surging inward until she felt her body go limp in his hold. Tom only let her breathe again just seconds before she would have passed out, too far gone to even notice at first her body has reflexively started gasping in oxygen again. It was while she was distracted, sucking in great big lungfuls of air, that he lifted her and effortlessly pivoted them both, giving her no chance to react before she ended up on her back, sprawled across the bedspread next to where Harry was fast asleep, still trying to calm her racing heartbeat and harsh panting.

Tom followed her down, his hands sliding under her skirt, yanking it down. He stripped her quickly and efficiently, mouth moving from her lips to her neck, worrying at the taut line of it as her head arched back and a raspy moan escaped her sore, no-doubt bruised, throat.

In another minute she was fully naked, her legs rising to clamp enthusiastically around his hips as he wasted no time in freeing himself from his trousers and then surging into her with a muffled snarl, sending them both up the bed several inches. Hermione clamped her arms and legs around the older boy, holding on. It was all she could do—between the perfect, hard thrusts and the consuming kisses, her mind was coming apart alarmingly fast.

All too soon, it felt, it was over. Tom climaxed only half a dozen thrusts after she did, raking lines down his back with her nails and clamping her teeth down into the meat of his shoulder as she did so, before he rolled off her, panting.

"Honestly," a sleepy Harry muttered, "you're worse then rabbits, the both of you. Now please shut up so I can go back to sleep."

Tom, predictably, rolled his eyes and Hermione just laughed, relaxing beside Harry. "Sorry." She said, even though she wasn't really. She was just glad to be together with her boys again. She wasn't sure how long she had before Tom would have to leave again, but she supposed the one
good thing about this whole godforsaken Tournament mess was that Tom had to train Harry– which meant he had to be at Hogwarts to do so.

She'd probably never admit it to Tom, not out loud anyway, but she did miss him when he was gone.

Harry's POV:

The time left before the First Task passed much too quickly, like time always did when you were dreading something. Harry felt progressively sicker as the date approached, no matter how much hell training Tom was putting him through. And Tom was– the older boy seemed very determined that Harry be prepared for what felt like anything, training him to the ground every second day (the other day was for all his schoolwork, because after the hours of training more often then not not Harry would pass out before even reaching his bed).

He never complained, though– not seriously, anyway. He fully intended on surviving the Tournament, thank you very much, and he was prepared to accept every scrap of help offered.

And thankfully, everybody else seemed to be aboard the helping Harry train– Snape had actually approached Hermione and handed her a stack of books, giving her a significant look as he did so before walking off. An examination of those books had revealed one to be a history of Triwizard Tournaments and the others to be about dragons, with bookmarks in place in the all the texts to mark the chapters detailing both first tasks through the ages and nesting dragons– Snape, not knowing they already knew what the Task was, had given him a hint without technically breaking the rules of the Tournament. Harry had been impressed with his cunning.

Of course, all the help in the world didn't change the fact he was fourteen years old and due to go up against an effing dragon, but he still appreciated it.

Before the First Task, however, had been an odd gathering called the 'Weighing of Wands'. Dumbledickhead had sent a Gryffindor in the year below them to fetch Harry for it during his potions class one afternoon and, after hearing the words 'Daily Prophet' 'interviews' and 'photos', Harry had instantly refused to move from his desk. Snape had looked amused enough he didn't try making Harry either.

"Tell Dumbledore I'm a minor, I can't be in the papers or have my photo taken or anything without my guardian's permission," Harry had told the Gryffindor boy– Creevey, he was pretty sure was his name– before sending him off to go tell the Headmaster exactly that.

"I'm not surprised they're trying to make the Champions pose for photographs and give interviews," Hermione muttered to him over their potion, a fierce scowl on her face. "Publicity for the Tournament will be paramount for the Ministry. A successful competition will bring it prestige and respect."

"Absolutely not," Harry said instantly, knowing exactly which direction her mind was going in. "We're not killing one of the Champions, or making sure they die in one of the Tasks, just to get revenge on the Ministry."

"You spoil all my fun," Hermione commented, dryly. Harry ignored the genuine disappointment he could see in her eyes at his stern refusal. "Fine. But I can't guarantee that our host from the summer..."
hasn't had the same idea." She added, very quietly so that nobody else could overhear. "It's an excellent way to undermine the current Ministry– and a perfect way to get Fudge sacked, or at least well on the way to being sacked."

"Well... shit." Harry said, alarmed and horribly dismayed at the thought. "That sucks. I like Fleur and Viktor, and Diggory is being a bit of an arse about the whole not believing I didn't enter my own name thing, but he is a good person. Do you think V- uh, our host might not kill any of them if I asked him nicely?"

"Harry, it's... well, you know who it is we're talking about. Asking nicely isn't going to get you anything or anywhere." Hermione said, looking horribly amused.

"You're awful." Harry said, despairingly.

The dismayed Creevey returned then, before he could continue bemoaning the lack of morals and ethics in those around him, the younger boy breathless and red-faced from exertion, and with a note from Dumbledore in hand.

Harry,
Don't fret my boy, as headmaster I am your ad litem guardian and I've granted permission. Young Colin will lead you to where you need to go.
– Dumbledore

Well, fuck that, Harry thought to himself, instantly tearing up the note, tossing the scraps of parchment in the fire burning under his cauldron and quite simply telling Creevey, "No. Tell him no." Beside him, Hermione was barely able to keep her mirth under control.

Of course, that mirth disappeared pretty quickly when Dumbledore himself came down to drag him out of the dungeons for the ceremony. The journalist covering the Weighing of Wands– Rita Skeeter– had tried latching onto his arm, saying something about private interviews, but Dumbledore had actually been less of a dick then usual and prevented her from dragging him from the room like she'd been trying.

That didn't mean the article she'd written wasn't all about him anyway and filled with horrifying quotes of things he'd never said ("Even if I did sometimes still cry about my parents I wouldn't have admitted it to her!"), much to Harry's annoyance and frustration, but at least Skeeter managed to mention the other three Champions too– and she had called Hermione a 'stunningly pretty Slytherin girl who, like Harry, is one of the top students in the school' when writing about how he'd 'found love at Hogwarts'. For that, he wasn't asking Tom to deal with the reporter for the other, far more embarrassing and much less flattering things she'd written.

Speaking of the other Champions, though, Harry had decided to finally introduce himself properly to Fleur Delacour after Ollivander had finished checking all their wands. He'd seen her a few times while Hermione was in the hospital wing, but he hadn't really spoken to her before.

Fleur Delacour was... well; Harry could see why Hermione liked her so much. Meeting the French witch properly for the first time, as her deep blue eyes swept him up and down he couldn't help but look past her schoolgirl exterior and see her for the powerful entity the part-Veela really was.

"'Arry Potter," she'd said, after she'd finished assessing him, offering her hand to be kissed and smiling a sharp, sharp smile that Harry knew hid behind it power and schemes and danger. "Eet eez a pleasure to meet you."

"You too," Harry had replied, polite but genuine– and it was a pleasure to meet Fleur, the French
part-Veela was utterly fascinating. Almost as if she'd read his thoughts, Fleur's smile had softened into something less... sharp and predatory, and Harry would almost have wondered if he'd imagined it if it wasn't for the glints of cold intelligence he could still see lurking in her distractingly beautiful eyes.

"Reckon she knows about the dragons?" he asked Hermione, later. "Fleur, I mean." He clarified. Hermione shrugged, her fingers trailing up and down his chest. They were both lying down in his bed, Harry in just a pair of boxers to sleep in, while Hermione wore one of her ridiculous traditional pureblood nightgowns.

"I'm not sure. I'm assuming so," she said, "If Snape knows about the Task then so will Maxime and Karkaroff, and I would honestly be shocked if they hadn't told their Champions."

"What if Madam Maxime didn't, though?" Harry asked, frowning. "I should tell Fleur. Maybe Diggory and Viktor too– it doesn't seem like it would be fair for some of us to know and others not to."

"If you want," Hermione easily acquiesced, honestly not seeming to care. "Just remember– the tournament is a competition, and you should always play to win. Plus those three actually signed up for the blasted thing, which means they signed up to play by all its stupid rules too. You didn't."

Harry had thought on her words and ended up deciding not to tell the boys, but he did go ahead in telling Fleur. Hermione was adamant about not getting 'attached', and Harry thought she might have even convinced herself that whatever it was she had going with Fleur was casual, but he'd never seen her talk about any of their classmates with the sort of bright hunger in her eyes as she did the French girl. Forming a good relationship with Fleur, Harry was convinced, would only ever be a positive thing for his future, because he had a feeling she would be around for it.

Fleur's face, when he did quietly pull her aside after spotting her leaving the Great Hall about a week and a half before the First Task, had been shocked. "I wasn't sure if you knew or not," he shrugged, smiling sort of awkwardly up at her, "but you're Hermione's friend. That means you're my friend, too– or you will be," he tried to explain, speaking with more confidence then he actually felt. Her deep blue eyes widened at his words, shock briefly visible when he claimed they were friends, or would be anyway, before the young woman hid it. "I think we could be friends," he finished, "I like you– I think you're clever and I think you're kind; Hermione explained the meanings behind those flowers you sent her to me. And letting my future friend go face a dragon without some kind of warning would be a pretty lousy thing for me to do."

Fleur stared at him for a long, long moment, before her full, rosy lips curved into a genuine smile, her eyes, usually like two chips of ice, softening. "Merci beaucoup, 'Arry." She said, "I will not forget zis, my friend."

And then she'd leaned forwards and kissed his cheek, and Harry couldn't deny being a little stunned as she gracefully walked away, her long silver hair rippling like a liquid wave of moonlight down her back.

Hermione, when he told her later, just laughed.

The day before the First Task, though, there was certainly no laughter. Hermione never said anything about being afraid, but she clung to him like some sort of limpet, overly possessive and clingy and needy in a way she usually wasn't. Harry had actually been surprised by how much things hadn't changed since they'd added sex to their relationship– with how Hermione and Tom were always going at it, he'd sort of expected Hermione to start being the same with him. He'd also sort of expected Tom to start pushing for more intimacy between the two of them, which Harry
didn't think he was exactly ready for yet. He'd been pleasantly surprised, instead, when things had actually barely changed.

Tom was mostly respectful of the wordless boundaries between them, though he wouldn't be Tom if he didn't push occasionally, and Hermione tended to take lead from Harry for being physical; sometimes they had sex, sometimes they just made out... either way, though, Harry had quickly realised that with Hermione bites were constant. Even ones that didn't actually break skin, that only bruised, spoke to him with every shift of breath or muscle. He sometimes found himself rolling up his sleeves when no one else was around to look at them, lines of purple flowers with blue stems running under his skin.

The night before the First Task, though, Hermione took her usual, er, *quirk* to a whole new level and seemed to be trying to leave imprints of her teeth on every inch of his skin, fiercely possessive and protective and panicked. She was barely in control as they rocked together in his bed, her eyes wild and her grip frantic and unforgiving. He hurt pretty much everywhere after, the quick red of bruises that later turned purple and blue, the hard sting of teeth, the raised welts left by her nails... after, they curled up together in the soft darkness of his dormitory-- and thank Salazar for silencing charms, they're an absolute gift from the gods-- and she muffled half-sobs she determinedly refused to let escape her into the curve of his neck.

Tom visited much later, when Hermione had fallen into an exhausted sleep. It was hours past midnight but Harry was too stressed to drift off, and he was grateful for the presence of the older boy.

"You'll be offered the selection first," Tom said, speaking quietly so not to wake the girl sleeping beside him-- her sleep was already restless enough. "The bag containing the models of the dragons has been charmed so to ensure that the first person will be pulling out the Common Welsh Green-- out of all the dragons, it will be the easiest. It'll also mean that you'll be the second to compete-- whoever draws the Swedish Short-Snout will be first, the Chinese Fireball third and the Hungarian Horntail last."

Harry nodded silently, not really trusting his voice enough to speak. Tom reached out, trailing his long, slender fingers along the curve of his jaw. "You're going to be fine." He said, quietly. "Listen; from the time I've known you, and what I've heard about from before we met, I have come to the undeniable conclusion that you have great luck on your side, Harry. Both forms of it, actually-- the Bad Luck to get into the situations you do, and then the Good Luck to get out of them relatively unscathed. You are going to be absolutely fine."

"Sooner or later," Harry couldn't help but whisper, looking away from Tom, "all luck comes to an end." Tom's fingers went from lightly tracing along the line of his jaw to gripping it tight, forcefully yanking Harry's head up so he was forced to meet the older boy's eyes.

"Harry," Tom said calmly, grey-violet eyes boring straight into his own green ones, "do you trust me?"

Harry sucked in a startled breath that, embarrassingly enough, got caught in his throat. For a moment his mind had gone completely blank in shock at the question and all he could do was just stare at Tom.

Harry liked to think that, unlike nearly everyone else, he knew exactly what Tom was, what the older boy was capable of. He was one of the few able to see through the consummate ability both Tom and Voldemort possessed that allowed them both to pass themselves off as relatively normal, was capable of seeing behind the façade, the brutal, brilliant disguise, to where in actuality beat the cold hearts of ruthless, glacial predators. Harry knew the horrors of which Tom was capable, as
well as the basic human emotions that the older boy was not. Tom was a monster. It was a fact. And despite this, Harry loved Tom. He really, truly did. But did he trust him?

"I do." And god, he must be insane, because, "I really do."

Tom's irises flashed bloody crimson for a blink, and Harry could see the lines of pride and satisfaction in Tom's expression. The older boy was unquestionably pleased and delighted by Harry's response, and Tom couldn't help but wonder if he was going to regret placing his trust in the teenage counterpart of Dark Lord Voldemort. And he was pretty sure that the answer to that was 'yes; yes you fucking are you fucking, dunderheaded, brainless fool' but Merlin help him, he trusted Tom anyway.

"I will keep you alive." Tom said, his voice low and smooth, even as his eyes burned into Harry's. "I will not let you be hurt."

Harry exhaled shakily, and he couldn't deny that some of the knots of tension inside him had started to loosen. Seeming to read that on his face, Tom's mouth curved into a very smug looking smirk.

"Go to sleep, Harry." He practically ordered, and Harry was finally calm enough to be able to do what he said and drift off.

He woke early on the day of the First Task to an atmosphere of great tension and excitement in the school. Lessons were to stop at midday, giving all the students time to get down to the dragons' enclosure—though, of course, they didn't yet know what they would find there.

Harry felt oddly separate from everyone around him, even Hermione, currently a terrifying presence at his side who was basically snapping and snarling at anyone who got too close like a particularly vicious guard dog.

Despite Tom managing to calm him down last night, this morning Harry existed in a state of nervousness so advanced that he wondered whether he might not just lose his head when they tried to lead him out to his dragon and start trying to curse everyone in sight. Tom would probably appreciate that.

Time was behaving in a more peculiar fashion than ever that day, though, rushing past in great dollops, so that one moment he seemed to be sitting down in his first lesson, History of Magic, and the next, walking into lunch... and then (where had the morning gone? The last of the dragon-free hours?) McGonagall was hurrying over to him in the Great Hall.

Lots of people were watching. Hermione was practically stone at his side— if stone had the ability to practically vibrate from tension, or spit pure hate from its eyes, that is.

"Mr. Potter, the champions have to come down onto the grounds now... You have to get ready for your first task." The Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts said.

"Okay." whispered Harry, standing up, his fork falling out of his limp hand and onto his plate with a loud clatter.

"I'll walk with you." Hermione said. McGonagall opened her mouth, and Harry could already see she was about to refuse them, when she then hesitated. After a moment, the Transfiguration professor let out a low sigh and then nodded.

"Alright, Miss Granger," she said, "but only Champions are allowed in the tent."
"Fine." Hermione said coolly. Harry was beyond grateful for her hand slipping into his, squeezing his numb fingers gently.

"Let's go." McGonagall said briskly.

"Yeah," said Harry in a voice that was most unlike his own. The three of them left the Great Hall with McGonagall. The older woman didn't seem herself either; in fact, she looked nearly as anxious as Harry felt as she walked them down the stone steps and out into the cold November afternoon.

"Now, don't panic," McGonagall said, "just keep a cool head... We've got wizards standing by to control the situation if it gets out of hand... The main thing is just to do your best, and nobody will think any the worse of you... Are you all right, Mr. Potter?"

"Yes," Harry heard himself say. "Yes, I'm fine."

McGonagall was leading them toward the edge of the forest where a tent had been erected, its entrance facing them. Harry couldn't see any dragons, but that didn't change the fact that he could smell sulfur, the stink of it heavy and tainted in the air.

"You're to go in here with the other champions," said McGonagall, in a rather shaky sort of voice, "and wait for your turn, Mr. Potter. Mr. Bagman is in there... he'll be telling you the– the procedure... Good luck."

"Thanks," said Harry, in a flat, distant voice.

"You'll have to say goodbye before going in," McGonagall added quietly, then the older woman left them at the entrance of the tent, giving them a few moments of privacy.

"You'll be fine. Just stay calm out there and you'll be fine." Hermione said, eyes fierce, before she yanked him forwards into a hard kiss, their lips and tongues sliding together until he was dizzy with it. When they broke apart Harry had to gasp for air, having forgotten to breathe. Hermione smirked at him fiercely, more teeth than lips, but that was fine.

"I love you," he said, a bit spontaneously but wanting her to know, just in case everything did end up going to hell. Her eyes narrowed dangerously.

"If you dare die today, Harry Potter, I will fucking kill you, I swear to Merlin." She threatened darkly, before giving him one last kiss then giving his shoulder a small shove towards the tent.

Harry obediently followed the silent instruction his best friend couldn't quite bring herself to say and went inside.

The other champions were already there. Fleur was sitting in a corner on a low wooden stool. She didn't look nearly as composed as usual, but rather pale and clammy. Viktor's expression looked even surlier than it usually did, which Harry supposed was his way of showing nerves. Cedric Diggory was pacing anxiously. When Harry entered, Fleur gave him a small smile, which Harry returned, feeling the muscles in his face working rather hard, as though they had forgotten how to do it, and Viktor nodded at him. Diggory didn't seem to notice his entrance.

"Harry! Good-o!" said Bagman happily, looking around at him. "Come in, come in, make yourself at home!" Bagman looked somehow like a slightly overblown cartoon figure, standing amid all the pale-faced champions. He was wearing his old Wasp robes again.

Barty, polyjuiced as his father, was also present and dressed in a very business-like set of robes. He was holding a small sack of purple silk and he gave Harry a quick wink when nobody was looking,
On the thin, stern face of Bartemius Crouch Senior the expression was so out of place Harry almost laughed.

"Well, now we're all here— time to fill you in!" said Bagman brightly. "When the audience has assembled, Mr. Crouch here is going to be offering each of you this bag" – he gestured to the purple sack which Barty obligingly lifted slightly– "from which you will each select a small model of the thing you are about to face! There are different— er— varieties, you see. And I have to tell you something else too... ah, yes... your task is to collect the golden egg!"

Harry glanced around. Diggory had nodded once, to show that he understood Bagman's words; he looked slightly green now. Fleur and Viktor hadn't reacted at all. Perhaps they thought they might be sick if they opened their mouths; that was certainly how Harry felt. But they, at least, had volunteered for this...

In what felt like no time at all, hundreds upon hundreds of pairs of feet could be heard passing the tent, their owners talking excitedly, laughing, joking... Harry felt so separate from the crowd in that moment that it was as though they were a different species. And then— it seemed like about a second later to Harry— the disguised Barty was opening the neck of the purple silk sack.

"Youngest first," he said in Crouch Senior's hoarse voice, offering it in Harry's direction. Harry bit back the brief flash of annoyance at the words– he remembered Tom instructing him that he would be selecting first— and dipped his hand into the silk bag, pulling out the very familiar miniature replica of a Common Welsh Green dragon, the animated model carved from stone, painted jade-green and wearing the number two around its neck. It stretched its small stone wings as he looked down at it, and bared its minuscule fangs. Small sparks escaped its tiny jaws and Harry felt a molten panic inside him.

"Ladies next," Barty said, offering the bag to Fleur. She put a shaking hand inside the bag and drew out the silvery-blue model of the Swedish Short-Snout. It had the number one around its neck.

Diggory gestured for Viktor to go next, and when the Bulgarian pulled out the tiny, fierce Hungarian Horntail with the four around its neck Harry winced in sympathy for him. Viktor didn't even blink, making Harry suspect he'd had a fairly good idea already about what they were facing, and just sat back down and stared at the ground. Diggory, last to pick, pulled out the remaining scarlet Chinese Fireball with the three around its neck.

"Well, there you are!" said Bagman. "You have each pulled out the dragon you will face, and the numbers refer to the order in which you are to take on the dragons, do you see? Now, I'm going to have to leave you in a moment, because I'm commentating. Miss Delacour, you're first, just go out into the enclosure when you hear a whistle, all right? Now... Harry, could I have a quick word? Outside?"

"Er... yes," said Harry blankly, not missing how Barty's eyes sharpened. He got up and walked out of the tent with Bagman, who led him a short distance away, into the trees, and then turned to him with a fatherly expression on his face. Unseen to Bagman, Harry noticed Barty had followed them, and was watching their interaction with sharp eyes, wand in hand. Harry was a little flattered by the protection, but mostly just confused by Bagman.

"Feeling all right, Harry?" the round-faced man asked, "Anything I can get you?"

"What?" said Harry, confused. "I– no, nothing."

"Got a plan?" said Bagman, lowering his voice conspiratorially. "Because I don't mind sharing a few pointers, if you'd like them, you know. I mean," Bagman continued, lowering his voice still
further, "you're the underdog here, Harry... Anything I can do to help..."

"No," said Harry so quickly he knew he had sounded rude, "no– I– I know what I'm going to do, thanks."

"Nobody would know, Harry," said Bagman, winking at him.

"No, I'm fine," said Harry, wondering why he kept telling people this, and wondering whether he had ever been less fine. Alright, he could think of a few occasions, but this was still pretty out there. "I've got a plan worked out, I–"

A whistle had blown somewhere.

"Good lord, I've got to run!" said Bagman in alarm, and he hurried off.

Harry walked back to the tent and saw Fleur emerging from it, paler than ever. Harry tried to wish her luck as she walked past, head held high and hand clutching her wand, but all that came out of his mouth was a sort of hoarse grunt. Fleur, almost white and trembling from head to foot, looked like she understood because she managed a weak sort of smile back.

Harry went back inside to Viktor and Diggory. Viktor was still staring at the ground and Diggory was pacing around and around the tent again. Seconds later, they heard the roar of the crowd, which meant Fleur had entered the enclosure and was now face-to-face with the living counterpart of her model.

It was worse than Harry could ever have imagined, sitting there and listening. The crowd screamed, yelled and gasped like a single many-headed entity, as Fleur did whatever she was doing to get past the Swedish Short-Snout.

And Bagman's commentary made everything much, much worse... Horrible pictures formed in Harry's mind as he heard Bagman shouting gleefully. "Oh... nearly! Careful now... good lord, I thought she'd had it then!"

Ten minutes later, Harry heard the deafening roar of the crowd that could mean only one thing: Fleur had gotten past her dragon and captured the golden egg. Relief flooded him, momentarily drowning out his panic.

"Very good indeed!" Bagman was shouting. "And now the marks from the judges!" But he didn't shout out the marks; Harry supposed the judges were holding them up and showing them to the crowd. The panic returned as he realised then it would be his turn any moment now. He stood up, noticing dimly that his legs seemed to be made of marshmallow. It would be his turn any moment.

"One down, three to go!" Bagman yelled and then he heard the whistle blow. It sounded like a death sentence, as did Bagman's accompanying, "Mr. Potter, if you please!"

Harry walked out through the entrance of the tent, the panic rising up into a crescendo inside him. And then he was walking past the trees, through a gap in the enclosure fence.

He saw everything in front of him as though it was a very highly colored dream. He seemed to be looking at everything around him through some sort of shimmering, transparent barrier, like a heat haze, which made the enclosure and the hundreds of faces staring down at him from the magicked up stands swim strangely... not that he really noticed them all, not in the face of the fucking dragon at the other end of the enclosure, crouched low over her clutch of eggs and her wings half-furled.

Harry felt lightheaded looking at her. The Welsh Green was wildness and ferocity made blood and
flesh and jade-green scales, with yellow fangs and stinking, sulfuric breath, and in her eyes it was like he could see the red fires of Hell burning. Fully grown and vicious, open-fanged mouth nearly fifty feet above the ground on her outstretched neck, the scaled beast was already growling at him, a low, rumbling snarl of spring-coiled menace, the sort of growl that started in the back of one throat and ended up in everyone else's in the vicinity. Her long tail, tipped by several dangerous looking barbs, thrashed threateningly, leaving yard-long gouge marks in the hard ground.

The crowd was making a great deal of noise, but whether friendly or not, Harry didn't know or care. It was time to do what he had to do, to focus his mind, entirely and absolutely, upon the thing that was his only chance— the Plan that had been thought up by much cleverer minds then him."

"Accio animated stone dragon model," he said, keeping his voice as calm and even as possible. The dragon model flew from the entrance of the tent, probably confusing Viktor and Diggory, and he easily caught it then dropped it on the ground and pointed his wand at it.

He barely remembered speaking the spells he'd practiced over and over and over under Tom's harsh eye and unforgiving teaching methods, but he felt the magic flow through him and on the ground the animated stone dragon model was twisting and growing, stone-carved scales hardening to be impervious to dragon fire and blunt-force damage, the fire runes carved into the roof of its mouth strengthening and multiplying so a steady, never-ending stream of dark smoke escaped its jaws. Its carved lips pulled back in a twisted snarl that revealed chiseled stone fangs, newly sharpened, charmed unbreakable and never-blunting, and stone claws, each over half a foot long, scraped against the hard floor of the enclosure as the animated stone model dragon, now even bigger then the real Welsh Green, stood and stretched. Then it unfurled its wings, now wider then those of a small airplane and large enough to block out Harry's sun as it arched them above its head, raised its head to the heavens and roared.

Despite having seen the animated stone dragon countless times before, as Harry applied the last charm– this one for aggression– he couldn't help actually been frightened by his own creation. Carefully stepping away from it, he raised his wand again. "Accio my broom!" he breathed, letting the much friendlier magic wash over him.

Harry waited with baited breath, because Salazar almighty, he did not want to be on the ground when the two dragons started duking it out... And then he heard it, speeding through the air behind him; he turned and saw his Firebolt hurtling around the edge of the woods, soaring into the enclosure, and stopping dead in midair beside him, waiting for him to mount. The crowd was making even more noise... Bagman was shouting something... but Harry's ears were not working properly anymore... listening wasn't important...

He swung his leg over the broom and kicked off from the ground. And a second later, something miraculous happened....

As he soared upward, as the wind rushed through his hair, as the crowd's faces became mere flesh-colored pinpricks below, and the Welsh Green shrunk to the size of a dog, he realized that he had left not only the ground behind, but also his fear... He was back where he belonged....

This was just another Quidditch match, that was all... just another Quidditch match, and the Welsh Green was just another ugly opposing team.

He looked down at the clutch of eggs and spotted the gold one, gleaming against its cement-colored fellows, residing safely between the dragon's front legs. "Okay," Harry told himself, "diversionary tactics... let's go..."

He pointed his wand at his animated stone dragon and spoke, giving his creation its first– and
"Impetus!" Attack.

The animated stone dragon roared to the skies again, this time in challenge, and lunged across the enclosure. The Welsh Green roared back, leaping forwards to meet the animated stone dragon halfway across the rapidly closing gap between them, the two beasts colliding together with a tremendous crashing sound. It was actually a terrifying sight, the two mammoth creatures tearing viciously into each other. Fire spilled freely from both jaws, heating up the air to the point where Harry was sweating through his robes and he was relieved by Tom's foresight to get him to charm the animated stone dragon impervious to the stuff.

Trying to tune out the sound of the screaming dragons below, Harry carefully applied a sequence of spells to hide him and his broom from sight, as well as disguising his scent and heat signature.

Satisfied that he was as invisible to the Welsh Green as he was going to get, Harry turned his focus back to the battle between the dragons, living and magically animated, and winced. Ruby splatters and chipped stone each freely littered the ground which was now scorched black, parts of the hard-packed earth smoking slightly. The Welsh Green currently had her jaws locked futilely around the throat of his animated dragon but her fangs were unable to chip through the stone and, as he watched, the animated dragon twisted out of her grip by ripping into her more vulnerable stomach with its magically enforced and sharpened stone-claws, sending more red splashing freely onto the ground and causing the Welsh Green to release it, backing off slightly as she screamed in pain and rage.

Deeming her very thoroughly distracted, especially as the stone dragon lunged for her again, Harry sped toward the ground as fast as he could go, toward the unprotected eggs – his heart was racing, breath trapped in his throat he approached quickly, ten feet away, five feet, three – he had taken his hands off his Firebolt – he had seized the fucking egg, and the precious metal was searing hot to touch, enough to almost make him let go automatically except he couldn't, he wouldn't – a bestial scream of utter rage, a sheet of fire launched in his direction as the Welsh Green spun towards the threat to her nest, hell-eyes burning with pure hatred – flying without being able to use either hand, directing his speeding broom with his knees as the hand not securing the egg to him whipped his wand in the direction of the flames, deflecting the wall of heat from him – locking his ankles together and rolling on his broom in the air, still with no hands, to avoid the barbed tail that cut through the air where his head had been just moments before – and then finally his animated stone dragon had leapt on the unprotected back of the distracted Welsh Green, jaws locking around the back of her neck–

As the Welsh Green was forced to abandon attacking him in order to save herself from getting her spine severed, Harry was able to stash his wand in his sleeve and grab onto the shaft of his broom, rolling back so he was upright again and soaring out over the stands, heavy egg still safely under his arm, and it was suddenly as though somebody had just turned the background volume back up and he became properly aware of the noise of the crowd, which was screaming and applauding as loudly as the Irish supporters at the World Cup.

"Look at that!" Bagman was yelling. "Will you look at that! Have you ever seen anything like that before in your lives!? Well, this is certainly going to shorten the odds on Mr. Potter!"

Harry flew back down to the entrance of the tent and landed with a stumble, nearly falling over as he stepped off his broom. Dragon keepers were rushing into the enclosure and Harry hastily dropped his broom so he could pull out his wand. He pointed the stick of holly at his animated stone dragon, whose jaws were still locked around the neck of the Welsh Green whose struggles to
free herself had weakened exponentially and who was making a horrible noise, a yowling, screeching scream, and despite the lack of air that wanted to make its way to his lungs, he still managed to pant, "Prohibere! Somnum! Finite incantatum!"

The animated stone dragon stopped moving, and the Welsh Green was able to free herself as the magic animating it ended, sending it shrinking, shrinking, until Harry wasn't even able to see it anymore.

A majority of the Welsh Green's jade-colored scales, especially the ones around her throat and neck, were now stained red, and she was snapping and snarling like a rabid beast at anything that moved as she backed away to her nest. Harry felt a bit bad for her as he saw how torn the wings she raised over head threateningly were as she crouched protectively over her eggs. Then he remembered her trying to burn him alive and either decapitate or skewer him with her tail and felt a lot less sorry.

Harry barely had time, though, to process that he had just not only survived the First Task but actually completed it too, when McGonagall and Snape were suddenly there, the two apparently having rushed over to meet him.

"My word, Mr. Potter," McGonagall said, looking faint, "that was truly extraordinary flying. And that spell-work..."

"Um, the stone dragon was already animated. We pulled the models out of a bag," Harry explained weakly, "it tried to bite me and huffed out a tiny flame, which made me think if I made it bigger it could be a pretty good distraction."

"You also made it impervious to dragon fire, gave it sharp claws and fangs, heightened the aggression of the animation charms, got it to breathe fire and set it to attack the real dragon." Snape drawled.

"The fire wasn't-- there were already fire runes on the roof of its mouth." Harry mumbled, "I recognized them-- Hermione likes those ones. She's shown me how to strengthen runes before, so..." he shrugged awkwardly, remembering the cover-story Hermione and Tom had drilled into him. McGonagall snorted, which made him look at her in shock.

"It was exceptional magic, Mr. Potter," she said crisply, "don't let anyone tell you otherwise. Now go get checked out by Madam Pomfrey in the first aid tent then reassure Miss Granger you're alive and unharmed."

She gave him a gentle nudge towards a second tent he hadn't noticed before and, egg in one hand, broom in the other and still panting quietly, Harry walked over to it. Madam Pomfrey was standing at the mouth, looking worried.

"Dragons!" she said, in a disgusted tone, pulling him inside. "Last year Dementors, this year dragons, what are they going to bring into this school next? You're very lucky you escaped injury, but I've still got two bloody students to go!" Harry was pretty sure that last part wasn't meant for his ears, as she'd muttered it darkly as she fetched something which she then pressed against his mouth. "Here, drink this-- it'll calm you down." She ordered and Harry obediently swallowed the calming draught, cheeks flushed from more then just exertion at her tipping it into his mouth for him. Madam Pomfrey nodded her satisfaction, not seeming to notice his embarrassment. "Now, just sit quietly for a minute-- sit! And then you can go and get your score."

Harry didn't want to sit still; he got to his feet, wanting to see what was going on outside, but before he'd reached the mouth of the tent a very familiar someone had come darting inside.
Harry dropped both the egg and his broom, throwing his arms around Hermione and hugging her tight, and then they were kissing, kissing, kissing, all tongue and teeth, his best friend clinging to him like she was never going to risk letting him go.

"How do you feel?" she demanded, between frantic, furious, adrenaline-filled kisses.

"Like my bruises have bruises," he panted.

"You were fucking amazing, Harry," she growled against his mouth, before pulling away, an expression of great reluctance on her face. "They'll be putting up your scores," she said. Harry nodded, bending to pick up the golden egg and his broom again, and feeling more elated than he would have believed possible an hour ago, Harry ducked out of the tent, Hermione by his side, talking fast.

"Fleur was impressive, used this sort of charm that put her dragon in some sort of trance— she probably would have gotten full marks, except then it snored, sending out a great jet of flame and her skirt caught fire. She put it out easily enough. You were much more remarkable, though— I don't know how much of the dragon fighting you saw, but it was incredible to watch, and your flying was amazing— though I'm sure Tom will be having words later about your disillusionment charm failing, and Christ, Harry, I thought I was going to have a heart attack when you did that roll; no hands, what the fuck were you thinking?— but all that Quidditch had to come in handy at some point, I suppose."

When they reached the edge of the enclosure, now that the Welsh Green had been taken away Harry could see where the five judges were sitting— right at the other end, in raised seats draped in gold.

"It's marks out of ten from each one," Hermione told him quietly, and Harry squinted up the field and saw the first judge— Madame Maxime— raise her wand in the air. What looked like a long silver ribbon shot out of it, which twisted itself into a large figure nine. The polyjuiced Barty came next, and he also shot a number nine into the air. Then, Dumbledore. He too put up a nine. The crowd was cheering harder than ever. Ludo Bagman— ten.

"Ten?" said Harry in disbelief. "What's he playing at?"

And now Karkaroff raised his wand. He paused for a moment, scowled darkly, and then a number shot out of his wand too— eight.

"Couldn't risk giving you a lower score," Hermione commented, amused. She then grinned at him, fierce and triumphant and obviously pleased as anything. "You're winning— the other champions will have to do something pretty fucking incredible to top that." She said smugly. "Now come on, I think you're supposed to wait inside the first aid tent, but we can watch from Krum and Diggory from the front of it."

Harry followed her without argument, adrenaline still burning in his veins and a grin on his face he knew looked stupid as anything but he couldn't help. Madam Pomfrey didn't try making him go wait inside, but he ducked in to put down his broom and the egg, which he found himself oddly reluctant to leave, before going back out. Hermione followed, obviously not ready to let him out of her eyesight yet.

Diggory was first out of the remaining two Champions, up against the Fireball, a red dragon with an odd fringe of fine gold spikes around her face who kept shooting mushroom-shaped fire clouds into the air. While creating a diversion was a sound strategy— which Harry should know— and a clever one to think up on the spot, seeing as he hadn't had a chance to prepare, and the
transfiguration itself flawless, turning one of the boulders into a large dog, the Hufflepuff didn't account for the possibility of the Chinese Fireball's level of intelligence. They were known to be one of the smartest dragon breeds out there, as well as both very quick to suss out threats to their nests and intelligent enough disregard that which was not a threat. Diggory got the egg but Harry hoped that Madame Pomfrey could repair the damage done to the other Seeker's face— he knew the girls of Hogwarts would be very unhappy if the older boy was permanently disfigured.

Viktor, who was last, did well against the Hungarian Horntail too. The Horntail herself was terrifying; a gigantic black beast, more lizard-like then either of the other two dragons Harry had seen, with evil-looking yellow eyes and a tail that had vicious looking long bronze-coloured spikes protruding every few inches. Viktor got a direct hit to her eyes with a conjunctivitis curse that sent the dragon trampling around in agony, thoroughly distracted from the Bulgarian Champion. Viktor might have lost points when the Horntail ended up squashing a bunch of the real eggs, which they were apparently not supposed to damage, not that any of the Champions had actually been told that, but upon noticing the eggs being squashed in the first place, the Durmstrang boy had put up a shield to protect them out of pure kindness, which had earned him back any points he might have lost because of the others that had been crushed.

When, after Krum had been given his scores— Karkaroff gave him a ten— and Harry realised he was in first place, he turned and gaped at Hermione. She looked very satisfied with herself, and like she was about to start preening.

"I'm winning," he said in disbelief.

"Of course," Hermione said, voice almost affronted, "if you're going to compete in this, then you're not going to lose. Tom and I won't allow it."

Harry laughed, thrilled and breathless, and when McGonagall appeared again to usher him back to the tent— apparently Bagman wanted a word— he went without complaint, even though he had to leave Hermione behind. She looked very annoyed about it, but didn't kick up a fuss.

Somehow, the tent looked quite different now: friendly and welcoming. Fleur, Viktor, and Diggory were all already in there. One side of Diggory's face was covered in a thick orange paste, which was presumably mending his burn. To Harry's surprise, Diggory grinned at him when he saw him.

"Good one, Harry."

"Thanks," he said, after a moment of shock, "you as well. And you too, Viktor, Fleur; you were all incredible."

"Merci," Fleur said, with a tired smile. Viktor nodded stoically, but his mouth looked like the corners were turned up, which Harry took to be a full-blown grin from the stoic older boy.

"Well done, all of you!" said Bagman, bouncing into the tent and looking as delighted as though he personally had just got past a dragon. "Now, just a quick few words. You've got a nice long break before the Second Task, which will take place at half past nine on the morning of February the twenty-fourth— but we're giving you something to think about in the meantime! If you look down at those golden eggs you're all holding, you will see that they open... see the hinges there? You need to solve the clue inside the egg— because it will tell you what the Second Task is, and enable you to prepare for it! All clear? Sure? Well, off you go, then!"

Pleased that he wouldn't have to worry about a swim in the Black Lake for a while yet, Harry left the tent and rejoined Hermione, and then his fellow Slytherins were running over, Daphne, Tracey and Blaise all hugging him while Blaise, Draco, Theo, Vince and Greg were all grinning and
cheering and kept clapping him on the back, and even Pansy Parkinson, Millicent Bulstrode and Lilyan Moon, the other Slytherins in their year level who he didn't usually have much to do with, were all beaming proudly at him.

Harry felt amazing, and all worries and fears were put out of his mind as his fellow Slytherins dragged him back to the dungeons to celebrate.

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Hermione's POV:

For Hermione, despite the complicated layers of it all when it came to it, the whole situation with the First Task, with the Tournament in general actually, was very black and white to her. Either Harry would succeed in the Tasks, and after they would celebrate, or something would go horribly wrong and she would salt the earth with the bones of anyone and everyone even remotely responsible—starting with Dumbledore.

Knowing that, knowing what she'd do should the unthinkable happen, didn't detract from the stress of it. For weeks now she'd been borrowing Daphne's make-up so as to hide the shadows under her eyes; sleep had been an evasive, interrupted thing, and it showed in the pale arcs of her cheekbones, the hollows under her collarbone. When she did sleep, she dreamed—and they were never nice dreams. It had been a while since she'd suffered from nightmares as horrible and persistent, and she fully blamed the stress of the Tournament for the nights, more and more frequent now, where she woke up with lips bloody from biting back screams.

And all of that sleeplessness, that stress, had culminated to this moment, in which she was utterly helpless. Watching Fleur face the dragon had been difficult enough, though the blonde witch had done amazingly and Hermione was thrilled for the French girl, understanding what it meant to the part-Veela to prove that she wasn't getting by on her otherworldly beauty alone.

But Fleur was just a fling, of sorts—Harry was hers, he was part of her; all the very best parts. She'd said before that if he ever died she would burn in the flames she used to burn whoever was responsible to the ground, and she meant it.

When Hermione got her first sight of the great dragon standing at the opposite side of the enclosure that Harry had to face, her breath caught in her throat, heart stuttering then speeding up at the sight of the apex predator before her. When Harry entered the enclosure, she couldn't help but think how small the fourteen-year-old boy was, how pale, but Harry's face had hardened and she could see the determination in the line of his shoulders as he stared at the Welsh Green. She was so fucking proud of him. That didn't mean, of course, that her heart didn't almost stop multiple times as she watched Harry outfly a fucking dragon, and her sense of relief when the First Task was finally over was nearly without measure.

The Slytherins celebrated for hours that afternoon and into the evening, the assorted rich pureblood brats amongst her housemates having sent off requests to different catering companies which has resulted in their common room overflowing with a variety of delivered food of exceptional quality. Some of the upper years had smuggled in alcohol too, much to her delight, and Hermione had gladly drunk what was probably more then her fair share of the stuff, but her nerves were still utterly shattered and nobody had tried to stop her.

She was stumbling a bit as she and Harry made their way back to his dorm room, and she wasn't exactly surprised to see Tom waiting when they fell onto Harry's bed together, tangled in each
other's limbs as they traded hungry kisses.

"You were magnificent," Tom murmured, eyes gleaming ruby as they look hungrily at Harry. Rolling back to give Tom room to reassure himself of Harry's safety, much like she had done when the Task was over, Hermione gasped slightly as Harry, who hadn't actually drunk anything, took the initiative for once with the older boy and seized Tom by the shoulders of his robes, pushing him down so he was sprawled across the bed then crawling on top of him so he was straddling him. Heat flared in her lower abdomen as she watched the two boys kiss, and then Tom flipped them so he was on top, his smile sharp and almost feral as he looked down at the younger boy. Then, with a murmured word, Tom made both their clothes just disappear.

Harry instantly froze when the barriers between the two of them had been magicked to nothingness. The younger boy looked much smaller under Tom, waifish all around; thin arms, accentuated collarbones, light dusting of hair on his chest. Delicate wasn't exactly the right word to describe him, but beneath the older boy he did look oddly breakable. The long lines of muscle on Tom's body curved and flexed with fluid grace as he shifted, purposefully grinding against the frozen Harry where they were both hard and exposed.

Hermione's mouth watered as silence hung like a taut string between her lovers; seconds that seemed to stretch to an eternity as she watched with baited breath, waiting to see what Harry would do. Then, with the suddenness of a wire snapping in two, Harry arched up to meet Tom, dragging the older boy down into a searing kiss that left her breathless and aching just to watch.

Apparently satisfied that Harry wasn't going to freak out and run, Hermione watched as Tom started to explore Harry's upper body with his hands, touching the younger boy everywhere; stomach, chest, arms, sides, waist, hips. Every inch of skin. Beneath him, Harry was making the most delicious noises.

"I really don't think there's going to be an exam later," he gasped as he arched eagerly under Tom's touch.

"I prefer to be as thorough as possible," Tom replied smoothly, before pressing his lips against the hollow of Harry's throat, then sliding them down lower to nip at his collarbone before laving over the pale skin with his tongue. Harry moaned, hips twitching, hands trembling where they were balled up in the green sheets. Tom smirked and repeated his actions, again, and again, and again, leaving a row of glistening red marks until Harry was gasping, his hands both buried in the older boy's hair.

Hermione realised what Tom was going to do before Harry did, and bit back her own moan as the older boy slithered down the slim length of Harry's body, dropping a line of hot, slick kisses along Harry's stomach, before going even lower. The noise Harry made when Tom slid a hand around the base of his member was breathtaking, yet it had nothing on when Tom opened his mouth around him, drawing him in.

Hermione watched, wide-eyed, as Harry edged up with his hips like he couldn't even help it, and Tom just took it, took everything, fingers catching firmly on the younger boy's thighs as he sucked sharply, nails digging in just enough to make it hard, make it dirty, as the noises escaping Harry turned high and breathless and desperate.

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Harry moaned out Tom's name as he came, breathless and unsteady, and watching as the older boy then got himself off too, groaning into the soft skin of the younger boy's thigh, his teeth biting down in a way that made Harry squeak in surprise as the young Dark Lord reached his own release, was enough to prompt Hermione to push her fingers down her skirt, too desperate to wait to start anything with either of her boys, the sharp, desperate urge to come too close.
After, when they were all a sticky, sated mess on Harry's bed, Hermione wasn't really surprised that Tom was the first one to speak-- the older boy was certainly a fan of his own voice.

Tom sat up, leaning himself against the headboard, and smirked down at them. "Your face is breathtaking when you climax," he told Harry, his voice a low purr, "It contorts in the most stunning way. It would be so easy to mistake the expression for pain."

"Le petit mort," Hermione mused, out loud, and Tom made an amused sound.

"Little deaths," he said, "in this instance, the French are certainly correct. Orgasm is close to death--at the moment of climax, our bodies are utterly out of our control. Our breathing stops. Our hearts sometimes stutter. Our minds taste oblivion."

"How is it," Harry wondered aloud, "that you manage to make even sex sound creepy?"

Tom smirked down at him then, swollen, sinful mouth curving into a wicked smirk. "Would you like to hear about how oral sex and tears taste remarkably alike, Harry dear?" He purred. Harry groaned.

"Such a psychopath," he grumbled. Hermione laughed, reaching out to stroke her hand through his dark hair.

"Semen does have a distinctly salty taste." She said teasingly.

"Care to find out, darling boy?" Tom arched an eyebrow, and Hermione could literally see the moment Harry drew his conclusion and started to panic.

"I-- I'm not sure-- I don't think I'm ready to--" he started stammering, but Tom interrupted.

"Not that," he said, exasperated, "I meant a kiss."

Hermione rolled her eyes at both of them as Harry relaxed, a sheepish look on his face, reaching up to shyly tug Tom's head down to him, like the older boy hadn't just had his dick in his mouth.

In the end, 'love' was just a word, one that was filled with vagaries and mixed connotations. What she felt for her boys couldn't be pinned down with that one word. Too simple, too complex, too insignificant, and too profound for words that she didn't need to describe what they had. They were hers, and that was enough.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies for the wait. Hope you enjoyed the chapter!
~Cheshire Carroll
I just wanted to say thank you for everyone's lovely comments, and though I'm terrible at replying (because I read them on my phone through email) each and every one of them means so much to me. Thank you for giving me support and feedback and motivating me when I have writer's block. You're all the best <3

CHAPTER XLVII:

Fleur's POV:

... and I miss you, Fleur! Home is so much more lonely with you gone, and the whole of France feels emptier without you. Mamman and papa say we will be coming to see you for the Second Task, though, which is so exciting! Will you be coming home for Noël? I've asked for a pet this year, after you wrote to me about those beautiful abraxans that pull the Beauxbatons carriage. Mamman has been letting me have horse riding lessons and papa has hinted that they are going to build a stables on the grounds of the chateaux in Rochefort-en-Terre, but do you think they are preparing for a horse or an abraxan? I would love either, Fleur, I really would, but can you imagine how much fun it would be to fly? I'd love wings; is there a spell that lets you grow them? I would grow wings and I would fly every day for hours—

Fleur gently traced the loopy, babbling script on the scented parchment with a single fingertip. Letters from Gabrielle were always a balm on her soul, filling her with warmth and love. Her classmates had teased her in the past for being so wildly protective over her baby sister, but they were all clueless— they had no idea of the paralysing grief and fear she had suffered on that awful day when Gabrielle was only five years old, herself a tender eleven, and she'd thought she'd never see her sweet baby sister again.

Even thinking about that day made fire burn under her skin, made her perfectly manicured nails itch with the urge to form into talons while her face tingled like it had a bad case of pins and needles. Fleur wasn't capable of a full change, her Veela blood was too diluted for that, but she'd inherited enough of her grand-mère's nature to grow claws and for the beautiful features of her face to twist and sharpen to something far more bird-like, unnerving in the extreme. She didn't particularly care about either of those, other then to appreciate the 'hidden' weapons her talons could be utilised for.

No, it was the fire she loved. Veela were creatures of fire, and the dilution of her blood meant nothing in the face of this. Fleur didn't have her mother's ability to burn an attacker to ashes without lifting a wand or saying a word, but flames would never burn her and she could create spheres of flame from nothing but her will, a gift of the blood that burned in her veins, an instinct thousands of years old that sang in her heart.

From a very young age Fleur had adored playing with fire, but she'd always had good control over her abilities. She hadn't actually burned another living being with her flames until age eleven, when
a slaving group that went by the moniker 'White Lilies', who were known for their work in the illegal sex trade—specifically in trafficking Veela and part-Veela to be sold to illegal brothels—had snatched up her sister and tried to snatch her too. Fleur had escaped, giving the man who'd dared to put his hands on her third degree burns on his face and hands in the process, but sweet, little Gabrielle who caught spiders in cups to carry outside, who cried over a butterfly with a torn wing and an ant she'd trodden on; her dear, darling Gabrielle who couldn't even bring herself to squash a fly, had not been so lucky.

The following forty-eight hours had been the worst two days of her life. All young Veela and part-Veela were given a sex education when they were young—sex and sexuality were both very important to their kind—and they'd heard enough horror stories of young Veela being kidnapped and never seen again for it to be at the forefront of the minds of everybody involved. The agony of thinking about what could be happening to her little sister as she waited and prayed for Gabrielle to be found had been petrifying and utterly heartbreaking. When Fleur finally learned Gabrielle had been located, alive, she hadn't been able to stop her hysterical crying until she saw her baby sister again.

It wasn't until later that she learned her Papa was having difficulties with bringing the men responsible for the bruises on kind, beautiful Gabrielle's slender wrists and inner-thighs, for the terrible hollowness in her glassy eyes as the tiny blond girl curled up under the cotton sheets in her hospital bed because she was too afraid to move, to justice.

Upon learning that the men might yet escape any proper persecution for what they had done to her precious baby sister, Fleur had been so furious that the fire burning under her skin had startled even her as it flared to an inferno inside her. To this day she remembered the expression on her full-blooded Veela grand-mère's face; she remembered Adèle Turenne's focus and fury in the face of her missing granddaughter, remembered her desperation and drive in the days that followed, her strength and her sharpness, her terrifying beauty and her terrible rage.

Papa had wearily explained to a daughter who should have been too young to have to learn this, how the abductions and rape of Veela children and teenagers so rarely went punished, though he swore—and he'd fulfilled his vow to her—that the White Lilies would not be getting away with what they had done to Gabrielle. The sheer injustice of this had turned all the fear and grief Fleur had been drowning in to a sickening mix of hatred, fury and an overwhelming, burning need for revenge, to ensure those who victimised her people, especially the ones so defenceless like her baby sister, would pay dearly for it.

She had to move quietly, fully aware even at just eleven years old that her actions would not be appreciated by those in power in the French government. But she wasn't the only one out there who was angry, the only one who burned with the desire to get even and to change the circumstances of their people.

It was inspired in part by the White Lilies, the slave traders who had been responsible for opening her eyes to the harsh realities of what being part-Veela meant for her and her future, that the image she chose to represent the slowly but surely growing group she had started was a lily. Her mother had taught her the language of flowers when Fleur was younger, though, and the petals of their icon were not the pure and unblemished white the traffickers had chosen to represent the innocence and purity of their stolen ‘wares’, but rather a bold, vibrant orange with crimson stamens and crimson tipped petals, like someone had dipped the flower in blood. Orange lilies represented hatred and revenge, and hatred is what Fleur and her people felt, and revenge is what they would have.

Aurèle hooting softly brought Fleur's attention back to the letter before her and she gave the tawny-
eyed, pale-feathered avian an apologetic look before turning her attention to the final few lines of Gabrielle's correspondence.

*I hope you are well, Fleur, and that you are enjoying Hogwarts, which I just know is wonderful! Please be safe and happy!*

*Lots and lots and lots of love,*

*Your sister,*

*Gabrielle*

Fleur couldn't help her smile at Gabrielle's enthusiastic words. Her younger sister was almost hopelessly optimistic, a miracle really considering the horrific trauma in her past, but in this case she couldn't say that Gabrielle was wrong. Hogwarts actually wasn't awful; not like she'd been expecting, anyway, despite her half-hearted hopes— unlike her sister, Fleur had little use for optimism. It was certainly cold— November had smudged into December in a miserable parade of wet, grey days and it had started snowing that very morning, soft, silent, thick flakes swirling lazy patterns through frozen air— but the company, and this was certainly something she'd never thought she'd say, was shockingly pleasant.

Harry Potter was certainly a darling, an odd and contradictory one— both soft and hard, with kind smiles and hard, weary eyes— but a darling nevertheless, and Hermione Granger... she was a treasure. A very confusing treasure, actually— despite their playful dance of flirtation, Fleur had thought that the younger girl had been fully devoted to Harry Potter, and just enjoyed their clever, saucy exchanges. And then the day after the First Task, which sweet Harry had warned her about— unnecessary, for Madam Maxime had already told her what she had to prepare to face, but sweet nonetheless— Hermione had approached her in the halls of the castle and, practically out of nowhere, kissed her.

What happened next they didn't even discuss. Whether that was a good thing or a bad thing, Fleur wasn't particularly sure, and at the time she hadn't particularly given a damn, far too distracted by the way Hermione had arched against her when she glided her hands along the younger girl's sides, too focused on the way Hermione pulled back slightly, just enough to catch her bottom lip between blunt teeth.

Fleur closed her eyes and shivered, remembering the encounter.

The younger girl had bitten her lip hard enough to draw blood and Fleur had felt a flash of sharp pain, enough to drag a small cry from her throat, one muffled by their joined lips, and then Hermione was licking the blood away and tugging at her, pulling her towards the nearest girl's laboratory.

They hadn't bothered with going into a stall, and while Fleur was grateful that they didn't end up having an audience, at that point in time she couldn't really say that she'd have protested too much if they had. She'd discovered rather quickly that it was very difficult to think even remotely coherently with Hermione's hand up her skirt and inside her panties, slim, clever fingers rubbing at the bundle of nerves that turned her to jelly. Just the right amount of pressure and Hermione's mouth on her neck was enough to make Fleur tremble in anticipation.

It was hot and dirty and quick, and Fleur came the moment she felt Hermione's teeth break her skin, the rush of endorphins accompanying the pain enough to tip her over. She came with her blood in Hermione's mouth. She came with her fingers tangled in Hermione's curls. She came with Hermione's name on her lips, and she wasn't the least bit ashamed of that fact.
Hermione's below-the-knee school skirt was hiked up then and the British girl pressed herself against one of Fleur's thighs, grinding against her, and Fleur had been able to feel how wet Hermione was, even through the thin cloth barrier between them. She had then grasped onto Hermione's hips and helped her, moved with her, until Hermione was moaning and panting and shuddering, and then she went still, save for the tiny post-orgasm spasms.

Eventually, Hermione had lifted her head and Fleur found herself licking blood from the younger girl's lips.

They hadn't had much of a conversation following that, Hermione leaving almost immediately, but Fleur had both heard and understood what had remained unspoken between them during their brief, intimate encounter, that the physical pleasure had been a way for Hermione to express her relief that she'd completed the First Task, both successfully and without being harmed. The other girl, Fleur had quickly figured out, was not accustomed to voicing her emotions aloud, and she could understand that, didn't mind that the girl chose physical means to express her emotions, far too satisfied that the younger girl felt the emotions in the first place. The understanding that Hermione had felt at least a degree of concern for her gave Fleur a thrill of hope and satisfaction.

Because to get the revenge that she sought, that her group sought, to get the justice that their kind deserved, Fleur was smart enough to know they needed allies—strong ones, with strong influence. Hermione Granger and Harry Potter fulfilled both those categories—all she had to do was convince them that she and her kind deserved their aid.

It was time, she decided, tracing Gabrielle's writing with her fingertips and steeling herself with fiery courage and burning resolve; it was time to gather her research together to present to the pair, along with her case for her cause. She owed it to her people, and she could only hope they would be prepared to take the risk to stand at her side.

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Harry's POV:

"A ball." Harry repeated numbly, looking up at a scowling Snape in horror. "Dancing. At a ball."

Snape scowled even harder, his arms crossed against his chest and his eyes narrowed. The start of December had brought wind and sleet to Hogwarts and, like the weather, Snape's mood had gotten progressively fouler with each day that passed. Students in his class had been docked points for as little as breathing too loudly, and nobody was safe in the corridors, whether it was uniform infractions, tracking mud or walking too quickly. Even the Slytherins weren't exempt from his ire, so when he'd ordered all the Slytherin fourth years and above to meet in the common room at six pm, not a single member of the house of green and silver had dared be even a second late.

When the meeting started, Snape had announced an upcoming event apparently known as the "Yule Ball", a traditional part of the Triwizard Tournament that was an opportunity for socializing with the foreign guests. It was to start at eight o'clock on Yule, and would finish at midnight.

"And if any Slytherin dares bring shame to Hogwarts and our House, I will have them scrubbing toilets with a toothbrush for the rest of their school years!" Snape had concluded his speech, with a fierce glare. It was little wonder that Harry had been terrified when Snape ordered him to stay behind as he dismissed everyone else. Hermione had grinned and mouthed that he was on his own before disappearing with Daphne, Tracey and the boys to the boy's dormitory. Snape seemed to pretend not to notice the flagrant breaking of school rules, much to everyone's relief.
Harry had been desperately trying to figure out what he'd done to bring Snape's ire down on him, when instead his head of house had given him the most awful news imaginable— the Champions and their dance partners opened the ball. Hearing that, he had had a sudden mental image of himself in a top hat and tails, accompanied by a girl in the sort of frilly dress Aunt Petunia always wore to Uncle Vernon's work parties, and immediately felt physically nauseous.

"Professor, I– I can't dance." He said, desperately.

"Then I suggest you find a teacher." Snape replied coolly, "I expect nothing but excellence from my students, and you will not shame the noble house of Slytherin by fumbling about in front of the entirety of Hogwarts and our foreign visitors."

"I think I'm going to be sick." Harry whispered looking down at his feet, genuinely terrified at this point. His insides seemed to have curled up and shriveled, and he was starting to wonder if he really did need to make a dash for the closest bathroom. Snape's hand suddenly coming down to rest on his shoulder was unexpected enough to make him flinch slightly in surprise, and he looked back up at his professor to see that his face had softened. Well, softened as much as Snape's face ever did.

"I've seen you dance before, Harry, at the Malfoy's galas." He said, voice much kinder then his brisk tone from before. "You need some formal instruction, but you have the basics down. You will be fine, and there are more than enough students around here who will be able to teach you— every pureblood will have training in the traditional styles of dance, and I cannot see any of them refusing to help you. You reflect our house, and we are all proud of you and what you have accomplished so far."

"Thank you, sir," Harry said, a warmth growing in his chest that suddenly made the sick feeling in his stomach much less overwhelming.

"You're welcome." Snape said. "Now off with you, child. Go tell Miss Greengrass, Miss Granger and Miss Davis that I expect them to return to their own dormitories before curfew." Harry nodded hurriedly, and Snape swept from the common room in his usual dramatic billowing of dark robes.

Harry made his way to his dormitory where his friends were all sitting around. "Are you in trouble?" Draco asked immediately when he walked in. He shook his head.

"No, Snape just needed to pass on some awful news." He said. "Apparently the Champions are supposed to open the Ball."

"Ooh, tough luck." Theo said, with a wince.

"Thanks," Harry sighed, going over to sit beside Hermione on his four-poster.

"We were just discussing what Snape said, when he was telling us when the ball was," she told him.

"Yeah, he said it was on Yule, right? Isn't that the wizarding version of Christmas?" Harry asked.

"Do you remember how the Ministry passed Mr. Dagworth's law, the one about how the traditional holidays have to be celebrated at Hogwarts?" Draco asked and Harry frowned slightly, thinking back.

"I think I remember that," he said, slowly. "Though I didn't really notice anything different about Halloween— I guess I was kind of distracted by the whole Tournament mess."
"Well, that's the thing, isn't it?" Draco said, leaning forwards eagerly, always in a good mood to spill some juicy gossip. "Dumbledore didn't let the school celebrate Samhain, he did Halloween again. He broke the law. Apparently the Ministry was pissed, but they didn't want to kick up a fuss with the two foreign schools here— but for Yule, Dumbledore's been told that if Hogwarts celebrates Christmas instead of Yuletide, foreign visitors or not he'll be suspended."

"Wouldn't that be the day?" Harry said, wistfully. "It would be my Yule wish come true."

"All of our wishes, mate," Blaise said glumly. "Well, that and for Snape to cheer the bloody hell up."

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*Hermione's POV:*

*Can we meet after classes today in the library? If you could, please bring Harry along as well xoxo ~Fleur*

Hermione frowned as she looked again at the note that had been delivered to her that morning by an owl with pale feathers. Her relationship with Fleur had continued since the first time she'd dragged the older girl into one of the girl's bathrooms and got them both off, but it was mostly a physical thing, with not a lot of talking involved. As far as she'd been aware, they were both happy with that.

And the sex was fucking *fantastic*. They suited each other *perfectly*. Hermione liked to hold Fleur down against whatever desk or wall or even a mirror that one time that they were shagging on or against, even though both of them knew it was more or less a farce; she didn't have the physical strength that the older girl did. Fleur was older and not entirely human, and she could break her hold in less than a second if she wanted to, but she didn't. Fleur allowed Hermione to grip her wrists and hold them above her head while she showered kisses along the part-Veela's neck (and then bit down and sucked purple bruises into the creamy skin); Fleur allowed Hermione to hold her hips down while she flicked her tongue over her again and again— slow and then faster, only to slow down again. Hermione liked to draw it out, liked to make both of them work for the older girl's release. There was a sense of power that came with it, but also some strange sense of utter satisfaction. Fleur trusted her enough to allow her to do these things, and that made her happy.

So Fleur interrupting their usual routine of meeting, finding an empty classroom, broom cupboard or bathroom, shagging, then kissing and leaving, had Hermione understandably... wary. Especially because Fleur had requested she bring Harry with her.

Still, she felt she owed it to the girl to at least see what she wanted, and had written back an agreement and they'd arranged a time to meet in the library. She and Harry had arrived first and Hermione, unable to sit still, had found herself pacing as they waited for Fleur to arrive

"I'm not sure I've ever seen you this worried about meeting someone," Harry commented as he watched her from where he was leaning against one of the desks students could sit at to do their homework. "Well, except that one time in our first year, when we met *that* person in the Forbidden Forest. But anyone would be worried about meeting *that* person. You really like Fleur."

"I know," Hermione sighed, just as confused by her own behaviour as Harry was. "It's utterly bizarre to me too. I'm friends with Daph, of course, and Tracey and the boys, and even Luna a bit, sweet little thing that she is, but it's... different with Fleur. She's one of us, Harry; a kindred spirit,
of sorts. She may have grown up with servants to wait on her, and silk and pearls and diamonds to wear, but her life... it hasn't been easy. Everywhere she's looked down on, for being less then human. Like she's not worth it. The only reason she's in Beauxbatons is a combination of the fact her father was an important government official, and that Madam Maxime has a soft spot for so-called halfbreeds."

"Because she's, er, half-giantess, right?" Harry said, carefully.

"No, she just grew a lot during puberty." Hermione scoffed. "Of course she's half-giantess. The French government can bloody delude themselves all they want, there is giant blood in that woman, and I don't even want to know how that happened."

Before she could continue along that rather disturbing train of thought, Fleur arrived in a swish of pale blue silk. Her achingly lovely face was solemn, though she brightened slightly when she saw them both waiting. Hermione saw, as she got closer, that she was holding a thick sheaf of parchment to her chest.

"Zank you for taking zee time to meet." The French girl said.

"I figure it has to be important." Hermione returned, ceasing her anxious pacing.

"To me, eet eez very important." Fleur said softly. They were in a quiet corner of the library, out of the way, and the only person who might walk by was Madam Pince. Still, Fleur flicked her wand, murmuring a silencing charm under her breath, and Hermione felt tension rise in her stomach in response.

"I'm really feeling the suspense here," she commented, her tone sharper then she intended in her uneasiness.

"Ah, I apologise." Fleur said, looking genuinely apologetic, "I just wish zat we are not disturbed." The blonde girl took a deep breath, seeming to steady herself. "I assume zat you know I am part Veela, oui?"

"We do." Hermione agreed. Fleur took another deep breath.

"When my leetle sister, Gabrielle, was five she was taken, from right in front of me, by a group of men who wished to let people pay to 'ave sex wiz 'er." She said, her face terribly blank. Hermione felt her stomach start churning with something other then tension as Fleur continued. "I fought off my own attacker, but I could not save her. Papa 'ad enough connections to track down and save Gabrielle before anyzing was done to her– zey found 'er at an auction. Zere were eleven Veela children– zee youngest was only four years old."

"That's just sick," Harry said, his face pale. Hermione didn't say anything; she felt sick, and her nails were digging into her palms.

"Papa pushed," Fleur said, her face turning fierce, "he made sure zee monsters were sentenced. But zee problem eez zat Veela are not seen as 'people' and do not 'ave zee same rights. You saw zem at zee Quidditch World Cup, all zee Veela– paraded around next to zee leprechauns like mascots! A– a zing to bring good luck!" Fleur spat, her expression one of fury. "I am allowed to be a student of Beauxbatons because I am only one quarter Veela. I will not be allowed to inherit zee Delacour ladyship title– and more importantly zen zat, nor will I ever be able to hold a position in government.

"Papa 'ad to resign from 'is position in zee government when 'e married my muzzer. But 'is
connections meant zat zee ones responsible for 'urting my leetle sister were somewhat punished. After all, an auction eez different from a single attack, so zee could not blame zee allure for zee actions zey took. It was a political mess at zee time– and in zee end, zee slavers were given zee same sentence zey would for trading exotic animals. Better zen nothing, but still not enough."

"I'm sorry," Hermione said, quietly. "That's... that's beyond horrible."

"Zank you." Fleur said, after taking a deep, calming breath. "When I came 'ere, I 'ad 'oped zat Britain would be different from France, zat zee famed Albus Dumbledore would be different," she shook her head, disgust clear on her pretty face. "I am zee daughter of a politician, not many people remember zat. I investigated zee British Ministry's laws, and crossreferenced wiz certain International laws... It's easier to show you, and zen explain." Fleur placed the thick sheaf of parchment she was carrying on the table.

Recorded on the stiff paper, Hermione could see, was a long timeline. The first date, 1900, was recorded in blue ink. Spreading out from each date were laws written in blue, green and red.

"Zee green shows when zee politiians are elected to office," Fleur said, tapping the parchment with her wand so it hovered in the air in front of them, spreading out so the entire timeline was visible. "Zee blue laws advanced muggleborn rights and zee rights of magical creatures. Zee red laws took rights away."

Fleur then tapped under 1945, where green ink proclaimed 'July 13th: Albus Dumbledore named Chief Mugwump'.

"Before nineteen forty-five," Fleur said grimly. "I recorded most of zee laws in blue. About a quarter of zem were repealed later, but zere was still progress. After, 'owever... red." Hermione hissed through her teeth in shock and anger at was Fleur was implying. Beside her, Harry made an equally shocked and horrified sound. "Not pretty, non?" Fleur said, bitterly. "Zee supposed champion of muggleborns and magical beings is zee one 'indering us zee most."

"Why are you telling us this?" Hermione asked through her clenched teeth, a numb sort of seething rage boiling inside her as she looked at the timeline hovering before her.

"You both loathe zee Headmaster." Fleur said, simply. "It's what made me start investigating in zee first place. You 'ave seen zee students of Beauxbatons— zey all despise me, because I am smarter and richer and more beautiful zen zem, capable of making every boy look my way, and even zeir boyfriends drool over me. When I came 'ere, I predicted it would mainly be zee Purebloods who would be bigots, but zey were all perfectly welcoming and courteous. I know I 'ave you to zank in part for zat, but zat doesn't change zee fact zat zey are genuine in what zey say, and 'ow zey treat me. It isn't a well known fact, especially outside of Veela communities, zat we 'ave a certain skill in sensing zee emotions of ozzers. Your fellow Slyzzerins truly hold no animosity towards me."

"I've never read that before," Hermione said, surprised at the information. "About Veela having empath abilities."

"It's a fairly closely guarded secret." Fleur said, simply. "It 'elps to protect us from those who wish to do us 'arm."

"Why did you tell us, then?" Hermione asked, warily.

"You barely know us." Harry pointed out.

Fleur just smiled at them, knife sharp. "Ah, but it eez like I said, I am a politician's daughter, 'Arry.
"How do you know about Thaddeus?" Hermione asked, sharply. As far as she knew, her supposed relation to Voldemort's alias was not a well-known fact.

"I investigated you both." Fleur said, with a small shrug. "Eet eez a matter of public record zat 'e eez your uncle." Hermione frowned but nodded.

"Alright then. What makes you think we'll help you?" She asked, with a raised eyebrow. Fleur arched a slim eyebrow right back at her.

"Because I 'ave talked to you– both of you. And I slept with you. I may not know you well, but I do know you enough. You know what eet eez like to be a victim. Do you know 'ow many Veela are raped every year? How many of zem are children? And zee government don't ever imprison zee rapists– zee worst zey get slapped with are fines, because of course it was zee Allure zat made zem do it."

"That's so fucking wrong!" Harry exploded from beside her, making Hermione glad Fleur had thought to put up those silencing charms. "What the fuck? That is just– fuck!"

"Zat is why I came to you." Fleur said, head high and proud, blue eyes fierce. "Zat is why I choose to trust you. Will you 'elp me?"

"Yes," Harry said, instantly. "Of course, yes, Fleur."

Hermione gave Fleur a long, considering look before speaking. "If, at any point, it came down to wand against wand... would the Veela community stand behind Harry and I– and, by extension, Thaddeus?" She asked quietly. Fleur swallowed and nodded, head still high.

"I only speak for zee younger community, Ley Lys, right now when I say yes, but if Meester Dagworth sent delegates to talk to zee leaders of zee French and Bulgarian Veela communities... I am confident zey will agree, so long as certain Magical Oaths are given to ensure zee law changes are kept and to ensure zat zey are all given safe refuge in Britain."

"Ley Lys? The Lilies?" Hermione asked, brow furrowed. Fleur smirked, and there was something wicked about the look in her azure eyes.

"Zee full title eez zee Orange Lilies, but to add orange makes it too... obvious. We are zee next generation of Veela, and none of us are happy." Hermione laughed, startled, then turned to Harry to explain.

"In flower language, orange lilies symbolise hatred and revenge." She informed him and he let out a surprised laugh of his own. Hermione then turned back to Fleur, calmer now that the tension brought on by the seriousness of their conversation had been broken. "You help us and we'll help you." She said. "And that's a promise." Fleur smiled again, and there was a fierce triumph to her smile and fiery resolve burning in her eyes.

"Excellent!" She practically purred, "I do 'ave one question, before we finalise zis deal of ours." Before Hermione could reply to that, Fleur had moved forwards and pinned her against the desk bodily, her mouth heated against Hermione's, catching her in a kiss before she could even quite
process the contact. One slim, perfectly manicured hand cupped her jaw, holding her head in place as kiss quickly became filthy.

Hermione, far more used to being the one who used her sexuality against others, found herself trying to catch up to Fleur. She had instinctively gripped the older girl's waist to push her away, not appreciating not being the one in control, but found herself instead hesitating. Then Fleur's knee slipped between her legs and the French girl used a bit of leverage to apply just the right amount of friction against the junction of her thighs. Startled, Hermione's fingers automatically tightened their grip and she pulled Fleur's body closer to her with a breathy moan. She broke away, just briefly, to say, "I don't actually see how this is your question."

"I wanted to ensure that our business would not get in the way of our pleasure," the French girl murmured, her lips still brushing Hermione's. "A new professional relationship will not have any impact on our personal one, non?"

"Non, indeed." Hermione grinned, then licked at Fleur's lower lip, making a low sound when the older girl caught her tongue and sucked hard, before breaking away.

"Excellent," Fleur purred, before her mouth—hot, wet and sensual—was pressed back against Hermione's. Hermione barely noticed Harry's presence as she let Fleur lift her so she was sitting on the desk she had been pressed up against. Fleur broke the kiss in order to step back slightly and flip up her skirt, practically yanking Hermione's knickers down past her knees, all the way to her ankles. Without the obstruction, Fleur then pushed her legs apart so she was standing between them and knelt down so she could bury her mouth between Hermione's thighs.

"Oh my fucking god, yes, yes, right there!"—Fleur was, in her opinion, without a doubt the absolute best ever when it came to this. The French girl didn't give head like it was something she was trying to get over with, she revelled in it, teasing and kissing, sucking dark bruises on the exposed skin of her hips and inner thighs and making sharp nips to the flesh before moving back in, taking her time, and Hermione was only human, for Salazar's sake, and the French girl was eating her out with determination to make her—"Oh, oh fuck," Hermione choked out, and came.

"Yes," Fleur practically growled, fierce and breathless and so devastatingly proud and beautiful as she licked a second wave out of her, and then a third, and Hermione could only writhe on the desk, could only reach down with weak hands and yank desperately at the blue silk collar of Fleur's uniform, urging her up.

Fleur followed her wordless plea, standing back up, her stunningly lovely face never more glorious then it was now, wet and near-about glowing with satisfaction. The older girl leaned forward and kissed her, her mouth still slick, lips red and kiss-swollen. Hermione used the long, silvery hair to pull Fleur's head back, to cause the other girl to gasp and arch her neck as she took the time to lick the French girl's face clean. Fleur shivered and moaned, bracing her hands on the desk, on either side of Hermione's hips.

"Guys, Madam Pince is coming over!" Harry hissed, urgently.

"Shit," Hermione muttered, pushing Fleur back slightly so she could stand back up, tugging her knickers back up from her ankles, smoothing down her hiked up, rumpled skirt with sweaty palms. "We really need to get around to actually using a bed." She noted.

"Yeah," Harry said, voice strangled as he sat down heavily and grabbed a book to cover the front of his pants just as Madam Pince walked by, giving the three of them a suspicious look as she did so. "Probably a good idea."
"You are the absolute best at that, Fleur." Hermione said happily as she sat down next to the flustered Harry, boneless and satiated.

"Someone once told me zat a man can become quite skilful at using 'is pénis but when it comes to 'is mouth, tongue and fingers, all 'e could ever be is satisfactory, while even zee most innocent girls are natural chatte pleasers, and wiz a little practice a woman can drive anozer crazy wiz just zee simplest of zee touches."

"Was that 'someone' your first female lover, by any chance?" Hermione asked, amused and already looking forward to sharing it with Tom when she next saw him, knowing it would most certainly lead to a very pleasant evening with Tom attempting– and likely succeeding, the older boy was determined and prideful like that– to prove it wrong.

"You zink you are not my first?" Fleur asked playfully.

"I think you were far too confident not to have previous experience." Hermione shot back.

"I am not your first lover eizer, I zink," Fleur mused, not agreeing or disagreeing. "But I am zee first of zee same sex, non?"

"Mostly true." Hermione agreed. "You're my first time with a girl when I've actually reciprocated– Bella had very little interest in me doing anything but getting off on her fingers." Fleur laughed.

"Zat certainly sounds like quite zee story!"

"Bella is quite the unusual woman. I half think she might have cursed me if I'd tried touching her." Hermione said, thinking back on how she'd ended up a tear-stained, trembling, boneless lump of pleased aftershock on the floor of the converted dungeon, half drowned in endorphins from the Dark magic in the air and the orgasm humming in her veins.

"You two are shameless." Poor Harry groaned, his face still burning red. Hermione just laughed.

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**Voldemort's POV:**

Over time, Voldemort had found that the less soul he had, the less colourful the world became, and the less human those around him seemed.

Even in the manor he remembered to be relatively bright it was all grey walls and grey floors, and in the monochromatic space he was always surrounded in it was hard to see humans sometimes– they just blended in. Grey, flat things that moved and made noise and danced along the periphery of his vision most of the time. Sometimes they got in the way. Sometimes animals and plants and rocks got in the way too. He did the same with the humans as he would a troublesome branch– he moved it in the most efficient manner.

What felt like a lifetime ago, back when he was still practically an infant, back at that loathsome orphanage, he'd explained it to a visiting doctor just once, before he knew better, that of course he could tell the difference between a human and a rock, he just didn't see what the difference was in kicking a human and kicking a rock. What fundamental difference was there in breaking a stick and breaking an arm? Neither the rock nor the human mattered to him. Neither the branch nor the arm was a thing he cared about. Why did it matter that the body parts mattered to others? What did that have to do with him?
For Voldemort, even before the world started to lose its colour, its life bleeding from his eyes as he tore his soul over and over, most humans had been little more then objects in his eyes. There were precious few who he had viewed as actually people– and as they eventually died, thanks to his soul's mutilation it was practically impossible to form any new... 'attachments'. Now there were only a finite number of humans who weren't just black and white objects taking up space, like so many of the other things in the world. Those humans had sharp focus and full colour and actually managed to be people to him. Those humans, those swirling collections of colour, stood out from the things and the objects as alive, though he would easily admit that even those he recognised as people were still messy and complicated and not worth much of his time.

They were, however, unlike the vast majority of the population, worth a bit of his time, and they were distinguished in his mind from a tree branch which made him less likely to break their arms. Not impossible, of course– just because they had colour and he saw them as living humans didn't mean he cared for them. Didn't mean he'd hesitate to kill them or that he'd feel upset about them being killed.

No, it was an even smaller number of people who had actually managed to find themselves in that position; just five people over the entire span of his life so far that he would hesitate before murdering, five people whose deaths would– and had, in two cases– left him... upset. And highly murderous. Lucretia and Cygnus Black had attended Hogwarts with him, those many, many years ago. He had been... very displeased when they passed on. Bellatrix, dear Bella, had always reminded him of Lucretia... it was what had made him notice her in the first place, but it was her devotion, her sadism, her passion and her raw power that had kept his attention, had made him start to view her as her own person, not a pale imitation of the one he'd lost.

Harry Potter and Hermione Granger-Dagworth he had never looked at, instead they had seared their way into his sight, vibrant and alive and oh-so amusing in their determination. Bright streaks of colour in an otherwise bland world. It was little surprise to him that his diary Horcrux had latched onto them; 'Tom' was, perhaps, the most human part of his soul and he had, at that age, experienced the same desires of the flesh as most adolescents, though he'd never stopped so low as to be ruled by his hormones. He did wonder, occasionally, what the world looked like from 'Tom's' eyes, but he'd never cared enough to ask.

He had been keeping 'Tom' busy, lately, and it amused him how irked his Horcrux was at being kept away from his two little lovers. But 'Tom' understood duty, and part of the plan to overtake Britain included the establishment of his identity, because it would be needed very soon.

And of course, now there was a new angle he had to look into. The Veela.

Personally, held no animosity toward the magical species, and the clever little Veela girl that had written up the timeline that Hermione and Harry had sent to him, along with the agreement they had made with the girl, was very interesting. Very thorough and very, very interesting.

That little French schoolgirl had made a connection in her research that he himself had not noticed. Everybody in Britain knew that Dumbledore was the champion of the underdogs. It was a trap that even he had fallen into.

So what was Dumbledore's real angle? What was the old man really trying to achieve? It was frustrating, to have this core piece of knowledge set asunder. Infuriating, even.

The Veela, at least, was simple enough. He had always wanted to preserve magic; to preserve the integrity of the magical world that had freed him from the filthy muggle one he'd had the poor luck of been born in. Muggles were his only true hatred– muggles and disgusting muggle-lovers. He couldn't care less about mudbloods; they were just a convenient way of gathering followers, and he
had a similar lack of any animosity toward magical beings and creatures, Veela included. Even better, most Veela were able to use wands— they would add numbers to his ranks, and their allure was a weapon all of its own, one that could be directed at the enemy in a fight.

Yes, he decided, he could certainly see the benefits to adding Veela to his ranks. It would be a process, of course— he was not Minister yet, though it was a matter of time now. Once he was, he'd replace all the key department heads with loyal Death Eaters and permanently remove the more troublesome thorns from his side. With proper planning, he wouldn't even have to engage in open warfare.

Dealing with Dumbledore, of course, would be... problematic. But if he destroyed the man's reputation first, well, it would certainly make it easier to get rid of the old wizard when the time came.

And it would come. Dumbledore's days were numbered, because the wizarding world was very nearly in his grasp, the pieces all falling nearly into place. On the evening of the first day of the new year he would summon his followers to his side for the first time since his rebirth. It was time for them to face their Lord's displeasure, to be reunited with their brethren freed from Azkaban, and to start, once more, to serve him loyally.

Dumbledore's era had reached its bitter end, for the era of Lord Voldemort was about to begin.

And to think, it had all started, had all been made possible, because of Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived; his accidental Horcrux.

Harry's POV:

The last two weeks of term became increasingly boisterous as they progressed. Rumors about the Yule Ball were flying everywhere, though Harry didn't believe half of them - for instance, that Dumbledore had bought eight hundred barrels of mulled mead from Madam Rosmerta. It seemed to be fact, however, that he had booked the Weird Sisters. Exactly who or what the Weird Sisters were Harry didn't know, never having had access to a wizard's wireless, but he deduced from the wild excitement of those who had grown up listening to the WWN (Wizarding Wireless Network) that they were a very famous musical group.

Some of the teachers, like Professor Flitwick, gave up trying to teach them much when their minds were so clearly elsewhere; he allowed them to play games in his lesson on Wednesday, and spent most of it talking to Harry about the perfect Summoning Charm Harry had used during the first task of the Triwizard Tournament. Other teachers were not so generous. Nothing would ever deflect Professor Binns, for example, from plowing on through his notes on goblin rebellions— as Binns hadn't let his own death stand in the way of continuing to teach, they supposed a small thing like Christmas wasn't going to put him off. It was amazing how he could make even bloody and vicious goblin riots sound duller then a flobberworm. Professors McGonagall and Moody kept them working until the very last second of their classes too, and Snape, of course, would no sooner let them play games in class than adopt a Weasley. Staring nastily around at them all, he informed them that he would be testing them on poison antidotes during the last lesson of the term.

It was when he was studying for the Potion's test in the library with Hermione that Viktor Krum approached them.
Viktor, along with the other Bulgarians, were still sitting at the Slytherin table for meals, and Harry had had some fun conversations with the older boy. Once Viktor relaxed, he didn't seem quite so surly, more just awkward about his fame and popularity. Harry could relate to that, and the pair of them had formed a sort of friendship based on mutual understanding. Harry hoped one day that Viktor might want to go flying with him, but he hadn't asked yet– like he said, the older boy was quite awkward about his fame.

"Can I talk vith Harry?" Viktor asked politely, after greeting them both.

"Of course," Hermione said, standing up. "I need to go get another book anyway." Viktor waited a moment for Hermione to be out of earshot before turning back to Harry.

"I vos vundering if you vere taking Herm-own-ninny to the Yule Ball." He half-muttered, looking a bit embarrassed to be asking. Harry blinked, surprised and unsettled. Viktor's words had conjured up an odd feeling in his stomach, and it took him a moment to realise what it was– jealousy. He really did not want Hermione going with Viktor to the Yule Ball– desperately so, in fact. Hermione and Tom, they were his everything. They were his family and his best friends and his lovers. And one day, he knew, they would be his husband and wife. They were forever, for him, and he'd never want it any other way.

"I am planning to ask her," Harry said to Viktor, a bit stiffly.

"It is not like you are thinking," Viktor said, awkwardly, "I am not vanting to date her. She is very lovely. You are very lucky. I just vanted to ask a girl that vould not vant anything but to dance. Back in Bulgaria, I have some-vun. Ve are very in love, but hide it from press. I vould not take a date if Champions did not have to open Ball."

"Oh," Harry said, relieved that Viktor wasn't after Hermione. That ugly feeling in his stomach had settled, though he still felt a bit... wary, almost. He hadn't ever felt jealous like that before; not over Hermione. He'd been jealous of Dudley when he was younger, back when he wanted the food and toys and bedroom and love that his cousin was given so freely and he had to desperately slave to receive even scraps– and as hard as he'd tried, as good as he'd been, it had never been enough to earn him his aunt and uncle's love.

"There are some girls I know who are betrothed," Harry suggested to Viktor, "maybe you could take one of them?"

"Be-tro-th-ed?" Viktor sounded out the word, puzzled.

"Um, it means their parents have arranged a marriage for them." Harry explained. "Daphne– she's the blonde that I usually sit near– hasn't got a date yet for the Ball, and she's betrothed to some older guy who's already graduated."

"She wouuld be happy to be date for me?" Viktor questioned.

"I'll ask her and tell you at dinner." Harry said, and Viktor smiled, looking relieved.

"Thank you." He said. "It has been nightmare. Every girl it seems is asking me if I vill be date for them. I am hiding in library vhen not in class."

"We're in the library a lot, Hermione and I," Harry said sympathetically, "feel free to join us whenever."

"Thank you." Viktor said again.
Hermione came back over as the Bulgarian shuffled away, a curious look on her face. "Am I allowed to know what that was about?"

"Helping him find a date who doesn't want to jump his bones." Harry said and Hermione laughed.

"You know, Fleur asked me the same thing a few days ago."

"Well I told Viktor I'd ask Daphne— she's already betrothed to that Ravenclaw who graduated a year or two ago." Harry said. "Who did you suggest for Fleur?"

"Longbottom." Hermione said, casually, and Harry blinked.

"Nev?"

"She asked for someone who needed a date and was an excellent dancer," Hermione shrugged, "I told her he'd need a make-over beforehand, but she'll have a bit over three weeks to work with the raw material."

"Neville's a good dancer?" Harry asked, surprised.

"Augusta Longbottom is his grandmother." Hermione said with a scoff, "I can guarantee that he knows how to dance. He can probably play an instrument and speak passable French, too."

"Maybe he'll be able to teach me to dance," Harry said, perking up a bit. He hadn't found someone to teach him yet, and it was getting closer and closer to the dreaded Ball— or, as he'd started referring to it in his head, the 'Unexpected Task'.

"Let's go find him." Hermione said, flicking her wand and making her books soar into her satchel. Harry copied her, then slung his book-bag over his shoulder.

Neville, when class wasn't in session, could always be relied upon to be found in one of the greenhouses. Today he was in greenhouse three, and Harry and Hermione waved to the cheerful Professor Sprout as they walked past her on their way in.

Neville was pruning some sort of daisy that kept making an annoying honking noise. When he looked up and saw them he smiled shyly.

"Hi Harry, hi Hermione."

"Hi Nev." Harry greeted him cheerfully.

"We'd like to ask you a favor." Hermione said, in lieu of a greeting. Harry resisted the urge to roll his eyes at her as she just steam-rolled ahead. "Two, actually. Harry needs someone to teach him how to dance and I have a friend who needs a date."

"Oh," Neville said, surprised. His round cheeks turned pink. "I— I can teach Harry to dance, but I'm probably not a very good teacher." He mumbled.

"I'm sure you'll be fine." Hermione dismissed. Harry elbowed her.

"What she means is we know you'll be amazing, Nev. You're brilliant at explaining Herbology to me."

"O-Okay." Neville said, going even pinker. "But I... I'm not... are you sure your friend wants to go the Ball with me?"
"You're one of the only people at Hogwarts who can think past a Veela allure that hasn't already got a date." Hermione said. Neville's eyes widened.

"M-Miss Delacour?" He said, weakly. "Y-You... her... me?"

Hermione let out a sharp sigh beside him. "Look, Neville, here's some advice I was given, when I was a buck-toothed, bushy-haired little know-it-all nobody-- smile, no matter what you're feeling inside. Don't let anyone else see if you're hurting. No matter what anyone says to you and no matter what they do. Even if they trip you or push you and you fall on your damned face, just get up again and smile. You don't let anyone look down on you. As long as you smile and laugh, they'll get tired of saying things about you. As long as you smile, you can get through anything.

"Of course, while I smiled I planned out the bloody and brutal retribution I would one day rain upon them, but you actually need some self-esteem first, so baby steps. Fleur wants a date who isn't going to drool over the front of her stylish robes and won't step on her toes. You need a date, you can dance and you can throw off the allure after a moment– your pureblood Occlumency training, I presume. Any questions?"

Neville shook his head slowly, his eyes almost comically wide now. He then took a deep breath and squared his shoulders, a look of determination appearing on his face. "No questions." He said, voice strong and clear, and Hermione smiled, a quick, sharp smile.

"Excellent. I'll let Fleur know. She'll want to catch up with you sometime later today, to start sorting out robes and... other things. We also need to arrange those dance lessons for Harry."

"We both have Wednesday afternoons free," Neville suggested, "and weekends. Though I have to study for Professor Snape's test."

"I'll help you study after." Harry promised.

He already felt lighter as he left the greenhouse, waving goodbye to a very pleased looking Professor Sprout, who he suspected had heard the whole exchange. There was only one more thing he needed to do, and that would require Daphne's help.

That evening, Harry pulled Hermione to the side and took a deep breath as he held out three flowers– a gloxinia, a forsythia and an iris. They meant, according to Daphne, love at first sight, anticipation and hope. "Will you be my date to the Yule Ball?" He asked. He thought he should feel anxious asking the girl he loved to the Ball, but instead he felt calm and at peace. There was a soft smile on Hermione's face, and the gentle kiss she pressed to his cheek was brief and chaste but filled with a breathtaking and humbling love.

"Harry," she murmured, "nothing would make me happier."
A/N: Hope everyone enjoyed the chapter! It was an absolute pain to write— I'm trying and trying to reach the Yule Ball but plot keeps on happening! I'll get there next chapter, though (hopefully).

~ Cheshire Carroll
CHAPTER XLVIII:

Remus's POV:

The muggle library was one of the quieter jobs Remus had had, especially after a year teaching so many children, but it wasn't a bad job. The pay was average, certainly nothing like the wages of a Hogwarts professor, but without records to say he'd even graduated muggle primary school, his options were limited—especially with his mandatory three day absences per month.

He enjoyed the tranquillity of the old building, though. There were three other full-time staff members, all of them women and at least twenty years older then him, and he never had an issue with taking the time off for the full moon.

Of course, it wasn't particularly... stimulating, but it paid the rent and put food on the table so he knew better then to complain, despite the fact he lived in what was unquestionably one of the worst flats in London.

After the goblins had sent him a copy of Sirius's Will and he'd learned that, much to his shock, Sirius had left him a rather sizeable amount of gold, he had considered using it to buy himself a more comfortable place. In the end, he'd been unable to make himself touch the galleons. He didn't deserve Sirius's kindness or his goodwill, generosity and friendship, not after he'd so easily abandoned the other man nearly a decade and a half ago.

Except it hadn't been easy; it had been heart breaking and soul crushing to turn away from Sirius, the man he'd still loved even when he'd thought the man had betrayed their friends to Voldemort. Now, though... now the fact that he hadn't even been able to bear visiting Sirius in Azkaban, to ask him why he'd supposedly betrayed Lily and James and killed Peter, was his bitterest regret. If he had just known the truth...

He tried not to think of Sirius if he could, but his guilty conscience would not allow him to forget the man. He should have done more. He should have been better. He should have been a true friend, the sort of friend Sirius had always been to him, to James and Lily, even to Peter.

With a heavy sigh, Remus finished placing the books that had been returned over the weekend onto their shelves, in their rightful places. The library was empty that afternoon, bar a scattering of students all cramming for some test or rather. It gave him time to resume his pet project as of late.

The image of the little girl with long red hair and purple bruises around her neck haunted him. Perhaps it was her likeness to Lily, perhaps the unexpectedness of the sight of the body in his classroom, when he hadn't been prepared to see one.

Perhaps it was a way to distract himself from the overwhelming guilt that he thought he might one day drown in.

The library he'd applied to work in had an archive, of old newspapers. He assumed that was how Sna—no, Severus, they were all adults now—how Severus had found the newspaper clipping with the photo of the deceased child that he'd sent for him to confirm she was the one Hermione Granger's boggart turned into. The photo had been cut completely from whatever article it had been
attached to, which had left Remus with little reference to go by. And there was a niggling feeling inside him that whispered it was important.

The way Severus had been sending him Wolfsbane potion every month after requesting he tell absolutely nobody about the photo only added to that impression. Remus wasn't above the bribery—that potion was a godsend of unimaginable magnitude—but he was also a Gryffindor, and Gryffindors were stubborn, stupid idiots who ran off and got themselves killed by Dark Lords, and never knew when to leave well enough alone.

Which was why, before sending the photo back to Severus, he'd made a copy, and used an old spell on the original that he remembered Madam Pince teaching him. The crotchety librarian had always liked him; he was quiet and respectful and, when he was younger especially, he'd had so little energy and had constantly been so weak and exhausted that reading in the library was literally the only thing he could do. The spell wasn't a particularly useful one for most people, which was why he doubted Severus even knew it existed. Nothing grand or flashy, it simply told the caster the date of an object. Madam Pince had used it to ascertain how old certain books were, and he'd seen her using it one day and asked.

Knowing the date the newspaper containing the photo had been printed gave him somewhere to start looking. And there was definitely a possibility that he'd chosen this library in particular to apply for a job because of its archive of newspapers he'd wished to gain access to, whilst also being able to pay the rent.

And maybe it was turning into an obsession, finding the identity of the little red-haired girl, but what did it truly matter? He was alone in the world, with no one who'd miss him if he just... disappeared. His entire life revolved around his search for the girl, the letters Harry sent him and the short notes that accompanied his monthly Wolfsbane potion from Severus. It was pathetic, the way he clung to his correspondence with the two. Harry barely knew him and Severus didn't even like him, but in this empty, lonely world they were all he had.

And if he hoped, sometimes, that if he did disappear that perhaps they might notice; that Harry would realise his letters weren't getting a response and that Severus might make note of the fact that the polite thank you letters he always made sure to send had stopped coming.

It wasn't a hope he visited often. The world had never let him have something truly good in his life, had taken all too much pleasure in crushing any spirit he once had to a fine dust. And if finding the name of the little girl with the red hair was the only thing that got Remus out of bed in the mornings, well, the truth was nobody cared.

Not even him.

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Harry's POV:

As the last week of school crept by, Harry found himself faced with a new dilemma, one presented to him by Daphne while they were all lazing about the girls’ dormitory.

"You think I should give an interview? With a reporter?" He asked her very doubtfully. Daphne, who was examining the fresh coat of pale pink nail polish she'd just applied, looked back up at him and nodded.
"I do. Skeeter's article on the champions after that whole Weighing of Wands ceremony was complimentary enough, but she can get very nasty, and as a public figure you definitely want to keep on her good side. Besides, I think you'll like her– she wrote a piece over summer about the International Confederation of Wizards' Conference where she described Dumbledore as an 'obsolete dingbat.'"

"Really?" Harry asked, unable to help his smile. "Well, I guess one interview couldn't hurt."

"You cannot lose your temper with her," Daphne warned. "And if she asks to use a Quick Quotes Quill you need to politely but firmly refuse."

"Alright." Harry nodded and Daphne smiled the smug smile of a cat with the canary.

"Excellent." She said. "I'll arrange it."

"Will we have to wait for a Hogsmeade visit?" He asked, and Daphne laughed.

"Don't worry, Harry– Rita Skeeter has ways of getting into places she shouldn't. We won't have to wait."

Daphne was right. The next morning with breakfast, a nondescript brown owl landed in front of him and dropped a small scroll of parchment directly on his plate of bacon and eggs.

"Er, thanks," he told it, feeding the feathered fiend a piece of his bacon before unrolling the letter.

**Harry Potter,**

_I was thrilled to hear you wanted to give an interview, telling people your side of the story– especially after the excitement of the First Task! How about we meet this afternoon, down by the Hogwarts Quidditch Pitch– say, three o'clock?_

_Yours truly,_

*Rita*

"Does anyone have a quill?" Harry asked. Theo fished one out of his book-bag, along with a pot of ink, and Harry scrawled a short affirmative on the back of the scroll and brushed off the bits of egg stuck to the parchment before handing it back to the owl. "Take that back to Ms. Skeeter, thanks," he told it and tried not to feel too uneasy about the whole thing.

"Rita Skeeter can be a nasty piece of work," Blaise commented. "She doesn't discriminate, at least. Anyone's fair game, to her."

"You're really filling me with confidence about this." Harry muttered.

"I don't think I should go with you," Hermione said, giving him an apologetic look. "I'm not sure I'd be able to stop myself from insulting her or retaliating if she says something... less then complimentary."

"Yeah, no, that's a terrible idea," Theo said, with a slight shudder. "She's vicious when provoked– rips people's reputation to shreds, then sets whatever's left of it on fire."

"Seriously guys– you're really not helping right now!" Harry snapped.

"I'll go with you," Daphne offered. "I can make sure you don't stick your foot in your mouth too horrifically, and we can go over what you'll say at lunch."
"Thanks Daph," Harry said, gratefully.

Throughout the day he could barely concentrate in his classes, too distracted by the sinking feeling in his stomach as three o'clock drew closer and closer. Despite Daphne's efforts at lunch, when the final bell of the day rang he felt like a prisoner about to make his final walk to the hangman's noose.

Saying a glum goodbye to Hermione, Tracey and the guys, he and Daphne left the castle and made their way across the grounds. It was freezing cold and the snow came up past his ankles, but the sky was clear and there was only a light breeze.

Rita Skeeter was already waiting for them, standing out of sight from the castle by the change rooms used by the Quidditch teams. She was wearing a knee-length white fur coat that reminded Harry of the Disney character Cruella De Vil from 'A Hundred and One Dalmatians', and her sticky red lipstick and long black boots with pointed toes only added to the likeness. A sleek, pointed witch's hat was perched precariously on her windswept blond curls and she was holding a crocodile skin handbag tightly in one hand. Her nose and ears were pink from the cold, and as he and Daphne drew closer Harry could count three gold teeth in her wide smile.

"Harry Potter, what an honor," she practically gushed, reaching out with the hand not clutching the handbag to shake his. Her fingers were thick and ended in two-inch nails, painted crimson. Harry tried and failed not to be intimidated.

"Thank you for taking the time to meet us, Miss Skeeter," he said, remembering Daphne's coaching during lunch. "Um, this is Daphne– Daphne Greengrass. She's one of my closest friends."

"Lord Greengrass's daughter?" Rita asked, her eyes seeming to light up and her smile widening like she'd just received a particularly juicy piece of gossip.

"Yes," Daphne smiled prettily, her tone a light, flattering one Harry hadn't heard her use before. "I'm quite the fan of your work– when Harry said he was meeting you this afternoon, I simply had to come along!"

"Always lovely to meet a fan," Rita said, a bit dismissively in Harry's opinion. Daphne didn't let it deter her, her polite smile only growing sweeter as she continued.

"Your piece on the International Confederation of Wizards conference very interesting– I especially enjoyed how you pointed out how too many old-fashioned ideas and traditions have become irrelevant to the modern day witch or wizard and that the insistence to carry on with them regardless is turning our society stagnant. And I completely agree with the point you made about how it's time for certain older members of the ICW to step back and make way for new blood, younger witches and wizards with fresh ideas and a better understanding of what our race needs as we move towards the new millennium."

"That's very insightful of you, Miss Greengrass," Rita said, eyes suddenly a lot sharper. Her expression was one of calculated consideration as she looked at the two of them, no longer the simpering countenance or dismissiveness she'd worn in turn before.

"Our society needs change, but at the same time it also needs to be preserved. Old ways and customs are being lost, replaced by muggle traditions that have never belonged to our people; it's a tragic loss to our proud culture and history. Yet we also cannot remain in the past, as the muggle world advances we must too– we need to find a medium between both, and the old witches and wizards that currently make up the majority of the ICW are too set in their ways to ever be able to achieve that." Daphne said.
"Yes, yes, very insightful indeed," murmured Rita, and there was a gleam of respect in her shrewd eyes now. "Are you interested in politics too, Mr. Potter?"

"Um, please call me Harry." Harry said, a bit awkwardly, "and yeah, I am. I mean, I don't think I'd like to work in politics, I'm not really suited for it, but I agree with Daph, and I'd definitely support her if she decided to get involved with them after Hogwarts."

"Can I quote you on that, Mr. Potter?" Rita asked, and Harry nodded.

"Yeah. Just... Daphne's one of my best friends, but she's just a friend. Nothing more." He said, firmly.

"Yes, I believe you already have a girlfriend– the lovely Miss Hermione Granger. Tell me, how does she feel about you competing in the Tournament?" Rita asked.

"Well, worried, I guess. But proud too? She was really happy after the First Task. Mostly that I didn't end up burned to a crisp, but she was also really pleased I did well." Harry answered.

"What about your parents? How do you think they would have felt about you competing? It's very dangerous– do you think they'd be proud?" Rita probed. Harry shifted slightly, uncomfortable. He didn't like thinking about his parents much, if he was being honest with himself. It made him feel sick and unhappy, his heart heavy with the knowledge that he'd betrayed them; that he'd betrayed the cause they'd died for– died to protect him from the same man he'd turned to instead.

"Harry?" Rita asked, her tone softer, though Harry knew her compassion was probably faked to make him feel more at ease. Still, he took a deep breath, steeled up his courage and started talking.

"HARRY POTTER TELLS ALL!

By Rita Skeeter

This reporter brings to you, loyal readers, the long awaited first ever interview with the Boy-Who-Lived himself!

When I first met our favorite celebrity, I was shocked by the humble, thoughtful boy who greeted me and asked to be called by his first name. Unfailingly polite, Harry didn't even flinch away from the harder questions this reporter posed.

"I think my parents would be proud," he told me, choking up a bit as we broached the topic of his war hero parents, Lily and James Potter. "I've always been so proud to call them my mum and dad," he confided, "and not because of the fame– honestly, that's usually more trouble then it's worth– but because every day when I wake up, I know I'm alive and here because of their love and their bravery and their sacrifice."

I was then shocked and horrified to learn that our savior was forced to relive his parents' noble sacrifice every time he got close to the Dementors that were posted at Hogwarts last year. "My dad told mum to take me and run," Harry told me, in the first official recount of what really happened on that Halloween night that none of us will ever forget. "He told her that he'd try to hold off You-Know-Who as long as he could, so we could get away. And when the door to my nursery was blown open, mum tried to shield me with her body. You-Know-Who offered to spare her if she just stepped aside. Three times he told her, but she refused each time and begged him to kill her instead and spare me."
I won't deny there were tears in my eyes as Harry bravely recounted his parents' death. "People always call me a hero, a savior," Harry said after, his striking green eyes so solemn as they met my own. "But I think my parents were the real heroes of that night."

Following the seriousness of that heartbreaking tale, it was almost a relief to turn to brighter topics. When asked about the Triwizard Tournament, Harry confessed to being nervous but determined to do well. When I then questioned how his girlfriend, the lovely Miss Hermione Granger, felt about him competing he blushed charmingly. "She's worried, I guess," he said, "but proud too– she was really happy after the First Task. Mostly that I didn't end up burned to a crisp, but she was also really pleased I did well." When asked if Miss Granger was to be his date to the Yule Ball, Harry blushed again but confirmed he would be opening the Ball with her on his arm.

To my surprise, politics also came up in our conversation. While Harry admitted he could never become a politician, saying he wasn't suited for it, he displayed a keen interest in the matter. "Our society needs change," Daphne Greengrass, a close friend of Harry's and a fan of yours truly, claimed, "but at the same time it also needs to be preserved. It's time for certain older members of the ICW to step back and make way for new blood, younger witches and wizards with fresh ideas and a better understanding of what our race needs as we move towards the new millennium." Harry agreed completely with Miss Greengrass's insightful words, stating that if the young witch ever chose to go into politics after graduating Hogwarts then she would have his full support.

To conclude our interview, I asked a question that I believe all of us have wondered at some point in time over the last thirteen years. Does Harry believe that You-Know-Who is really dead? "I can't say for sure," Harry admitted, "but thirteen years is a long time, and it's my hope that this new generation can grow up without ever having to know the darkness of war."

And that, loyal readers, concludes the first ever official interview of Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, the one who saved us all.

"That is so disgustingly sappy." Draco snorted. "'It's my hope that this new generation can grow up without ever having to know the darkness of war'– urgh, you are so full of shit and people are just going to eat that up! What happened to just talking about the Tournament?"

"We got distracted by Daphne's politics," Harry said with a shrug as he helped himself to a piece of buttered toast. Around him he could hear people talking about the article, some of the younger students from the other houses actually standing up to look over at him.

"She included part of my quotes." Daphne said, sounding very smug about it.

"Is that why you wanted me to meet her in the first place?" Harry asked, the realization slowly dawning over him. Daphne smiled her sharp, pretty smile.

"I meant everything I said about needing to stay on Rita's good side, and an exclusive interview being the best way to do so. The fact I had an agenda of my own is irrelevant."

"You are such a Slytherin." Harry sighed, shaking his head at the golden-haired girl.

"Oh Harry," Daphne said, fanning herself with her copy of the Prophet, "save the compliments for your girlfriend– 'the lovely Miss Hermione Granger'."

"Oh shove off, all of you." Harry grumbled as the whole evil lot of them just laughed. "I honestly have no idea why I'm friends with you all."

Draco scoffed. "Who are you kidding? Without us you'd be some sort of pathetically inept doormat
Gryffindor with an overblown hero complex who clung onto Dumbledore's every word like the old fool was Merlin himself."

"Sadly," Harry winced, "you're probably completely right." Daphne patted his cheek consolingly.

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Severus's POV:

"You-Know-Who offered to spare her if she just stepped aside. Three times he told her, but she refused each time and begged him to kill her instead."

The words wouldn't stop replaying in his mind. They hadn't since Severus had first read them in that damned interview Harry had with Skeeter that had turned his entire world upside down.

For thirteen years he'd thought the Dark Lord had broken the promise he'd made him. For thirteen years he'd hated his old master for what he'd done.

"You-Know-Who offered to spare her if she just stepped aside"

Thirteen years of thinking he had as good as killed her, and it was all unraveling before him. The Dark Lord had listened to him. He had tried to spare Lily; stupid, stubborn, beautiful, loyal Lily.

A tear dripped down his cheek as he bowed his head, resting it on his hands. He could feel the stinging moisture in his eyes but ignored it.

The Dark Lord had been willing to spare her, to spare a "Mudblood" member of the Order and a thorn in his side, because Severus had asked him to. But Severus... he knew Lily. He knew who she was, what she valued beyond anything and mattered the most, and for her that was family. Family by blood, family by choice; Lily's family had always meant the world to her and she'd faced down the Darkest wizard in magical history to keep hers safe.

When given the option between herself and her son, Lily would use her own body to shield Harry every time and die without a single regret.

Severus wanted to hate her for it. He wanted to hate her for throwing away her life, when the world without her in it was a darker, grimmer place. But he could never hate her.

And, Merlin damn it, he actually understood. If Harry was in danger, Severus wouldn't use his body as a shield for the boy because of the Vow he'd made to Dumbledore or because of any supposed Life Debt he owed James Potter, he'd do it because he cared for that troublesome, little scoundrel.

Severus had never planned on liking the boy. Had fully intended on hating Harry, in fact. Seeing him walk into the Great Hall that first time, lined up with all those other petrified first years, the only things he'd really seen was that messy hair and those stupid glasses that Harry had managed to get rid of at some point– and good riddance.

When he first saw Harry, all he'd been able to see was James Potter.

"My dad told mum to take me and run"

Severus had hated James Potter even more then he'd hated Sirius Black. Black had always been the
worse bully, the stupid son of a bitch had had a massive Slytherin complex with that family of his, always needing to prove he was different when he was just as cruel, petty, hot-tempered and bloody psychopathic as the rest of the Blacks. But Potter... Potter had been the one who'd won the heart of the woman he'd loved more then anything else in the world, and for that Severus hated him more then he ever could Black.

But it was proving very hard to hate the man who had sacrificed himself for Lily. For Harry.

He would never like James Potter, never be able to think of him and not grimace– too much bad blood had happened between them for that. But perhaps... perhaps it was time to let old grudges go. To move on and stop clinging to hatred for the ghost of a memory.

James Potter was dead, killed because of information that Severus himself had passed on to his Lord. Black was dead, murdered by his own godson in exchange for the true traitor of that Halloween night. Pettigrew was locked up in Azkaban and if the Dark Lord didn't just leave him there to rot, well, Severus was very confident the traitor wouldn't last long freed– if Harry or Hermione didn't end the vermin, then he'd do it himself; Pettigrew had sold Lily to the Dark Lord in return for his life, and Severus would make sure that the miserable remainder of that life he had so prioritized would be agonizing enough he wished he had died rather then betray Lily and Potter.

And Lupin... Remus Lupin, the sole remaining "marauder". He was alone and he was lonely. It was pitifully obvious from the unnecessary letters the werewolf sent him each month, thanking him for the latest batch of Wolfsbane and inquiring after his health. So desperate for someone that he didn't care who it was, just that they wrote back to him.

But what did Lupin have left? His friends were all dead and he was practically a leper to the Magical community. A quick *Avada Kedavra* might even be a mercy.

And now he was feeling sorry for him. Severus exhaled sharply through his teeth. Supplying the Wolfsbane was more then enough– it was overly generous, in fact. There was no need to go any further. They were not, after all, *friends*. For most of their lives they'd been enemies, in fact. They had been in opposing Houses at school and after graduating they had fought on opposing sides of the war. Remus had been one of his childhood tormenters before Severus's skill in potions had gained him enough allies in Slytherin to be able to fight back against the Marauders.

There literally was no reason why Severus should even entertain the idea of actually replying to one of Lupin's pathetic letters, practically reeking of desperation. He didn't need to defend himself.

Except he was. And it wasn't working. Because he, better then anyone, knew all too well what it felt like to be so utterly alone in the world.

Severus gritted his teeth, furious with himself. Fine, he thought grimly. Fine. He would reply to the latest letter, but he wouldn't be doing it out of the good of his heart– Harry needed everyone he could get in his corner. Lupin might not be worth much, but he was still an extra wand– and an extra body that could shield Lily's boy should it ever once more come down to that.

*Lupin,*

*I am physically well, though the holidays cannot arrive quickly enough. I will be immensely glad to have a break from teaching the dunderheads I have the misfortune of calling 'students' how to not blow up the classroom. It is one area, I will admit, that I am having very little luck with.*

*Did you read the article by Rita Skeeter in the Daily Prophet? Harry gave an interview. Shockingly, it didn't turn out to be a disaster– he must have made a good impression on her. That*
woman has the sort of vicious tenacity any Slytherin would be proud of. She also happens to be petty and vindictive, which is never a good combination. We better hope that Harry doesn't manage to get himself on her bad side. Actually, forget Harry— it's Hermione we need to be concerned about. She and Skeeter will either hate each other on sight or form a terrifying friendship and take over the world.

I have attached a copy of the article in case you missed it.

I trust you are well.

Regards,

S. Snape

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Neville's POV:

Neville staggered to a halt outside of greenhouse five and doubled over, resting his hands on his thighs as he gasped for breath. His legs were shaking, his chest felt like it was on fire and he thought he might actually be sick, but he was grinning so hard that his face hurt.

Today was the first time he'd managed to jog two whole laps around Hogwarts and the Black Lake without stopping a single time.

Once his breathing was more under control, Neville started his cool down walk, a lap around the Hogwarts greenhouses. It was his favorite part of jogging, this walk, because he could feel the burn in his chest, the pounding of his heart and the ache in his legs, and it made him feel like he was floating.

Fleur had mentioned something about chemicals in the brain being released by exercise, but he couldn't remember exactly what it was she'd said, as at the time he'd been learning how to use something she called a "jump rope" where he basically jumped up and down while swinging a piece of rope, the ends each held in one hand, over his head again and again. He had to time it exactly right so that he jumped at the same time as the rope hit the ground, otherwise he'd land on top of it and Fleur would make him start all over again.

That was her teaching style, really. If he messed up, it was back to the start. And it was exhausting— as well as "jump rope", there were push ups, squats, a horrifying combination of the two, and so much more. By the end of a session with her he'd be too exhausted and too sore to do anything but lay on the ground and try to catch his breath, but he didn't think he'd ever been happier.

All Neville's life people had told him that he should do better and that he should be better, but before Fleur and Harry and Hermione, nobody had looked at him and said I know you can do better; I know you can be better. They believed in him, in "loser Longbottom" as his housemates called him. They looked at him and they believed he could be better. And for them, Neville would be. For them he would get up every morning at five to run his laps around the school and its grounds. For them he would meet with Fleur every afternoon to work out with her for two exhausting hours (apparently the food at Hogwarts was too heavy, and she was worried about fitting into her dress-robes). For them he would run a hundred laps, would jump that evil rope a thousand times, would do push ups until his arms collapsed.
For them, Neville would become the person they knew he could be when they looked at him.

And, Neville had been surprised to find, he sort of did enjoy the exercise. Not so much while he was doing it but afterwards, even when he was sweaty and exhausted, he'd feel like he just scored a perfect O on a test.

Since starting to exercise, Neville had found that he felt stronger in general, that he had more energy throughout the day and could focus better in class. Professor Snape hadn't yelled at him for ruining a potion for nine whole days– a new record!

Fleur had also changed his diet. Instead of scrambled eggs with bacon and buttered toast and a glass of pumpkin juice in the morning, he had yoghurt with fresh berries. For snacks during the day he had fruit, dark chocolate and nuts. For lunch he had sandwiches with the sort of bread that had grains in it. For dinner he'd have fish or chicken with vegetables, sometimes fresh and sometimes boiled, and dark chocolate for dessert.

It was hard to not serve himself up all the delicious food he had been enjoying for years, the food the people around him were shovelling in their faces in delight, but the thought of Fleur and Harry and Hermione, the thought of how proud they would be, of their faith in him, gave Neville the strength to turn away from the treacle tarts and roasts dripping with gravy and gooey chocolate puddings.

He could already feel the difference in himself. As well as having more energy and better focus, the robes he'd bought at the start of the year were getting loose– if he kept up what he was doing, he was going to have to write to gran about getting them altered.

Neville shuddered a bit at the thought of having to write that letter. On second thoughts, maybe he'd ask Fleur if she knew any good tailoring spells. She had talked about adjusting the dress-robes she'd ordered for him to his frame so maybe she'd know something that would work.

"Up early again, dear?"

"Oh! Professor Sprout!" Neville spun slightly to see the professor standing near the door of greenhouse two. "I– I didn't see you." He said, blushing a bit.

"Lost in your thoughts, were you?" She asked, smiling kindly at him, and Neville nodded sheepishly. She chuckled. "Well, since you're here, would you mind giving me a hand?" She asked and Neville immediately agreed. He loved helping out in the greenhouses and Professor Sprout was easily his favorite teacher.

Together, Neville and Professor Sprout got to work on repotting the fanged geranium sprouts. The seedlings had grown their first set of fangs and kept trying to bite each other, so it was time to separate them into their own pots. It wasn't particularly difficult– they wouldn't be able to start drinking blood until their third set of fangs grew through– and Neville happily settled into the comfortable repetitiveness of it.

Nearly an hour had passed by the time they'd finished and Neville straightened up from tipping the last cup of lamb's blood over the soil. Until their third fang set grew, the seedlings relied on getting their nutrients through the soil so it was important to keep them fed or they'd starve.

"Thank you, Neville!" Professor Sprout beamed happily at him. "I honestly don't know what I'd do without you." Neville immediately blushed. He wasn't used to teachers– or adults in general, really– giving him praise, and even after four years he still went red every time Professor Sprout paid him a compliment.
"Are you excited about the Yule Ball, dear?" she asked as they started packing up. "The whole school's in quite the dither over it, but I haven't heard a peep from you."

"I'm scared," Neville confessed to her, "everyone will be looking when Fleur and I open the dance and I'm scared I'll mess it all up." His shoulders slumped as shame washed over him. "I'm a terrible Gryffindor." He said, miserably. It was no wonder that Ron, Seamus and Dean called him "loser Longbottom" and said he didn't belong. He wasn't brave at all; he was a coward.

"Do you know what I think, Neville?" Professor Sprout said, thoughtfully. "I think that doing something when you are afraid is much braver then not being afraid at all. It's my belief that true courage is when you're faced with something that makes you want to run away or curl up in a little ball and hide, but instead you stand tall and face it anyway. Are you planning on skipping the Ball?"

"Never," Neville said, horrified by the very thought. "Fleur's relying on me– I couldn't let her down like that!"

"And that, Neville, is why you are a true Gryffindor." Professor Sprout said, with her warm, motherly smile that made his chest tingle. "And it's why I'm always so proud of you. Even when you're afraid, you keep going. This world has been unspeakably cruel to you, but you've never let it defeat you. You've always stood back up and kept going, and I think that is true bravery. Out of all the Gryffindors who live in that Tower, you are the most Gryffindor of them all."

Neville was blushing so hard he thought his face might catch fire. His eyes were also suspiciously watery, and there was a tightness in his throat and a warmth in his chest that wasn't from exercising.

He didn't think he'd ever be able to tell Professor Sprout that she was the closest thing he'd ever had to a mother, but Neville was pretty sure he didn't have to– she already knew.

"Will you save me a dance?" He blurted out, before he could stop himself. "I promise I won't step on your toes." He added. Professor Sprout laughed.

"I would be delighted. Why, I'll be the envy of all the professors, having a handsome young lad like you taking little old me for a spin on the dance floor."

Neville wasn't sure he'd ever stop blushing at this rate so he was sort of relieved when he had to say goodbye and rush off back to the castle in order to shower and get changed into his uniform in time for class.

He managed to stop blushing before he reached the portrait hole but the warmth in his chest lasted all day.

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Harry's POV:

The Hogwarts staff, demonstrating a continued desire to impress the visitors from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, seemed determined to show the castle at its very best this Yule. When the decorations went up Harry noticed that they were the most stunning he had seen so far inside the school. Everlasting icicles had been attached to the banisters of the marble staircase; the Great Hall was bedecked with everything from luminous holly berries to real, hooting, golden owls (the usual twelve Christmas trees notably missing, Harry was smug to see), and the suits of armor had all
been bewitched to sing carols whenever anyone passed them.

It was quite something to hear "Solstice Evergreen" and "Wizards of Winter" and "Lady Greensleeves" sung by an empty helmet that only knew half the words. Several times, poor Filch had to extract Peeves from inside the armor, where he had taken to hiding, filling in the gaps in the songs with lyrics of his own invention, all of which were very rude. Iago, Mrs Norris and their assorted, now half-grown kittens had taken to prowling the corridors, looking for mischief makers and rule breakers. It wasn't unusual to see students with bleeding scratches on their hands from defending themselves against Iago and the kittens while Mrs Norris scampered off to fetch Filch.

The school was served a good bit of entertainment when Ron Weasley made a complete idiot out of himself trying to ask Fleur to the Ball and Harry couldn't wait to see the looks on people's faces when Neville got to walk out with Fleur on his arm. It was going to be spectacular and Nev was going to be the envy of pretty much every male in the room— and a handful of girls too.

Daphne had agreed to be Viktor's date, delighted by the opportunity to be escorted to the Ball by the international Quidditch star even with there being no romance involved. Draco, in an effort to escape Pansy, had asked Daphne's sister Astoria, who was only a year younger then them. Blaise, who as far as Harry knew had never actually shown any sort of romantic interest in another human being at all— and he lived in a dorm full of boys, there was a lot of discussion about girls and even the odd lad— had asked Luna so that Astoria would have a friend there her age.

Luna and Astoria, along with the Carrow twins Flora and Hestia who were also third years, had all bonded spectacularly following Luna's introduction to the three Slytherins during the Malfoy's Gala. Upon learning that both Luna and Astoria were going to the Ball, Flora and Hestia had straight up told Greg and Vince they'd be their plus one's for the night. Neither boy had argued, probably too stunned at their good luck.

Tracey was going with Yosef Borisov, one of the Bulgarian students; the brother to Nikolina, the girl who was betrothed to Theo's Durmstrang cousin Sashko. Tracey and Yosef had gotten to know each other over meals at the Slytherin table and Harry was pleased to see how happy his friend was that Yosef had asked her to be his date for the evening. Hermione had told him about the conversation she'd had with Tracey months ago, about how to tell somebody that you liked them. He hoped that Tracey had either moved on from whoever it had been, or had worked things out some other way.

Theo was also going with someone from Durmstrang, a girl he knew through Sashko. Anastasiya Vasilka had pale eyes, a sharp jaw and hair so blonde it looked almost white. She appeared very much the ice queen, but Theo reassured them "Ana was a good sort, just shy around strangers". Harry thought Anastasiya looked more like she wanted to murder them all then possibly drink their blood, but by now he was pretty used to the women in his life being beautiful and terrifying and possibly homicidal.

While not particularly beautiful or terrifying, Pansy had certainly been very near homicidal in her fury over not been asked by Draco to the Ball. Her status as a Pureblood from one of the Ancient and Noble Houses of Britain meant she'd have no trouble getting a date among the Slytherins— or among the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs who placed stock in such things; people tended to think that blood and family lines only mattered to Slytherins, but there were a surprising amount of Purebloods from those two houses who also cared a great deal— but it was Draco who she'd really wanted. In the end she'd had to settle with Cassius Warrington, one of the Slytherin chasers, and she was not happy about it.

She also wasn't the only one from their year going with a member of the Slytherin Quidditch team.
Millicent—the slightly large but very comely girl who Harry hadn't interacted much even though they were in the same year as she and the other female fourth year Slytherin, Lilyan Moon, weren't that close to Daph or Tracey—was going with Harry's captain, Graham Montague. Lilyan was going with Adrian Pucey, one of the other chasers.

With most of the students paired off, the anticipation in the castle was nearly palpable. The last day of term already promised to be an exciting one, but Harry and Hermione had decided to make it just that much more exciting and unforgettable—especially for the visiting schools; Madam Maxime and Karkaroff in particular.

On the night before the last day of term, Harry and Hermione enacted their first real prank since the unmitigated disaster that had been bringing the House Banners to life.

In a bit of spare time, Hermione had brewed up a clever little potion she'd found in a library book and together, while hidden from view under his invisibility cloak, they snuck down to the Great Hall under the cover of darkness.

With the help of magic, they poured the potion over the stone floor and gleefully watched it spread, coating the stone in a clear sheen that gradually sunk in so it was undetectable to the naked eye.

Earlier that day they had decided to warn Snape, because, as Hermione put it, he might actually kill them both if he was caught in it. Harry had stayed back after Potions, as they both agreed he was slightly less likely to take points from Harry, and innocently inquired if the professor knew any spells that would stop a transfer potion. With a polite smile, he had then added that rumor had it people were bound to find themselves in a 'sticky' situation at breakfast the following morning.

Snape had pinched the bridge of his nose and given him a long-suffering look before wordlessly pointing to the door of the classroom. Harry had got the message and quickly made himself scarce.

With the potion in place Harry and Hermione returned back to the Slytherin dorms, both of them looking forward to the chaos of the next morning and Dumbledore's ensuing embarrassment in front of the foreign visitors.

Sure enough, the following morning when he, Hermione and their accompanying housemates arrived up at the Hall for breakfast, Harry nearly fell over he started laughing so hard.

A rather shocking number of people in the Entrance Hall had found themselves stuck in weird positions, including three of the Hogwarts professors and that tosser Karkaroff. When the people snickering at the misfortune of those who had stepped in the Entrance Hall tried to leave, though, they quickly discovered that it wasn't just the Entrance Hall that had been coated. Yells and shouts rang out as more and more people discovered they were stuck, and Harry and the others had to edge out of the hall and run back down to the Common Room, where they collapsed, laughing their heads off.

Unfortunately, Dumbledore had apparently managed to perform the counter charm with ease when he arrived for breakfast. Still, it had been wonderfully amusing and Karkaroff getting stuck really had been a stroke of luck; an entirely humiliating situation for both headmasters involved.

It was, in Harry's opinion, a high note to finish the term on. And the Yule holidays promised to be even better.
I'm not sure how it's possible, but I still haven't reached the Yule Ball. I'm actually genuinely shocked. Still, I hope you enjoyed the chapter!

~Cheshire Carroll
Part Four: Goblet of Fire - Chapter XLIX

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER XLIX:

Harry's POV:

Due to the very heavy load of homework that the fourth years had been given for the holidays, when term ended Harry spent most of the week leading up to Yule getting it all done.

Unsurprisingly, the Slytherin common room was hardly less crowded than during term-time as a majority of the students had signed up to stay for the Yule Ball; it seemed to have shrunk slightly too, as its inhabitants were being so much rowdier than usual as excitement for the upcoming night grew.

Snow was falling thickly upon the castle and its grounds now. The pale blue Beauxbatons carriage looked like a large, chilly, frosted pumpkin next to the iced gingerbread house that was Hagrid’s cabin, while the Durmstrang ship's portholes were glazed with ice, the rigging white with frost. The house-elves down in the kitchen were outdoing themselves with a series of rich, warming stews and savory puddings and all the fireplaces were constantly lit and crackling merrily.

On the morning of Yule, Harry awoke very suddenly to a rather enthusiastic morning blowjob. Spending the next half hour recovering from having his brain sucked out of his... down there meant the boys' dorm was empty by the time he and Hermione started opening their presents– both piles of which, he noticed, were located at the foot of his bed. Harry was pretty sure Snape knew Hermione was spending every night in his bed– or him in hers– but so far their Head of House hadn't said anything about it and Harry was definitely okay for it to stay that way.

Most of his presents were the usual– sweets and chocolates, Quidditch gear and the odd fancy quill with a gold nib– but this year he'd also gotten a rather interesting book on human anatomy from Bellatrix that was very thoroughly annotated with disturbingly detailed notes and corrections on locations of nerve clusters and tendons and arteries, as well as little "gems" such as where to avoid cutting if you "didn't want them to lose consciousness and bleed out while you were carving them apart". And, of course, there was her written reassurance at the start that everything inside was based on her own firsthand experience, making the book somewhat of a horrifying, grisly memoir.

Harry still wasn't sure why Bellatrix had chosen him to take under her psychotic wing when out of him, Tom and Hermione he was the only one who didn't possess some form of sadism or homicidal impulse.

Hermione's gifts were mostly the same as his, except with books in the place of the Quidditch gear. There were a couple of unique presents in there too– Fleur had given her a diamond-based nail polish that was, apparently, laced with poison. It was not meant to be lethal, Fleur had written in the accompanying note, but as a last resort it could be considered gloriously effective. Harry, while impressed by the whole concept of it, reminded himself to always check if Hermione was wearing it before they had sex– she liked to use her nails. Hermione was sort of like a cat in that regard; she liked to dig her nails in, cling too tight, bite, scratch– all as if she was a feline marking her territory.
From Tom, Hermione had received a necklace– a "choker", to be precise, which Harry thought was a fairly accurate representation of the pair's sex life. It was a band of white lace with little pearls and looked pretty and delicate and expensive. "I'm fairly certain this is a collar," Hermione mused as they both looked down at it. "A metaphorical one, anyway– it's a bit too flimsy. I could probably charm it to be unbreakable, though."

"Tom's kind of... possessive?" Harry offered up and Hermione rolled her eyes. "Understatement of the century." She muttered. Harry thought about the half-faded bite marks on his collarbone and shoulders, the yellowing bruises on his hips and half-healed scratches down his back and felt she shouldn't really be throwing stones from her glass house, but he was definitely smart enough not to say anything. "What did he get you?" Hermione asked, looking up from the choker... collar... thing.

"Some kind of weird bracelet," he told her, digging through the wrapping paper to find it to show her. It was made of leather that had been worked to the point of perfect softness, black in colour and looked to be comfortably flexible. It was around two and a half inches thick, with a half inch silver buckle at the centre and a small, silver metal plate on the side opposite the buckle that looked like something could be attached to it, though Harry wasn't sure what. Upon seeing the odd bracelet, Hermione shook her head looking equal parts amused and exasperated. "Oh, that cheeky bastard. He probably thinks he's being subtle."

"Um." Harry said, because if Tom was trying to be subtle then he'd halfway succeeded at least. Hermione looked like she wanted to roll her eyes again but refrained from doing so.

"Harry," she said instead, her voice patient, "he gave me a collar and you a wrist cuff– see that metal plate? It's meant to have a silver O-ring attached. Honestly, that possessive wanker's message could not be any clearer then if he spelled it out for us; he's saying that we're his, that we belong to him. Well, that, or he wants to explore BDSM." She added, in an offhand manner. Harry immediately blanched, dropping the– wrist cuff?– onto the bed. "No thank you!"

"Well of course not. You two haven't even shagged yet." Hermione said, tone all matter-of-fact. Only her twitching lips gave away her amusement. "It's good manners to save the kinky stuff until at least the third date."

"I don't think I'll ever be into that sort of stuff," Harry said with a bit of a twitch, because he got the feeling that Tom was– probably Hermione too; they both had a tendency to get... rough during sex. "I really don't understand it, you know. BDSM." He admitted a bit awkwardly, because he'd heard boys discussing things like that in the Quidditch locker-room and in the dorms and it had always confused him. He'd never want to hit someone or call them derogatory names and try to humiliate them, and he didn't know why anyone would– or how it could even be considered pleasurable. It just didn't make sense to him.

"How is it right or– or ethical to do stuff like that?" he asked Hermione. "How can you, like, ethically degrade someone?" Hermione looked very thoughtful, seeming to realise that her playful comment had sparked up a very real concern of his, because Harry was now getting anxious that she and Tom might want him to do stuff like that and he couldn't. He just couldn't.

"I think the only acceptable answer to how you can ethically degrade someone," she said, slowly, "is with that person's enthusiastic consent. If you're into it and you want someone to do it, then it's not actually 'degrading', even if an outside observer might call it that. It's just a way of interacting
that makes both parties incredibly turned on, and that's usually the goal."

"You sound like you're speaking from experience." Harry hesitantly pointed out. Hermione shrugged.

"Well, you know Tom and I haven't done anything formal, but we have... leaned towards that direction, I suppose. Being sexually submissive wouldn't be something I'd want to do all the time, but I can see that it would have a lot of positives going for it if I was in the mood. When you're in the submissive role, you don't have to make any decisions, an idea which I sometimes find soothing— after all, we both know that I'm a perfectionist with control issues. The times when Tom says 'first you're going to go down on me, then I'm going to hold you down and fuck you until you come and then I'm going to come on your face', it's like; alright, let's do that then, because now I don't have to worry about what's coming next or whether he's enjoying what I'm doing or any of the countless other things a corner of my mind is always worrying about. It's basically like a day at the spa, complete with a complimentary facial."

"That was terrible." Harry said, pulling a face, and she laughed.

"I make no apologies. And like I said, that isn't exactly actual BDSM, but it is leaning towards the direction of it."

"You two don't want me to do that sort of... stuff, right?" Harry asked, after a moment of contemplative silence between them, because that's where his real worry was.

"Harry, I never, ever want you to do or watch anything you're not completely, one hundred per-cent comfortable with," Hermione said firmly, steely in her resolve as she looked him straight in the eye. "And fuck whatever Tom says— he's got issues, and coming from me that's certainly saying something, but if you tell him to stop he will stop and I will always be there to make him if he doesn't get his shit together fast enough. And besides," she added with a light shrug, "as I said, Tom and I haven't actually done anything formal. If he brings it up then sure, I might be interested, but it's not something I need."

"Alright," Harry said, relieved. "Because I really don't think I'm into pain and stuff." He shifted slightly in place as Hermione's eyes focused back on him. "What?"

"You do realise BDSM isn't just whips and chains and humiliation, right Harry?" She asked slowly and Harry shrugged nervously because yeah, that was pretty much what he'd thought it was going by the boys' talk he'd overheard. From Hermione's expression, though, it seemed he was about to be lectured on just how very, very wrong he was.

"Harry," Hermione said and Harry almost winced because, yes; that was her lecture voice. "Let me tell you right now that BDSM isn't about just tying someone up and thrashing the shit out of them. In its most basic form, it's about erotic and sexual acts involving mind-sets of domination and submission gained through either assuming or letting go of control. Pain and humiliation are only two different flavours of it; there are so many other options and varieties out there. BDSM doesn't even have to involve sex when it comes down to it. You don't have to hit or tie up or fuck someone to dominate them, after all."

"So... it's about control?" Harry said, slowly.

"More trust, I think," Hermione said, after taking a moment to consider. "Though in the end, it's all about pleasure, isn't it? People do it because for them it feels good. It fulfils some need. And the most important part of all is that it's safe and consensual. An experienced dom can and will pick you apart until you're nothing but a quivering mess, but— and this is the important part— afterwards
they'll put all your pieces back together, making you a real person again."

"You really know a lot about this." Harry said. His cheeks were hot and Hermione's lips curved into a familiar, teasing smile at the sight of his blushing.

"Did you like me talking about that?" She asked, her tone all wicked suggestion.

"Hermione," he muttered, looking down at his hands, embarrassed and uncomfortable, and Hermione sighed.

"Sorry," She apologised. "And you're right; I do know a lot about it. I did some research, after that time I let Tom choke me and I didn't hate it. I don't think having my oxygen cut off did much for me, but the trust I was putting in Tom was... exciting, I suppose? I trusted him not to go too far and he didn't. Well, he didn't kill me at least. Of course, what we did hardly followed proper BDSM etiquette, but I felt it was still important to learn more about the practice as a whole. In the end, to enjoy mixing a little violence in with sexuality is very human of us. It's a rather primal urge that can be very enjoyable when done right."

"So," Harry said slowly, trying to wrap his brain around it all, "you like being the, er, submissive?"

Hermione shook her head. "I think I'm more of what they call a switch," she explained. "I'm fairly certain I'd enjoy both roles. Probably a little too much, in the case of domination."

"Could you, though?" Harry asked. "I mean, you're pretty small. Both Tom and I are bigger then you, and neither of us exactly have a good track record of doing what we're told."

Hermione grinned at him. "You realise no part of what you just said means I couldn't be a domme for you."

"But it would make it less likely, right?" Harry pressed and her grin widened.

"Oh Harry," she said, a curl of laughter in her voice, "I bet with the right practice I could dominate the ever-loving fuck out of someone twice your size."

"You're a natural at magic, brilliantly clever and fit as anything, but without magic you're physically weaker then Tom and I— that's not a criticism or anything, it's a fact." Harry argued, though he wasn't sure why he was making the conversation go on longer. Except that it was sort of interesting. Purely in a theoretical approach, of course. He did feel sort of hot and flushed but that was definitely just from the embarrassment of talking with Hermione about something that was considered by most to be quite taboo.

"It's not about physical size, Harry," Hermione said calmly, "it's about presence."

"You couldn't hold me down," he argued, reaching down to pick up the wrist cuff, wanting to look at it closer now he actually understood what it was. His fingertips had just brushed against the smooth leather when Hermione said sharply,

"Stop moving!"

Harry froze, confused. What was wrong? Had Tom put a curse on the cuff? What was it?

Hermione started to slowly inch her way across the bed, over to where he was sitting cross-legged. "Shh... don't move, love..." she breathed and Harry was genuinely very concerned now. When Hermione came within arm's reach, she touched his wrist gently, moving his hand away from the cuff then guiding it so it was resting palm down on his lap. She then reached for his other hand
and did the same, so his left palm was pressed against the back of his right hand. Harry looked at her, his eyes wide with confusion.

"What are you--?"

"Hush," Hermione chided him, "I'm almost done, love." With slow and deliberate movements, she picked up a long piece of festive green ribbon from the pile of discarded wrapping paper and wound it around his arms from elbow to wrists, binding them together. She then tied the ends of the ribbon neatly, just tight enough for him to feel it and arranging it into a bow, before moving backwards, to where she had started. "And done." She announced, with a satisfied expression on her face.

Harry didn't move for another couple of seconds, still frozen in place as his mind tried to figure out what had just happened and what was going on. "What the hell was that?" he demanded. "I thought there was something wrong!"

"Oh there was," Hermione agreed, "there was the very serious issue of your doubt in my abilities." She then tilted her head slightly. "And apparently there was some denial mixed in there too."

"What's that supposed to mean?" he snapped as he yanked his arms apart, the ribbon easily undoing with only a slight burn to his skin at the friction. Harry wasn't sure why he felt so defensive, but he was bristling anyway. Hermione smirked at him, her eyes truly wicked.

"It means, Harry dear, it took me about five words and all of a minute to perfectly position you how I wanted and then tie you up, and you obeyed me completely. Do you still think me being smaller means I couldn't dominate you?"

"I thought Tom had cursed the cuff or something!" Harry spluttered, his cheeks burning red hot.

"If that was really the case, you could have moved away from it or asked me what was wrong. But you just let me tell you what to do." She then grinned saucily at him, wriggling her eyebrows in a purposefully ridiculous way. "Also, I suggest you look down before keeping up your denials."

Harry could practically feel his blush spread from his face down his neck as he realised he was embarrassingly hard in his pants.

"I'm not going to force you to try anything." Hermione said, her saucy grin softening to a kind smile. "I made my point, Harry, but I'm not expecting anything like that from you. Our vanilla sex is more then just okay; it's brilliant fun, incredibly enjoyable and extremely satisfying. When it comes to sex there are many options out there that can be explored, but we're young and inexperienced and should take the time to learn each other's bodies before we start anything new and serious."

Harry thought he knew Hermione's body quite well, actually. He'd kissed and touched and licked and caressed practically every square inch of it, mapping her with his fingers, teeth, lips and tongue. He knew about the ticklish spot under her left knee and how her entire neck was an erogenous zone but her breasts weren't very sensitive at all. He knew that her favourite position during sex was on top, riding him, and that she had a complete oral fixation which meant kissing and biting alone could get her aroused enough they didn't even need to use lube. He knew which of her scars she liked touched, which ones did nothing for her and which ones he needed to avoid completely. He knew that she liked to see his face or hear him talk during the act so she could be reminded that it was him she was with in order to chase away memories that sometimes surfaced unbidden. She liked having her hair pulled hard, liked the sharp jolt of pain that came with scratching his nails down her back or nipping at her skin wherever his mouth was closest.
And he knew that afterward she liked to be shown that she was loved but she hated to be told it, to be given any sort of praise at all. She just liked to be held in his arms and for soft kisses to be pressed against her cheeks and forehead and jawline and chin, but never her lips, so she knew she was cared for and cherished.

Thinking about all this, Harry looked over at Hermione to see a soft expression on her face that he knew was mirrored on his own. "I love you." He told her, because he felt like he didn't get the opportunity to say it enough. He'd tell her it every second of every day, he knew, if she'd let him. But overt displays of emotion unsettled Hermione at the best of times, so he saved them for the special moments when she was softer, gentler, when her sharp edges and shattered pieces weren't quite so cutting and she'd relaxed her guard.

"Me too." She murmured and Harry smiled because he didn't need to hear her say the words to know it was true. Hermione smiled back at him, the curve of her lips wicked and her eyes sparkling with enough mischief that he could predict what she was going to say before she'd even opened her mouth. "Fancy a good, old vanilla shag before we go down to the common room, then?" she asked and Harry laughed, looking back down at his lap again to where he was only slightly less ready to go then before.

"I don't think I'll ever say no to that."

"And that's perfect." Hermione said and Harry felt lightened because looking at her, straight in her honey-brown eyes, he knew that she meant it.

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"I suppose the question," Hermione said later, as they were about to head off to the common room to meet the others, "is are we going to wear them?"

Harry, who was feeling kind of sleepy and not very focused after their activities, took a while to figure out what she was talking about. "The wrist cuff and choker-collar thing?" He asked.

Hermione, forever amused by how sleepy he– and Tom, though the older boy tried to hide it– got after an orgasm, looked equal parts exasperated and entertained by something that was a very normal biological response, thank you very much. She could be mean like that.

"It's a bit of a statement, isn't it?" Hermione mused, out loud. She ran her fingers over the fine lace of the choker-collar, thoughtful. "I could probably hide it under the collar of my school shirt." She said. "Or I could make Tom actually ask me in person if I would do him the honour of wearing what is a particularly twisted version of a promise ring slash engagement ring slash mark of ownership."

"I think," Harry said, "that if we wear them then we should get something for Tom too. He's ours as much as we're his. It would probably do him some good to be reminded of that."

Hermione looked back up at him, bright eyed and visibly delighted. "Oh Harry, that's perfect!" She exclaimed gleefully. "The bastard's face will be absolutely priceless-- and it'll serve him right, the presumptuous fucker."

Harry, knowing her little "nicknames" for the sign of affection for Tom they were, got the feeling that Hermione wasn't actually as annoyed about Tom's gifts as she was acting. He understood why, too. It wasn't a sex thing, or anything, it was just... nice to know they belonged. And that Tom wasn't ever planning to leave them, not again.

With the older boy gone all the time, which Harry did understand– it would be pretty boring for
Tom to just hang around in their dorm all day while they had classes, nothing to do but wait for them to return– he sometimes got worried that the older boy would get bored of them. That he would find someone else, someone closer to his age with less baggage and purer blood.

Tom was even worse at showing his affection then Hermione, and Harry wasn't as good at reading him as she was. He trusted Tom, of course he did, but Tom wasn't capable of love the way that he was, placed no value in the concept of it all. It made Harry wonder, sometimes, if Tom valued their relationship as much as he did– if the older boy was even capable of doing so. The wrist cuff, though, and the choker-collar... Harry thought that, in a weird, twisted, messed up sort of way, they were how Tom showed his particular brand of love; a slightly psychotic blend of obsession and possession. It was his promise to them; that they were his and he wasn't ever going to let them go. Harry thought he really shouldn't find that as sweet as he did, but he was a little messed up too.

Sometimes he thought Tom and Hermione forgot that he'd spent half his childhood in a cupboard under the stairs. That he understood the urge when finding something precious to grab hold of it and never let it go. Most people loved in a soft way, all warmth and comfort and affection, but people like them, people like him and Hermione, they loved like a battlefield. There was blood and pain and every inch they gained they would never give back.

And for Tom, who had probably imagined killing them both a hundred times over, his attachment to them was fuelled not by love, but by his desire to avoid the pain their loss would cause him. His attachment to them was one of possession and obsession, of fascination and selfishness, and Harry didn't care because in a world where for most people love only lasted for the duration of its convenience, urges like selfishness worked better and lasted longer then most love ever could.

"I'm going to wear it," he told Hermione, out loud. "Under my sleeve, of course, but it's..."

"Yeah," Hermione said softly, as they exchanged a look of mutual understanding, the silent, unspoken acknowledgement that this was Tom's promise to them of forever. "I know."

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Hermione's POV:

After exchanging greetings and good tidings with the other Slytherins in the common room, most of whom had already eaten, Hermione and Harry headed up to the Great Hall together to get something to eat. After, they spent most of the morning in the Slytherin common room where everyone was enjoying their presents, before returning to the Great Hall for a delicious lunch. Since breakfast, a series of magnificent fireplaces had appeared along the walls of the Hall and inside each a traditional yule log had been placed amidst the crackling flames, filling the Hall with a not unpleasant smell of burning wood.

Following lunch she and Harry paid a visit to Filch, who Iago had practically abandoned her for. She didn't blame the cat, of course; Iago had never been a tame pet– he was as tough and vicious as the streets they'd called home, and she'd never dream of taking his freedom from him, especially now that he'd found a mate in the adorable Mrs. Norris.

After cuddling all the cats and wishing Filch a good tidings for Yule, Hermione and Harry headed out onto the grounds to join Daphne, Tracey and the boys for an afternoon of carefree play. The snow was practically untouched except for the deep channels made by the Durmstrang and Beauxbatons students on their way up to the castle and a group of Gryffindors further up, who seemed to have had the same idea. Hermione, Daphne and Tracey chose to watch Harry and the
boys' snowball fight rather than join in, though they took a great deal of enjoyment in bewitching the occasional snowball to swerve around and hit its thrower in the face to keep things exciting.

At five o'clock she, Tracey and Daphne decided to head back inside and start getting ready for the Ball. The boys, well used to how long it took for the girls to get ready thanks to the Malfoy's twice-annual galas, as well as various other balls, galas and functions the purebloods had all attended growing up, waved them off before returning to their fight with full enthusiasm.

Preparing for the evening ahead proved somewhat of a daunting affair. Hermione, Tracey, Daphne, Pansy, Lilyan and Millicent spent about an hour running around in their underwear trying to locate this and that and panicking when they couldn't before remembering that oh, right, they had magic and could just summon the elusive little shit from its hiding place. Considering the fact that their underwear mostly consisted of tiny scraps of silk that covered just shy of absolutely not a goddamn thing at all, Hermione thought it was either a sign of how they'd all bonded over their years sharing a dorm or the fact that they'd seen enough of each other during those same years that they could probably parade around their dorm naked and nobody would bat an eye because it wasn't as if there was anything there they hadn't seen before.

Between Hermione, Tracey and Daphne, the three of them managed to delegate tasks to suit their strengths. Tracey, who was a miracle worker when it came to curls and could do wondrous things with braids, hairpins and the magical version of hairspray that had to be seen to be believed, styled their hair. Daphne, the household beauty-charm expert and make-up artist extraordinary, took care of things like pesky leg, armpit and bikini-line hair and did their make-up and nails. Hermione, who was useless at pretty much all things related to beauty, though she was a fair hand at braids out of sheer necessity, was delegated the surprisingly complicated task of helping lace the other two into their dress-robes.

Their hours of hard work proved to be worth the effort, though, because when Hermione stepped in front of the newly conjured full-length mirror at ten to eight, she didn't feel like a princess; she felt like a motherfucking Queen.

The dress she'd chosen with Narcissa’s help and had altered by a dressmaker the older witch had suggested was one of white lace with sections of the delicate, fine filigree embroidered with a red as sharply, defiantly reminiscent of blood as simple thread and jewels could manage. Expertly tailored to her slight frame, the corseted bodice curved with the sharp juts of her hips and tightened over her breasts while the multiple layers of decorated lace that made up the skirt tumbled freely to her ankles. Her lips were a brilliant, bloody crimson that drew attention to the red on her dress and her hair was a crown of braids held in place by jewelled pins. Around her neck was Tom's promise, the band of delicate lace and pearls that pressed to her throat with every breath she took, an ever-present reminder of its presence.

"We look fucking amazing." Tracey said, her voice hushed and awed. "Those boys waiting in the common room do not deserve us. We are fucking fabulous."

Looking over at the other two, Hermione couldn't help but fully agree. Daphne cut a stunning figure in wine-red satin, a spray of silk blossoms woven into the elaborate braiding of her hair, and beside the golden-haired girl Tracey was a vision in sky-blue organza, her strawberry blond curls flowing freely to her hips in perfectly-styled ringlets.

Even Pansy had polished up well and looked every part the prissy pureblood princess in her frothy pink dress-robes and abundance of pearls, though her simpering about her date—especially when everyone knew it was Draco she'd really wanted to ask her—was as annoying as ever. Hermione was relieved when she left, along with Millicent and Lilyan, because putting up with Pansy and her
nasally voice for extended periods of time usually left her with a headache.

Tracey, Daphne and Hermione stood there together for a long moment. All of them were basking in the results of their labour and Hermione thought the other two were as quietly stunned as she was by the image reflected before them. She'd known her body was growing as she aged and matured but it had never been clearer to her that she was only a few years shy of being a woman then it was in that moment.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Tracey asked suddenly, a smirk curving her cherry-blossom pink lips. "Let's go blow all their feeble, little minds."

Hermione laughed and she and Daphne followed Tracey as she glided across the room, her skirt swishing with every step. Hermione was able to move confidently in her red kitten heels as they were so much easier to navigate then the five and a half inch stilettos Narcissa had ruthlessly had her practice wearing over the summer. Narcissa had made her practice walking, running, making her way up and down stairs and dancing in the Manor's ballroom over and over and over and over until Hermione could move in the stilettos with enough balance, grace and skill to make it appear effortless. Her ankles had been sore for days, even with the swelling solution and bruise removal cream she'd so liberally applied, but it had been worth the hours of effort for the ease she felt now.

Hermione couldn't help her proud smile when she saw Harry waiting nervously for her in the Common Room by the fireplace where a yule log was burning. In her opinion, Harry looked very handsome and distinguished; he had his contact lenses in for the night, his hair was tied back traditionally with a bit of black velvet ribbon and he was wearing a very fashionable and proper wizards dress-suit paired with a frock-coat sort of jacket, all in black except for the white undershirt with its high collar. His ruby lapel pin and cufflinks were the only splashes of colour in the ensemble, the red stones gleaming and glittering almost ominously in the light from the nearby flames.

The common room looked strange, full of people wearing different colours instead of the usual mass of black. Theo had already left to meet with his date, Anastasiya, but Draco was there, dressed in traditional black with the golden-haired Astoria, who was draped for the evening in lavender silk, by his side with her slim hand resting on his proffered arm. Flora and Hestia were twins in shimmering silver and brilliant gold, standing alongside Vince and Greg who, Hermione rather uncharitably thought, resembled human boulders in their moss-green dress-robes. Terrible choice there.

Blaise easily stood out from the others with his dusky skin, jewel-bright eyes and full lips. He had an exotic sort of beauty to him, one he'd inherited from his black widow mother, and would definitely grow up to be a lady killer– possibly in the very literal sense if he was anything like Adrienne Zabini. For the Ball, Blaise had dressed in a set of midnight-blue dress robes with silver trimmings and little shimmering silver moons embroidered along the collar that made much more sense when their group exited the Slytherin common room and Blaise met up with his partner for the evening.

Little Luna, who already possessed a unique sort of style, was looking particularly original. She appeared even more fey-like and delicate then usual in her midnight-blue silk dress paired with a sparkly, sheer overdress that was decorated by shimmering silver embroidery of starbursts and comets that actually moved. On her head she wore a wreath of midnight-blue flowers and silver feathers, and with her pale skin, large silvery-grey eyes and dirty-blonde hair; long and unruly, spilling over her shoulders and painting pale streaks against the dark material of her dress, Luna looked positively ethereal.
The effect was slightly ruined by the fact her fingernails were each painted a different neon color and she was wearing tinkling silver bells as earrings, but only slightly. The contrast of coloring between the pair was eye-catching, the image they presented one of a pale faery princess with her dark, seductive king.

When Hermione, Harry and their friends at the entrance hall it was already packed with students milling around, waiting for eight o'clock when the doors to the Great Hall would be thrown open. Those people who were meeting partners from different Houses were edging through the crowd trying to find one another.

The oak front doors opened and everyone turned to look as the Durmstrang students entered with Professor Karkaroff. Viktor was at the front of the party and Daphne blew their group a kiss before making her way through the crowd, over to her partner for the evening. Hermione could make out Theo among the Durmstrang students, looking handsome in burgundy with Anastasiya to his left. The fair-skinned girl was wrapped in black silk that made her light blonde hair, tonight styled in a straight curtain that fell midway down her back, look white as freshly-fallen snow.

Over the heads of the Durmstrang students, Hermione could see that an area of the snow-dusted green lawn right in front of the castle had been transformed into a sort of grotto full of fairy lights—meaning hundreds of actual living fairies were sitting in the rosebushes that had been conjured there, and fluttering over benches that appeared to have been carved from marble.

Hearing McGonagall's voice call out, "Champions over here, please!" Hermione linked her arm with a visibly nervous Harry's and tugged him forward, the chattering crowd parting easily to let them through. McGonagall, who was wearing dress robes of red tartan that looked surprisingly good on her, informed them, looking very harried as she did so, that they were to wait in the antechamber that led out to the staff dais, the same one that Hermione remembered the champions been sent to immediately after their names had been drawn from the goblet of fire. After everyone else went inside and sat down, McGonagall told them, the champions and their partners for the evening were to enter the Great Hall in procession.

Fleur was already waiting in the antechamber, out of sight of the rest of the Hogwarts population, and when Hermione saw the French girl for a moment she felt winded, like all the breath had been stolen from her lungs.

Fleur, almost colourless in her ivory dress robes, the cut of which seemed nearly scandalous as her turning at the sound of them entering caused the skirt to swirl up above her knees in a delicate waterfall of pale chiffon and vintage lace, looked almost unearthly to behold she was so utterly, painfully lovely.

Beaming at the sight them, Fleur immediately made her way over and with every step closer the French girl took Hermione could make out more detail of the part-Veela's outfit for the night: the colour of her eye-shadow, the gloss on her lips, the glints of silver jewellery at her wrists and the clear glass roses on the pins holding in place her silvery-blonde hair, coiled intricately in whirls around her head, and forming a sparkling circlet that glittered under the light like her own crown; she was as much a queen this evening as Hermione.

Particularly eye catching, as one of the only splashes of colour in her pale ensemble, was the orange lily pinned to the bodice of her dress, between the curves of her almost indecently exposed cleavage. The tips of the petals were so dark they looked crimson against the milky-white skin of her breasts, almost as if they'd been dipped in blood.

*Orange lilies for hatred and revenge*, Hermione remembered, and couldn't help her smile at the symbol of Fleur's defiance, as bold as the embroidered, jewelled spray of blood over the pure
colour of innocence that Hermione had picked to wear as her own statement for the evening.

"He is perfect, non?" Fleur said proudly once she'd reached them and Hermione looked away from the French girl for the first time since she'd spotted her, turning her attention to the boy whose proffered arm Fleur was lightly resting her hand on.

Neville's cheeks were pink but Fleur was right; he looked good– astonishingly so, in fact. The strict diet and intense exercise regime Fleur had assigned him had already started to trim Neville out, his face having lost a good deal of its roundness with the now-visible arcs of his cheekbones and curve of his jawline giving his face a more angular, regal look.

The robes Fleur had dressed him in were an old-fashioned style, yet they seemed to suit Neville. He wore an ivory shirt, the colour identical to that of Fleur's dress, with cuffs tied by satin, ivory-colored ribbons which ended in small bows at his wrists. Over the shirt he wore a very form-fitting black satin doublet with a high collar and polished silver buttons running down the center. Tailored black trousers and polished black shoes completed the outfit– and, of course, the orange lily pinned to the boy's lapel.

Even Neville's hair was newly cut and styled, immaculately groomed for the night ahead, and Hermione couldn't deny that she was both shocked and very impressed– with Neville and Fleur both. Fleur had taken a lump of clay and turned it into a sculptured masterpiece and Neville had been both determined and dedicated enough to follow through with the French girl's plan, an undertaking which could not have been easy. Maybe there was hope for him yet, she mused. Either way, this seemed to be a very promising start.

"You look amazing, Nev!" Harry said, beaming, and Neville smiled shyly as Fleur practically preened beside him.

"You both, of course, look magnifique." The French girl said and Hermione laughed.

"I'll agree with you on that, but you two will be the stars of the show tonight, Fleur." Nobody bothered to deny her words, though Neville did go pinker, because they were inarguably true. Fleur was radiant and Neville the gentleman at her side.

When McGonagall walked back into the room with Viktor, Daphne and Diggory and his date– Cho Chang– following after her, Hermione knew that the spectacle was about to start.

The champions and their partners were all lined up, McGonagall placing her and Harry at the start, likely because they were the shortest. Fleur and Neville were next, then Viktor and Daphne with Diggory and Chang entering last.

"Are you ready?" She whispered to Harry, squeezing his hand lightly.

"Definitely not. You?" He whispered back.

"Oh, not even slightly."

They were both quiet for a moment, before Harry spoke again. "Hey Hermione?" he whispered. "Let's knock 'em dead."

"Oh Harry, save the dirty talk for the bedroom," she replied, smirking slightly as he bit back a grin. "Bit more ready now?" He asked and she smiled at him, fierce and vicious and utterly fearless.

"Let's do this shit."
Harry's POV:

Following McGonagall into the Hall, Harry worked on not going red or tripping over his own feet as everyone started to applaud.

The Great Hall had never looked so different, or so breathtaking. The walls had all been covered in sparkling silver frost, with hundreds of garlands of mistletoe and ivy crossing the starry black ceiling. The House tables had vanished; instead, there were about a hundred smaller, lantern-lit ones, each seating about a dozen people, all of whom were a sight to behold; gorgeous, colourful gowns adorned every girl, and muted but no less impressive dress-robes clad every boy.

To Harry’s immense relief, the eyes of the Hall's occupants were only on him and Hermione for a handful of seconds before Fleur stepped into the Hall after them on Neville's arm. Fleur was a Queen in her domain as she glided across the floor with Neville as her dashing escort and all at once nobody's attention was on him and Hermione at all.

Fleur, of course, paid nobody but Neville even a whit of notice. She was a stunningly effervescent, unattainable pillar of glorious perfection; the envy of every girl, the desire of every boy. She was a shining, shimmering goddess as untouchable as the starlight her silvery hair seemed to glow with; she was an angel gifted from the heavens and given human form; she was—

"So fucking sexy," Hermione whispered, sounding a bit awed as Fleur commandeered the attention of the entire Hall and everyone in it with her mere presence alone. "I kind of want to just ditch this thing and drag her off to do unspeakable things to her."

"You and every other boy at Hogwarts," Harry whispered back with a grin and Hermione grinned wickedly at him.

"Yes, but the difference between me and every other boy at Hogwarts is I know exactly what her face looks like when she comes all over mine."

"You do realise that doesn't even make— wait, no. No, we are not having this conversation in front of all these people when god knows who can read our lips." Harry said firmly.

::I can say it in Parseltongue if it makes you feel better:: Hermione hissed quietly, her words almost inaudible. ::That way I can tell you about the way she always tosses her head back and lets out this sexy moan when I suck bruises on her breasts and how when I pull her hair she gets so turned on she loses control and practically shreds my back to ribbons with her nails. And there is this amazing thing she can do with her tongue that makes me see stars every time and when she adds her fingers—::

::Hermione, you are going to give me a boner in front of every single student and professor at Hogwarts as well as both visiting schools:: Harry hissed back frantically. ::And Snape will kill us if we embarrass Slytherin House and they will be slow, painful deaths! We will be begging for him to finish us off and end the agony for days before he grants us the mercy of sweet oblivion!::

::Shit, you're right::: Hermione sounded a bit disappointed because she was mean and cruel and horrible and evil like that.

By this point they'd thankfully almost reached where they'd be sitting for the feast, the dickheads who'd thought this torture up apparently satisfied now that they'd been paraded around like show
ponies for long enough.

The champions were all to be seated at the top table for the evening, which unfortunately meant being in close proximity to Dumbledore for an uncomfortable amount of time. With so many witnesses around, though, Harry figured Hermione wouldn't try to disembowel the headmaster with her dessert spoon if he pissed her off. Well, she probably wouldn't. There was about an eighty percent chance. Actually, it was probably closer to sixty percent. Or fifty percent, if he was being honest. Oh dear Merlin, he really hoped Dumbledore didn't try to speak to them.

Thinking about Hermione murdering the headmaster did make Harry wonder, though, if she was currently carrying one or more of her usually ever-present switchblades. And if she was, where she had concealed it or them while she was wearing her beautiful but intimidating (what with all the red decoration stuff that looked suspiciously like it was supposed to mimic blood) dress. The intimidation factor suited her, though, and Harry didn't know how, after seeing her reflection, she could've ever thought that Fleur could compare.

"Hey Hermione," he whispered, only a few feet away from their seats now, "Fleur might be stunning but I think you're still the most beautiful girl in the room. You light up my entire world."

Seeing Hermione descend into the common room had been like the most wonderful dream he'd ever had. She was so breathtakingly beautiful that Harry had been afraid if he touched her she would disappear, so painfully perfect that she had to be a mirage.

And for some reason, some bewildering, unknowable reason, she had chosen him. She had chosen him and she had transformed him into someone more then he could have ever dreamed of becoming.

Hermione made him happy and during his childhood, in his darkest hours, he'd wondered if such a thing was even possible for him. She was his miracle and he loved her so much it hurt.

She lit up his world, she was the love of his life and in his eyes nobody could ever be more beautiful.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry, I've got a bit of a long author's note this time. I broke it into parts but I think that just made it look longer. The first parts is the important bit, though, and I'd really appreciate if you read it. So without further ado...

I'm splitting the Yule Ball into two parts (obviously) because otherwise it stretched out too long and I didn't want to rush it. I tried not to be too descriptive with the outfits (other then with Fleur, Nev, Hermione and Harry because they were the important ones— and Luna, because I can never resist making her look utterly unique) because I know it can be really boring to read when that's the case so if anyone has any feedback on whether I succeeded or not, what I could improve on, what I should change and what— if anything— I did right, I would really appreciate it <3 To apologise for this request, because I really don't like asking people to comment, I'm giving you all the spoiler that there will be two new characters introduced in the next chapter which will be posted at some point tomorrow ;)

Also, for those who are interested Tom will be making his reappearance once Harry
and Hermione leave Hogwarts for the second week of the holidays. I'm sure he has
been missed! I've certainly missed writing him.

Thanks for reading and I hope you enjoyed the update! Though I'm warning you all
now that once my second week of uni holidays is over it'll be back to normal (slow)
speed which I already apologise for.

~Cheshire Carroll

P.S. So much love and thanks to all the amazing, wonderful people who've been
leaving such amazing, wonderful comments– you guys always make my day xoxo
Part Four: The Goblet of Fire - Chapter L

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER L:

Harry's POV:

Dumbledore smiled happily as the champions approached the top table and Hermione smiled back at the headmaster. It was a cold smile, the one Harry had dubbed her 'I am planning which spell I am going to use to make your insides your outsides' smile. It was, in his opinion, gloriously effective. Madam Maxime certainly looked a bit wide-eyed.

Madame Maxime cut a striking figure even while seated, having changed her usual uniform of black satin for a flowing gown of lavender silk, but Harry thought Karkaroff looked no different then usual. Ludo Bagman had chosen horrendous bright purple robes with large yellow stars and thankfully the final member seated at the top table, Mr. Crouch– or rather, the polyjuiced Barty Crouch Jr– was much less of an eyesore in his very proper, stiff-looking steel grey dress-robes. Barty also looked very bored with the proceedings though he perked up slightly at the sight of their approach and nodded to the empty chairs on his right.

Harry quickly steered Hermione over to the empty seats, thankful for the fact it would have them seated far enough from Dumbledore that any chance of interaction between Hermione and the headmaster would be limited.

There was no food as yet on the glittering golden plates, but small menus were lying in front of each of them. Harry picked his up uncertainly and looked around– there were no waiters. Dumbledore, however, once the champions had all chosen a seat, looked carefully down at his own menu and then said very clearly to his plate, "Pork chops!" And pork chops appeared.

Getting the idea, the rest of the table placed their orders with their plates too. There was a gentle hum of conversation in the hall, students chatting casually to their partners and the others seated at their tables while eating the delicious food the Hogwarts house elves had produced for them.

Viktor and Daphne, Harry was glad to see, appeared to be getting along well, with Viktor enthusiastically describing Durmstrang to a genuinely interested Daphne.

"Vell, ve have a castle also, not as big as this, nor as comfortable, I am thinking," he was saying. "Ve have just four floors, and the fires are lit only for magical purposes. But ve have grounds larger even than these– though in vinter, ve have very little daylight, so ve are not enjoying them. But in summer ve are flying every day, over the lakes and the mountains–"

"Now, now, Viktor!" said Karkaroff with a laugh that didn't reach his cold eyes, "don't go giving away anything else, now, or your pretty lady friend will know exactly where to find us!"

Dumbledore smiled, his eyes twinkling. "Igor, all this secrecy, one would almost think you didn't want visitors."

"Well, Dumbledore," said Karkaroff, displaying his yellowing teeth to their fullest extent, "we are all protective of our private domains, are we not? Do we not jealously guard the halls of learning that have been entrusted to us? Are we not right to be proud that we alone know our school's
"Oh I would never dream of assuming I know all Hogwarts' secrets, Igor," said Dumbledore amicably. "Only this morning, for instance, I took a wrong turning on the way to the bathroom and found myself in a beautifully proportioned room I have never seen before, containing a really rather magnificent collection of chamber pots. When I went back to investigate more closely, I discovered that the room had vanished. But I must keep an eye out for it. Possibly it is only accessible at five-thirty in the morning. Or it may only appear at the quarter moon— or when the seeker has an exceptionally full bladder."

Despite himself, Harry snorted into his plate and Hermione rolled her eyes— whether at him or Dumbledore, he wasn't sure.

Meanwhile Fleur was criticizing the Hogwarts decorations to Neville, and despite how genuine her expression appeared in its disdain Harry wondered how much of her diatribe against Hogwarts was real and how much of it was faked due to her intense dislike of its conveniently within earshot headmaster.

"Zis is nothing," She sniffed, sweeping a dismissive hand around to gesture at the sparkling walls of the Great Hall. "At zee Palace of Beauxbatons, we 'ave ice sculptures all around zee dining chamber at Yule. Zey do not melt, of course... zey are like 'uge statues of diamond, glittering around zee place. And zee food is simply superb. And we 'ave choirs of wood nymphs, who serenade us as we eat. We 'ave none of zis ugly armor in zee 'alls, and eef a poltergeist ever entered into Beauxbatons, 'e would be expelled like zat." She slapped her hand onto the table.

"It sounds beautiful," Neville said, apparently not at all put off by her insulting their school. Harry supposed Hogwarts had given the Gryffindor very little reason to defend it. "Do you have a favourite place in the palace?" Neville then asked Fleur, smiling shyly at her. "Somewhere you love to go?"

"Oui," Fleur smiled back at him, seeming delighted at his interest. "Zee gardens of Beauxbatons are zee most magnifique in all of France, especially in Spring when everyzing eez in bloom."

"The greenhouses are my favourite place at Hogwarts," Neville told her, looking just as delighted to have found something they had in common, "we don't grow a lot of flowers, but we do have a few pots of fanged geraniums and a patch of honking daisies."

"I 'ave never 'eard of fanged geraniums," Fleur said, looking intrigued. "Do zey look like normal geraniums? Eez zere a reason zey 'ave fangs?"

Smiling, pleased that Fleur and Neville were getting along so well, Harry turned his attention away from their conversation and looked around the rest of the Hall. Hagrid was sitting at one of the other staff tables; he was wearing a horrible hairy brown suit and gazing up at the top table with dreamy eyes. Harry saw him give a small wave and, looking around, saw Madame Maxime return it, her opals glittering in the candlelight.

"I have a message for you both," Barty said, his voice pitched quiet enough that only Harry and Hermione could hear. Harry nodded to show he was listening and Hermione went very still beside him. "Because of this ball, the Malfoy's are going to be throwing a gala for New Years Eve this year, in place of their usual Yuletide gala. He is expecting you both to be there. And He wants you to bring the French girl too."

The train taking the students who wished to return home for the remainder of the holidays following the Yule Ball was leaving at nine the next morning and Harry pulled a face at the
thought of having to get up early to pack after the late night he was sure the Ball was going to turn into. Still, he nodded to Barty because you couldn't just say no to Voldemort. Or, at least, Harry tried not to— he was a Slytherin, after all; he had a very healthy sense of self-preservation, thank you very much. He liked being alive, in one undamaged piece, and despite the Vow that they'd made with Voldemort, Harry was pretty sure that the Dark Lord was cunning enough to figure out some sort of loophole. Smart as Hermione was— and she was wicked smart— she had only been twelve when she'd worked out the wording. So far Voldemort had been keeping his word, though, and Harry was very happy to not push their luck and let the mutual peace continue on as such.

Also, the thought of seeing Tom again was too good to pass up— even if he had to sacrifice a few hours of sleep. Thinking of Tom, though, made him think of the wrist cuff hidden under the sleeve of his dress-robes. Harry felt his cheeks redden as he became ultra aware of the weight of it against his skin and he hurriedly turned his attention back to his dinner.

When all the food had been consumed, Dumbledore stood up and, with a wave of his wand, he conjured a raised platform into existence along the right wall. A set of drums, several guitars, a lute, a cello, and some bagpipes were set upon it.

The Weird Sisters now trooped up onto the stage to wildly enthusiastic applause; they were all extremely hairy and dressed in black robes that had been artfully ripped and torn. They picked up their instruments and Harry, who had been so interested in watching them that he had almost forgotten what was coming, suddenly realized that the lanterns on all the other tables had gone out, and that the other champions and their partners were standing up.

Harry tripped over his dress robes as he stood up. The Weird Sisters struck up a slow, mournful tune and Harry walked onto the brightly lit dance floor, carefully avoiding catching anyone's eye (he could see Draco and Theo waving at him and sniggering, the tossers).

Taking a deep breath, and ignoring all the eyes on them the best he could, Harry turned his focus to remembering the lessons with Neville and placed one hand on Hermione's waist and gently grasped one of hers with the other, lacing their fingers together and squeezing lightly. Hermione smiled at him, warmer then the sun, and rested her free hand on his hip, situating herself so he could lead the dance.

As the music changed into something a bit faster and lighter Harry carefully started to guide Hermione through the thoroughly rehearsed steps of the dance, relaxing a bit despite the crowd as he fell into the familiar movement and flow. Hermione only had to once redirect them, Harry catching a glimpse from the corner of his eye of Neville and Fleur whirling past in some infinitely more complicated style, just inches away from collision.

As the song started to slow down Hermione drew in closer to him. Pausing a moment, Harry focused solely on the movement of their bodies. The fixed tempo. The ebb and flow of their strides. How their legs stepped in sync with one another. How their torsos slotted seamlessly together. How they became one as they moved around the dance floor. It was almost more intimate then sex.

So focused as he was on Hermione, Harry hasn't realised that other people had joined in the dancing, the champions no longer the center of attention, until he spotted Dumbledore waltzing with Madam Maxime out of the corner of his eye. It was a rather comical sight, as Dumbledore was so dwarfed by her that the top of his pointed hat barely tickled her chin; Madam Maxime, however, moved very gracefully for a woman so large.

Hermione, following his line of vision, looked horribly amused and Harry couldn't help his own grin. When the bagpipes let out a final, quavering note he playfully dipped her, making Hermione
laugh delightedly. The sound was so warm and genuine that it made him want to make her laugh like that every day for the rest of their lives.

The Weird Sisters began to ready themselves for the next piece, and without saying a word Harry pulled Hermione back into his arms and started them through the next dance. Their bodies were pressed as close to one another as possible as they moved in time to the music and Harry wanted this almost perfect moment in time to last forever.

The only thing that could make this any better, he couldn't help but think wistfully, was if Tom were there with them. He and Hermione were two halves of a whole, but it was only with Tom that they were truly complete.

"I miss him too," Hermione whispered, her hand leaving his hip momentarily to brush against his wrist where the cuff sat fastened, hidden from sight. Harry moved his hand up from her hip to touch the band of lace around her throat, lightly running his fingertips over the delicate pearls.

"Maybe he'll meet us at the train station tomorrow." He suggested, "Wouldn't that be the most wonderful surprise?"

"The best." Hermione agreed, before her smile turned to the wicked one Harry was becoming far too familiar with. "Well, nearly the best." She corrected, her eyes glittering with mischief. "It doesn't quite beat waking up to a morning blow job."

Harry laughed, too used to her dirty humour and in too good of a mood to be shocked by her words. "Yeah," he agreed, recalling earlier that day when Hermione had woken him up exactly as she'd described. "I'm pretty sure nothing beats that." Hermione laughed too, then rested her head against the crook of his shoulder.

"Hey Harry?" She whispered, her warm breath brushing against his neck. "You don't just light up my world– you are my whole world." Harry blinked back the tears that blurred his vision for a moment and kissed her forehead, holding the girl he loved more then life itself tightly in his arms and never wanting to let go.

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Severus's POV:

His student looked particularly eye-catching tonight in her white gown, the splashes of crimson and rubies accentuating the dress reminding Severus almost uncannily of blood– and he got the feeling the effect wasn't unintentional; Hermione's sense of humour was an interesting one. An exquisite choker of delicate white lace wrapped around her pale throat and, as if sensing his gaze, her sharp eyes flashed over to meet his and she smiled, proud, cat-like and viciously fierce, her lips painted the glossy brightness of arterial blood.

"That one is going to cause trouble," Minerva noted dryly from where she sat beside him, Poppy and Pomona the sole other occupants of the table they were seated at. Severus let out a snort.

"You mean she hasn't already?" he asked sarcastically and Minerva dipped her head, conceding to his point with a slight accompanying wince.

"You mean she hasn't already?" he asked sarcastically and Minerva dipped her head, conceding to his point with a slight accompanying wince.

"I must admit, seeing young Mr Longbottom this evening was quite the surprise." She noted. Severus and Poppy nodded their agreement as Pomona practically glowed in pride for her prized student, the boy who was practically a son to her.
The changes in Longbottom were, frankly, bewildering to see. The boy had been slowly gaining more confidence and improving in his classwork lately, and Severus was honestly surprised he hadn't realised sooner that his troublesome two had taken the boy under their wing. Seeing the young Gryffindor tonight, it was practically impossible to recognise him; he looked confident, happy and attractive.

Befriending Longbottom seemed rather uncharacteristic of Hermione, and Severus ventured it was more Harry's influence then hers responsible for it. And then he thought of the prophecy and almost laughed out loud, something which would have gained him more then a few odd looks. Even without knowing the prophecy Hermione had befriended Albus's 'spare', managing to spite the headmaster without even trying by taking Longbottom under her wing and thus into her sphere of influence. It was masterfully done, ingeniously wicked and entirely accidental. Merlin, he loved that girl.

Severus choked on his goblet of wine as he realised exactly what he'd just thought. "Severus? Are you alright?" Minerva asked, concerned by the unusual behaviour. That made the two of them, he thought.

"Yes, yes, fine." He said out loud, cleaning the mess with a flick of his wrist, a handy bit of wandless magic he'd mastered years ago. "Just had a thought." Minerva arched an eyebrow.

"Surprising?"

"Disturbingly so." He said with a light shudder.

"The Second Task is coming up." Minerva said, when it became clear he wasn't going to elaborate. Severus would quite happily die before he ever told Minerva, Poppy and Pomona what had just passed through his mind.

"Yes," Poppy said, with a frown. "Do we have any ideas on how to... not-assist Harry?"

"I may have suggested to Filius that the bubble-head charm would be an interesting lesson for his fourth years," Minerva said, her expression one of utter nonchalance. Only the slight upturned corners of her mouth gave her away. "He agreed that it was a rather excellent idea."

"Sneaky." Severus said, approvingly. "You're wasted in Gryffindor."

"Well I've decided to do a water based unit when term begins." Pomona said, smiling sweetly like butter wouldn't melt in her mouth. "We'll be covering a number of different plant species, both magical and muggle. Incidentally, gillyweed is one such plant that we'll be covering."

"Wasted." Severus repeated, shaking his head. "The Sorting Hat is obviously defective to have made such egregious errors while sorting you both."

"And you should have been a Hufflepuff, dear," Pomona said, reaching up to pat his cheek fondly. Out of respect for the surprisingly sly woman, Severus allowed the indignity. "You're as loyal as they come, Severus."

Thinking about his thrice changed alliance from Dark to Light to the recent switch back to Dark again, Severus couldn't quite help but disagree. Pomona, seeming to read it on his face, just looked even fonder. "You're so protective of Harry and Hermione– of all your Slytherins, really. You've devoted yourself to keeping them safe, even from those they should be safe from." Her eyes slid, at that point, rather accusingly over to where Albus was dancing. Severus felt his jaw clench unbidden at the sight of the old man. He'd taken to avoiding the headmaster whenever he could
since Skeeter's article came out, not trusting himself not to try and curse the man.

For the past thirteen years Albus had used Severus's grief and guilt against him, constantly reiterating— in his kindly, grandfatherly way— that it was his fault Lily had died, that it was his fault she had been hunted down and killed, and he'd used Severus's self-hatred to ruthlessly manipulate him. It was a move so Slytherin that Severus was honestly surprised he hadn't seen it before now.

Except, if he was being honest with himself, he had seen it. He'd just felt he deserved the constant flagellation, the endless reminders that he'd as good as murdered Lily himself, leaving her son an orphan who was forced to grow up with those loathsome muggles.

But the Dark Lord had tried to spare Lily. Yes, Severus had still been the one to give Him the prophecy but it had been war. He couldn't have possibly known that Lily's son was the boy referred to, nor would Albus have been able to keep the prophecy hidden forever— sooner or later the Dark Lord would have learned of its existence, most likely from Pettigrew who Potter would have confided in, along with Black and Lupin, all three unaware of the traitor in their midst.

But Severus had done what nobody else had ever dared before to try and save the woman he loved. He had begged the Dark Lord to spare the life of a "mudblood" member of the Order of the Phoenix, one who had faced Him three times in battle and managed to walk away. Severus had gone to Him, knowing that he could be murdered for his request, and begged for her life. The Dark Lord had listened and He had agreed.

For the first time in thirteen years, the crushing guilt and self-loathing was gone; the knowledge that he hadn't sentenced Lily to her death, but rather she'd chosen to die in the place of the son she loved more than life itself, had freed him.

And Severus would honor her sacrifice; he would keep her boy alive, keep Harry alive, for as long as there was still breath left in his body. And everyone who knew Harry knew that the boy was one half of a whole, that without Hermione Granger he would be reduced to a mere shadow of his former self. So Severus would protect her too; he would, in fact, be glad to protect the young woman he'd have been proud to call his own daughter and he'd do so with the same devotion as he protected Harry.

If that made him a Hufflepuff at heart, well, badgers could be just as vicious as any snake.

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Hermione's POV:

After about an hour of dancing, Hermione wasn't ashamed to admit her feet were killing her and she was dying for a drink. Her dress was starting to feel stifling, and sweat had plastered the stray curls that had popped free from their braids to the back of her neck.

Harry; annoying, fit, Quidditch-trained Harry, didn't look nearly as wiped so she gave him a small shove as the music stopped and ordered him to go ask McGonagall for a dance while she sat down and had a drink.

"McGonagall?" Harry asked, looking amusingly horrified.

"What? Neville danced with Sprout. We're supposed to be fostering good relations with her, remember? She's keeping Dumbledore from bothering us and he's been quiet for too long— he didn't even try talking to us tonight. He's up to something, and it isn't anything good." She said grimly,
frowning darkly at the concerning thought. Harry's jaw tightened and he nodded determinedly.

"Right. She's probably our best defense while on Hogwarts grounds. She's got more power than Snape and more influence over Dumbledore than he does." He said, decisively.

"Spoken like a true Slytherin," Hermione said fondly, "off you go, love. Don't panic about having to touch her and don't step on her toes. We're trying to make her like us, remember."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Harry winced, but he kissed her cheek and then took off in the direction of McGonagall and her tartan.

Snagging a glass of something or rather, Hermione found a place to sit and rest her feet while she sipped her fruity-tasting drink. While sitting there, she managed to get her first look at Ron Weasley for the evening and he was a sorry sight indeed. He had a furious, petulant expression on his face as he watched Neville with Fleur, and he was wearing atrociously awful shabby and badly frayed dress-robes that clashed horribly with his hair and resembled some old biddy's dress more than anything. Snickering quietly to herself, Hermione turned her attention to the dancing.

Luna was a delicate porcelain doll in the candlelight, and Blaise's jewel-bright eyes dared someone to even try and touch her. The two didn't appear to be moving in time to any beat but their own, and Hermione had never seen Luna look so relaxed and serene as she was in that moment, slowly swaying in Blaise's arms as the older boy looked down at her with a gentle expression on his handsome face.

Fleur and Neville were spell-binding as they dipped, spun and sashayed across the dance floor, and Viktor appeared to be teaching a giggling Daphne some sort of Bulgarian style of dance, a small but genuine smile on his face. Flora and Hestia were dancing together, Vince and Greg nowhere to be seen, and Draco and Astoria appeared almost as skilled as Fleur and Neville as they danced together, Draco talking rather animatedly to the younger girl who was laughing and nodding along to what he was saying.

Tracey and her date, Yosef, had forgone dancing to instead try and locate each others tonsils with their tongues, a worthy endeavour in her opinion. Theo and his date, Anastasiya, were nowhere in sight, and Hermione hoped for Theo's sake that he was off somewhere getting lucky not murdered and drained of blood.

Harry was pink-cheeked but smiling as he danced with McGonagall, and Hermione was about to stand up and make her way over to the pair when somebody cleared their throat from next to her.

Hermione swiftly turned to face the red-haired, stocky young man who'd approached her. He was too old to be a student and much rougher-looking then most of the Ball's attendees; a real 'outdoors' sort of person going by his weather-beaten face. Burns were visible on his arms where the sleeves of his robes ended and his hands were blistered and calloused. He had a good-natured sort of face and wore a relaxed smile that was at odds with his startlingly sharp blue eyes. Flicking her eyes up to his hair, a familiar shade of flaming red, Hermione realised she knew exactly who he was.

"You're a Weasley," she said, aloud. "And I've already met the eldest, so you must be Charlie the dragon keeper. You were involved in the First Task, I presume?"

"Yeah, I was." Charlie said, still with his easy-going smile and sharp eyes. "That was some fancy spell-work your boy did. Very impressive. Lykke– the Swedish Short Snout, that is, still hasn't recovered from that fight."

"Am I supposed to feel bad?" Hermione asked coldly. Charlie laughed.
"Not at all. It wasn't anything worse then what they get up to in the wild, anyway."

"Then was there any particular reason you came over here?" She asked pointedly.

"You're not a fan of Weasleys, are you?" Charlie said, looking amused, and Hermione curled her lip back.

"None of you have ever given me a reason to be. Quite the opposite, in fact."

"Yeah," Charlie agreed, a frown briefly crossing his face before the smile returned, "I heard about what happened in your second year." Hermione felt her jaw tighten at the memory of Ron, Fred and George Weasley beating Harry unconscious when they thought he was responsible for the death of their sister. He hadn't been, of course, but the three had never gotten anything more then a slap to the wrist in punishment for the assault and thinking about it still made Hermione coldly furious in the way that made her want to pull out her switchblade and carve people open, or hold them under the Cruciatius curse until their hearts gave out.

"You still haven't said why you came over here." She said, her voice much colder then before.

"Well, my date for the evening seems to have ditched me for some French bird," Charlie said, looking very amused for someone whose date had apparently just abandoned him. "And I've got no interest in talking to my brothers, who all seem to be avoiding you for some reason. Funny that."

" Quite," Hermione said, her lips curving up slightly as she was unable and unwilling to hide her vicious satisfaction of the fact no Weasley dared approach her alone. Except this one, apparently. And that older brother of his who she refused to think about. "Any particular reason you're hiding from your brothers?" She asked, genuinely curious.

"I'm not hiding," Charlie said, easy-going smile widening to something a bit more real, sharper to match his eyes. "I'm talking to a pretty girl at a Ball. Isn't that what I'm supposed to do?"

"And doing what you're supposed to do is important, then?" Hermione raised an eyebrow and Charlie laughed again.

"Well that depends." He said, his tone almost teasing.

"On anything in particular?" She asked, unsure if she should be annoyed or not by the teasing.

"Usually on how far away my mother is." Charlie admitted, expression turning briefly wry.

"A mother's boy, then?" She pulled a face.

"Hardly," he said, and this time his laugh was the exact opposite of amused. "There was a reason I moved to Romania practically the moment I graduated and never came back."

"If this is a ploy to convince me that you're some poor, misunderstood soul who dislikes his family and the headmaster as much as I do so we bond and you can pass on everything I tell you to Dumbledore, then consider it a failure." Hermione said, coldly.

"Hermione," Charlie said, the easy-going smile she was starting to find very annoying– almost as annoying as that laugh– back on his face. "I haven't spoken to the headmaster since I was in high school, or my family since they visited me in Romania last year. And I'm not trying to convince you of anything; I just wanted to meet the girl who had my family so vexed. Ron practically didn't shut up about you or your boy the entire time, he kept ranting on and on and on. Very annoying, let me tell you."
"Sounds like him," Hermione agreed, pulling a face. "If your story's true, which I highly doubt, what's your impression of me, then? Do you think I'm as evil as your brothers are convinced?"

"I think," Charlie said, looking at her thoughtfully, "that you certainly don't disappoint, Hermione Granger. My date would have been quite taken by you, if she hadn't found that French bird first. She's got a thing for pretty, dangerous people."

"You think I'm dangerous?" Hermione asked, giving him her best innocent look. Charlie laughed again, and this time his amusement was very real.

"We both know that look isn't fooling anyone," He said with a smile, tone teasing.

The sound of the music changing startled Hermione, who hadn't realised they'd been talking so long. She'd lost track of time talking to a Weasley, how horrifying! Worse, she was pretty sure she'd actually been enjoying it too.

"That's my cue, I think," Charlie said, "I think I'm looking forward to when we meet again."

"You live in Romania," Hermione said, voice sharp and eyes narrowing dangerously, "and I utterly loathe your family. Why on earth would we ever cross paths again?"

"You'd be surprised," Charlie said, with a wink. "It's been a pleasure, Miss Granger."

"I wish I could say the same." Hermione said with her best Malfoy 'I'm better then you' sneer. Charlie, annoyingly enough, just laughed that goddamn laugh again before moving away, stepping neatly to the side to let the approaching Harry get past.

"Who was that?" Harry asked, frowning in the direction of Charlie's back. "Is he a Weasley?"

"Charlie Weasley," Hermione confirmed, frowning after the confusing man too. "He's... strange."

"Good strange or bad strange?" Harry asked, worried.

"I don't know," she said thoughtfully. "I'm not sure."

"Huh." Harry frowned, before turning back to her and smiling. "Do you want to dance some more?" He asked, "it's not long until midnight now."

"I think I'm all danced out." Hermione admitted. "Do you want to go for a walk instead?"

"Sounds good," Harry smiled and she accepted the hand he offered, standing up and lacing her fingers with his, squeezing lightly.

Together they slipped out into the entrance hall where the front doors still stood open. The fluttering fairy lights in the rose garden winked and twinkled as they made their way down the front steps, where they found themselves surrounded by bushes, winding, ornamental paths and carved stone benches. Hermione could hear splashing water that sounded like some sort of fountain. Here and there, people were sitting together on the benches, cuddled together or making out under the light of the moon.

She and Harry set off along one of the winding paths through the rosebushes, arms linked and fingers still entwined. It was quiet and peaceful compared to the Hall, and Hermione rested her head on Harry's shoulder with a soft sigh. "This is so romantic it's giving me hives." She murmured. Really, the whole thing was sickeningly sweet enough to give her cavities.
"And it's sweet enough to give you a tooth-ache." Harry said and she couldn't see his face but it sounded like he was smiling.

"Mind reader." She accused.

"No," he corrected, with a quiet laugh, "I just know you."

"Are you saying I'm predictable?" She asked him, playfully.

"You're one of the most unpredictable people I know." Harry said honestly, "you never stop surprising me."

"Mm, speaking of surprises," Hermione mused, lifting her head off Harry's shoulders and glancing around to see if there was anyone near them. She could hear faint voices from the direction they came, back where the benches were, but there was nobody close enough to see what she was about to do here in the dark.

Letting the skirts of her dress pool around her as she slid down his body, Hermione had to bite back a laugh at the startled sound Harry made. "Hermione!" He whispered, seeming completely shocked. "What are you doing? Anyone who walks past will see us!"

"Then we'd better be quick." She replied, taking a moment to figure out how to unlace the trousers of Harry's dress-suit.

"Hermione!"

"Come on, Harry," she wheedled, looking up at him from where she was kneeling, "doesn't it turn you on just a little bit? The thrill of knowing anyone could see us, see what I'm about to do to you?" Harry let out a sound that was suspiciously like a whimper. The fact she'd just figured out how to open his trousers might possibly have contributed to that.

"We're going to get caught and Snape will kill us," he lamented, which Hermione took as the green light to go ahead and got straight down to business. It was quick and dirty and messy in more ways then one; Harry didn't seem to know where to put his hands, not wanting to mess up her braids, she was making a mess of her lipstick as she bobbed her head and probably her dress to from kneeling on the grass, lightly dusted with enough snow that her knees felt wet through the material of the lace skirts and a bit numb from the cold. The thrill of excitement at doing something so forbidden mixed with the fearful anticipation of being caught meant Harry didn't last long either, and a particularly clever trick with her tongue that Fleur had taught her had him reach his finish with a hastily cut-off groan, spilling in her mouth and down her throat. A bit escaped the corners of her mouth as she pulled off him, adding to the mess of lipstick on her face.

It quickly became apparent that the speed in which Harry had climaxed had been a very good thing, because Hermione had barely tucked him away and laced his pants up when Snape turned the corner, Karkaroff a half step behind him.

It was... not an ideal state to be seen in, and definitely not one Hermione had ever wanted her Head of House to catch them in. She was still kneeling on the ground, her lipstick was badly smudged and she was very aware of the fact that her mouth and chin were wet with more then just saliva. Also, Harry had gone bright red and had an absolutely mortified look on his face that left very little to the imagination of what they'd just been up to. With an internal sigh, Hermione realised it was going to be a good long while before she managed to talk Harry into exhibitionism again.

"Professor, Headmaster," she said, nodding at them both like there was nothing out of the ordinary
going on. Harry made a noise that was definitely a whimper this time, and it had absolutely nothing
to do with arousal.

"Miss Granger, Mr Potter," Snape gritted out, a very familiar long-suffering look on his face.
Hermione smiled brightly at him as she stood up, making sure to keep her lips firmly pressed
in case she hadn't quite swallowed all of her mouthful. The stickiness she could feel drying
on her face was more than enough to mentally scar her poor Head of House, she didn't want to add
to the trauma. He might make her pay his therapy bill and she got the impression it would be a very
expensive one.

"We were taking a walk and one of my hairpins fell out," she lied shamelessly to his face, instead,
regardless of the fact it would fool no one. "I was looking for it."

"In the boy's pants?" Karkaroff scoffed and Hermione narrowed her eyes at the man, wondering if
she could ask Tom to pretty please request his older self kill off the annoyance. Karkaroff was a
traitor Death Eater, after all– killing him must already be on the agenda. Just perhaps it could be
put higher up the to-do list?

"My hair got caught when I was standing up." She said out loud, giving the man a particularly icy
look.

"A likely st--" he started to say, a sneer on his face, but he was interrupted by her Head of House.
Bless the man.

"Be more careful in the future, Miss Granger." Snape said briskly, and she had an inkling he wasn't
referring to hairpins. "Much, much more careful." He added, with a slight involuntary twitch.
Definitely not talking about hairpins, then.

"Of course, professor." She agreed, relieved that he, at least, was willing to go along with her lie.

"And get out of my sight. I don't want to see you until the school term starts." Snape added, his face
turning pained again, as if the trauma of what he'd just not-seen was causing him actual, physical
hurt.

Hermione linked her arm around a frozen Harry's and started pulling him after her, away from
the two men. "We'll see you at the Malfoy's, professor!" She was unable to resist calling back over her
shoulder, snickering as the sound of Snape's defeated groan of realisation carried over to them.

"Oh my fucking god, that was the most embarrassing thing that's ever happened to me in my entire
life," Harry whimpered as they clambered back up the steps of the castle. Hermione couldn't help
but laugh, already planning on getting him to return the favour when they returned to the dorms.

As they passed the doorway to the Great Hall, Hermione wondered how their friends had enjoyed
the evening. She was also briefly reminded of the puzzling Charlie Weasley who was apparently
convinced they'd cross paths again, and his runaway date who apparently liked people who were
pretty and dangerous.

Putting those somewhat troubling thoughts aside for the time being, Hermione decided to enjoy the
rest of her evening—though it was technically morning now— and worry about them later.

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*Tonks's POV:*
People make the mistake of thinking that women forged from ice and stone and fire are the only ones they should fear— they always forgot that there's something dangerous about good girls. And nearly everyone forgot that there was something dangerous about Nymphadora Tonks (because it wasn't like the Noble and Ancient House of Black was known for its mental and emotional instability or anything. No, not at all).

Good girls were bad girls that didn't get caught. That's what Tonks had always thought to herself, anyway. And it wasn't as if anyone had ever disproved that to her— least of all herself!

She was a chameleon and had been all her life. Even as a child she'd been a master at infiltration, able to become whoever she needed to be and spot lies as easily as she changed her skin. After all, Tonks was a daughter of the House of Black, regardless of the fact people never seemed to remember that. She knew that glittering make-up was war paint, sparkling jewels were armour and finely-honed words the deadliest of weapons. For as long she lived, Tonks would never forget her mother's warnings that girls with pretty smiles and knives for teeth were the most dangerous ones of all.

But she'd always been drawn to danger, to predators, to the darkness in people. She honestly couldn't help herself. There was a reason she'd chosen to become an Auror, and it wasn't because she believed in those vague concepts of Right and Wrong that were spouted by the Ministry, though justice was certainly something she could get behind; justice, after all, was very similar to vengeance— it was all about making someone pay for something. The 'who' and the 'what' were just largely irrelevant to her (she didn't tell Moody that— actually, she pretty much didn't tell anyone that. She wasn't an idiot).

Despite her more Slytherin virtues (or were they vices?), Tonks hadn't been at all surprised to be sorted into Hufflepuff. She'd always gloried in hard work the way that most people didn't; gloried in the sweaty triumph that came from mastering a new skill, memorising an obscure fact or achieving victory over an opponent. And her loyalty was certainly nothing to scoff at, a burning inferno under her skin that consumed both her and those she granted it to.

Andromeda Tonks née Black had raised her only daughter to be a lady. Tonks knew how to sit, how to smile, and how to pour tea for guests. She knew how to speak French, how to dance and how to use flowers as a language (to perfectly weave together geraniums, foxglove, meadowsweet, yellow carnations and orange lilies to gift to people with the sweetest of smiles; a bouquet so striking, so colourful and so filled with beautiful hatred and loathing and fuck you's— oh Circe, the look on her mother's face the first time she saw one of those bouquets had been priceless...)

Andromeda hadn't been entirely focused on etiquette and music and dancing (that last one had always been a lost cause with Tonks with her constantly changing centre of gravity, never able to find a shape that fit her just right)— she'd also been determined Tonks knew how to defend herself, with and without magic. It was all well and good to act like a lady, she'd always lectured, but you still needed to know how to fight like a right bitch.

Well, those weren't her exact words, but they were heavily implied.

And Tonks may not have been any good at ballroom dancing but she fought like she was born to, never missing a step of the complicated dance that verged between defensive and offensive, attacked or attacker.

There was always a niggling, nagging, ever present part of her, though, that was frustrated by how once her opponent was down she had to back off— it made her feel like a muzzled dog, a tiger in a cage, a bull whose horns had been sawn-off; it made her jittery and frustrated and left her aching for an outlet to the adrenaline rushing through her veins.
"I'm worried about her," she'd overheard her father, Ted, say once.

"About Dora?" Her mother hadn't sounded at all surprised by his concern.

"The way she fights... she's very vicious about it, love. She seems to... enjoy it a little too much." Her father had said.

"Oh darling," her mother had sighed in return. "Darling, our Dora is a daughter of the House of Black; my being disowned doesn't change that. And being a Black is more then just a name; it's blood and it's history and it's magic. Dora is, and always will be, a true Black at heart with all that that entails."

Tonks had left it at that, not feeling bad about eavesdropping on the private conversation. Regret wasn't something she felt often. Neither were a lot of things, actually. She'd always been a bit different from other people. Like how she got the feeling that, for most, it wasn't harder to try not to kill people. But really, it wasn't like she could help feeling as if certain people in the world didn't really deserve to live. If people couldn't be polite, useful, hard-working members of society, then wouldn't society just be better off without them?

School had always been particularly difficult in that regard.

Charlie Weasley was an old school friend and the only person from her Hogwarts days she'd bothered to keep in contact with. He had been wildly popular from a young age thanks to his Quidditch success and he'd always played up the ladies man well. Tonks was one of the only ones to know the truth behind that particular facade— they'd both been fourteen when she'd asked the redhead why he pretended he liked girls when he kept staring at Stebbin's arse. She'd been teasing mostly (she hadn't quite got the hang of that back then), but Charlie had been genuinely horrified. She'd learned that day about how his staunchly Light parents— his mother in particular— could never accept a gay son. Tonks had never realised just how Grey her mother had raised her until Charlie explained his life to her.

She hadn't told anyone his secret, as per his wishes, and the odd-duck 'Puff (her person-skin had been more of a work in progress during her earlier years at Hogwarts and it has taken her a year or two to learn how to properly blend in amongst the other students) and the popular Gryffindor Quidditch star had formed an unlikely friendship that lasted to this day— despite Charlie running off to Romania as soon as he graduated.

It was to be expected, though, that their bond ran deeper then just friendship because the secret of Charlie's sexual orientation wasn't the deepest, darkest one they shared just between the two of them.

When Tonks dreamed, she dreamed of blood and sweat and tears, of painting the walls red and of the sheer exhilaration of being alive that only being inches from death could bring. And when she woke up after these dreams, she'd never been wetter. And Charlie, her Charlie, he was like her but different. Both of them, when confronted with something that should disgust them or horrify them, should send them running and screaming, instead made them pitch a tent (usually a metaphorical tent in her case, though being a metamorphmagus meant that wasn't always so).

For Tonks, it was the bloody mess of a fight, the sort where she could rip and tear and bathe in the blood she'd made spill, the sort where the loser didn't get to walk away— didn't get to walk again ever. For Charlie, though, for her Charlie (the only interesting person she knew) it was fire.

As far as Tonks knew (and she knew a lot), she was the only person Charlie had confessed to that he couldn't "get it up" without imagining himself or his partner— or both of them— being covered in
hot flames, the acrid scent of burning hair and the sickly sweet smell of crackling flesh filling the room. She was also the only one who knew that not all of the burns on his arms, or the ones hidden under his clothes, were from handling dragons. After all, Charlie was the only one who knew about her own marks, marks made by pretty blades and erased by her chameleon-skin to leave her an unblemished canvas to repaint.

Really, it was no wonder they were friends; they were practically as messed up as each other. Extremely questionable kinks, adrenaline junky occupations chosen specifically because of said extremely questionable kinks...

Really, there was no way they couldn't be friends.

And even with her Auror training and the inconvenience of him living in a different country, Tonks still visited Charlie whenever she could, dragged him away from his dragons and off to muggle cities where together they'd dance nights away at clubs, getting drunk on life's high– and booze. Helga's tits, muggles had the best booze.

And when she ducked into dark corners with girls or guys or both, the rush and thrill that came with the conquest was almost incomparable, and if she had to close her eyes and picture silver light sliding off the edge of a blade soaked red, had to imagine bodies falling with heavy thumps under her bloody fists, to immerse herself in remembrance of the thrill of living that only dancing with death could bring, to reach her finish; well, it was always easy enough to do so, with the booze clouding her head and adrenaline still pulsing through her body from dancing among a crushing, gyrating crowd of strangers.

When Charlie had owled her about the Triwizard Tournament and his role in it, she wasn't particularly surprised when he sheepishly admitted he was expected to take a date to the Yule Ball he'd been invited to, as had anyone who'd been involved in the Tournament so far, and he was expected to attend so could she pretty please be that date. She'd agreed, of course– Charlie was her best (and only real) friend, first and foremost, and she knew she'd enjoy getting to see Hogwarts again. It was the students she'd disliked, not the professors or the castle.

Her first impression of the newest generation, however, hadn't been any better then that of her own and after an hour or two Tonks was considering dragging Charlie off to the Quidditch pitch to have a smoke behind the stands or break into the broomshed (just like old times) when she saw her.

Well, she'd noticed her before, everyone had, but it was the first time she'd been close enough to really see.

And when she looked at the stunning blond in the pale dress, it wasn't the young woman's beauty that had caught her attention, that had made her take a second, closer look for what lay hidden that pretty, painted surface– it was the orange lily nestled just below her glistening breasts as her chest heaved with exertion and her graceful, swan-like neck tilted back to reveal a slender throat that would look so pretty painted red, sweet laughter escaping her perfect, cupid-bow lips.

And, well, Tonks couldn't help but smile as shrewd, pretty azure-blue eyes met hers, because she'd always had a thing for predators, for those with monsters behind their eyes and under their skin; hiding, creeping, lurking, ready to consume.

The part-Veela smiled back at her, succulent rosy lips and white glittering knives, and Tonks remembered her mother's words, her warnings about pretty girls with dangerous smiles.

She moved forwards anyway.

(Butterfly wings ripped and torn, feathers pulled from struggling owls, stones thrown at
unsuspecting cats. Smoking behind the Quidditch stands, fucking strangers in dark corners, cutting lines into her forever-uncarred chameleon-skin.

Tonks was good with her smile and an expert at hiding behind clumsiness, bubbliness and sweet-awkward charm, but she was even better with a blade.

People were so stupid to think that women forged from ice and stone and fire were the only ones they should fear, to forget the danger of good girls; the ones with dried blood under their painted nails and shadows under their skin and madness in their hearts)

"Wotcher! Care to take a whirl?" Tonks asked cheerfully, offering her arm to the young woman dressed pure as an angel and wearing hatred on her heart.

Perfectly white teeth stretched into a reaper's smile (the only sort of angel Tonks would ever care to meet) as Fleur Delacour gracefully placed her hand over Tonks's own. "Oui, I would be delighted." She murmured, accent rich and throaty and delicious, curling ever-so delightfully over the syllables as they left her pink, poison-sweet lips. Tonks couldn't help her own smile in return, her real smile; wide as a Cheshire's, sharp as her favourite knife, the curve of it hungry and bloodthirsty.

"Then let's dance."

(There is always madness in love, but there's reason in madness too)

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Neville's POV:

Neville was glowing.

Not literally, of course, but he certainly felt like he was. Tonight, for the first time in his life, he felt like a son his parents could be proud of; like the man his grandmother had always wanted him to be.

All his fears about the Ball seemed ridiculous now. The whole evening he'd never missed a step and Fleur had shone brighter and more brilliantly then the sun as she twirled in his arms. They'd rehearsed their dancing together for hours— whenever they weren't working out that was— and their practice and hard work had shown in their synchronicity as they moved together across the dance floor as one.

Everyone had been watching them but it wasn't the sneering and mocking looks that Neville usually received— shock, open awe and admiration had been plain to see on everyone's faces, and Neville felt as if his chest might burst from happiness.

And even better then anything else was the look of pride on Professor Sprout as Neville had led her through a careful waltz. She'd had tears in her eyes that she had to dab away with a handkerchief when the song ended and he bowed to her. Neville had never been happier in his life then in that moment.

It was close to midnight when Neville went to go fetch a drink for Fleur, the two of them both exhausted from the dancing but trading wide, beaming smiles with each other, breathless but exhilarated. It took him a moment to find her again when he returned, as she'd moved away from the spot he'd left her, and was now standing next to a witch he hadn't seen before. The young
woman had bubblegum pink hair that was twisted in a fancy knot on the top of her head and was wearing a slinky dress as bright as her hair.

When Fleur spotted him approaching she enthusiastically waved him over. "You got zee drinks," she said, gratefully accepting one of the glasses of fruit punch and slipping her free arm through his. She pressed a light kiss to his cheek and Neville worked on not going red. He was much better at it now then he had been the first time she'd done it, back when they'd been rehearsing and he managed to lift her up and spin her in a full circle for the first time. He was pretty sure she'd made a game out of it since then, as he kept blushing when she did so, but it wasn't a cruel game, more light teasing between friends. Friends. He had friends. It was an intoxicating thought, one that still made him dizzy and he sometimes struggled to believe.

"Neville, zis is Tonks," Fleur introduced him to the bubblegum pink-haired witch who waved cheerfully at him. Tonks had a friendly face with a warm smile and pretty eyes. Neville thought there was something a bit familiar about her, but he couldn't place it.

"Wotcher, Neville was it?" Tonks asked. Her accent was British which surprised Neville, as he'd been expecting to hear Fleur's friend speak with the same French lilt as her.

"Yes, it's nice to meet you." He replied with a shy smile and Tonks grinned at him.

"You too, mate. You're certainly looking sharp tonight." She said and Neville blushed slightly at the compliment.

"Thank you," he said, "you look really nice too."

"Tonks eez in training to be an Auror," Fleur told him and Neville felt his eyes go wide as he looked at Tonks in awe. Aurors were the bravest people he knew– his gran had always told him how brave his mum and dad were and everyone had said they were amazing Aurors.

"That's amazing." He said and Tonks's cheeks went pink.

"I'm just a trainee right now," she protested, but Neville thought she looked pleased.

The sudden sound of the clock chiming midnight had all the people still in the Great Hall groaning in dismay. Beside him, Fleur let out a disappointed sigh.

"I was 'oping zat we would be able to fit in anozzer dance," she said, before smiling at him. "Zank you for tonight, Neville."

"No, thank you, Fleur," Neville said earnestly, "for everything. Thank you so much." Fleur's eyes were soft as she looked at him and her smile was breathtaking. "Would you like me to walk you back to the carriage?" Neville offered.

"Oui, I would appreciate zee escort." Fleur said. "Eet is quite dark out zere, I would not want to lose my way and freeze to death. Eet would ruin what 'as been zee most perfect night."

Neville smiled at her and they joined the small crowd of students and staff trickling through the doors, out into the Entrance Hall. As he and Fleur turned towards the oak front doors of the castle Neville was a bit surprised when Tonks followed after them, easily keeping pace to Fleur's right, but Fleur didn't seem at all surprised so he guessed that the two had planned to continue their conversation in the carriage. He wondered briefly when and how they'd met, but it wasn't his business and his gran had always impressed upon Neville the importance of not prying.

It was dark outside, the stars were a brilliant, twinkling blanket above them and the moon just a
slither in the sky. The darkness made the trail of footsteps along the lightly snow-dusted ground that led to the Beauxbaton's carriage difficult to see and follow, and Neville was glad he'd offered to show Fleur and her friend the way.

Reaching the carriage, Neville smiled at the two young women. "Thank you again," he said to Fleur, "I really had a wonderful time." Fleur smiled softly back at him, slipping her arm free from his so she could cup his face between her slim hands.

"Merci, Neville. It was zee most magnifique Ball I 'ave ever attended," she said, before leaning down and pressing her lips lightly to his. The kiss only lasted a few seconds but for Neville, it was like time had stopped. When Fleur broke the gentle kiss Neville sort of just stared at her. Tonks, her lips twitching up in an amused smile, reached out to lightly bump her knuckles against his shoulder.

"Goodnight, Nev," she said, "it was great meeting you."

"Y-You too," he stammered, waving weakly as the two young women disappeared into the carriage. Once the door had closed behind them Neville lifted a hand that was shaking slightly to press his fingertips against his tingling lips. He knew Fleur wasn't interested in him romantically, that the kiss had been her way of thanking him for the evening, but as far as first kisses went, receiving his from the most beautiful woman Neville had ever seen was impossible to beat. It had been the perfect way to end what had been a perfect night.

Feeling like he was floating, Neville started to make his way back to the castle, pulling out his wand to cast a lumos to better see the ground after almost tripping over a bit of uneven ground in his distracted state. His mind was so focused on the memory of the kiss, of the soft, sweetness of Fleur's lips on his own, that he didn't realise he was being followed until the curse hit his shoulder.

Neville let out a yelp of pain as he fell, tumbling forwards. There was a loud crunching sound and Neville thought he must have broken a bone until no pain hit him and he realised that the light from his wand had gone out. Horrified, Neville could just make out the sight of his snapped wand in the dim light. His wand! He'd broken his wand!

He didn't have time to start panicking, though, not when another bright flash of light gave him a few seconds of warning that another curse had been sent his way. Neville flung himself to the side, the spell hitting the ground where he'd been only moments before and sizzling out against the grass.

Stumbling to his feet, Neville dropped the useless half of his wand near where the other half had broken off and frantically looked around for his attacker. It didn't take long to spot him– the red hair was very distinctive, even in the dark.

"Ron!" Neville shouted, feeling anger rise up inside him. "What the hell was that for?"

Ron's face as he stomped forwards was red with rage. "You think you're so much better then the rest of us, huh?" He shouted back, "Fleur only picked you because she felt sorry for the pathetic crybaby! Why else would she go with Loser Longbottom? You're nothing but a useless lump!"

Neville felt such a rush of rage in response to the insults Ron was hurling at him that when the redhead tried to curse him again, instead of running away Neville charged towards the Weasley instead, ducking under the curse and tackling Ron, sending both boys toppling to the ground. Together they rolled across the grass, both grappling for the upper hand, but Ron wasn't the one who'd worked out for three to four hours every day for the past three and a half weeks, and Neville managed to get Ron on his back, holding him there by kneeling on top of the redhead.
Panting, Neville snatched Ron's wand out of his hand and, using the muscle he'd built up lifting weights, doing push-ups and dancing with Fleur, practicing lifting her over and over again, Neville threw Ron's wand as hard as he could in the direction of the Forbidden Forest, sending it hurtling off into the darkness.

Ron let out a howl of rage and tried to punch him but Neville whacked his arm away and managed to pin both of the redhead's hands to the ground. "Never," he snarled down at the Weasley, "ever call me 'Loser Longbottom' again!" Ron's face twisted into an ugly sneer.

"Don't like to hear the truth, you worthless shit?" He taunted and something just snapped inside Neville. Releasing Ron's hands, he pulled his fist back and punched the redhead in the nose as hard as he could.

Ron let out a scream of pain, both his hands moving automatically to his nose where blood had started gushing out at an alarming rate. Neville, still seeing red, punched the other boy a second time, not bothering to aim anywhere but in the general vicinity of Ron's face. He ended up hitting the redhead in the mouth causing Ron to howl in agony and Neville had to clench his teeth shut, holding back a shout of his own as a sharp jolt of pain flared through his fist.

Stumbling off the other boy and back to his feet, Neville cradled his hand to his chest as he glared down at a sobbing Ron. The redhead's face was a mess of tears, blood and snot as he wailed in pain and Neville thought he should probably feel bad about hurting the other Gryffindor, but all he could feel was a deep burning hatred and rage and a vicious sense of satisfaction. "Don't even think about telling anyone about this," he spat down at Ron. "You cursed me first so I'll just tell everyone it was self-defense. And they'll all believe me, because I'm just a crybaby coward, remember? And you know how Moody feels about people who curse people behind their backs!"

Ron didn't say anything in reply, just sobbed wordlessly while clutching his face. Neville wondered what his own face looked like as he looked down at Ron, wondered what people would think of him as he barred his teeth at his dorm-mate in a fierce, viciously satisfied grin.

Staring at the crying boy, Neville remembered the constant bullying, remembered how small and helpless and cowardly and useless Ron had always made him feel, and how it had always reminded him of the way he'd shrink into himself under the weight of his gran's disgusted looks.

Feeling his teeth clench together in rage at the memory of his gran's obvious repulsion of her weak, useless grandson, Neville's vision turned red again. I'll show her, he thought furiously, I'll show all of them! Just watch me!

Mouth twisting into a snarl, Neville drew back his foot and kicked Ron in the side as hard as he could, then did it again and again. The other Gryffindor was screaming and Neville wanted to keep kicking him over and over, wanted to stomp down on the other boy as hard as he could, wanted to pummel Ron with his fists until the redhead was black and blue, and most of all he wanted to make Ron feel as fucking useless and worthless as the other boy had always made him feel.

Neville was yanked from his blind rage, from his fierce need to make Ron hurt, to make him suffer, by the sharp jolt of pain that flared in his right thumb joint as he clenched his hands into fists, ready to start throwing punches again.

Hissing under his breath, Neville lifted his hand up to look at the damage. His knuckles felt tender and they were bleeding freely, the skin torn from when he'd hit Ron in the mouth, and the area around his thumb joint had swollen up with the skin already looking bruised purple. Hoping it was just sprained or something, because going to Madam Pomfrey was the last thing Neville wanted to do, not wanting to explain just how his hand had ended up in such a state, he left Ron sobbing and
wailing as he back-tracked his way to where the two halves of his broken wand lay discarded on the ground.

His gran was going to be furious, Neville thought glumly. The usual flash of resentment that came along when he thought of her had him gritting his teeth in more then just pain as he used his uninjured hand to scoop up both pieces of his father's old wand.

Pausing to look back at Ron, Neville felt his lip curl back in disgust. "I'm worth ten of you, Weasley," he spat, before turning and making his way back to the castle, leaving Ron bleeding on the ground where he belonged.

He'd been wrong earlier, Neville thought, the same viciously satisfied grin from before once again firmly in place. This had been the perfect way to finish a perfect night.

Chapter End Notes

So Neville's officially shown he's got claws after all– rawr! There's definitely a lot of pent up rage in our boy! I hope everyone enjoyed the introduction of our newest anti-heroine, the lovely (and secretly insane) Tonks, and the only Weasley not included in the "Weasley bashing", good ol' Charlie.

For those who are interested, Charlie's "kink" (fetish or paraphilia would be a better descriptor) is a real thing. It's called pyrophilia and is very rare– or at least, not many people own up to it. It's different from pyromania in that pyromaniacs don't get any sexual pleasure from starting fires. Despite Charlie's wanting to be on fire/set his partner on fire, death, murder and pain aren't part of the fetish, so he doesn't want to hurt or kill anyone– himself included.

Tonks's, er, "kink" probably has a real name too– other then bloodlust, psychopathy and psychosis, that is– but "slightly-less-insane-then-her-Auntie-Bellatrix" (or at least much, much better at hiding it) is as good a diagnosis as any.

The Yule Ball is finally complete and I hope you had as much fun reading this as I had writing it! Feedback is always appreciated xxx

~Cheshire Carroll
CHAPTER LI:

Charlie's POV:

People saw Tonks and they thought "funny, goofy and not too smart". They thought that the only thing that really stood out about her was her hair.

They were wrong.

Charlie had always known there was something different about "Don't Call Me Nymphadora" Tonks. It might be because he'd known her for so long, before she'd mastered that sweet, clumsy, eager young Auror trainee act that she fooled everyone else with; back when she hadn't quite mastered the words and actions she'd needed to fit in with the rest of the Hogwarts student body. Or it could be because he was the only one she felt comfortable enough with to show her true self.

People at Hogwarts had usually overlooked Tonks's oddities– why would they concentrate on her cold eyes or emotionless face, when her hair had just turned into a neon blue Mohawk or a bright orange afro with stripes? It took Charlie some time to figure out she did it on purpose, distracted people with her constantly shifting features when she couldn't quite figure out how she was supposed to react to something. By that point he didn't care– at fourteen years old, Tonks was the best friend he could ever ask for.

And all these years later she still was. By now she'd perfected what she called her "people-skin" in a way that made him pretty sure she wasn't actually joking about it, and nobody seemed to remember the odd Hufflepuff who'd stared just a little bit too long when someone was injured, except to recall her flashy hair-styles and funny noses– an owl's, a cat's, a duck's; even an elephant's trunk once.

Charlie remembered, of course, but he didn't care. Tonks had been such an essential part of his life for so long she was like another limb. She had her issues, sure, but it wasn't like he wasn't messed up in the head too. So what if sometimes she seemed so empty it was like there was no one there; so what if sometimes she'd fly so high it was like she'd never come down again? So what if she stared ravenously at the sharp edges of blades; so what if the sight of blood made her wet? She was Tonks and she was perfect the way she was.

"You're interesting" She would tell him, during the times when fondness softened her jagged edges. Charlie was never quite sure exactly what she meant by that, but he'd always accepted it as the compliment she intended it as; her explanation for why she'd never let go of the bond they'd formed.

Tonks had been the one to give him the courage to admit his biggest secret, the one he could barely admit to even in his own head. Not that he was gay; she'd figured that one out herself. Later, years after she'd terrified him by asking why he pretended to like girls, Tonks had admitted she hadn't realised at the time why she shouldn't confront someone like that, with something they were trying to hide, but she didn't regret doing it to him. Charlie didn't regret her confronting him either. Being gay was a secret he'd probably die before ever telling his family, but it wasn't his biggest secret. No, Charlie's biggest secret was the fact that fire turned him on.

Actually, it did more then that. It completely dominated his sex life; he couldn't even get hard
without imagining the flickering flames licking his skin, the glorious, sweltering heat of them. The spell for bluebell flames Tonks had found, portable fire that was cool to touch, and his imagination was usually enough to get him by—though convincing his partners to let him cover whatever surface they were about to fuck on with the bluebell flames tended to be a bit awkward—but sometimes he craved the real thing. Sometimes he'd dress in layers, pour alcohol on the topmost sleeve of the six or seven jumpers he was wearing, and just cast an *incendio*. Usually he'd put the fire out before it reached the last layer—he might love fire, might love the heat of it, but pain had never been his particular poison of choice. Sometimes, though, he'd be too slow or too lost in the moment and he'd add a new burn to his collection.

Once he'd started working with dragons he'd been able to start wearing short sleeves again around other people. It had been a relief.

Charlie had spilled his shameful secret out to Tonks when they were sixteen and had snuck out of Hogwarts after dark to go get drunk at the Hogs Head. Tonks had just grinned and told him about the dreams where she practically bathed in the blood of people she'd cut to pieces and how sometimes she reenacted parts of those dreams on her own skin.

It really said something that the first thing Charlie had felt was relief. It said even more that the next thing he asked was if she ever put herself in danger when hurting herself, concerned for her safety. Tonks had laughed and cut a bloody line across the smooth, unscarred flesh of her arm with a knife she conjured and he'd watched, amazed, as the skin rippled and knitted itself back together until the rivulets of blood looked out of place on her flawless skin. "Metamorphmagus," she'd said, when he asked her how she'd done it. "I can change everything in my body, I can create whole new appendages that aren't even human—why wouldn't I be able to put myself back together after cutting myself apart?"

Sometimes Tonks joked their friendship was like some kind of Stockholm Syndrome. It was a muggle term she'd heard from her father that Charlie had looked into after the third time she'd mentioned it. Sometimes he thought she might be right, but he could never find it within himself to care.

Tonks had been pretty much the only one not horrified when he said he was moving to Romania to work with dragons after graduation. His mother had cried, his father had patted her back and given him disappointed eyes, his younger brothers had all whined and complained, self-centered as always, and Ginny... well, Charlie wasn't her precious Bill or the 'Boy-Who-Lived' of her dreams so the darling apple of his parents' eyes hadn't cared one bit what he was doing. Bill was okay, but Charlie had never been his favourite and he was gone most of the time anyway, too busy with his job to even write.

Frankly, Charlie had been relieved to get away from the whole lot of them.

When he'd told Tonks, though, that he was leaving she'd just asked if it was supposed to surprise her. By then Charlie was so used to her atypical reactions that he just shrugged and asked if she wanted to go get drunk.

They'd done that a lot as young, stupid teenagers; so confident they knew the world. They were much smarter about it now— or at least they could afford the better quality stuff.

The only time Tonks had really, truly scared him was when they were nineteen and drunk, sharing a bed together in some shitty muggle motel in Romania, and she'd turned to him and said she was a murderer.

It was the fact that his immediate fear was for her and not of her that made it as messed up as the
rest of their gloriously messy friendship. "Who did you kill?" He'd asked her, already thinking of ways to hide the body or to help her hide from the Aurors if it was too late. "Did you cover your tracks? Do you need an alibi?"

Tonks had laughed until she'd cried then cried until she laughed. She'd then told him she hadn't actually killed anyone but had added "not yet" and he knew she wasn't lying. "Every day I kill people," she'd confessed, "when I'm awake, when I'm asleep, I always see their blood on my hands."

And Charlie had hugged her, because there was nothing else he could do and he just hoped that the day the blood on her hands wasn't in her head that she wouldn't get taken from him forever.

"Maybe I should kill myself," Tonks had said, resting her head against his chest, her ear over where his heart was beating steadily in his chest. "Before I hurt somebody."

"No!" Charlie had responded instantly, shocked and horrified. "No you can't."

"But I'll kill somebody!" She'd said, frustrated. "You don't understand, Charlie– I'm going to kill someone; I won't be able to stop myself, not forever. Don't you care?"

"Not as much as I care about you." Charlie had replied, and that had been one of those defining moments in life where he realised just how screwed up he was and that his friendship with Tonks wasn't all to blame– or maybe it was why they had become such close friends in the first place. He had his own darkness in him, and in a way his was even worse then hers. Tonks couldn't help it; she'd been born that way, born a bit emptier inside and missing the parts that made up moral compasses and stopped people from dreaming about murder and waking up with a smile on their faces.

Tonks was born wrong, but Charlie's moral compass was fully functioning– he just chose to ignore it. Because when it came down to some faceless stranger or Tonks, he'd choose her every time. Even if it wasn't a stranger, he'd still choose her.

"Don't do it." He'd told her.

"I can't help it!" She'd shouted, sitting up in the bed, suddenly furious and spitting mad, her eyes wild and angry as she looked seconds away from trying to strangle him or breaking his nose. "I can't help it, Charlie; I've tried!"

"I don't care about that!" He'd shouted right back at her, sitting up too so he could grab her shoulders and shake her. "Don't you dare kill yourself, Nymphadora Saiph Tonks, or I will kill you myself! Fuck everyone else! If– when– you end up killing someone, then you better do it right and hide your fucking tracks because I have no idea how to stage a fucking prison break for fucking Azkaban!"

"Don't call me Nymphadora." She'd muttered. It was probably a reflexive response for her, by now, to hearing her full name. The fury had disappeared as quickly as it had come and her eyes, as she'd looked up at him, had been filled with a cautious, desperate hope. "Do you mean it?"

"You're the only one who matters." He'd repeated his words from earlier. "You do what you have to do. Just... don't leave me, alright? I need you. I'd be lost without my favourite psycho."

"And I need my darling firebug." It was probably another reflex, her automatic reply of their black-humour nicknames, chosen back when they were sixteen. Her face had softened to a more gentle expression, one that she didn't wear often, and he'd tugged her back down so they were lying flat
on the mattress again. "You're interesting." She'd murmured, leaning her head back against his chest with her ear over his heart and for her that was the highest honour she could give someone.

They'd both been quiet for a bit, just curled up there together. Tonks was the one who'd broken the silence.

"I'm not going to just go kill someone." She'd said. "Not yet. Auror training makes it easier to... deal with the urges. So does drinking and fucking. But one day it won't be enough."

"Tonks..." he'd whispered, his heart breaking a little for her.

"Charlie... don't ask me not to, don't ever ask that of me. I can't be fake for you too." She'd whispered back and her face had been desperate again.

"I won't then. I promise."

"Okay." She'd breathed and he'd felt her hands trembling slightly where they were pressed against him. "Okay. You can't ask me not to, you can't ever ask me that, but for you... for you I'll try. I'll try."

Charlie hadn't replied to that, had just reached for a trembling hand with one of his own calloused, blistered ones and squeezed gently. They'd lain there together in silence for the rest of the night, eventually dozing off in the early hours of the morning.

Being a country apart had never done anything to their friendship. Or "weird co-dependency", as one of his fellow Quidditch players had once called it, not understanding why they were so close if they weren't shagging. The distance wasn't even an issue, not with Tonks working at the Ministry and constantly breaking into the International Portkey office to nick herself a round trip to Romania and back.

It was in Romania that Tonks met Antoaneta Ferox and discovered a whole new sort of interesting. "Pretty, dangerous things," Tonks had explained with a smile on her face he hadn't seen before. The look in her eyes had been a bit like the one she'd had when she'd told him she was a murderer, but not quite. And Antoaneta had definitely been pretty and she'd definitely been dangerous— that girl had been the sort of unhinged that made Tonks seem well-balanced. Despite how much Tonks had enjoyed the short-lived relationship, Charlie had been relieved when it was over— apparently Antoaneta's parents had had the girl committed. Tonks had sulked about it for weeks.

Charlie had been understandably wary the next time she found someone, a man called Luther with cold eyes and long, dark hair. Luther had been a muggle who'd ended up getting arrested by the police— it turned out there were seven bodies buried in his backyard. Charlie had asked Tonks if she knew about the dead women and she'd just shrugged. It wasn't an answer but Charlie had decided to take it as one and hadn't asked again.

It was a pattern that had continued, though Tonks didn't try a relationship again after Renata Tress; a woman who'd tried killing Tonks in her sleep when she'd spent the night at her place. Charlie honestly had no idea how Tonks managed to single out the most dangerous person in a crowd, but again and again she'd zero in on someone and when Charlie would take a closer look at whoever it was he'd feel the warning hairs on the back of his neck start to prickle.

"Like calls to like," Tonks had once told him. "Sometimes it's like looking in the mirror."

"But you're not crazy," he'd pointed out and she'd winked at him.

"Or maybe I'm just better at hiding it."
Years with Tonks, though, had given him enough practice to see through most people's masks, had taught him how to walk into a room and take a good guess as to who the most dangerous person in there was.

Charlie didn't know if she'd been the most dangerous person in the room, but Hermione Granger had certainly been dangerous. She held herself like a coiled wildcat, ready to lunge for the throat of her prey; claws out, teeth bared. And she'd looked at Harry Potter like she'd burn the world to ashes for him.

Which was... troublesome, and it had led to him sitting in the Hogs Head at just a bit past noon the day after the Yule Ball with a cigarette in his hand and a beer to his left as he waited for Tonks's inevitable arrival while brooding about the night before. Sure enough, he'd only been sitting there for about an hour and a half before Tonks slipped into the bar and sidled her way over to him.

"So," she said, lighting up her own cigarette as she sat down beside him. She picked up his beer—he was on his third by now and he'd gone through nearly half a pack of cigarettes— and drained half of what was left in the mug in one long swallow, took a breath and then drained the rest.

"So," Charlie mimicked, rolling his eyes at her and his now empty beer mug as he took a long drag and exhaled slowly. Smoking was a habit he'd gotten into for the hot burn in his throat and the look of the smoke more then any kick from the nicotine. Charlie wasn't sure why Tonks smoked—probably because she was bored one day. She could be whimsical like that.

"Fun night?" Tonks offered and Charlie snorted.

"For one of us. I thought you were supposed to be my date."

"Sorry Charlie," Tonks grinned, all fake-remorse and mocking eyes, "she was just so much hotter then you."

"Not going to argue there," he agreed, because that French bird had been smoking. Even he'd been in awe of her beauty and he was gayer then a fucking rainbow. "Was she any good?" He asked, because he and Tonks were like twelve year old boys who'd just seen their first boob and had to tell all their mates about it.

"One of the best," Tonks sighed happily, which was high praise from someone who'd shagged as many people as she had. "You would have loved her, Charlie. She had fire burning under her skin and wore hatred on her heart."

Well used to Tonks going off into her poetic tangents, Charlie took another long drag of his cigarette before saying, "I met someone interesting last night too."

"Was he hot?"

"She was a bit too young and a lot too female for me to answer that."

Tonks turned to look at him curiously, her interest piqued. "Who was she?"

"Hermione Granger," Charlie said and Tonks's eyes widened in realisation.

"The one your brothers say is crazy and evil and turning the Boy-Who-Lived Dark?" She asked.

"Well it's a unique name," Charlie teased and Tonks rolled her eyes.

"Well? What was she like?" She asked, impatiently.
"You would have liked her." He said which made Tonks's interest sharpen, made her shed her "people-skin", scraping away the masks until only the flat, lifeless face and cold, calculating eyes remained. This was Tonks in her truest state; no buffer between her and the world.

"Interesting." She murmured as she tilted her head slightly, not unlike an apex predator observing its prey. "You usually try to keep small children away from me."

"You don't like kids," Charlie pointed out, not at all unnerved by the transformation that had taken place before him. It wasn't anything he hadn't seen before– the first few times had spooked him but by now he just accepted it as another facet of Tonks, one of the multiple "skins" she made and shaped and changed easier then she breathed. "You say kids are too needy and annoying," he reminded her. "And besides, she's not a kid– believe me, in that dress Hermione Granger was all woman."

"I'm almost disappointed I didn't get to see her myself." Tonks said, her "people-skin" sliding back into place as she pulled a face. Charlie had told her once that she didn't need to act around him but it was a reflex for her to hide what she really was. And besides, she'd once said, "Tonks" was sort of an ideal– who she thought she might have turned out like, if she hadn't been born wrong. She'd never be that Tonks, but there were days, she said, when she almost felt like she was. "Hermione Granger," Tonks mused out loud, "she sounds interesting." A high compliment coming from her– the highest, in fact.

"She was." Charlie agreed. "Beautiful, ice cold, smart as a whip, completely scathing towards Weasleys, the Order and the Headmaster then turned to complete goo when Harry Potter walked over."

"I read that article in the Prophet everyone was talking about." Tonks recalled. "It said she was his girlfriend."

"They're more then just boyfriend and girlfriend," Charlie disagreed, shaking his head. "Those two look at each other like they hung the moon and stars. Like without the other one they'd starve. It was sort of adorable, in a very co-dependent sort of way."

"Well, we'd know co-dependent." Tonks said and he grinned.

"I certainly don't know what I'd do without my favourite psycho." He said and Tonks batted her eyelashes at him.

"And I'd be lost without my darling firebug."

They laughed at themselves before turning serious once more. "My parents are convinced that You-Know-Who is back." Charlie said quietly and Tonks pulled a face.

"Urgh. Moody's the same; it was such a drag before he retired and fucked off to Hogwarts, thank Merlin."

"Well I'm pretty sure Hermione Granger would jump off the Astronomy Tower before following Dumbledore in anything and Harry Potter would jump right after her." Charlie sighed and Tonks looked at him curiously.

"What are you saying?" She asked.

"I'm saying there's a better chance of finding a unicorn in hell then there is of Hermione Granger siding with Dumbledore. And if You-Know-Who is back then there's only one other side she can be on and Dumbledore knows it– and he also knows that wherever she goes, Harry will follow."
"I still don't know what point you're trying to make." Tonks frowned at him.

"I'm saying if the Boy-Who-Lived goes Dark then the Light is fucked." He told her bluntly, and Tonks just shrugged.

"So? We can just stay out of the fighting and it won't affect us at all. You live in fucking Romania and I could probably move there for a year or two while things get settled here in Britain."

"My family are all Light," Charlie pointed out.

"You don't even like your family," Tonks shot back.

"Your parents aren't Dark."

"Maybe not, but they aren't Light either."

They both looked at each other, cigarettes long forgotten, nothing but burnt out stubs held between their fingers. "I don't think I could ever fight for the Dark." Charlie told her honestly. Despite everything, Charlie had never hurt another person in his entire life. He was a Light wizard, mostly, but... he didn't know if he could side with the Light.

"Light or Dark or neither, it doesn't matter to me." Tonks said with another shrug. "Whatever happens, whoever wins, I don't care. I'll just follow your lead."

"Yeah," Charlie said with a sigh. "Yeah, I know. That just means I really don't want to make the wrong choice."

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_Hermione's POV:_

Getting up early the next morning to pack and then shrink their trunks down so they were pocket-sized was not fun after their late night. It was a group of very tired Slytherins who made their way to the thestral-drawn carriages at a quarter to nine, Hermione included. Harry kept yawning and rubbing his eyes and twice Blaise had to stop Draco from walking into a wall.

Contrary to his orders the previous night of not wanting to see them before the term begun, Snape had been waiting for them in the common room, pulling her and Harry to the side so he could have a word with them before they left. Hermione thought they were about to be punished for the night before– so did Harry, if his expression was anything to go by– but Snape seemed very determined to pretend the whole thing had never happened and instead asked them where they were planning to spend the holidays.

"Draco invited us to stay at Malfoy Manor," Harry told their professor and Hermione nodded along even though she wasn't sure that was actually where they'd be spending the last week of holidays. She was actually hoping that Tom would be waiting for them at the station and that the older boy would whisk them off somewhere, with any luck that somewhere not being Riddle Manor, and they could have lots of enthusiastic sex. If Tom wasn't there to meet them, though, Draco actually had invited them to spend the remainder of the holidays with him at Malfoy Manor so it technically wasn't a lie. Technically.

Seeming satisfied with their answer, Snape swept from the common room with his usual dramatic billowing– Hermione _really_ needed to learn which spell he used to do that– and she and Harry
rejoined the rest of their group to traipse tiredly to the thestral-drawn carriages, Luna meeting them by the oak doors of the castle to accompany them on the short journey down to the train platform.

As their carriage reached the platform, Hermione noticed Neville climbing out of one a few spots ahead of them. Spotting the same thing, Harry seemed to wake up a bit as he caught sight of the Gryffindor. "Let's go say hello," he said eagerly, not waiting for her to respond before dragging her after him, in Neville's direction. Hermione sighed in exasperation but didn't try to fight him.

Neville looked pale, she noticed as they got closer, and his face was tight like he was in pain. The Gryffindor jumped slightly when he realised someone was approaching him but he calmed down when he realised who it was and gave them both a strained smile.

"Are you alright, Nev?" Harry asked with a frown.

"Y-Yes, yes, I'm fine," Neville said, speaking a little too quickly for it to be the truth. His right hand, Hermione noticed, had yet to leave the pocket of his robes.

"Did someone curse you?" She asked bluntly, not wanting to waste time beating around the bush. "You're hiding your hand." Behind her, Hermione could sense the other Slytherins in their group drawing nearer, probably attracted to the sign of some sort of trouble.

Neville cringed, ducking his head. "Well, sort of," he mumbled.

"Neville," she said sharply, "remember what I told you. Smile." Neville took a breath and looked up, seeming to square his shoulders.

"I walked Fleur and her friend back to the Beauxbatons carriage," he said, his voice stronger now. "Ron must have followed us, though I didn't notice until after I'd said goodbye to them and started walking back to the castle. He hit me with a curse from behind and I broke my wand when I fell. He tried to curse me again and was calling me the usual names when I... well, I lost my temper."

"You lost your temper?" Hermione asked in disbelief. Neville slowly pulled his right hand out of his pocket and she whistled through her teeth, impressed. "Oh wow, you must have done a real number on him."

Neville's knuckles were bruised and torn and she could already see from where she was standing that his thumb was broken– he'd obviously never punched somebody before and hadn't known not to tuck his thumb inside when making a fist.

"He was very annoying," Neville admitted. "I think I broke my thumb punching his stupid face though."

"Oh it's definitely broken," Hermione confirmed before turning to face the others. They all looked different levels of surprised and approving, with a degree of calculation also evident in their expressions. "Any of you lot know how to heal a broken bone?" She asked, already planning on looking it up as soon as possible– it was very remiss of her to have overlooked such a useful and necessary field of magic and she found she was quite annoyed with herself.

"We do," Hestia said and Flora stepped forwards, pulling out her wand. She smiled reassuringly at Neville.

"Don't worry," she said, "I've had a lot of practice at this." Hermione resisted the urge to scowl at the reminder of the twins' less then pleasant home life. Nobody outright said anything, but everyone knew how abusive Alecto and Amycus Carrow were– the evidence of it was painted across the skin of Alecto's daughters.
"Episkey!" Flora said, gently tapping her wand against Neville's thumb. Neville let out a yelp of pain but after a moment his face relaxed, some of the strain disappearing.

"Thank you." He said and Flora grinned at him.

"No, thank you. It's always nice to hear about a Weasley being punched in the face."

"I may have kicked him a few times too," Neville confessed. "And I threw his wand into the Forbidden Forest and threatened him that if he told anyone who'd attacked him, I'd say it was self-defense because he cursed me first. Which he technically did."

"Neville!" Hermione said, genuinely delighted. The night before she'd considered that perhaps the boy had promise but this was above and beyond what she could have expected. "Come sit with us and I'll teach you how to throw a punch without hurting yourself," she ordered and Neville looked at her surprised and then nodded shyly.

"If that's alright with everyone else...?" He said hesitantly.

"Mate," Blaise said, with a snort, "you punched Weasley. You can sit with us any time you want."

They found a compartment that would fit all of them—the fourth year and eight fourth years—and Hermione wasted no time in teaching Neville how to keep his thumb tucked outside his fist and how to aim and swing to achieve maximum momentum. Once she'd declared him satisfactory, Neville had sat down with Harry, Theo and Draco and joined in their game of exploding snap. Blaise was sitting with Luna curled up to his side, one of her small hands holding his sleeve while he had an arm wrapped around her frail-looking shoulders. Hermione was pretty sure that whatever it was going on between the two was fully platonic but it was amusing to see Blaise letting the younger girl cuddle into him. Hermione then remembered allowing Luna to do the same to her and wondered if the little blonde had some sort of power that chipped away at people's icy exteriors to expose the slightly softer sides usually kept hidden.

The conversation in the compartment was light-hearted as the train chugged along, everyone relaxed and cheerful with Neville managing to fit in surprisingly well with their group. He was still shy but Hermione was reminded that while Neville might be a Gryffindor, he was also a Pureblood who had been raised by his very traditional grandmother which meant he was better at navigating the more complicated dance of words favored by Slytherins then she'd have expected of him.

She was starting to get the feeling she'd have to actually stop underestimating the boy and she wasn't sure whether to be annoyed or pleased by the fact.

It was some time after the lunch cart lady had come around and the exploding snap cards had been packed away that Neville pulled out the two halves of his wand to show Harry. "Gran's going to kill me," he said glumly, "it's my dad's old wand."

"You didn't see the Prophet this morning, did you?" Daphne spoke up and Neville shook his head, looking over at her with visible confusion.

"I've got mine here," Astoria said, opening her light pink carry-on case and pulling out a copy of the Daily Prophet. She deftly unrolled the newspaper then held it up for everyone to see.

The entire front page had been dedicated to the Yule Ball and the moving photograph that took up half of it was of Neville and Fleur. It was printed in full color, the elegance and grace of the striking pair as they danced across the cover of the Prophet displayed for all to see.

"It continues on about the Yule Ball for about six pages," Astoria told Neville. "You're mentioned
by name and I think you're in one of the other photographs too, the one of the top table where all the champions sat. Page two has one of Daph dancing with Viktor and Harry and Hermione are on page three."

"What? Oh no!" Harry groaned as Astoria obligingly flipped the pages over to show them. Hermione cringed at the sight of it. It was a nice enough photo of them— they were swaying together and Hermione had her head rested on Harry's shoulder— but the thought of their picture being plastered in the newspaper for everyone to see was not a pleasant one. She was a private person, as was Harry, and the publicity made her anxious.

"Your gran can't be too upset," Daphne was telling Neville, "not when everyone's going to be talking about how you made the cover of the Prophet and she'll get to boast to all the other old gossiping ladies she associates with." Neville nodded dumbly, his eyes wide with shock that he was too Gryffindor to know to hide.

Hermione resisted the urge to roll her eyes and instead relaxed back, letting her attention drift as the scenery raced by. It was strange, she found herself thinking, that it actually didn't feel strange to be sitting with so many other people, talking and laughing and enjoying each other's company. It was heartening in a way, to realise just how far she'd come, but it was also sobering in that she didn't want to forget just where it was that she'd come from.

She'd barely thought about Sting for so long, too busy living her new life of luxury while he had to tough it out on the rough streets of London. An emotion that felt suspiciously like guilt twisted in her stomach and she bit back the urge to grimace. Guilt wasn't something she felt often— but she owed her life to Sting and then she'd just left him behind without looking back. Hermione wondered if he ever thought about her still, if he hated her for getting to live in a world of magic and privilege while he was forced to scavenge in dumpsters for food if he didn't want to starve.

Maybe she could visit London for a few days during the Easter holidays, she thought to herself. She could give Sting money, could set him up so he'd be comfortable, maybe even ask Harry if she could borrow some of his gold to buy Sting a cheap flat. At the very least, she owed him a face to face conversation— and a proper goodbye before she left the muggle world forever.

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Harry's POV:

When the Hogwarts Express pulled up at King's Cross Station and Harry spotted a very familiar figure standing among the crowd, it was all he could do not to shove all the exiting students out of the way and sprint over to Tom.

"Oh. He's here." Draco said, sounding disappointed as he followed Harry's line of sight and recognized Tom. "I suppose that means you're not staying with me after all." The blond was practically pouting and Harry grinned as Hermione reached over to pinch one of his cheeks. Draco swore, whacking her hand away, and the others laughed.

"Don't worry, Draco," Harry said, because he knew that the other boy was genuinely upset that they wouldn't be going home with him. "We'll be coming to the gala on New Years Eve." Draco brightened up at the reminder.

"And I'll be bringing Fleur as my plus one." Hermione added, reminding Harry of Voldemort's message passed on by Barty the night before. He wondered what Voldemort could want with Fleur
and guessed it had something to do with the Veela.

"Does Fleur actually know she's your plus one yet?" He asked and Hermione flashed a sharp smile in his direction.

"She will when I write to her and tell her my 'uncle' requested her presence."

"Your uncle?" Draco practically squeaked, reminding Harry that the blond had figured out the truth about just who 'Thaddeus Dagworth' really was. "I'll have my mother send her whole family an invitation." Draco said hurriedly and Blaise gave him a weird look.

"What is it with you and Hermione's uncle?" He asked. "You get so flustered and Gryffindor-ish—no offense Longbottom—whenever somebody brings him up. Do you have a thing for him?"

All the color drained from Draco's face, leaving him looking grey and ill. Harry winced in sympathy because Voldemort wasn't the sort of person you talked about having a 'thing' for. Except, he couldn't really say that, seeing as he was in love with Tom who was sort of Voldemort, but also not.

Tom was more human then his older counterpart, which didn't exactly make sense seeing as Tom had been a memory trapped in a diary until he'd drained Ginevra Weasley's life-force to become fully corporal, but that didn't stop it from being true.

"I don't have a crush on Lo—Mr. Dagworth!" Draco hissed, speaking so quietly Harry could barely hear him and he was only standing about two feet away. "Don't say things like where someone could overhear you!"

"Alright princess," Blaise said, giving Draco a weird look. "If it means that much to you."

"It does!" Draco snapped, visibly flustered. "So shut up already and let's change the subject!"

"Does this happen a lot?" Neville whispered.

"Draco's kind of a diva and Blaise likes to pick on him." Harry whispered back. "They have a weird dynamic— it's hard to explain. Hermione thinks it's unresolved sexual tension, but she says the same about Blaise and Daphne too. I think Blaise just likes stirring up trouble and Draco keeps falling for it."

"Slytherins are so weird." Neville muttered. "Er, no offense."

"None taken," Harry assured him with a grin.

"What are we all standing around for?" Tracey complained, "get out of the way you lot so I can go tell mother about Yosef."

"Yeah, from what we saw last night you'll be needing to ask her for a supply of contraceptive potions. Probably a morning after one for today too." Blaise smirked before ducking out of the way of Tracey's slap.

"See?" Harry said to Neville, with a roll of his eyes. "Trouble maker."

"I'm pretty sure that's Snape's nickname for us," Hermione said, slipping her arm through his. "We'll see you lot all at the gala. Neville, tell your gran that you're Harry's plus one. I'm fairly sure you're already invited, Luna, but if you aren't Blaise will take you as his plus one."
"Oh I will, will I?" Blaise asked before looking down at Luna who was still holding onto his sleeve. "She's so presumptuous," he complained and Luna giggled.

"The Lovegoods are both invited," Draco confirmed and Hermione smiled, looking very satisfied. Neville looked stunned silent and Harry felt sorry for him being caught up in hurricane Hermione—it took some getting used to. Personally, Harry had just learned to go along with what she said when she was like this.

"Excellent." She said, briskly. "Have a good holidays everyone." And with that, Hermione pulled Harry after her as she started cutting her way through the much thinner crowd of students who were exiting the train then before. Harry followed her lead, knowing the other students were more likely to get out of her way then his.

Tom smirked at them as they approached, a confident curl of his mouth as his eyes roved over them both. "Aren't you two a sight for sore eyes?" He said playfully and Harry didn't try to hide his happy smile as Hermione released her grip on him in order to grab the collar of Tom's robes and yank the older boy's head down so she could give him a hard, fierce kiss that seemed to involve a lot of teeth and tongue.

"I've fucking missed you, you bastard!" She growled between hungry, forceful kisses, before she eventually stepped back to let Harry take her place.

Harry eagerly wrapped his arms around Tom and hugged the older boy tightly. "I missed you too," he said, before standing on his tip-toes so he could press his lips against Tom's with more eagerness then even he had expected. Tom seemed to hesitate for a moment but then he pushed Harry's mouth open with his own and slid his tongue inside, deepening the kiss into something possessive and demanding with an edge of roughness. Tom's fingers tangled in his hair, holding him in place as he owned Harry's mouth, like Harry had given him that right and he would never let him take it back.

When they eventually pull apart, Harry letting go reluctantly, Tom's eyes were red and sharp and his mouth was wet. The older boy's hair was dishevelled from Hermione raking her fingers through it before and seeing Tom like that made Harry want to mess him up even more.

"We're going. Now." Tom said shortly as he grabbed them both, his fingertips jabbing into Harry's arm like iron spikes as he twisted sharply on the spot. The familiar sensation of apparation had Harry grimacing and with how long it had been since the last time he'd been apparated, it was only Tom's harsh grip that kept him from falling over as they arrived in a strange room he hadn't seen before.

It was grand and luxurious, of course– this was Tom they were talking about– and definitely a bedroom. It had a very Slytherin feel to it with its green shag carpets, carved ebony furniture and dark panelled walls, and the bed itself was enormous, with green silk hangings, silk sheets and a well-crafted wrought iron headboard that was cleverly designed to resemble coiling silver snakes. A fire burned merrily in the corner, big, fat white candles lit the room and a pot of steaming tea was hovering above the bedside table. Curled up in front of the fireplace was Apophis, the enormous silver serpent that used to decorate the Slytherin house banner. It seemed Tom had decided to make the snake a permanent addition and Harry hoped Hermione wouldn't take that badly, seeing as Apophis had almost killed her last term.

Harry didn't have time to worry about the potential problem of Hermione and Tom's pet for long though, not with Tom practically dragging him and Hermione over to the bed and shoving them down onto it. Harry pushed himself up into a sitting position to watch as Hermione wrapped her legs around Tom's waist, locking her ankles behind his back so she could use the grip to pull him
down after her, rolling them over so she was straddling the older boy.

Harry watched them trade messy, urgent kisses, breaking apart only long enough for Tom to wandlessly vanish their clothes. Harry couldn't help the squeak he let out when his uniform disappeared as well, not having expected it, but despite his automatic blush at suddenly being as naked as the other two he didn't rush to cover himself up.

"You wore them," Tom said, his voice turning to a groan as Hermione dragged her teeth down his jaw to his throat, closing tight on the skin. When she pulled away, Harry shivered at the sight of a glistening trail of blood sliding down the skin of the older boy's throat, pooling along his collarbone and into the hollow of his throat.

He was confused by Tom's comment until he saw the older boy reach up to touch the band of lace around Hermione's throat with a covetous look on his face, the choker having remained even when the rest of her clothes had vanished. Glancing down, Harry realised the cuff around his wrist was still present, the black leather bold against his pale skin.

"Of course we wore them," Hermione said, her voice breathless but huffy. Harry thought about the gift they'd transfigured for Tom and bit back a grin, already anticipating the look on the older boy's face when he saw it.

"Don't worry," he told the older boy, unable to resist teasing him, "we won't tell anybody you're actually a huge softie at heart."

"I am not!" Tom protested, looking positively appalled by the very thought.

"So these weren't a promise of forever?" Hermione asked, smirking down at Tom who growled, reaching up to grab a fistful of her hair and use it to yank her mouth down to meet his while twisting his hips so she was knocked off him and onto the mattress.

Harry honestly wasn't sure if they were fighting or fucking, both trading hard, biting kisses as they fought to be on top. Tom eventually managed to wrestle Hermione off from where she'd been clinging to him, shoving her roughly to the mattress and pinning her down by a hand around her throat. Hermione immediately went still, soft pants escaping her, and then Tom was turning to him, reaching out with his free hand in open invitation. Harry, after a moment's hesitation, shuffled forwards on his knees, let himself be pulled so he was facing Tom, kneeling with his knees pressed against Hermione's thigh, and Tom pulled him into a rough, wet kiss that had his head spinning.

Tom trailed the hand he'd used to pull Harry close down his chest, wrapping his long, clever fingers around where he was already hard from watching their violent version of foreplay. The touch sent a thrill of pleasure through him that had Harry closing his eyes and moaning as the older boy started wringing breathy gasps from his parted lips.

He wasn't quite sure at which point Tom actually started fucking Hermione, only that at some point she'd hooked her legs over Tom's shoulders and the older boy started making bitten-back noises against Harry's mouth while Hermione's moans grew louder and longer.

A smaller hand replaced Tom's, Hermione's touch hot, sweaty and familiar around him, and Harry only had to wonder about the change for a moment before he felt Tom's fingertips, oddly wet and slick, drag down the base of his spine and dip lower. As one of Tom's fingers pressed against the twitching skin there, a strange tingling crept up inside Harry, one that left him feeling open, clean and slick. The bizarre sensation had him automatically tensing up, his eyes flying open to look at the older boy in shock. "Just relax," Tom encouraged, leaning in to run his lips along Harry's jawline, teeth lightly tugging on his earlobe and making him shiver. "I won't do anything more
then touch, I promise, just relax."

Harry shuddered as Hermione did something particularly clever with her thumb and weakly nodded his consent. Tom pressed their mouths back together in a deep, dirty kiss, practically fucking Harry's mouth with his tongue as he pressed one long finger inside him. Harry gasped at the burn of the unfamiliar sensation but Tom shushed him with more kisses and Harry tried to relax as he was stretched and stroked and the pain gradually faded. "Just wait for it," Tom murmured against his lips and Harry wasn't sure how the older boy managed to stay so focused as he held one of Hermione's hips in a grip that was already leaving red marks on her skin as he fucked her, while at the same time he was kissing Harry and doing that to him. Harry was having enough trouble concentrating and all he had to do was keep himself upright as Hermione's hand squeezed and stroked him while Tom's mouth practically devoured his as he did that with his finger.

And then suddenly that long finger was brushing up against a spot inside him that had Harry crying out in shocked pleasure. "There we go," Tom said, sounding deeply satisfied, and Harry could only moan as his brain tried to decide whether to thrust forwards into Hermione's clever, twisting hand, or press back against Tom's finger, chasing after that startlingly intense sensation that had him gasping and moaning each time he felt it.

"F-Fuck!" Hermione choked out, a familiar shuddering sound escaping her that Harry recognised as her climax. Tom's hips stuttered, losing their rhythm for a few seconds as he let go of Hermione's hip, letting her legs slide off his shoulders and pulling out of her so he could twist around so he was pressed against Harry and Harry could feel a familiar heat coiling inside him as Tom ground their hips together. The older boy tangled his now free hand in his sweat-drenched hair, yanking him into a filthy, bruising kiss as he slid a second finger in alongside the first. Harry cried out but the pain and surprise only lasted a second before both fingers were hitting that spot inside him and he was shaking apart, no longer able to keep himself upright and collapsing back onto the mattress.

Harry wasn't sure when Tom came, too lost in the aftershocks and dizzying intensity as he clung to Hermione who was pressing kisses to his parted lips and sharp little nips along his jawline. He thought Hermione might have wrapped her legs around Tom's hips at one point as the older boy slid back into her and that it was Tom who'd scraped blunt nails along his chest, but by that point the three of them were a tangle of limbs and hungry, panting mouths, so keeping track of who was where got tricky.

When it was over, the three of them a sticky pile on the ruined sheets, Harry lazily lifted an arm to smack Tom on the shoulder. He was too sleepy and sated to really be annoyed by the unexpected fingering and Tom just laughed anyway, wrapping a possessive arm around him while Hermione tangled her fingers with his.

"Welcome home," the older boy said, his voice laced with a mix of smugness and satisfaction.

"It's good to be home." Harry said, unable to help his wide smile at the thought. Hermione squeezed her fingers and made a humming sound of agreement.

"Wake me up when it's time for round two," she said and Harry grinned, closing his eyes and curling into her as Tom pressed lazy kisses against the back of his neck. He had no idea where they were, but it didn't matter. Home was wherever Tom and Hermione were and right now they were tangled up with him, their bodies pressed against his on either side where he'd be quite happy for them to stay forever. Though they'd probably have to do something about all the stickiness at some point, preferably before it dried on their skin. Or they started on round two.

It really, really was good to be home.
Fleur's POVs:

Fleur was in pain. It was a good sort of pain, mostly, but she was fairly certain she finally understood all those 'limping' jokes as she tried to find some sort of comfortable position to sit in. Her efforts so far had not proven successful and mamman and grand-mère were both giving her knowing, amused looks, as they had been since she arrived back in France along with the rest of the Beauxbatons delegation for the last week of the holidays. The fact she was wearing a dress with long sleeves and had wrapped a silk scarf around her neck gave her away just as much as her wincing every time she was required to sit, but they were both very, very necessary considering what was hidden underneath them.

Fleur liked to submit in bed but she didn't give her submission to just anyone. Hermione had always liked being in control during sex and Fleur had always chosen to give that control to her. She'd always been aware that she could break the younger girl's grip if she so chose, but why would she want to? The idea always seemed ridiculous to her– she was perfectly content to submit to Hermione, to let the younger girl to hold her down and mark and claim her body with her teeth and nails.

Tonks had been very like Hermione in that regard– apparently she liked to leave her mark on her conquests and unlike Hermione she was both older then Fleur and stronger. Fleur hadn't given Tonks her submission and nor had the other woman asked for it– no, Tonks had taken it. It had been thrilling as the other woman had held her down to fuck Fleur exactly how she'd wanted to fuck her. Fleur remembered thinking at one point that Tonks must be looking down at a panda, her carefully applied make-up for the Ball had been such a mess– by then her entire face had been slick with the older woman's arousal and Fleur's tears had merged with the saliva dripping from her chin. She'd been a trembling, sobbing mess and loving the utter overload of it. How could she not, so overwhelmed with the complicated tangle of pain and pleasure that left her choking on her own sobs as she desperately pleaded for more?

Every inch of her had felt so used and wrung out in the most delicious way, but when Fleur woken up this morning it had been with a groan of pain, her body stiff and aching all over. She'd sat up in her bed and immediately regretted it, able to feel every throbbing bruise and bite-mark that littered her creamy skin. Tonks, who'd apparently spent the night after Fleur basically passed out in exhaustion, had smirked up at her, reaching across to run a finger across the raised red welts on Fleur's wrists from when she'd been tied to the bed. Fleur thought she'd been up to orgasm number four or five by that point so it had been a bit of a blur.

"Morning pretty girl," Tonks had practically purred before grabbing a handful of her hair and yanking her head down for a kiss that was rough and demanding at first but turned softer, gentler after a few minutes. Fleur had been fairly certain she was in heaven, whimpering into Tonks's mouth who bit her bottom lip too hard in response. The taste of her own blood on her tongue had done wicked things to Fleur's libido despite the pain from her already bruised and bitten lips and her over-sensitive scalp as Tonks kept up her tight grip on her hair. Or maybe it was because of those facts– she'd learned several new things about herself the previous night as she'd been pushed further then she ever had before.

Fleur honestly wasn't sure if she was relieved or disappointed that there hadn't been time for a repeat performance but Tonks had given her a hungry, predatory look before leaving that made her think whatever it was between them wasn't over yet. The thought made her shiver. There was
something different about Tonks, the same sort of different Fleur sometimes saw in Hermione. Tonks, she suspected, was a very, very dangerous person and getting into any sort of relationship with her, whether it be dating or the occasional meet up to have sex, was ill advised. But Fleur remembered the look in Tonks's eyes when she approached her at the Yule Ball. 'I see you' they'd said, even as Tonks's mouth had curved into a fake smile, fake greetings dripping from her mouth. 'I see what you really are and I want you'.

How could Fleur deny herself something like that? How could she deny herself someone who'd taken one look at her and seen past all her masks to the monster who lurked within?

Hermione had once mentioned the phrase 'kindred spirits', used it to describe the people she met with dark pasts and shadows in their eyes. Fleur thought Tonks was a little like that, able to recognise the darkness in others so easily because it existed in herself. She was quite certain that Tonks was not a good person, but neither was Hermione and Fleur was also quite certain that she didn't care.

She didn't want nice. She didn't want someone to kiss her sweetly and make love to her gently. She wanted teeth and nails and fight. She wanted someone who would stand by her side when she burned all the people like the ones who'd hurt Gabrielle so many years ago to ashes. She wanted someone with the same monster in them as the one in her.

'I see you' Tonks's eyes had said and Fleur smiled.

'Well I see you too. And I'm very much looking forward to when we meet again.'

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Severus's POV:

Severus,

I hope the Yule Ball went well last night. I confess to almost being relieved I had to resign at the end of last year and was able to avoid it. The idea of having to supervise so many students in a state of such excitement is horrifying and I don't even want to think about how many of them would have ducked away with their dates– I suspect Poppy had to place a large order of contraceptive and morning after potions. I do hope you weren't the one who had to brew them for her.

I've been invited to the Malfoy's gala again, Harry's influence I'm sure, and I was wondering if you would be attending. It's really not my scene and I can already picture the awkwardness now that everyone is aware of my status as a werewolf, but being able to see Harry again is too tempting to pass up. His letters seem cheerful, despite the pressure of the Tournament, but I worry about him. I was thinking about putting together a photo album of his parents for him as a Christmas present. He seems to like hearing about them both in our letters, but you know him far better then I and I was hoping you could advise me on whether it would be a gift he'd appreciate or not. If you do think it is a good idea, do you have any photos of Lily from when she was younger that you could part with?

I hope you're well and once again, thank you for the Wolfsbane.

Kind regards,

Remus
Severus honestly wasn't sure how Lupin had managed to hit so many sore points in one letter without even trying. The part about the Yule Ball in particular and the potions that yes; Poppy had requested he brew, brought to the forefront of his mind the horrifying memories from the previous night he'd so desperately been trying to forget. Severus had walked across a number of half-dressed students trying to devour each others mouths while trying to get rid of Karkaroff but none had been quite so haunting as the image burned into his retinas of Hermione on her knees with semen on her face.

He'd been too stunned to even take any points off her and Harry, just wanting them out of his sight as quickly as possible so he could go back to his quarters and drink enough whiskey to erase what he'd seen from his memory forever. Unfortunately, it hadn't worked and he'd woken up with a headache that wasn't helped by the fact it had been a summons from the headmaster that had roused him in the first place.

Hungover and in a terrible mood, he'd stormed to the Slytherin common room to wait for Harry and Hermione to emerge from the dorms, wanting to know where they'd be spending the remaining week of the holidays. He hadn't forgotten the state they'd been in when they'd arrived at the Malfoy's during summer and with Narcissa's theory that Dagworth was a Death Eater and that he was likely housing the Death Eaters who'd been freed from Azkaban, he wanted Harry and Hermione as far away from the man pretending to be Hermione's uncle– he didn't believe that story for a moment– as possible. He'd been relieved to hear that they'd be staying at Malfoy Manor and had given them a curt farewell before going to hunt down a hangover potion to relive the throbbing in his temples and churning in his stomach.

Fortunately, he'd brewed a batch up recently. Less fortunately, upon arriving back to his quarters he'd found the letter for Lupin waiting for him. By this point Severus had felt he'd kept Dumbledore waiting for what was an appropriate length of time in retaliation for the early morning disturbance– he'd never admit that it had actually been fortunate that blasted phoenix had woken him, because in his drunken state the night before he'd forgotten to set an alarm to wake him in time to check in with Harry and Hermione– so he'd decided to read Lupin's letter as he made his way to the headmaster's office.

It had proven to be a mistake because despite the hangover potion, his headache was returning as he cursed out Lupin and his stupid letters, Poppy and her blasted potions orders, all the horny teenagers who couldn't keep it in their pants, the dunderheads who'd decided to reinstate the Tournament, Lupin again for reminding him of his broken childhood friendship with Lily, and Albus because he was a manipulative bastard who Severus hated.

It was in this foul mood that he banged his fist against the door to the headmaster's office, having barked out "sugar cubes!" to the gargoyles who'd taken one look at his face and practically thrown themselves out of his way.

"This had better be good!" He snarled when the door swung open and he stormed into the far-too brightly lit office.

"Quite the opposite, in fact." Albus said and his voice was so cold that Severus could actually feel the moment his anger turned to trepidation in the face of the fury so visible on the headmaster's face. There was a reason that Albus Dumbledore was the only person the Dark Lord had ever feared but the moments where Severus was so acutely aware of that fact were rare– this, however, was certainly one of them. It had been a very long time since he'd seen the headmaster look so openly furious.

Severus became aware of the other people in the office when he heard the dull clunk of Moody's
wooden leg. Glancing around, he felt his stomach sinking as he realised that as well as Moody; Minerva, Poppy, Filius and Pomona were also all present.

"I apologize for my tardiness," he said, stiffly. "I had several students approach me this morning requiring assistance."

"Assistance?" Growled Moody.

"Morning after potions." Severus said flatly, making sure the brief flare of satisfaction he felt as Moody immediately winced in response to his lie didn't show on his face.

"And they didn't go to her?" The ex-auror still pushed, waving a hand in Poppy's direction. Severus was unable to help his lip curling up in a sneer at the disrespectful, dismissive way Moody was treating the woman he'd grown rather fond of, as she, Pomona and Minerva helped him keep Harry as safe as possible from Albus's manipulations.

"Last I was aware, I was still the potions master of Hogwarts," he said, icily. Moody opened his mouth to continue arguing, Merlin knew why, when Albus interrupted.

"Enough!" He barked out, voice thundering. Severus couldn't help his slight flinch as he wondered what on earth had happened– or, to be more specific, what on earth had Harry and Hermione done now. "I've summoned you all here because of a terrible incident that took place last night," Albus said, voice still cold with fury. "A student was viciously assaulted on our very grounds to the extent that he had to be sent to St Mungo's."

"Who was it?" Minerva asked, her face openly concerned.

"Ronald Weasley," Albus answered her grimly, "he was physically beaten and left outside overnight. His brothers didn't find him until earlier this morning when they were alerted by his classmates that he wasn't in his dorm and hadn't returned to it after the Ball last night."

"How bad is it?" Pomona asked, looking horrified.

"Blunt force trauma that likely came from being kicked repeatedly caused internal bleeding." Poppy answered her quietly. "It would have been easily treatable if he'd received immediate medical attention. As it was, by the time he was found he'd already slipped into a coma. Due to the severity of his condition I contacted St Mungo's immediately."

Severus felt a terrible fear grip him as he listened. Not for the Weasley boy, of course– he honestly couldn't care less about him. It was Hermione he was worried for. Everyone knew how much she loathed the Weasleys and due to the physical nature of the assault– everyone knew about the troll story– she would be the top suspect. And the worst part was, she was Severus's top suspect too.

"Poor Molly and Arthur," breathed Minerva, a trembling hand pressed over her heart. "Will the boy live?"

"The Healers are hopeful," Poppy sighed, "but internal bleeding is tricky, especially after being left untreated for so long."

"There's going to be an official investigation." Albus said, voice harsh in its anger. "The Ministry has agreed to put Alastor in charge and he will be assisted by a trainee Auror who he was mentoring before he retired from the force so he could teach at Hogwarts."

"Tonks is a good kid," Moody said, gruffly. "Clumsy, but her heart's in the right place and she gets top marks in infiltration."
Severus remembered a Hufflepuff who'd graduated several years ago who'd gone by her surname, Tonks. She stood out in his memory due to her metamorphmagus skill, which would certainly explain her skill in infiltration, and because she'd been friends with Charlie Weasley, the only Weasley boy not in Albus's precious Order; the one who'd always been a bit too quick to flirt with girls and always stared a bit too long at boys and had run off to Romania the moment he graduated.

If Tonks was Moody's trainee, though, Severus had no doubt she'd be just like him. And he didn't even have to ask to know just who Moody was going to go after– it was going to be a witch hunt in a very literal sense.

"Are you sure Alastor will be able to be an impartial investigator?" Pomona spoke up with a frown and Severus could kiss that woman.

"The Ministry has approved my request," Albus said, because of-fucking-course he was responsible for Moody leading the investigation.

"That's not what I asked, Albus," Pomona said, her voice sharper, and Severus was going to buy her the most expensive exotic plant he could find. "I'm going to say what we're all thinking but not saying," the Head of Hufflepuff continued, "you suspect Hermione Granger is responsible, likely as retaliation for the assault on Harry during their second year. We all know that neither you or Alastor have any fondness for the girl, so can either of you be trusted to lead an unbiased investigation into the matter?"

"Have I ever given you reason to doubt that the wellbeing of all my students is of utmost importance to me, Pomona?" Albus asked and Severus had to bite his tongue in order to hold back the accusations that he wanted to shout in response to that filthy, filthy lie.

Pomona lifted her chin so she was looking Albus straight in the eye. "I don't know, Albus," she said calmly, "have you?"

Not many people could face down Albus Dumbledore when he was angry, Severus knew, let alone challenge him, but Pomona was doing exactly that. She was a true Hufflepuff; unflinchingly loyal to her students and fully prepared to face down one of the most powerful wizards who'd ever lived to protect them. Severus found himself feeling humbled.

"I have only ever wanted the best for all my students." Albus told Pomona, firmly.

"Then you should have the Ministry send in impartial investigators," she replied, just as firmly.

"Ms. Tonks will be unbiased–"

"Young Dora is Alastor's trainee, not a fully trained Auror–"

"That does not mean she is less capable then–"

"I'm not saying she's less capable, I'm saying she's going to be looking to Alastor for guidance–"

"He will be the senior investigator, so whoever the Ministry sent would look to him for guidance–"

"And he'll pass along his bias to them which is why he shouldn't be senior investigator at all!"

"Enough!" Albus slammed his hands down on his desk, ending the argument that had rapidly been increasing in volume as Pomona refused to allow him to finish a sentence. They were both now glaring at each other, Pomona with her hands planted firmly on her hips and her expression fiery while Albus was tight-faced and visibly frustrated.
"Enough," he repeated, "I am the headmaster of this school and I have put Alastor in charge of this investigation. I will not hear another word about it."

"When Alastor finds the culprit," Severus said, using his best 'bored' voice, "I assume they'll be facing the same punishment as Ronald, Fred and George Weasley were given when they nearly beat my student to death."

"When Alastor finds the culprit," Albus said, his face dark, "they will be expelled and sent to Azkaban for attempted murder."

Fuck.
CHAPTER LII:

Severus's POV:

"What do you mean those little shits aren't here!?” He snarled.

"I mean that they're not here, I thought that was obvious," Lucius said, looking irritatingly composed. Severus let out a sound of inarticulate rage as he violently shook the ash off his robes from the Floo, not caring how it landed on the expensive wine-red carpet of Lucius's study.

"I'm going to kill them!" He seethed. "I'm going to kill them then bring them back to life just so I can kill them again!"

"What in Salazar's name has happened to put you in this much of a snit?" Lucius asked, arching a single eyebrow in that superior way of his while eyeing the mess on his carpet with distaste. "I haven't seen you lose your composure like this in years."

"Somebody beat one of the Weasley boys into a coma and Moody’s in charge of the investigation," Severus hissed. "That's what's happened!"

"Ah," Lucius said, understanding dawning on his face. "Well that is certainly unfortunate."

"Unfortunate is an understatement. I need to speak with Hermione immediately because if she is responsible we need to figure out a way to either make her look innocent or frame someone else—and I can't do that when I don't even know how to get into contact with her!" Severus wanted to throw something or tear his hair out in frustration. This was an emergency and he had no way to get into contact with either of his two most troublesome students— if this was anything like the previous times they'd disappeared, he doubted even an owl would be able to find them. What's more, they had lied to his face earlier. To his face! "I'm going to put them in detention for the rest of their Hogwarts years." He said darkly. "They're going to be scrubbing cauldrons every night until they graduate."

"Or get expelled," Lucius pointed out 'helpfully'.

"As you are currently the only person within my wand range, I would be very careful about what you say, Lucius." Severus growled and Lucius just rolled his eyes.

"Relax, Severus," he drawled. "If you can't find them then Moody and Dumbledore won't be able to either— nobody ever has before. And Draco informed me earlier that they both confirmed they'd be attending Narcissa's gala, which is only five days away."

"Five days." Severus tried to take a deep, calming breath. "Five days. How much trouble can they get up to in five days? No, don't answer that Lucius, just pour me something strong. I need it after the hell that has been the last twenty-four hours."

"Ah, the Yule Ball. It was a nightmare, then?" Lucius asked sympathetically as he obligingly stood up to pour them both a glass of cognac.

"Worse." Severus said darkly, accepting the glass that was noticeably fuller then the one Lucius had poured for himself. He took a large sip of the expensive liquor, relishing in the burn. Harry and
Hermione were going to drive him to alcoholism, he thought grimly. "And once again, it was the fault of those two."

"Oh my," Lucius said, looking unfairly amused. "What did they do this time?"

"Each other." He said with a slight shudder at the memory.

Lucius raised an eyebrow, surprised. "You mean—?"

"Yes I do."

Lucius frowned. "Were they actually having intercourse?" He asked disapprovingly. "I don't doubt they'll end up married but it's not exactly proper. I suppose neither were taught any better, though, having to grow up with muggles."

"They weren't having intercourse," Severus said through gritted teeth, regretting even bringing the subject up at all. "Without going into further detail, let's just say that when I turned the corner Hermione was on her knees."

"Oh-ho!" Lucius said, a sly grin on his face. "Well, I suppose they are at that age. I don't suppose you noticed if Draco snuck off with his pretty little date for the evening? Narcissa was quite pleased when he wrote to say he'd invited the Greengrass girl instead of Parkinson's daughter. The Greengrasses might be a neutral family but at least my future grandchild won't have a crup's snout in place of a nose."

"Believe it or not, Lucius, I actually pay very little attention to the romantic exploits of my students." Severus said, pinching the bridge of nose with his free hand as he once again tried to take deep, calming breaths. It worked just as well as his previous attempt, which was to say not in the least.

"Pity," mused Lucius, apparently ignoring his turmoil. "Narcissa's hoping he kissed the girl at least. The older Greengrass girl is already betrothed to one of the Goldstein's but from what I've heard, the younger one has yet to be promised to anyone."

"It's times like these that I'm relieved I was born a Halfblood," Severus muttered with a grimace.

"Narcissa and I were betrothed when we were both young and we're very much in love," Lucius pointed out frostily.

"And yet, she routinely tries to murder you, leaving me having to save your pathetic arse," Severus sniped back before sighing. "While I do appreciate your attempt to distract me, Hermione could really be in trouble this time."

Lucius nodded, his face turning serious. "Would it be better or worse for her if the Weasley boy died?" He asked quietly. "I'm sure I can arrange something."

"It would be better if she wasn't responsible at all!" Severus replied, frustrated. "I thought she had better sense then this— she's just given Dumbledore the excuse he needed to get her out of Harry's life for good!"

"Well she could still be innocent," Lucius pointed out. "Don't jump to conclusions so easily, old friend. Where was the boy found?"

"Near the groundskeeper hut." Severus answered, his mouth twisting in distaste. "He was physically beaten and left outside over night."
"Right out in the open?" Lucius asked, looking doubtful. "That certainly doesn't sound like her. She's far more cunning then that. And you said you saw her with Harry that night– did either of them have blood on their clothes?"

"No," Severus said slowly, thinking back. "And Karkaroff and I came across them at nearly twelve pm exactly, after which they both returned straight to the castle and Poppy estimates that it was around half past twelve when Weasley was attacked."

"So it's possible that they doubled back, but unlikely." Surmised Lucius. "It truly sounds like you could be worrying for no reason and if Igor was with you, then he can corroborate your story."

"Do you really think Moody would believe two Death Eaters?" Severus asked, his mouth twisting into sneer.

"You said you've improved your relationships with the other members of the staff," his friend replied, steel grey eyes boring into his, "use that. Ensure that they will have your back. Do you believe they would allow Moody to dismiss your word on the basis of your former conviction?"

"No," Severus said slowly, already able to picture Minerva's response to that. "No, they would not."

"There you have it," Lucius said with a smirk. "You've been spending far too much time around Gryfffindors, Severus. As Head of Slytherin house I'd think by now you'd know to keep a cool head in an emergency and think things through, not go charging around in a blind panic. Shame on you."

"Lucius?" he said through gritted teeth. "Do kindly shut up before I'm forced to make you."

Lucius, the pompous bastard, just laughed.

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**Harry's POV:**

"Where actually are we?" Harry asked later, when they were all fully clothed again and sitting at a large table carved from the same ebony wood as the furniture in the bedroom. From what little he'd seen of the house so far, it reminded him of a slightly more modern version of Malfoy Manor– and by more modern, he meant it had electricity which was something he'd always missed when staying at Hogwarts. Other then that, it seemed just as lavish and unnecessarily, excessively expensive as Draco's home, though thankfully it didn't have any portraits of scowling ancestors on the walls.

"It's my house," Tom answered his question with a very smug-looking smirk, "or rather, it's our house."

"Our house?" Harry said in disbelief and Tom gave a careless shrug.

"I appropriated some funds and decided to put them to good use."

"*Appropriated*?" Hermione asked, looking terribly amused by the vague statement but Tom didn't elaborate, his smirk just growing wider.

"Care for a tour?" He drawled, looking far too satisfied with himself.
"How about we give you your Yuletide present first," Hermione said with a glittery knife of a smile. Tom, Harry thought, was right to look wary in the face of it.

"I'll grab it," he offered cheerfully, pulling his shrunken trunk from his pocket and using his illegal blackthorn wand to undo the shrinking charm. Tom watched cautiously as he dug around inside his trunk, searching through the mess of hastily packed robes before pulling out a flat, square-shaped present wrapped in shockingly, luridly bright pink paper tied with a gaudy, equally bright orange bow that clashed horribly with the pink. "Here you go," Harry presented it to Tom with a bright grin, watching the older boy's face twisted in distaste.

"How... charming." He said through gritted teeth. "Is it going to explode in my face when I open it?"

"Oh please," scoffed Hermione, "Harry and I aren't that boring." Tom didn't look like he believed her but he did carefully start to unwrap the present. Tom was one of those annoying people who peeled back the wrapping paper instead of ripping it and Harry bounced his leg impatiently as the older boy carefully peeled back the spello-tape.

"Hurry up!" He urged, not caring if he sounded like a whining child and Tom rolled his eyes at him before tapping the half-unwrapped present with a finger, vanishing the pink paper and the ribbon. "I guess that works too." Harry muttered as Tom looked at the flat box that had been revealed. Carefully flicking the lid open, Tom's face immediately tightened when he saw what was inside.

The men's 'necklace' was a discrete design, three thin strands of black leather cording, two smooth and one braided, that had been interlaced together. It would hang low enough Tom could keep it hidden under his robes, which was a good thing considering the pendant attached to the discrete yet suggestive 'necklace'. It had taken Hermione several hours and a great deal of assistance from Fleur and Blaise to get the transfiguration right, but the end result was a length of silver wire that had been looped and wound into a miniature version of what Hermione had called a 'shibari rope hank', which looked sort of like a long bit of rope tied up in a figure of eight.

Shibari, Hermione had explained, was a traditional form of artistic rope bondage that originated in Japan that literally translated as "to tie." It was considered a beautiful and sensual art form where thin pieces of rope were used to create the intricate geometric patterns and shapes while binding the human body; it embodied the erotic idea of contrast present in so much of BDSM, with the roughness of the rope against the smoothness of the skin and the lines of the rope against the curves the body.

Harry privately– and, he would admit, gleefully– thought that the finished result resembled more of a collar then a necklace. Considering the fact Tom had given him a wrist-cuff and Hermione a choker-collar for Yule, Harry was pretty sure the older boy could do with the reminder of just what their relationship was– that above everything else, they would always belong equally to each other.

The idea of the shibari pendent, Hermione had told him, was to symbolise both the commitment and trust in their relationship. And, she'd added with a wicked smile, the pendant and the erotic implications of what it represented where inescapably obvious. Tom certainly hadn't missed the connotations and he was giving them both a look of genuine stunned disbelief.

"It took us a very long time to make that for you," Hermione said very sweetly, her eyes glittering dangerously and an angelic smile on her face. "So be a good boy and put it on."

"It's..." Tom looked like he was trying not to make a face and Harry was unable to hold in his snickering.
"Oh?" Hermione tilted her head, lifting a hand to run a finger along the band of lace wrapping around her throat. "We thought the theme this year was 'symbolic yet suggestive jewelry signifying chains of ownership'– were we, by chance, mistaken in thinking that?"

"No," Tom said through gritted teeth and Hermione leaned forwards, all sweet smiles and dangerous eyes, letting a glint of the violent predator inside her shine through.

"Then remember, darling, that you belong to us just as much as we belong to you." She said, very, very softly. "So be a good boy and put it on. Now."

Tom made a strangled sound before picking up the leather necklace and fastening it around his neck, adjusting it so the pendant rested over the hollow of his throat. Hermione only had a moment to look smug before Tom was then slamming her down onto the hard surface of the table, his eyes dark and hungry. "Only for you!" He snarled, using his grip to shake her roughly. "Do you understand? Only for you two! Only ever for you two!"

"Yes, yes, yes, now fuck me, Tom, come on–" Hermione urged, wrapping her legs around his waist and reaching up to brush against the pendant with her thumb. Tom grabbed her hand, slamming it to the table and Harry rolled his eyes, sighing as he pushed his chair back so he was out of the way as they got started on round three (round two had been before re-dressing).

-I hope we have house elves," Harry said once Tom and Hermione had sat back down, both sweaty and disheveled but fully clothed once more. In a rare show of... well, in a rare show of what, Harry wasn't quite sure– vulnerability, maybe?– Tom had left the collar of his robes undone so his gift was visible; the thin, black leather a stark line against his pale skin and the silver pendant subtle but suggestive.

Swallowing a bit, Harry very purposefully focused his attention away from Tom's neck and instead gestured to the sticky mess they'd made of the table and then back in the general direction of the bedroom with its ruined sheets. "I don't know how to wash silk, seeing as the Dursleys only ever had cotton and polyester sheets, and since I wasn't the one to make a mess of the table," he gave them both significant looks, "I'm not going to clean it."

"You were very welcome to join in." Hermione said, mischief in her eyes as she curled her tongue suggestively behind her teeth and her swollen, bruised lips curved up into a filthy grin.

"I like a softer surface, thanks," Harry told her.
"I'll make sure to remember that," Tom said, not looking at all abashed when Harry shot him a look. "Harry, I've made no secret of the fact I want to fuck you," the older boy said, his voice very matter-of-fact with only the slight curl at the corner of his mouth giving away his amusement when Harry twitched in place at his blunt words. "That I'm willing to take your preferences into account for when we do inevitably get around to it should please you."

"Such a fucking bastard." Hermione said fondly as Harry just put his head in his hands and groaned.

"To answer your previous question, though, I'm most certainly not going to be making you wash sheets," Tom said, his expression one of such distaste that Harry almost laughed. "Of course we have house elves."

"I haven't seen any around," Harry pointed out.

"Well that's the sign of a good house elf, is it not? Have you ever seen one of the Hogwarts house elves?" Tom prompted him.

"No, I haven't," Harry realised slowly. "Not unless I was visiting the kitchens."

"Exactly," said Tom.

"So where exactly is our house?" Hermione asked, standing up to go walk over to the large window through which Harry could see from where he was sitting that the sun had started to set, painting the sky with streaks of red, orange and pink. Curious, he stood up and followed Hermione, peering over her shoulder. The room they were in was apparently on the second or third floor of the house and seemed to overlook a large expanse of nothing but countryside, no other houses to be seen in any direction visible from their vantage point.

"England," Tom answered Hermione, "the middle of the Cornish countryside to be precise. Our closest neighbor is nearly forty miles away."

"Does that mean I'll be able to go flying on my broom?" Harry asked hopefully. Hermione automatically pulled a face and Tom let out an exaggerated sigh.

"Yes, dear, you'll be able to fly on your broom." He said and Harry felt a fierce rush of joy-- he'd missed Quidditch desperately and couldn't wait to get out on his Nimbus. "When you do go flying, though," Tom continued, with a much too pleasant smile on his face, "make sure to keep an eye out for the lake on the property. You'll be getting very well acquainted with it over the next few days."

"What?" Harry spluttered, giving the older boy a confused, horrified look. "You want me to go in a lake? It's the middle of winter! It'll probably be bloody iced over!"

"That's not my problem, is it?" Tom smirked back, eyes gleaming with his sadistic enjoyment. "You need to practice for the Second Task, which means first of all you need to learn how to swim. If I were you, I'd figure out how to cast a warming charm before going for a ride on that blasted broomstick of yours."

"If you don't tell me how to cast a warming charm, then that blasted broomstick of mine will be the only wood going between my legs this holidays!" Harry growled and Tom looked at him in genuine surprise for a long moment before his mouth curled up into a wicked smirk. Harry, realizing what he'd just said, immediately started blushing which just made Tom's smirk grow.

"Oh, really?" He purred, "Well if that's an option, darling boy, then I'd certainly be glad to teach you the charm."
"Hermione!" Harry turned pleadingly to face his best friend who just laughed.

"You got yourself into this one, Harry," she said, sounding all-too amused by the fact. "Besides, I think I'm looking forward to seeing you and Tom together."

"I hate you both," Harry said, his tone very even. "So, so very much. You are both terrible people."

"Did it really take you this long to figure that out?" Tom asked, just as horribly amused as Hermione because they were both awful and cruel and Harry didn't know whether he wanted to hit them or kiss those stupid smirks off their faces. He was getting the impression that that sort of indecision was going to be a regular occurrence over the next week.

And the rest of his life.

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The tour of the 'house' that they finally managed to get around to revealed it to be a Tudor style manor with four floors, a tower, a slate roof, a large flower garden in front and an orchard and large lake in the back. Green stretched as far as the eye could see in every direction and Harry noted that Tom, when showing them where the other bedrooms were located, didn't instruct them to pick one out— it seemed that the bedroom they'd first arrived in was to be the one they'd all share. Harry found he wasn't bothered by that at all.

Once Tom had finished showing off they returned to the dining room. Like the older boy had predicted, the table was now spotless and shining once again with all evidence of the earlier activities that had taken place on its polished surface gone. Instead, three heaped plates of fresh-cooked pasta were waiting for them and Harry hadn't realised how hungry he was until that moment, not even caring about his two lovers laughing at his eagerness in his haste to start eating.

It wasn't until later when they were all in bed, too tired to do anything else but not quite ready yet to call it a night, that Harry asked Tom if he would be returning to Hogwarts with them to help prepare him for the Second Task.

"I'm hoping I'll be able to join you for the weekends, at the very least," Tom said slowly and Harry felt his heart sink.

"Just hoping?" He asked, voice plaintive.

"Things are... tricky right now." Tom told him, appearing to be very careful in how he chose his wording. Harry frowned.

"What do you mean?"

Tom sighed, his eyes almost pitying as he looked down at him. "Do you really want to know, Harry?" He asked quietly and Harry chewed on his lip, hesitating.

"I want to know." Hermione said softly, taking the decision out of his hands. Harry wasn't sure whether he was relieved by that or not. Tom inclined his head, accepting their decision, and started speaking.

"Overthrowing a government without people realizing it's been overthrown is a delicate and time-consuming task, especially with Dumbledore stirring up trouble both with his claims that Voldemort is still alive and gaining strength and by opposing 'Thaddeus Dagworth' so forcibly in the Wizengamot." He explained. "Because I don't technically exist and I'm also one of the only people my older counterpart trusts, I've been doing a majority of the behind the scenes work while
he builds up the public face of the new government we're forming. My work involves certain... unsavory tasks that I won't go into detail of, as well as hunting down information. Voldemort is working subtly to replace different higher ranking members of the Ministry with those he knows will be loyal to the cause and I'm... removing some of the more stubborn obstacles from his way.

"On top of that, Dumbledore hasn't made the connection between Voldemort and Dagworth yet, but chances are he will and when that happens Dagworth's backstory needs to be better then rock-solid which means crafting an entire life and modifying the memories of countless people to ensure that any investigation will reveal Thaddeus Dagworth as a real person who has existed for the last three and a half decades."

Harry, carefully not thinking about the mentions of 'unsavory tasks' and 'removal of obstacles', took a good look at Tom and realised for the first time just how tired the older boy really looked. There were faint shadows under his eyes and his cheekbones were sharper then he remembered, the skin seeming stretched tighter. Harry frowned. "You're being worked too hard." He accused.

"I dare you to tell Voldemort that," Tom said, darkly amused.

"As much as I love you, Tom, I'm not going to do that." Harry winced slightly at even the thought.

"You do realise he's me," Tom pointed out, even more amused.

"Maybe so," Hermione conceded, "but he doesn't share the same attachment to us as you do."

"I think you'd be surprised," Tom said, the amusement in his eyes replaced by something Harry couldn't identify as the corners of his mouth turning up slightly. "You two are both very... bright."

"Bright?" Harry asked, confused by the choice of adjective. "As in clever?"

"Not quite," Tom murmured but he didn't elaborate any further. Hermione looked thoughtful so Harry decided he'd ask her later if she had any idea what on earth the other boy was talking about. "I'm afraid it's likely that I won't be here when you wake up," Tom told them, pulling Harry from his thoughts and he looked at the older boy in dismay.

"What?"

"I'll be back before lunch," Tom promised, his eyes suddenly glinting with a sadistic humor as he added, "I'd make the most of your morning too, because when I get back it will be time for your first swimming lesson." Harry looked across at him aghast and Tom smirked back. "But it's winter! I thought you were joking!" He protested, dismayed.

"Harry dear," Tom said, his voice laced with dark amusement. "I thought by now you'd have realised that when it comes to tormenting you, I never joke."

"You are a cruel, hateful person, Tom Riddle." Harry said sourly.

"Enough with the foreplay," Hermione interrupted them as Tom opened his mouth to reply, giving them both a sleepy glare. "Either start fucking or go the fuck to sleep."

"I have no idea why I missed having you two wretches around." Tom muttered and Harry leaned over to kiss the other boy, a slow press of his lips against Tom's that he waited for Tom to relax into before he bit the older boy, a quick, hard punch of teeth that made Tom hiss in surprise then laugh. "Alright," he murmured against Harry's mouth, "perhaps I can recall a reason or two." Harry smiled in response, pulling away and yawning.
"Night guys." He said, letting his eyes close as he drifted off with one leg tangled with Hermione's and one arm curled around Tom.

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Hermione's POV:

Maybe it was because she'd been thinking of him earlier, or maybe it had been Tom's use of the word 'home' when referring to the Tudor manor and all the connotations that word brought with it to the street rat she had been, but when Hermione dreamed that night she dreamed of the first time she'd met Sting.

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Hermione followed the boy who called himself 'Sting' warily as he led her through the streets of the rough neighborhood. It was cold and the harsh bite of the air raised goosebumps under the thin material of the St. Agnes's uniform she had yet to shed. Her hair, the curls uncharacteristically limp and drooping, was being whipped around her face by wind and she had to keep tucking it behind her ears.

The nine-year-old boy was moving quickly and at times her short, skinny legs struggled to keep up with him, something which wasn't helped as the sun sunk lower and lower in the sky. The sense of uneasiness brought on by the increasing darkness around her had Hermione burying her hand in the pocket of her tunic-dress to clasp her small fingers around the worn handle of the pocket knife Sting had given her with a wink and a wide smile that exposed his yellow teeth.

One of his front teeth—Hermione vaguely remembered her parents had called those incisors—was chipped almost in half and she wondered how it had happened and if it still hurt. She was pretty sure her parents had been able to fix broken teeth like that—Sting mustn't have gone to a dentist at all. Hermione wondered whether she'd ever visit one again either. That was okay, she decided—no other dentist would ever be good enough, anyway.

"Cute lil' bit like you," Sting had told her as he handed the pocketknife over, "needs summat ta protect 'erself. It ain't much bu' it'll do in a pinch, yeah?"

Hermione wasn't sure what he'd meant by that, what dangers she could be in for being 'cute', but she was aware enough of the cruelty ever-present in the world around her to know it wasn't anything good.

The toe of her shoe suddenly catching on a gutter had her pitching forwards and she only barely managed to keep her balance as Sting spun around to grab onto her shoulder. His hand was grubby and dirt-stained with long, ragged nails and Hermione instantly shied away from the touch, remembering all too clearly her suffering at the hands of the other children at the orphanage and the harsh brutality of the nuns. She couldn't even remember the last time she'd felt any sort of kind touch; one meant to help or comfort instead of hurt or debase.

Sting didn't try to keep holding on to her, instead he stepped back and lifted both his hands up in a surrendering gesture. "'S okay," he reassured her, "I won' try'n touch yeh again, yeah? 'S'all good, Janey."

Hermione winced slightly at the butchering of the name she'd picked when he'd told her that out on the streets kids often went by nicknames, not their real ones. "In case we git picked up by th'
bobbies," he'd explained. "Can't grass on no one if we dun know nuthin'." Put on the spot, Hermione had just blurted out the first thing she could think of which happened to be her middle name. Jane was nice and ordinary; sweet and pretty but not memorable in the way that 'Hermione' was. Sting had approved of her choice.

"We're almos' there now," the older boy said, pulling her from her memories. Hermione felt her cheeks redden as she realised that they'd been standing in the same place for a few minutes now; her wide-eyed and frozen while Sting stood there patiently, still holding his hands up in front of him with his palms flat and open and facing her.

"Sorry." She whispered, ducking her chin so that her fringe covered her red face though she took care to peek through the curtain of curls, not wanting to let him out of her sight. So far Sting had been overwhelmingly nice, but she didn't want to push her luck. People weren't kind, in this world. Especially not to her.


Feeling soothed by his words, Hermione took a deep breath, tangled down the residual traces of panic and cautiously started following him again. The sun had sunk well below the horizon by now and the streets were dark apart from the occasional dim streetlamp casting a sallow light over patches of broken pavement. The eerie way the weak light cast shadows over the faces of the scarce few people still out had ice trailing down her spine like frozen fingertips and Hermione took care to make sure she didn't fall behind Sting, getting as close to him as she was comfortable with.

They were approaching a warehouse district, some big industrial area filled with large stone buildings surrounded by barbed-wire fences. Hermione wasn't sure where Sting was taking her, but the boy had shown her nothing but kindness since he'd found her curled up under a bush in the park this morning. It had been five days since she'd escaped St. Agnes's and she was exhausted, freezing cold and absolutely starving. If this boy was luring her somewhere to kill her, she almost didn't care anymore and just hoped it would be fast. Anything was better then going back to St Agnes's and if she died maybe she'd get to see her mummy and daddy again.

"Here we are," Sting announced suddenly, stopping in front of a bit of wire fencing. It was standard for the area, maybe eight feet high, stretched between tall metal poles and topped with rusted barbed wire. But, Hermione realised in startled intrigue, the wire had been cut right along the pole, creating a gap so if it was pulled back like Sting just had done, it created a hole in the fencing big enough for someone to squeeze through.

"Careful not ter let th' wire catch on ya clothes," Sting warned, "ya don' want any more rips, now." Hermione nodded and carefully slipped through the hole in the fence, Sting following after her. The older boy smiled his chipped smile at her again before leading the way over to a door on the side of the warehouse. It was a rusted red color, with the word 'EMERGENCY EXIT' stencilled on it in peeling white paint.

Sting rapped on the door with his knuckles, knocking in a sharp rat-a-tat-tat pattern. Hermione waited, her stomach churning with anxiety as the sound of footsteps approached from the other side. As if sensing her painful nerves, Sting turned slightly and gave her a thumbs up. "Dun you go worryin' now," he whispered, "they'll all like ya loads, lil' bit. Jus' make sure you stick wiv me, yeah? Don' go followin' any of the older lads about. If they try teh get ya alone, ya just holler for me, yeah?"

Feeling even more anxious now, Hermione put her hand back in her pocket to clasp her awkward fingers around the handle of the pocketknife in a white-knuckled grip. The factory door opened
with a sudden, loud creaking sound, its rusted hinges protesting the movement, and Hermione couldn’t help but stare at the girl standing on the other side.

She was tall and thin as a rail with tired eyes, bitten nails and a cigarette clamped in the corner of her sticky-red mouth. Her long dark hair was painted with purple streaks and hung knotted and unruly down over her shoulders and tracks of smudged mascara darkened her light blue eyes. As well as the sticky lipstick she was wearing strappy heels, torn black stockings, a short vinyl skirt that barely reached her mid-thigh and an open jacket that revealed the tight, sheer blouse she was wearing underneath it without a bra to hide the way the cold wind had turned her pink nipples hard and pebbled. Hermione guessed she was fourteen, maybe fifteen, though her worn appearance, provocative clothes and cheap but heavy make-up made her look older.

“Found another kid, huh?” she asked, sucking in a careless lungful of smoke and slowly blowing it out, the grey drifting slowly up from her mouth, the smoke dispersing into the night sky above them.

“Yeah, this is Jane. She’s from one of ‘em orphanages,” Sting introduced her, “a real nasty one. They hurt her pretty bad.” The older girl’s eyes seemed to sharpen as they surveyed her and Hermione held herself stiff under the close examination. Finally the teenager nodded, blowing out another lungful of smoke. It smelled sweeter then tobacco, not like any cigarette Hermione had smelt before but sort of like how she remembered some of the older kids at the orphanage smelling before and it was making Hermione’s head spin slightly.

“Name’s Sharpie,” the older girl said abruptly, “I’m one o’ the resident whores. So’ll you be, if ya stay.”

“Whores?” Hermione asked, confused by the new word.

“Sharpie!” Snapped Sting at the same time and the teenager rolled her eyes.

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“She's gotta know, Sting. If she's gonna stay, she should know what she's gettin' herslf inta." Hermione shrugged as the girl– Sharpie– turned back to look at her. "This life ain' a game, kid– d'ya know what fucking is, kid?" Hermione shook her head, not brave enough to try opening her mouth and speak in the face if the older girl's intensity. Sharpie let out a frustrated sigh. "Jesus effin' Christ. Sex, then– ya gotta know 'bout that, at least; where babies come from, an' all tha' shit?"

Hermione nodded warily because that she did know. There were enough older boys at the orphanage who passed around magazines with pictures of naked men and women with the men putting their private parts into the women's private parts or sometimes their mouths that most of the children had seen them at least once. One of the girls had asked one of the nicer nuns about it and the whole orphanage had gotten a Talk about the immorality of 'pornography' and 'copulation' unless you were married and how if you were married it would lead to babies.

"Well," Sharpie said, with a bitter, twisted smile, "ya need money if ya don' wanna starve out here–money an' sticky fingers like Sting. Best way for a gal ta get some cash is ta get paid for fuckin' guys. Usually old tossers who can barely even git it up no more who'll drop ten quid for a handle. 'Least sometimes ya get ta sleep in a motel– bed, shower an' complimentary brekkie, 'n all ya gotta do is lay back with ya legs open an' think of queen 'n country."

The older girl laughed again as she smoothed a palm down the front of her body in a highly suggestive movement and Hermione felt herself recoil. Beside her, Sting made an angry sound. “Yer much too young fer tha’, Janey,” he said roughly. “An’ I'll teach ya to be ’s good at pinchin' shit ’s me. Unless ya start shootin’ up, tha'll be enough teh get ya by.”
Hermione wasn't sure what 'shooting up' meant but she vowed then and there she wouldn't do it. Sharpie just laughed bitterly again around her cigarette. "This life ain't a game an' even it was then it'd be a game we'd always lose. Kid'll end up with track marks on 'er arms, jus' like the rest of us." She said and Sting glared fiercely at her until Sharpie rolled her eyes and stepped to the side. "Git in, both of ya. I gotta old jacket tha's too small– girl looks 'bout ta freeze teh death."

"Thanks." Sting said grudgingly. "Yer still a bitch, Sharp."

Sharpie rolled her eyes again before turning and walking away. Sting moved into the warehouse after her and once inside he turned and smiled at Hermione again— he smiled a lot; she wasn't used to that— and gestured for her to walk in too. "C'mon, lil' bit," he coaxed, "'s cold out there, yeah? 'S warmer in here." Hermione took a deep breath, steeled herself with all the courage she could possibly muster and then stepped inside.

The air inside the warehouse was thick; hazy with smoke— both the sweet smoke from Sharpie's cigarette and the harsher, more acrid tobacco that she was used to— and sweat and something else she couldn't quite place. Vomit, maybe? It was warmer though, out of the biting cold, so Hermione decided she could put up with the smell.

"Here ya go," Sharpie said, having returned to them, and she pushed something into Hermione's arms. Hermione flinched back, shying away from the older girl before looking down at what she'd just been handed. It was a jacket, a puffy winter one with a hood lined with fake fur. It was metallic purple and the fake fur was white with the ends dipped in purple glitter. It was too big, she could already tell, and the material was dirty and faded, but at this point Hermione honestly didn't care— she wasn't a pretty picture herself right now; her tunic-dress was torn and filthy from sleeping on the ground, as were her once-white stockings, she smelt awful from the lack of access to basic hygiene and digging through rubbish bins looking for food, and her hair was a wild mess of limp, broken curls that spilled chaotically over her shoulders. Hermiones gratefully pulled on the too-large jacket and almost moaned at the sudden warmth as she rolled up the sleeves.

Sting was grinning at her and she found that his chipped smile bothered her a lot less now, despite being the daughter of two dentists. She was sure her parents would have liked Sting anyway, she thought.

Hermione took a moment then to get her first proper look around the factory. It was big, one of those industrial ones, and dim— she couldn't see more then a few meters away which both made her uneasy with memories of the time she'd spent in the Black Hole, the thought of it making her shiver despite her new jacket, and it also meant she couldn't see if there was anyone else inside.

"Who else is here?" Sting asked Sharpie, almost as if he'd read her mind.

"Jus' Josie, Pike an' me." Sharpie answered with a casual shrug.

"Jose is back?" Sting asked, perking up.

"I am. You found another stray, Sting?" an amused voice asked and Hermione flinched slightly, twisting to the left where another girl had silently approached. This girl was older then Sharpie, much older— maybe eighteen or nineteen. She smelled of smoke and alcohol, had bloodshot eyes and was wearing threadbare jeans, high-heeled boots and a thin tank-top that was poorly suited for the cold weather and left her arms bare, revealing both the entire sleeves of tattoos that wound from her shoulders down her forearms and the dark purple bruises on her inner elbows that Hermione would later learn were from the heroin Josie so loved. Josie was also skinny— scarily so, in fact, with her thin, fragile wrists, the hollowness in her face and the way her bones pressed against her stretched tight skin. Hermione thought she might have looked pretty once but instead
she looked pale and sickly, like a stiff breeze could knock her over.

What had startled Hermione the most about the girl—no, she corrected herself, what startled her the most about the woman, though, was that her accent was as upper middle-class as Hermione's own, unlike the chav Sharpie and Sting spoke.

"Well, at least you're cute," the woman—Josie—said, after looking her over with the same unnerving, sharply appraising look as Sharpie had. "Improvement on the last one that was brought in."

"Oi! Least I ain't a fuckin' useless shit like Sting," a much deeper voice shouted and Hermione couldn't help flinching again. Raised voices had never meant good things, not in the past three years at least. It didn't help that the boy who had spoken, now in view as he strode over to them, was built thick; he was only twelve or thirteen but he had muscle under his worn jacket, torn jeans and heavy, scuffed boots. One of his eyes had was deeply bruised to the point that it was nearly swollen shut and it scared her that nobody even gave it a second look, suggesting it wasn't an uncommon occurrence. The boy was grinning widely as Sting flipped him off.

"Shut yeh fat gob, Pike," he snapped, before ducking as the older boy tried slugging him in the shoulder. Hermione thought she might be sick.

"Poor little mite." Josie said and Hermione turned her attention back to the woman who was looking down at her with an oddly sympathetic look. "You've had it tough, haven't you? Well you found the right place." She gestured around the warehouse. "Stick with us and we'll keep the lads off you." She said. "You'll be okay."

The sound of knocking, the same rat-a-tat-tat pattern Sting had used, had Hermione twisting around to face the closed door. Fear rose in her throat almost choking her and she couldn't help but stumble behind Sting, images of policemen coming to drag her back to St Agnes's churning in her gut.

"'S'okay, li'l bit, it'll jus' be Rottie, Lacey or Sledge," Sting said comfortingly. Hermione tried to swallow past the lump in her throat and nodded hesitantly.

Sharpie opened the door again and this time, from where she was standing behind the teenager, Hermione saw the knife the older girl was casually holding behind her back, out of sight of whoever was on the other side of the door. It chilled Hermione's blood to think of a threat that had been so close to her and yet she'd been entirely unaware of it.

"Rottweiler," Sharpie greeted whoever was there, "Sting dun gone an' got us another stray."

Hermione was starting to get annoyed by all the "stray" comments— it was getting tiring being referred to as if she were some kind of pet Sting had found—but she stayed quiet.

"Rottweiler" entered the warehouse and Hermione went very, very still. If she'd been intimidated by Pike, he had nothing on the boy who had just entered. Tall and wiry with messy, dark-blond hair, there was nothing in the boy's unassuming appearance that particularly stood out. Hermione guessed he was around sixteen or seventeen and he was dressed in clothes that were dirty but not quite as threadbare as some of the others. He wasn't nearly as thickly built as Pike and yet Hermione thought he was about twice as terrifying— it was his eyes; his eyes were terrifying. They were a pale, pale blue, almost like ice, and utterly expressionless. Like shark eyes, she thought, wanting nothing more then to run away; they reminded her of shark eyes, predatory and unblinking.
Hermione felt about a foot tall under that cold stare and her hands trembled at her sides.

"She'll hafta earn 'er keep," Rottweiler said, finally. His voice was as quiet and as unassuming as he was and somehow that just made him even more terrifying.

"Of course," Josie said calmly, "and she's just a small thing, Rottie. She won't need much."

"Might not survive winter," Rottweiler– Rottie?– noted bluntly. "Sure you dun wanna go home, lil' girl?"

Hermione took a breath and summoned up the shreds of her courage once more. "I won't go back there. I'd rather freeze." She said firmly, proud her voice didn't shake. And she meant it.

The corner of Rottweiler's mouth twitched up and Hermione wasn't sure if it was mocking or not, but she met his stare straight on, looking right into those shark-eyes and holding her ground. Rottie's expression softened slightly at that. "Some'un git her a blanket an' summat ter eat." He ordered, before crouching down so he was at eye level with her. "Wot's yeh name, kid?"

"Jane." She said, ignoring the way her palms were sweating and her heart thudding so violently against her ribs she thought everyone in the warehouse must be able to hear it. "My name is Jane."

"She picked it earlier." Sting said and Rottweiler smiled.

"In tha' case, welcome Jane."

Hermione woke with a bitten back gasp, her heart racing in her chest. Her hands were trembling and she balled them into fists, digging her fingernails harshly into the palms and using the pain to centre herself. She concentrated on taking slow, steady breaths until her heart wasn't pounding quite so hard in her chest and she slowly started to became aware of the room around her; of the light filtering in through the window overlooking the rolling fields, of the green silk hangings around the wrought-iron bed she was laying in, of Apophis moving lazily across the floor, silver scales gleaming.

"Hermione?" She heard Harry mumble and she turned her head slightly to see him propped up on an elbow, yawning and rubbing at his eyes. Tom was noticeably absent but he'd warned him he likely would be when they woke. "Are you alright?" Harry asked, the concern clear even in his sleep slurred voice.

"I'm fine." She said, voice tight. "I just... dreamt about something that happened a long time ago." Harry sat up fully then, his concern visibly growing as he blinked away the last vestiges of sleep.

"Are you sure you're alright?" He asked. And before she could tell him she was fine, he met her eyes with his gentle ones and added; "It's okay not to be, you know."

Hermione carefully pushed herself up in the bed so she was sitting upright too, then tucked up her legs so she could rest her chin on her knees. "I dreamt about the day Sting found me." She admitted.

"Oh." Harry said, quiet comprehension dawning on his face. Hermione laughed, a weary sound that had very little to do with actual tiredness and a lot to do with the heaviness of her heart.

"Yeah."
"Do you want to talk about it?" Harry offered and Hermione exhaled slowly, the long sound coming out breathy and uneven. She was more shaken up by the memories that had resurfaced in her dreams then she'd care to admit and it was only the very real worry in Harry's eyes that had her start speaking.

"I was very lucky it was him who found me," she said, working to keep her voice even and steady. "It's not a nice place on the streets, though summer is infinitely better then winter. Winter is... there aren't a lot of people around.

"It was different, that summer you spent with me in London... it had an end date. We both knew we were returning to Hogwarts. You knew you had that vault filled with money. And, in a worst case scenario, you had a place to go back to. Not that the Dursleys aren't fucking awful, but life on the streets can be so, so much worse. At least with them you had a warm bed, semi-regular meals and cold running water. On the streets, winter especially, there's hunger and cold and rain and danger. And there are beatings and rapes and policemen and fucking rats everywhere– I kept Iago for a reason, even if it took money out of my pocket I couldn't really afford to keep him fed."

Hermione looked down at her hands, at the marks from where she'd dug her nails into her palms, a row of red crescent-shaped welts like little half moons on her knife-scarred skin. "But, like I said," she continued, quieter now, "I did get lucky with Sting. He's one of the decent ones. He had... before he ran away, he had a really shitty family. And he has his faults, a fuck ton of them, but Sting will never hurt a kid. I was lucky I didn't end up like... like her, those first few days before he found me."

Harry didn't have to ask who 'her' was– there was only one name that Hermione couldn't bear to say out loud, could barely even bear to think the name of the little red-haired girl who she'd failed.

"You met some of the crowd I hung with, that summer." Hermione continued, wrestling her face back to blankness. "I've mentioned before, how it isn't uncommon that a bunch of us band up together, a safety in numbers sort of arrangement. You have to earn your keep, to support yourself– nobody can afford handouts or charity, not really– but the others will protect you from... other dangers. I wasn't all that valuable at the start but Sting was determined and there were things a little six-year-old girl could do when it came to cons and creating distractions that was harder for the older ones to pull off without suspicion. And like I said, Sting was determined not just to keep me safe but to get me on my feet and make sure I was capable of keeping safe while I was on them.

"Oh fuck, I was so lucky; he helped more than he ever had to and he didn't ask for the sorts of favors that others might have. Our crowd, Rottie's crowd, there was a rule to keep your hands off those who weren't willing. No means no actually meant something there which definitely wasn't always the case. You never met him, Harry– he ended up dead when I was... ten, I think– but when Sting first took me under his wing, a guy called Rottweiler ran things in our group."

Going by his expression, Harry seemed surprised by the genuine affection she could feel on her face. "He scared me shitless, not gonna lie." She admitted, her sharply polished accent unconsciously slipping slightly into the street-slang she rarely spoke. "He had these awful scars, if you saw him without his shirt, and his eyes... fuck," she shook her head, "they were so cold and dead it was terrifying to look at him. But he did right by us. It wasn't free, nothing was, but he didn't take what wasn't freely offered. He was the one who taught Sting how to use the knives that Sting trainer me to use. Rottie taught me sometimes too, but he was one scary son of a bitch and I stayed out of his way if I could. By the time I really found my backbone he was dead." Hermione sighed, the sound wistful as it escaped her. "Sting and I didn't stick around a whole lot after that– not during the summers anyway, not with Rottie, Jose, Lacey and Sharpie all gone. Pike stepped up and he doesn't do a half bad job– Sting and I would still go back over winter and my
magic, not that we had any idea what the fuck it was back then, made me both valuable and
dangerous enough by then that nobody who actually knew me dared touch me— as an
unaccompanied child alone on the streets there were a number of men who'd tried to grab me. But
at that point I could match Sting when sparring with knives— and Sting is very, very good with
knives; I never participated in any street fighting for cash but he did sometimes and when he had a
knife in his hand there weren't many who could beat him— so I was far from defenceless."

"I don't think I've heard you mention those other names before," Harry said, his gave a bit shell-
shocked, as if he was stunned she had revealed so much of the past she usually tried to forget.
"Jose, Lacey and Sharpie— when you say gone...?"

Hermione stayed silent for a long moment. She didn't care for a lot of people in this world and
while those who existed outside of her sphere just didn't matter to her, those that she did care about
she'd always cared more intensely then what was normal. Jose, Lacey and Sharpie had been people
she'd cared for— Rottie too.

Before Harry could open his mouth to break the heavy silence, she spoke up. "You learned to live a
day at a time," she said, quietly. "You learned to live a day at a time and to never believe anything
until it actually happened. It wasn't an easy existence. Sharpie, Lacey and Jose— Josephina— meant
something to me. Sharpie and Jose were both there when Sting brought me with him the first time
and they both, along with Lacey, helped out more then most would. They both looked out for me in
their own ways. But shit happens, out there. Jose... she got sick one winter and she didn't get better.
And Sharpie and Lacey... well, thieving and whoring are humanity's two oldest professions and
those two were masters of both. But it's... it's a dangerous gamble— sometimes the johns don't
follow the rules. And sometimes they don't play nice."

Hermione arranged her pale face in a mask of feigned nonchalance but Harry ignored it, reaching
out to lightly grasp both her hands in his and squeeze gently. Her mask shuttered slightly and she
had to drop her eyes down to their joint hands. "Sharpie was murdered," she said, very quietly.
"Lacey got pregnant and got an illegal abortion that went badly. I... I didn't really make connections
after that. Not when every time I opened up to someone I ended up getting burned when they either
died or... showed their true colors." She lifted her head again and her smile was very bleak. "I
wasn't always as good as I am now at figuring out when people had... bad intentions. Or maybe it's
just that I don't trust anyone anymore."

"You trust me." Harry said, quietly but firmly. His green eyes solemn but steely in their resolve as
he looked her straight in the eye. "You're different then the girl who I met on the train in my first
year. That girl didn't trust anyone. But you trust me and you trust Tom— well, with most things
anyway— and I'm pretty sure you trust Professor Snape. And maybe you don't trust Fleur, Nev,
Luna and the other Slytherins yet, and maybe you never will, but you do like them all and you've
started opening yourself up. I know you'll never be considered... normal by society's standards, but
fuck that, okay? You're Hermione Jane Granger; you're a survivor and you are fucking amazing."

"I don't know whether I want to blow you or hug you right now." Hermione admitted, the warmth
filling her in response to Harry's words chasing away the harsher emotions revisiting old memories
she'd done her best to bury years ago had brought up.

"I love you too," Harry said with a soft smile, understanding her unspoken words the way he
always seemed to. Hermione knew Harry thought he was the lucky one, having been 'chosen' by
her back in their first year on the Hogwarts Express, but she knew who it was who'd really lucked
out that day— the skinny twelve year old with knife-scarred hands and a closed-off heart who'd been
forced to grow up hard, because otherwise she'd have grown up broken or not at all.
Neville's POV:

St Mungos had been a constant in Neville's life for as long as he could remember. When he was younger, back when his gran and the Healers had still held out hope that recovery was possible, they visited his parents nearly every day. But as gran got older and the Healers confirmed that Alice and Frank Longbottom were never going to get any better then they were, the visits had slowed down until he only got to see them once or twice a month. After he'd started at Hogwarts, it had changed to one visit each holidays.

Neville wasn't sure if his gran ever visited without him or if it was too painful for her to see what the son she'd loved so dearly had been reduced to. Neville knew how difficult it was for him and he'd never known them to be any different then they were.

He used to have dreams where the Healers would find a cure and his mum and dad would come and take him away from his gran and that they would live together like a real family; that his mum would hold him in her arms and tell him she loved him and his dad would smile down at him and say how proud he was to have a son like Neville.

Neville knew better then that, now. There was no cure for the sort of brain damage Alice and Frank had suffered, no matter how desperately he wished otherwise.

Gran didn't come in with him much anymore. Mostly she'd drop him off at the lobby of the hospital and tell him she'd be back in an hour. Neville was always relieved when she left as he much preferred having his parents to himself– or at least what he had left of them.

He greeted Maisie Briggs, the Healer on duty, by name and she kissed his cheek before waving him in, undoing the spells that kept the residents of the Janus Thickey ward locked inside. "I showed your mum and dad that lovely photo of you on the front page of the Prophet," Maisie said, beaming proudly at him. Maisie had known Neville since he was a toddler, as had a number of the staff who rotated through the departments of the Spell Damage floor of the hospital. "I'm quite sure they recognized you– Alice kept touching your face so I let her keep it."

"How are they going today?" Neville asked and Maisie's smile wavered slightly.

"Your father... he hasn't been very well recently." She said, sadness evident in her kind brown eyes. "He caught the flu several weeks ago and he's mostly been in bed and non-responsive since. Your mother's been moving around quite a bit, though. I told her you'd be coming in today. She always seems happier when she hears your name– oh, look! Here she is now!" Maisie beamed over at the woman who was tottering towards them.

Alice Longbottom looked thin and worn and her wispy hair was white and dead-looking. The Healers had to keep it cut short, the ends just brushing against her shoulders, but in all the photos Neville had ever seen of her and his dad, the ones that his gran kept out of sight because they were too painful for her to look at, his mother's honey-blonde hair had been thick, wavy and long.

"I'll give you two some privacy then," Maisie said, giving his hand a quick squeeze. "Come find me if you need anything, dear."

"Thanks." Neville said quietly and Maisie gave him another warm smile before bustling off. Alice smiled rather vacantly at him, her eyes not quite meeting his as she reached out to brush the tips of
her fingers to his chest. Neville gently wrapped both his hands around her thin, frail one, holding it so her palm was pressed over his heart. Her skin was cold and dry and her bones felt brittle like a baby bird's. "Hey mum," he said softly. "I've missed you."

Alice didn't say anything. She couldn't, not anymore. She couldn't even look at him properly, eyes constantly roving around the room while not seeming to see anything in it at all.

"I've made friends," Neville told her in a hushed voice, like he was sharing a secret with her, "real friends. And I took the most beautiful girl in the world to a Ball. You'd like her, I think. She's French and she loves flowers and dancing, just like me. I haven't told anyone else this, mum, but she kissed me after I walked her back to the carriage. It was my first ever kiss and it was brilliant."

Alice made a humming sound and reached up with her other hand to pat his cheek, her chewed nails lightly scratching the skin. Neville just smiled at her. "You'd like all my friends, mum. Harry's so nice and kind and Hermione taught me how to protect myself and how to smile. Even when things hurt, even when I fall on my face or someone pushes me onto it, she told me to stand back up and smile and if I do I'll be able to get through anything. They introduced me to their other friends too. It's the first time I've ever been asked to sit with other people on the Hogwarts Express."

Neville felt his smile waver and had to swallow thickly. "They're so nice to me, mum," he whispered to her. "They're all so nice. They're Slytherins but they've made me feel more welcome then anyone in Gryffindor ever has. I-- I want to be their friends but... I don't think they're Light."

There. He'd said it. Neville couldn't help the shaky breath that escaped him as he finally spoke the truth he'd always known but tried to not think about. "Oh Merlin," he croaked, tears blurring up his vision as he clutched his mother's frail, limp hand over his heart like a lifeline. "I-- I don't-- mum, I hurt someone and I liked it. And I like Harry and Hermione and the other Slytherins and I-- I don't care that they're Dark. I know they are but I don't care. I'm sorry I'm letting you and dad down, I'm so, so sorry, but I just-- they're my friends. I've never had friends before and I can't lose them, I just can't."

Neville choked back his tears, bowing his head forward so he didn't have to look at his mother's vacant eyes, pressing his face into her bony shoulder. She smelled like the sharp, clean scent of hospital. He wondered what perfume she'd liked to wear, what shampoo she'd used in her hair. Maybe she'd loved to bake, maybe she'd loved to garden like he did. So many things that other mothers smelled of, but all he'd ever had was the sharpness of antiseptic. "I love you, mum," he whispered into the stiff cotton of her hospital-issue pajamas. "I'm so, so sorry. I just... I just want to be happy."

Neville wasn't sure if his heart felt heavier or lighter after his confession but as he kissed his mother on her paper-thin cheek and said goodbye, accepting the lolly wrapper she dropped into his hands before tottering off while humming to herself, he decided it didn't matter. Harry and Hermione were his friends. So what if they were Dark supporters? It wasn't as if that really mattered-- the war was over; the Light had won. It didn't matter what his gran had always said about Dark witches and wizards; in her own way she was as trapped as her son, still living in a past where Dark meant evil and Light meant good. In the real world, Darkness and Light both existed but that didn't mean there had to be fighting, that there had to be only one or the other. There was no reason why they couldn't co-exist and Neville was determined he would do just that.

"Finished already, poppet?" Maisie asked as he made his way over to the locked exit. Neville smiled weakly at her and nodded. "Alright, love," she said, pulling out her wand to unlock the doors. "I hope you have a wonderful holidays and I was sorry to hear about your friend. I'm sure
"My friend?" Neville asked, confused and suddenly terrified. "Did something happen to Harry?"

"Oh!" Maisie said, surprised. "Oh, I'm so dreadfully sorry, dear; I thought you already knew! Ronald Weasley, the boy in Gryffindor with you that you've mentioned before, was brought in yesterday." Neville felt like his blood had been transfigured into ice in his veins. For a long moment he couldn't even breathe; it was like his brain had completely stopped working.

"What?" he finally managed to choke out through numb lips.

"Oh you poor, poor thing," Maisie tearfully exclaimed, pulling him into a hug. Neville was a statue in her arms, unable to make his body respond to the commands his head was giving it. "I can't give you details, of course," Maisie said as she pulled away, her voice hushed. "Confidentiality is part of a Healer's Oath, after all, but I can tell you he was attacked– and on the grounds of Hogwarts too! He's in a coma right now, but don't you fret– I'm confident the poor dear will be back on his feet in no time and I've heard they're getting Alastor Moody to find out who attacked the poor dear. Mister Moody's a war hero, Neville, just like your mum and dad– he'll catch whoever did this in no time!"

"Oh," Neville said, feeling dizzy like he was going to faint. "That's– that's good. Poor Ron."

"They'll expel whoever did this, Neville," Maisie reassured him. "Ron's mother was even talking about making it a legal matter too, so whoever it is might even end up in Azkaban!" Neville just nodded at her because if he opened his mouth he thought he'd be sick. "You better run along, dear," Maisie said, her face creasing with sympathy. "You know that grandmother of yours doesn't like to be kept waiting." Neville nodded again, barely able to choke out a goodbye before forcing his shaking legs start to moving, to exit the Janus Thickey ward.

Walking back down to the lobby of St Mungo's, Neville was barely aware of putting one foot in front of the other and his stomach was violently churning like he was about to throw up. Panic had flooded his veins and his head was spinning with it. His gran was waiting impatiently in the lobby but Neville barely registered her sharp reprimand for being late. He managed to mumble out an apology on autopilot that was apparently appropriately abashed because she just huffed and seized his arm, apparating them both back home.

Neville immediately fled for his bedroom where he could finally fall to pieces in the wake of the horrible, terrifying news. "Gran's going to kill me!" He moaned aloud, pacing back and forth frantically across his room. "Oh Merlin, they're going to expel me and then send me to Azkaban!" Panic ripped through him, tightening around his lungs like iron bands until only wheezing half-breaths could escape his chest. His legs felt too weak to hold him up they were trembling so badly and Neville had to hurriedly sit down before he fell. Putting his head between his legs, he tried to exhale properly so he wouldn't pass out.

He needed a plan, Neville thought desperately, except he was rubbish at making plans; he wasn't clever or cunning like a Ravenclaw or a Slytherin. He was just dumb, stupid, useless Loser Longbottom.

He felt his face crumple, tears starting to blur his vision, but then he remembered Hermione's words from the day she'd told him he was taking Fleur to the Ball—*smile, no matter what you're feeling inside.* Taking a shaky breath, Neville forced his trembling lips to curve up, wiping the tears from his eyes with the sleeve of his robe. *As long as you smile, you can get through anything.*

Alright, he thought, taking another shaky breath and keeping the smile firmly in place. So he was
rubbish at planning, who did he know who was good at it then?

Hermione was the obvious choice. Hermione was good at planning and so was Harry and Neville would be seeing both of them at the Malfoy's gala in four days. He could ask them for help– they were his *friends*; they had been proud when they heard what happened to Ron. They'd help him, he was sure they would.

For the first time since Maisie had mentioned Ron Weasley's name, Neville could actually take a proper breath, a tiny ray of hope wriggling its way into him. Harry and Hermione were smart, much smarter then he was. Maybe they'd know what to do, maybe they'd be able to help him figure out some way to get out of the mess he'd found himself in.

He really, really hoped so, because he didn't think there was anything else he could do.
Chapter Notes

I'm not going to make excuses for the long wait between updates—real life is my priority but I do try my best. Thank you for your patience, guys (that's not sarcasm—you're all wonderful) <3

~C.C.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER LIII:

Hermione's POV:

Staying with Tom and Harry at the house that was theirs was a dream. Hermione wasn't the sort of girl who went for fairytales, but she almost felt like she was living in one.

The house itself was lovely; it was large inside, hushed and cool with ceilings curved high overhead in the same arches as the doorways and the windows, with their stained-glass medallions set within mullioned panes. It was decorated simply, the furniture mostly antique and carved from beautifully treated wood, with a number of paintings hanging on the walls and a handful of vases and sculptures sprinkled around in a purposefully careless manner, as if due to the obvious wealth of their owners their worth meant nothing. Her favourite room in the house—her house—was unsurprisingly the private library, with its thousands of books, gold accentuated furniture, beautiful winged armchairs and walls decorated with heavy tapestries depicting different magical creatures, both those extinct now and those that were thriving.

The countryside surrounding the house was just as beautiful as the house itself, with rolling hills that were high and vibrantly green even when dusted with snow, scattered trees and wildlife and icy blue skies filled with trailing clouds like ribbons of white and various greys that sometimes wove together to create heavy blankets that hid the brightness of the sun and coveted the blue of the sky, hailing unforgivingly down over everyone and everything that turned its face up to its might.

Like he'd warned them he might have to, Tom would occasionally disappear for an hour or two, but there was more than enough available to keep them occupied so that his absence sped by while she and Harry explored or made use of the amenities of their new house.

Other then that, though, the three of them were rarely apart. They spent every moment together that they could and so far the only source of conflict and discord between them had been the dreaded swimming lesson.

Tom, it seemed, interpreted the saying "sink or swim" very literally. On a not-so entirely unrelated note, Hermione thought Harry might actually try and murder the older boy.

"It wasn't that bad," she'd tried to console him after the, er, 'lesson' and Harry had glared furiously at her.
"I just had to thaw out my eyebrows! There was ice in them!"

"...it could have been worse?"

"How?" Harry shouted, throwing his hands in the air. "How could it possibly have been worse? He vanished all my clothes except my boxers and pushed me in! He used my body to break the ice covering the top of the lake! He threatened to transfigure some rocks into sharks and get them to chase me if I didn't stop screaming and start swimming! He made me tread water without using my arms for nearly five minutes and kept adding time on every time my head went under! He then made me swim a lap just using my arms! And have I mentioned the fucking ice? Because I feel like that deserves a second, third and fourth mention!"

"Well," she pointed out, her voice and expression very reasonable with only her eyes giving away her true amusement. "He could have vanished your boxers too."

She was actually impressed with the shade of red Harry's face had turned in response to that. "You suck," he told her, glaring fiercely, "you suck so much!"

And despite the situation, that had been an opening she hadn't been able to resist taking. "You love it when I suck," she purred, licking her lips exaggeratedly slow so her meaning was explicitly clear. This had just made Harry glare harder, visibly seething.

"I'm going to go have another shower." He said through clenched teeth.

Having had her fill of teasing the poor thing, Hermione had pointed out there were so many ways to warm back up that were more fun then a shower. Harry hadn't been impressed.

"Gee, I'd love to, Hermione," he hissed, "except for the fact the lake was so fucking cold that my bollocks have gone into hiding and my knob has shrunk to about half it's size!" Hermione winced in response.

"Oh. Right. Well, I can see how that might be problematic." This earned her a particularly withering look.

"You think?" He asked sarcastically and she frowned at him, her mouth twisting down.

"I don't see why you're taking this out on me," she said, annoyed by the fact. "I wasn't the one who pushed you into a lake."

"You didn't try helping me either," Harry pointed out.

"Of course not," she said, "I didn't want to end up in there with you."

Harry had given her the filthy, withering look she admitted that that had probably deserved before storming back into the bathroom.

So yes, there had been that little incident and the several hours of upset that had followed it, plus after the first day Harry had yet to join them again in bed, seeming to prefer watching which Hermione didn't mind but was frustrating Tom, but it had been a dream-like holidays so far and it was the day after Harry's swimming lesson that the somewhat overdue conversation regarding their sex life ended up taking place.

It wasn't that they'd been avoiding it, exactly– no, it was more along the lines of it being a somewhat awkward topic to bring up; after all, 'so we've been having progressively kinkier sex and should probably discuss our limits and come up with a safe word' wasn't exactly a casual sort of
conversation.

But they'd just had sex— not unusual— and Tom had restricted her breathing during it— something else that wasn't exactly unusual— and her curiosity had sparked the overdue discussion, interested as she was in knowing just what Tom got out of the whole erotic asphyxiation deal.

"Why is choking such a thing for you?" She inquired, gesturing to her neck where the faint marks from Tom's fingers were only half concealed by the band of lace.

"Why is biting such a thing for you, hmm?" Tom said pointedly. There was a slight mocking lilt to his voice and his amusement was clear to see on his handsome face. Hermione narrowed her eyes at him and he smirked before answering her. "Choking," he said when she opened her mouth to either repeat her question or to threaten him with violence if he didn't shut up– she hadn't quite made up her mind, "is highly intimate. I personally find thrill involved to be very... sexually gratifying."

"It's a thrill that has the potential to be very dangerous in the wrong hands," Hermione commented.

"Pun intended?" Harry asked cheekily and Hermione rolled her eyes, unable to help her smile as Tom laughed before elaborating further.

"When I choke someone, I can feel their pulse racing and it's exhilarating." He said, his tone dipping into something softer as a sudden cruel hunger gleamed in his eyes and he glanced down at his hands, flexing his slender fingers like he was imagining them around someone's neck. "They always struggle underneath me; the panic is such an innate, human response and it's like a fight or a dance, just me and them. It's beautiful and thrilling like nothing else."

Hermione could feel the flush rising up under her skin at the sound of the soft seduction present in his voice, curling around each syllable that left his mouth and turning the words into something dangerous and alluring, and she slowly released the breath she'd been holding in without even realizing. The skittering of her nerves was a buzz in her veins, the anticipation and anxiety sparking in turn, and she turned her focus to Tom who was watching her with a knowing look in his eyes and an all-too tempting smirk on his pretty mouth. Harry, frozen in place at her side, was wide-eyed and equally breathless and when Tom spoke again his voice was low and irresistible with a dangerous edge that sent heat straight through her body.

"Knowing that I am the one with full control over their bodies," he murmured, "knowing that I own them so completely with each breath I allow or forbid and just how easy it would be to put them to sleep forever, with my face being the last thing they'd ever see, is a high comparable to orgasm."

"You do have got a nice face," Harry joked weakly after a moment and Hermione realised she'd been given as good an opening as they were going to get.

"We need to talk about this sort of stuff," she said, a bit reluctant to ruin the growing mood, the nervous tension only adding to the heated thrill in the room, but knowing it needed to be done anyway. "Obviously, you're interested in more... alternative kinks, Tom, and I don't know about you, Harry, but I'm not exactly averse to the idea of them. If we're going to explore them, though, we need to do it properly, we need to be honest and thorough. I'm not going to go about this half-arsed; our relationship is fucked up enough without adding some sort of god-awful, mind-fucking train-wreck of a sex trip to it."

"And I have no objections with that," Tom said smoothly.

"I don't know how I'm going to react to stuff, I don't know how either of you could react, and I
want to be smart about it. I don't want to fuck this up." She added. "Later, when we know how we both react to it all, we might be able to stop being so... formal about it, but not now."

"I told you, Hermione," Tom repeated, allowing a hint of exasperation to show on his face, "I have no objections to that."

"Alright then." She said, giving Tom a challenging look. "Prove it. Both of you give me a hard limit. Something non-negotiable. Like for me, no blindfolds." Hermione hated being trapped in darkness and had ever since the punishments at the orphanage. Being locked in that godforsaken room, hungry and thirsty, alone and blind; there were very few occasions in her life when she'd been more afraid. It had been years before being enclosed in a dark room stopped making her chest tighten as her pulse sped and her breathing hitched, icy fingers of fear dragging their way down her spine– years and the necessity of repeated exposure. The thought of willingly allowing herself to be trapped in darkness, however, went against part of what made up her very being and had every instinct, every fear, scream at her 'NO' and Hermione knew better then to ignore her instincts– blindfolds would only lead to disaster. "Nothing where my vision is obscured." She added, wanting to be very clear in drawing that line in the sand.

"For me, a hard limit would be being the submissive partner in the equation." Tom offered.

"I think she meant other then the obvious." Harry said dryly and Tom flashed a smirk at him.

"I thought we were being thorough. Something about not knowing how we'll react?"

"Oh shove off," Hermione rolled her eyes at him, relaxing slightly as Tom used humour to ease the growing tension in the room.

"I know what I like and don't like," Tom said. "It would be a better use of our time to go through what we do want first. But if you insist, then a 'hard limit' would be anything that belongs in the loo should stay in the loo."

"That's definitely not my kink either."

"Fetish would be the more accurate description," Tom corrected and she rolled her eyes again but refrained from childishly retorting with 'whatever'.

"Well I'm not interested in calling either of you 'sir' or 'madam' or 'master' or 'mistress','" Harry offered up. "It's not a– a hard limit? It's not one of those but I don't want to do it. There's nothing sexy about it for me."

"Nor me." Hermione admitted and Tom shrugged elegantly.

"I'm not interested in that sort of dominance and submission play," he agreed easily, "my interests are focused in sadomasochism– as I suspect yours are too, Hermione."

"There's a possibility I could be a bit of a sadomasochist," she admitted. The confession escaped her with a surprising ease and Tom laughed softly.

"Only 'a bit'?" He teased her playfully, before his voice smoothed out into something serious again. "I don't want you calling me any sort of title because I won't need the validation," he said, arrogant confidence sliding easily onto his handsome features. "Seeing you under me and knowing you'll have chosen to give me your body and let me do what I want to it will speak far louder to me then
any words either of you could possibly say."

Hermione could feel the flush under her skin heating further and she shifted slightly in place, her tongue darting out to wet her suddenly dry lips as Harry sucked in a shaky breath beside her. "And what do you want to do to us?" She asked in a breathier voice then she'd expected. Tom noticed her heightened interest, because of course he did; Tom was capable of reading people as easily as he breathed, figuring out what they wanted without them needing to voice their needs, their hopes and desires, and then using it to manipulate them so that eventually they would drown in him.

Hermione didn't think she'd mind drowning in Tom, drowning in his Darkness and his magic and his incomparable mind, and there was a look in his eyes that she didn't quite recognise as he looked back at her. It was a predatory combination of hunger and cruelty and triumph, even. She supposed it was a win, of sorts, them discussing this. Her discussing what she would let him do to her, to her body.

Morbidly, almost, she wondered just how far she would let him go– and just how much she might enjoy doing so.

"I want to make you helpless; bound and unable to fight me," Tom spoke softly, his voice silk over sharpened steel, and she couldn't help the way his words caused a shudder to roll down her spine. "I want your complete and utter surrender to me and then I want to hurt you."

Hermione swallowed. It was nothing she hadn't expected from him, but hearing Tom say it out loud was unexpectedly thrilling. Harry reached for her hand, gripping onto her tight, and she wasn't sure who the touch was really for. "Hurt me?" She whispered and Tom flashed his teeth in a sharp, hungry smile, a sudden, cruel glint in his eyes.

"I want to hurt you so the build-up of pain will push you to the point where you leave your body." He said, and the low grit of lust in his voice turned the words filthy. "I want you drugged out on endorphins under my hands with every part of body screaming at you."

Hermione licked her lips again, tempted to move her free hand to grind the heel of her palm against her clit.

"I'm not– pain isn't... I'm not wired like that," Harry said quietly, his cheeks flushed pink as he looked down at their joined hands, avoiding making eye-contact with either her or Tom. "I don't want to be hit and stuff."

"And I don't want to be humiliated or belittled," Hermione said firmly. "You can h-hurt me," she tripped over the word slightly, cheeks going red, "and you can order me to do something and I'll listen, but the moment you start calling me a whore or a slut or anything like that then the scene is over."

"Despite the popular belief regarding BDSM," Tom said, his mouth quirking up in amusement, "I can see where the power really lies in this arrangement." Harry made a small sound of amusement but Hermione met Tom's eyes with a sober, solemn look in her own.

"If– when– we do this, I'll be trusting myself to you," she told him, quietly. "And the moment I do, you will have all the power in the world to abuse it."

"Hermione," Tom leaned forwards, still looking her straight in the eye. "I may want to hurt you and take pleasure in your suffering at my hands, but that that sort of betrayal is one particular brand of pain I would get no joy out of ever inflicting upon you. I know very little about love outside how to manipulate it in others, but I do know just how severely I would punish anyone who dared lay a
hand on you or Harry in a way you did not consent to—myself being no exception."

Hermione could feel the anxiety flow away from her at Tom's violent promise, and beside her Harry had similarly settled. "Your suggestion before, about starting with saying what we'd actually want rather than going over what we don't, is a good idea," she said. "Why don't you go first, Tom?"

"Alright." The older boy agreed and Hermione entwined her fingers with a quiet Harry's as they settled back to listen.

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Tom pressing her back against the mattress alone already had Hermione's heart stuttering in her chest, her pulse skittering and her breath escaping in short, hard bursts. Nervous anticipation coiled through her, winding around her in loops not unlike the length of rope that Tom was wrapping around her wrists.

He took his time with the knots and Hermione took her time with concentrating on not freaking out over being made helpless as Tom's quick, clever hands did so in easy, practiced movements. He started by binding her wrists to her ankles then wove the ropes up her calves and forearms, holding them tight together, and finally tying it off at her knees. The helplessness of the position made unbidden panic rise up inside her as a reflexive pull at the ropes yielded no slack and her subsequent attempt to yank at her arms and twist her body proved just as useless. She was trapped and immobile, and embarrassment tangled with her fear at the vulnerability of her position. She could easily picture what she looked like, stripped bare and spread wide, unable to close her legs, and her cheeks stained red.

"Breathe darling," Tom coaxed as her heart started to choke her in her throat, the panic spreading like ice through her veins. His hands moved to her hips, gripping them securely to hold her in place as she started to struggle, and the touch was surprisingly gentle and grounding. The steady weight of his hands on her managed to calm Hermione back down enough from the reflexive panic that when Tom arched an eyebrow, wordlessly questioning if she wished to continue, she nodded. And as he leaned forwards to kiss her, she could feel how hard he was, could feel just how much tying her up alone had turned him on, and she closed her eyes and purposefully let herself relax into the ropes, allowing them to support her. Tom made a greedy, bitten-off sound against her mouth at her surrender.

"Oh my clever girl," he breathed against her lips, "I am going to break you."

Hermione's breath caught again, her eyes flying open once more as genuine fear made her body tense up all over again. Tom broke the kiss, moving his hands up her body so he was cradling her face, his thumbs sweeping across the arcs of her cheekbones. She looked at him, wild-eyed and ready to call the whole thing off, and he made a soothing noise. "Don't be afraid, darling girl." He said softly, "I promise I'll pick up all your pieces and put you back together when I'm done. Tell me your safe words."

"Green is 'yes', Yellow is 'please slow down' or 'I need to check in with you' or 'can we take a pause and switch to something else but please don't stop touching me entirely' and red is 'stop immediately'." Hermione recited, feeling something relax inside her again, and Tom smiled, dropping his hands from her face. Her skin felt colder without them.

"Good girl." He said, his tone one of approval. "And if you can't speak?"

"I click my fingers twice."
"Show me." He ordered and she did, clicking the fingers of her left hand. In response, Tom smiled and reached out to trail his fingers along her jawline then down the curve of her neck to briefly touch the lace choker before pulling back.

"Good girl." He praised and Hermione shivered, though from his touch or his words she wasn't sure. "I'm not going to be asking every five minutes, but remember you can use your words at any time. Now, are you ready, darling? Yes or no?"

"Yes." She whispered, nearly trembling from nerves and anticipation.

"Look at you..." Tom whispered back, his voice was thick with desire and something else, something much darker and much, much more dangerous. "So perfect. I'm going to make you cry, beautiful girl."

"Promises, promises," she was unable to stop herself from saying and Tom grinned down at her, a sharp grin that flashed his teeth as he wandlessly summoned the unlit candle that had been sitting on the bedside table. Hermione couldn't help the sound she made, anticipation drawing tight beneath her ribs at the sight of the wick over the tall, red cylinder of hard wax flaring to life.

The thrill of vulnerability turned her breath shallow and the curl of Tom's mouth was hungry and predatory as he looked down at her. As her eyes were drawn to the flame of the candle, almost involuntarily, her stomach drew in at the sight of the wax at the top start to melt. Tom's free hand lowered to idly trace a scar that curved across her waist and the nervous anticipation had her quipping, "ready when you are, hot stuff."

Tom's hand instantly tilted and Hermione let out a startled hiss as the hot, melted wax painted a burning line from the soft curve of her stomach to the sharp jut of her ribs. "Careful, darling," Tom warned, a glint in his eyes as he watched her clench her teeth and suck in several shaky breaths before forcing her tight-wound muscles to ease. "I'm sure you don't want me being too... distracted by that mouth of yours; I might just slip." A flick of the candle and the accompanying splatter of hot wax against her skin added emphasis to his casual threat and left her forcing herself to keep her back flat against the mattress.

Tom's free hand moving to her ribs and pressing down hard helped with her efforts, trapping her back down and holding her still as he tipped the candle again, spilling melted streaks of burning-hot wax along the slight dip of her stomach. Hermione squirmed at the deep heat of it; the sensation not unlike the sort of blow from sparring that sunk deep into muscle and lingered for several long seconds. With how she was bound on her back, though, she couldn't do much more than twitch in place, sweat beading on her shoulders and trickling down the curve of her spine leaving her wet in more places then just the obvious. She dug her nails into her ankles, the gritty sting of it grounding as she was left utterly unable to get away from the heat gathering on her navel.

When she eventually realised what Tom was doing with the wax, she gave a slightly shaky laugh that had him pausing, straightening the candle as he arched an eyebrow at her. Hermione let her muscles unwind at the pause in the assault and answered his unasked question.

"If you're planning on covering all my scars with wax then we're going to be here for a long time." She said, surprising herself with just how unsteady and breathless her voice was. The burning discomfort of the wax wasn't exactly noteworthy to her, not in comparison to suffering she had undergone in her past, but her willing submission to the pain was... twisting something inside her; the concept that she was allowing this to happen, that she'd allowed herself to be tied up and made vulnerable and hurt, that caused pleasure to spark along her nerves.
"I don't see a problem with that," Tom said smoothly, drawing her attention from where it had been focused on the growing pool of wax on top of the candle over to him. His eyes were dark and there was a razor smile on his handsome face as he looked down at her. "But perhaps this time we'll concentrate on just these first," he moved his free hand to trail his fingertips over the light scars of her lower torso, "and see afterwards how much more you can manage."

"I can manage more then this," Hermione scoffed dismissively, though she was already bracing herself for the response her words would receive and she bit back a yelp at the subsequent streak of wax that spilled over a few inches of her side, burning into her skin and down into the muscle beneath. She twisted in her bindings, arching her neck as she weathered the hot, sharp pain, the blood under her skin flushing up her neck and into her cheeks. Tom leaned forwards, pressing his mouth to the arch of her neck and scraping his teeth lightly against the heated skin. "Watch that mouth, darling," he warned again, his voice thick with heat, teeth sharp and breath hot as it fanned across her skin.

He pulled back then and the sudden drops of wax that splashed onto the thin, fragile skin of her throat surprised her. A strangled sound escaped from between her lips before she managed to silence herself, clenching her teeth together at the startling burn. It hadn't hurt any worse than the rest of the wax, not really, but the change in location had been startling; unexpected and shocking and jolting her from her careful control. The responding predatory look on Tom's face to the cut-off whimper, though, had a very different heat start building up inside her and as his breathing started to get heavier so did hers.

Tom's eyes didn't leave hers as he tilted the candle just enough to let it slowly drip down onto the skin between her breasts, trailing it down her body in a slow path to her belly button where he let the burning-hot wax pool while she shivered in nervous anticipation about the candle moving lower. The intense burning in her navel and the nervous, uncertain fear spiking sharply through her left her aching as she squirmed in the ropes.

Twisting her wrists in the ropes, she curled her fingers into fists and dug her nails into her palms as Tom moved the candle lower, swallowing and holding herself as still as she could manage, anticipating the sharp burn of the wax. She gasped as the next splatter fell between the juts of her hipbones, her abdomen sucking in briefly, but Tom didn't go any lower. Hermione wasn't sure if she was relieved or disappointed by that, but then he moved his focus to her breasts and she was too busy biting back gasps and curses as she flinched beneath the wax to care.

The sensations started bleeding together, the heat beneath her skin a mixture of the wax's effects and the arousal building inside her. She could feel a wetness in her eyes overflowing and trickling down her cheeks but the tears were more from the overwhelmed state she was in then from the pain of the candle wax. A thin whimper escaped her as Tom used his fingers to start to scrape off the wax, the already sharp sensation of his nails against her skin made sharper by how sensitive the burn of the wax had left her flesh. Her eyelids had mostly drifted shut, fluttering open in fits and starts as she drifted in the sensation until Tom had scraped the last of the wax from her breasts and slid his hand up to grip her chin, his tightening fingers commanding her attention. She pried her eyes open enough that she could meet his gaze and shivered at the sight of how blown his pupils were.

"Look at you, floating along," Tom said quietly, his mouth curling into a smile and his eyes alight with a hungry, cruel satisfaction. "You are so beautiful like this. What colour are you?" He had to repeat his question twice before her dazed brain really registered what he was asking.

"G–Green, so, so green," she gasped, leaning into his touch as he stroked her cheek. "C'mon, please, Tom."
"Please what?" He teased, his thumb catching at her mouth and pushing inside, dragging at her lower lip and the sharp edge of her teeth.

"Please," she repeated, voice dangerously close to a whine as she squirmed her hips, Tom's presence between her bound legs trapping them in their splayed open position and meaning that she couldn't move them to squeeze her thighs together for some relief. "Stop teasing and just touch me already!"

Tom laughed, the sound rough and low, and he moved his hands down to her thighs, digging his fingers into the flesh and holding her open as he dipped his head to suck on the still-sensitive skin of her stomach before sinking his mouth lower. It didn't take him long to get her to reach her climax with how on edge she already was, but he didn't stop there, instead moving his mouth to her clit and sucking hard on the over-sensitive bundle of nerves.

It was too much, too intense and far too soon, and Hermione jerked and writhed in her restraints, fresh tears gathering in her eyes as she desperately gasped for air that came back out as cries or high keening noises. Her back curved into a hard arch, black creeping over the edges of her vision as she came a second time in as many minutes, a sob ripped from her throat as the unrelenting pleasure overwhelmed her, devouring her from the inside out. She let out another sob, this time one of relief, as Tom finally, finally, removed his mouth from her. Her relief was short-lived, however, as he replaced his lips and tongue with his fingers and continued the torment.

Words tumbled from her mouth, curses and pleading intermixed with moans, whimpers and cries, but she didn't ask him to stop, didn't speak the word that would have ended it all. At some point during the ordeal, it had become a matter of pride for Hermione to let Tom do this to her, to bring her past the point of incoherent, unrelenting overstimulation and hover somewhere near blackout levels of endless, all-consuming pleasure as he flat-out tortured her with his fingers and mouth.

In her brain, the lines of pleasure and pain felt as if they'd irreversibly blurred, the tiny, piercing shocks snapping across her skin as Tom bit his way up and down her inner thighs currently indistinguishable in sensation from the sparking jolts caused by the pad of his thumb rubbing circles into her clit. She was floating again by the time she heard herself saying over and over, "please, please, please--" though she wasn't even sure what she was begging for as Tom scraped his nails over her ribs and licked into her again.

Tom, however, seemed to have an idea of what she was asking for, or maybe he just couldn't hold himself back anymore, because he moved his head away and instead of replacing his mouth with his fingers again he lined himself up and thrust into her, a short, rough slide that was hot and aching and left her feeling so full. He smoothed a hand over her face and panted, "perfect, so fucking perfect," and Hermione preened under the praise before he dug his fingers into her hair and started moving.

His pace was ruthless and each viciously deliberate thrust sent hot pain sweeping through her, making her shake and throb and need. Hermione shuddered and keened, tears leaking down her cheeks as pain and pleasure twisting together inside of her; aching and rising, rising, rising.

She made a weak sound of protest when she felt the grip in her hair tighten as Tom picked up his pace, so unbearably good as he slammed into her, then sucked in a breath right as Tom suddenly wrenched her head back. The sudden, swift twinge of discomfort in her scalp was joined by a lance of pain down her shoulder, sharp and cutting, and Hermione's brain shorted out on her entirely as she reached a shattering final climax. She didn't feel Tom come; couldn't even feel her own hands, in fact, just the hard, grounding pressure of Tom's teeth in her skin as she shook apart then faded out, losing time as her brain ran on vapours, spinning aimlessly and floating off as sweet ache and
bliss flooded her.

She became aware again through the uncomfortable sensation of pins and needles under her skin. Dry-mouthed and bleary-eyed, it took her a few minutes to understand that Tom had, apparently, released her from the ropes and was now stroking his hands on her skin while whispering soft, meaningless bits of praise into her sweat-soaked curls. Hermione found that both the touch and the words were surprisingly reassuring and reorienting as she floated back up into herself.

She wasn't sure how long they stayed like that, but eventually she felt together enough to lift one of her hands and slide it over Tom's. "I've got you, my darling girl," he murmured in response, kissing her shoulder gently and then again, this time accompanying the press of his lips with a quick lap of his tongue. Hermione made the supreme effort to lift her head and twist around to half-focus on Tom's face and her newly remastered ability to breath was stolen from her at the sight of him. Apparently he'd broken her skin when he'd bit her shoulder, and now his face was smeared with her blood from nose to chin.

A pathetic whimper escaped her and Tom raised an eyebrow, a smile curling his wet lips and exposing his red-stained teeth before he leaned in and dragged his tongue over the still-oozing bite mark on her shoulder then set his teeth onto the indents and bit down, hard. Hermione flinched and cried out at the pain; it hurt and she hadn't been expecting it at all, but it only took a few seconds to reach a steady burn. She closed her eyes as she shuddered and when she opened them again, Tom was looking down at her with his eyes unguarded in a way Hermione was pretty sure only she and Harry got to see. She smiled weakly at him and Tom echoed it with a small smile of his own.

"Back with me?" He queried, voice shockingly gentle, and Hermione nodded.

"I think so," she said.

"And how are you feeling?" He asked, stroking his fingers through her hair. Hermione shifted a bit, checking in and taking note of the aching stiffness in her limbs and the various pains, both stabbing and dull, throughout her body. The sharp throbbing of her shoulder from the bite was the worst of it and her entire body felt oversensitive, but not in a bad way. None of it actually felt bad, really–the opposite, in fact.

"I feel good," she answered Tom truthfully, bubbles of mirth rising inside her that she wasn't certain as to the cause of. "Sore but good. Really, really good." A small giggle escaped her and Tom made an amused sound in response.

"You're still flying high," he said, sounding equal parts entertained, fond and satisfied. "Rest, darling." He instructed her and Hermione did as told, closing her eyes and letting sleep tug her away.

When she woke up again, the world came back in the sort of slow, easy way that people like her, trained by the life they'd led to go from being asleep to aware in a matter of moments, hardly ever get to experience. It really went to show just how relaxed she was that her brain didn't activate its usual survival instinct.

There were limbs entwined with hers and Hermione opened her eyes lazily to take in the sight of Harry, who was watching her with a fond look on his face that softened further the moment he noticed she was awake.

"Are you okay with what happened?" he asked, quiet and solemn.

"I am," she said honestly and he relaxed, giving her a small smile.
"Alright," he said, and that was that.

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**Harry's POV:**

Harry woke on the morning of December 31st the same way he'd woken the last five days; in bed with Tom and Hermione, the three of them curled up together, skin-to-skin, their legs and arms entwined and their breath mingling. His nose was pressed into the hollow of Hermione's neck and he could feel her fingers carding through his hair, the movements slow and languid.

"I kind of want to cancel going tonight," he muttered sleepily against the sweat-damp skin of her neck and she made a humming sound of agreement.

"So do it," Tom said lazily, his long, slender fingers tracing abstract patterns on the bare skin of Harry's back, nails lightly scraping against the pearl string of his spine and straying dangerously close to the dipping below the small of his back before moving up again. "What's stopping you?"

"Besides the huge amount of sulking we'd have to deal with from Draco if we missed it?" Harry asked, the stirring interest inside him prompting him to start following the bluish hue of veins beneath the thin skin of Hermione's throat with his mouth, kissing and nipping his way along the warm and sweet-tasting creamy flesh. "I'm actually fond of living– and having all my limbs intact while I do so. Personally, I'd like to keep this way."

"Ah, I forgot Voldemort requested your presence." Tom mused.

"Requested," Hermione huffed lightly, amusement coloring her voice. "That's certainly one way to put it."

Due to the Yule Ball that had been hosted this year as part of the Triwizard Tournament, the Malfoy family's annual Yule Gala had been rescheduled with Narcissa deciding to organise a New Years Gala instead– and Voldemort had passed on the message through Barty Crouch Junior that he expected to see Harry and Hermione there, and that they were to bring Fleur along with them.

Harry didn't actually mind the idea of going– it felt like forever since he'd seen Narcissa and it wasn't as if the galas she hosted were horrible or anything. But the past few days that he'd spent just with Tom and Hermione in the house Tom had called theirs in the middle of the English countryside with no neighbors for miles had been heavenly and the thought of returning to real life once more filled him with dismay.

But Voldemort had 'requested' their presence and Harry had no intention of refusing such a request, which was why when late afternoon approached he changed into his outfit for the evening without complaint.

Instead of dress-robes, Harry had chosen to wear a suit for the evening, picking from the wardrobe Voldemort had supplied him with during the summer holidays a slim, tasteful black wool-twill blazer that had been tailored for an elegant, androgynous feel with a narrow waist, ruffled trims along the shoulders and sleeves and pristine ivory silk piping. His shirt, a classic button-down designed for a slightly loose fit, was been cut from the same shade of ivory silk and had subtle lace trim on the collar and cuffs, and the black wool-twill pants with their turned-up hems and a flared silhouette matched the blazer.

As opposed to Harry's more modern look that was purposefully somewhat mischievous with its
muggle hints, Tom looked very traditional, having donned a finely tailored dress-robe of blue silk so dark it almost looked black. The pendent Harry and Hermione had given him for Yule was hidden by the sharp neckline of the robes, the only 'jewellery' worn by the older boy being Apophis, the snake having shrunk himself down, turning small and slim and curling in rings up Tom's arm like an ornate arm cuff, his silver scales flashing in the light.

Despite the apparent youth of his appearance, there was something about Tom that commanded attention. Charisma, Harry guessed, or maybe it was just that that primitive little knot of brain cells at the base of his spine that realized this was something that could, and would, consume him; that saw past Tom's superficial charm to the way he walked with power and confidence in every step, to the coolness in his eyes that said he could and would cut down anyone who got in his path and the way he seemingly unconsciously surrounded himself with the air of the lethal Dark Lord he was.

Harry was personally quite fond of his primitive little lizard brain. It was a trustworthy collection of life-saving impulses that had proved to have very good instincts.

And yet, despite how devastatingly handsome Tom looked, the older boy breathtaking in the best–and worst–of ways, Hermione still managed to be the most stunning of them all. She was dressed for the gala in a lustrous, deep red silk-satin gown with a boned bodice that nipped in at her waist before falling to her ankles in layers of sheer tulle, the hem of the skirt just short enough to reveal the glossy golden high heels adorned with angel wings.

The ivory lace choker had been swapped for a gold-plated one strung by rows of delicate gold chains set with narrow columns of gleaming garnets, garnet-tipped gold pins and combs held her heavy chestnut curls off her face and neck and her lips had been painted with a bright red liquid gloss.

"Now I want to just stay too," Tom said, his eyes dark and his lips curled up in that all-too-tempting smirk. "You both look utterly delicious."

"Try sounding a bit less like a cannibal," Hermione advised him and Harry snorted.

"So I shouldn't mention wanting to devour you, to lay you both out and consume you entirely?" Tom asked, and though the older boy's voice was light and playful there was a dangerous heat in his eyes that made him shiver.

"I don't know whether to be turned on or horrified when you say shit like that," Hermione sighed and Tom smirked at them.

"Well, you know what they say– if humans weren't intended to be eaten, then why are they made of meat?"

"I have never heard anyone say that before. Ever." Hermione said flatly.

"And for the record," Harry added with a horrified shudder, "you know that conversation we had about hard limits? Consider cannibalism one of those." It was sad, he thought, that he actually felt the need to clarify that but he still did want it out there.

"Joking aside, I wouldn't ever resort to cannibalism," Tom assured him, much to Harry's relief. "I wouldn't want any part of those who I kill to become part of me." Tom added, and going by the disdainful curl of his lip, much to Harry's horror the older boy was being painfully sincere.

"Because that's the real issue with that." Hermione said and they traded disturbed looks before Hermione just shrugged in a 'what can you do' sort of way.
"Right then," Harry said weakly, very much wanting the conversation to be over, "well we should probably get going."

"Yes please." Hermione agreed immediately and Tom just rolled his eyes at them both before throwing a handful of floo powder into the fireplace, turning the flames emerald green as he said, "Malfoy Manor!"

Draco had given them access to his house's floo room so that they wouldn't have to apparate to the gates of Malfoy Manor like the rest of the attendees and make the walk along the long, paved drive to the front doors where the Lady of the Manor would greet them. Fleur and her family would be arriving via port-key and Hermione had sent the blonde an owl arranging to meet her outside the floo room when they arrived, instructing her to request that Draco show her where to wait.

The beautiful part-Veela was waiting for them where planned, her slender body fitted in a flowing, antique rose-colored chiffon gown accessorized by an ornate body chain with two silver medusa medallions at the front. Glints of silver jewelry were visible at the French schoolgirl's wrists and ears, a slim, coiled snake choker with a sinuous mesh body, beautiful silver finish and jewelled eyes curled elegantly around her throat and her pale hair was intricately piled on top of her head in great, stiff curls.

"Both of you look de toute beauté," Fleur beamed when she saw them, pressing light kisses to both of his and Hermione's cheeks before she smiled coquettishly at Tom. Harry's eyes widened slightly as the urge to stand and soak in Fleur's beauty spiked; her features hadn't changed but suddenly the azure-blue of her eyes, the softness of her skin and the flawlessness of her features wove a captivating tapestry that had something in him wanting to irreversibly tangle himself in without thought. This, he realised with a jolt of shock, was Fleur actively using her veela allure and for a moment he was confused as to why before he realised she was testing Tom.

Unlike Harry who had spent several seconds being stunned, Tom hadn't even blinked in the face of the weight of Fleur's allure. Instead he smiled a glittery knife of a smile at Fleur, eyes dark and cruel charm on his face. "You must be the veela girl," he said softly and Harry wanted to both step back and step in front of Fleur– Tom would treat him and Hermione right, he knew, but there was no such promise in place for their friends who existed on the thin ice that everyone but the two of them stood on.

"Tom," Hermione said quietly, pressing her hand to the older boy's shoulder until Tom turned to meet her eyes with his. A silent conversation seemed to pass between the two of them then Tom dipped his chin slightly before turning back to Fleur.

"It is a pleasure to meet you," he said with a pleasant smile and Harry exhaled, feeling the odd tension pass. "I'm Thomas Dagworth."

"My name eez Fleur Delacour," Fleur said, her voice more subdued now and careful. "Eet eez a pleasure to meet you too, monsieur; please call me Fleur."

"It would be my honor. And please, feel free to call me Thomas." Tom said, pleasant smile still in place. "Though I'm afraid we'll have to wait until later to get to know each other– my relative is waiting." Instantly, Harry felt the tension inside him return.

Voldemort intimidated him, there was no question about it, and the Dark Lord demanding a meeting had definitely unnerved him. Still, Harry was confident Tom was too fond of him and
Hermione to not pass on a warning if Voldemort was displeased with them in some way, so he just clung to Hermione's hand with an iron grip and followed Tom as the older boy made his way unerringly to where Voldemort as 'Thaddeus' was expecting them.

Hermione paused before they entered the ballroom, causing him to stop too. Fleur reacted by immediately ceasing her movements, drawn back to Hermione's side like a magnet.

"You know my relative appreciates promptness," Tom said sharply, a warning in his voice, and Hermione nodded.

"I know," she said quietly. "Fleur, could you look away for a moment?" Visibly confused but not questioning Hermione's request, Fleur turned her head from them, taking several steps over in order to grant them a thin piece of privacy. Hermione waited for a moment before lifting the hand Harry was holding, raising it up between them and then slipping off the ring Voldemort had given him for his birthday in a smooth movement that he barely felt, a left-over talent from her prestidigitation days.

"Hermione!" Harry whispered in alarm, his eyes darting from side to side, suddenly paranoid that Voldemort would appear and see his bare hand. "What the hell? I am not meeting him without that!" He didn't want to imagine Voldemort's anger if he thought Harry had spurned his gift.

"I know," Hermione said, voice low and her eyes narrowing in Tom's direction. "Turning up without the ring wouldn't be a good idea."

"So why the hell did you just take it off?" he demanded and Hermione's mouth twisted into a darkly amused smile.

"Because walking in with a fake ring would be even worse."

"What do you mean a fake ring?" He hissed in alarm and Hermione's hand disappeared into a slit in the side of her dress hidden by the layers of the skirts and reemerged holding a familiar ring, identical to the one she'd just taken off him. Harry's throat suddenly felt very dry. "Why did you make a fake version of the ring for me to wear?" He asked very quietly so that Fleur didn't overhear him. Hermione's eyes flicked over to Tom, her face uneasy, and Harry switched his focus to the other boy. "Why?" He repeated, his eyes narrowing dangerously at the older boy who remained stubbornly quiet, face expressionless to the point it may as well have been carved from marble.

It was Hermione who answered him in the end. "It's a long story." She said, "and this isn't the time or place to go into it. But wearing the ring for long periods of time wasn't... good for you. I didn't want to put you in an awkward position, so I made a fake. Tom figured it out."

"Wasn't good?" Harry repeated, feeling something cold and heavy settle in his stomach as he turned hurt eyes on Tom. "Did you know it would do whatever it was that wasn't good when he gave it to me?"

"It wouldn't have hurt you," Tom said stiffly, not quite meeting Harry's eyes. "And short bursts of exposure, like for this evening, will have little to no effect at all."

"Little effect? What sort of effects are we even talking about here?" Harry demanded, blinking back angry, hurt moisture from his eyes.

"We don't have time for this," Hermione cut in apologetically, "you can yell afterwards, right now he is waiting. Here," she was still holding his hand and she tightened her grip so he couldn't yank
his hand away as she slid the ring on in a swift movement.

It felt... different to the one he'd been wearing before. Heavier, but not physically so. It was an oddly familiar whisper against his senses; the inexplicable but undeniable familiarity accompanied by a sensation not unlike that of a cloak of weighted shadows settling over him in some parody of an embrace. "What the fuck?" he couldn't help but ask, looking up at Tom and Hermione in alarm.

"I believe it... likes you," Tom answered, face suddenly tight as he glared down at the ring. Harry turned his gaze back to it too, oddly fascinated and drawn in a way he couldn't quite explain but remembered now from when Voldemort had first given the ring to him. He wondered at which point he'd stopped feeling that draw, but couldn't quite place a time.

"It likes me?" He repeated cautiously, "as in, it's sentient?"

"No," Tom instantly rejected, shaking his head. "It's not sentient, it's magic. Certain pieces of magic can attune themselves more strongly to a witch or wizard and the magic on the ring appears to have chosen you."

"Huh," Harry said, still staring at the ring. "What--"

"Later," Hermione interrupted him again, though her tone had softened somewhat. "You can ask your questions later-- right now we have an... appointment that we need to keep."

Harry let Hermione tug him after her, Fleur following close beside them again, as Tom started to once more lead the way to his counter-part. His mind was spinning and he was moving in a haze, of sorts, one of confusion and betrayal and fascination, until the prickle of Voldemort's magic yanked him from his head and to the present.

Waiting in one of the anterooms that branched off from the main ballroom, the private chambers designed for the discretion of attendees to events should privacy be required in order to discuss some important matter or another, Voldemort cut a handsome, intimidating figure. Harry easily noticed the subtle way Fleur went very still at the sight of the Dark Lord in his 'Thaddeus' disguise, despite her speed at hiding her response-- probably because he'd reacted in a nearly identical manner.

"Harry, Hermione, Tom," Voldemort greeted them smoothly.

"Uncle," Hermione returned the polite greeting while Tom dipped his head sharply in acknowledgement and Harry tried to smile.

"Did you have a good Yule?" He asked, injecting cheer into his voice. He could feel Hermione's hand tighten around his to the point of pain and was careful not to wince.

"I did indeed." Voldemort said, brief amusement visible on his handsome face. "Thank you for inquiring." The amusement disappeared from his face as swiftly and suddenly as it had appeared, leaving behind the bland mask of politeness he was accustomed to seeing. "Harry, Hermione," the Dark Lord said, addressing them both. "Tomorrow Tom will escort you to the location where you spent the summer holidays as there are several things we need to discuss but a meeting with my old friends is being arranged for tonight, so you will need to leave Malfoy Manor by no later then a quarter to twelve. Understood?"

Harry nodded wordlessly. Hermione speaking a quiet agreement beside him, and Voldemort nodded. "You may leave." He told them, and Harry was very confused for a moment about why the Dark Lord had ordered them to be here only to tell them they'd have to leave the Gala before
midnight, but his confusion resolved itself when Voldemort's eyes turned to focus on Fleur. "Not you, Miss Delacour." He said, a far-too pleasant smile appearing on his face. "We have much to discuss, dear. In private." Voldemort's words had a clear meaning but Harry stayed frozen in place, reluctant and afraid to leave Fleur alone with the Dark Lord. Voldemort let out a put-upon sigh. "I'm not going to hurt her." He said, exasperated, "now get out before I make you."

There was no room for leniency in his words this time and, not seeing an option as he didn't want to make an issue of it, Harry gave Fleur a weak smile before allowing Hermione to lead the way in silent exit. Her face had smoothed over and turned blank, but Harry knew just how affected she really was by leaving Fleur too– she was still holding onto his hand, after all, and he could feel the bones in it grinding together as she kept tightening her grip in her anxiety.

Exiting the anteroom and stepping back into the main ballroom, Harry turned to Tom, opening his mouth to demand to know what Voldemort wanted with Fleur and then start demanding answers about the whole ring thing, when Draco's sudden appearance put halt to all of that.

"Oh thank Merlin you're here," the blond exclaimed, looking immensely relieved as he practically skidded to a halt in front of them. "I hope you've written a will because I think Snape might actually kill you." He added, after a handful of confused seconds where Harry and Hermione both stared at their uncharacteristically flustered-looking friend.

"Oh shit." Hermione said, her eyes widening.

"What did we do?" Harry immediately started panicking.

"Besides apparently tell him you were staying here?" Hissed Draco

"In our defence, we thought we were when he asked," pointed out Hermione and Draco glared at her.

"Feel free to tell him that!" He snapped. "He's been trying to get into contact with you both since the day we took the express home! Come on, if he realises you're here and I haven't taken you straight to him he'll kill me too!"

"Live hard, die young, leave a pretty corpse." Hermione sighed. "Fine. Lead the way Draco, let's go find out what we've done."

"What you've done this time." Draco corrected.

"Fine, what we've done this time."

"We're not that bad." Harry protested.

"Yes you are," Draco said darkly.

Tom flicked his fingers in a mocking wave, looking far too amused as Draco started to drag them off. Harry, after shooting a glare over his shoulder at the older boy, frantically ran through everything he and Hermione had been doing leading up to the end of term. He couldn't think of anything that had happened recently that could have caused Snape to want to see them so urgently, but there was a lot of other crap that their head of house could have uncovered that had gone down over their past three and a bit years at Hogwarts.

Really, when Harry thought about it the possibilities seemed endless— endless and terrifying.

It was almost a relief to arrive at Lucius's study— almost— but his stomach still crawled with anxiety
as Draco knocked.

"Enter," Snape ordered in his deep baritone and Draco mouthed 'you're on your own' before turning and practically fleeing back to the ballroom. Harry didn't blame the blond as he stepped inside, Hermione next to him, and came face to face with his head of house and the dangerously smooth expression that the man was wearing.

"Mister Potter, Miss Granger," Snape said in a silky voice that was a warning sign in and of itself and had Harry swallowing nervously and trying not to fidget in place. "If either of you had anything to do with this," he slammed a copy of the Daily Prophet down on Lucius's desk, the headline on the front page screaming 'HOW SAFE IS HOGWARTS? STUDENT FOUND HALF-DEAD ON SCHOOL GROUNDS!', in an abrupt move that had Harry flinch and Hermione's hands twitch presumably for a weapon, "I will kill you." Snape finished with a pleasant smile.

"I am being one hundred percent honest when I say I genuinely have no idea what this is about," Hermione said, actually looking shocked that she didn't. Harry was too.

"As opposed to when you're being less then one hundred percent honest about where you're staying over the holidays?" Snape asked pointedly.

"Yes, as opposed to that." Hermione agreed readily.

"I really did think we would be staying with Draco, sir," Harry said miserably, already predicting a never-ending row of detentions in his future.

"Obviously," Snape said through gritted teeth, "you are not.

"Weasley?" Hermione asked suddenly and Harry realised she'd been reading the newspaper article on Lucius's desk. "Weasley's the one that was found half dead? How utterly frustrating. Did they get interrupted midway through?"

"Miss Granger, this is no joking matter!" Snape snapped.

"I know," Hermione replied calmly, "and that's precisely why it's so frustrating. If I'm going to have to suffer through all the fuss of being blamed for this, then the least the actual culprit could have done was finish the job. Weasley isn't even dead and now Dumbledore's going to be unbearable."

"So you really didn't attack him?" Snape asked, looking honestly relieved by that fact.

"I'd swear it under veritesserum if you had any," Hermione told him firmly. "I'm not lying, Professor, and I've got an alibi. Well, I've got an alibi of sorts, anyway-- I'll be more then happy to give the investigators a copy of my memories during the time which Weasley was attacked. Though if the article is correct in that Moody is the one investigating then I'm afraid I'll have to insist that the Ministry has a female Auror view them."

"Dare I ask why?" Snape asked, already looking like he was dreading the answer.

"Because during that specific time period my boyfriend was performing oral sex on me, sir." Hermione said with a perfectly straight face. "We then went on to have some very satisfying sexual intercourse."

Harry made a sound like he was dying. "Oh god, you're talking about the night of the Yule Ball," he whimpered into his hands, not able to look Snape in the eye. "Oh god," he repeated, remembering just exactly what they'd gotten up to that night after Hermione had talked him down
from his mortification at being caught by Snape practically with his pants down. It hadn't taken her that long to convince him when he'd seen the lingerie she was wearing under the dress and then they'd-- "Oh god," he repeated a third time, looking up to give Hermione a horrified look, "that was the night you conjured the--"

"Yes, and then we tried that new thing I'd read about in--"

"Wait, does that mean they're going to see when I--"

"Oh believe me, Harry, my memory of that is very vivid, almost as vivid as after that when we--"

"Enough!" Snape interrupted them. Harry turned to see his Professor literally massaging his temples, a pained expression on his face. "Unless it involved Weasley then I don't want to know what you did that night. Emphatically so, in fact. Not letting Moody be the one to view the memories is a good play, even better considering the fact you have a plausible reason to refuse him that we will not ever be discussing. We need to get as many unbiased people involved in this investigation as possible. Hermione," Snape paused, looking at his best friend with grave eyes and Harry swallowed, sensing the seriousness of the moment as he addressed Hermione by her first name for the first time that evening. "Dumbledore and Moody will try to pin this on you. I need you to be completely honest with me about everything that happened that night if we want to keep you from being expelled at best and sent to Azkaban at worst."

"Professor, I swear I did not do this," Hermione said, looking him straight in the eye, "I'll swear it on my magic if I have to but I did not do this."

"I believe you," Snape said, his face suddenly looking very tired. "Now we just have to make sure everyone else does too."

"Come on, we need to find Neville," Hermione muttered as they left Lucius's study nearly an hour later.

"What? Why do we need to find Nev?" Harry asked bewildered, letting her drag him along. She gave him a frustrated look.

"Have you forgotten just who it was that broke his thumb on Weasley's face the night of the Yule Ball?" She snapped and Harry felt the blood drain from his face as realisation settled over him like ice.

"Oh god," he whispered and she nodded grimly.

"Exactly."

"Oh my god!" he repeated, panicked. "What do we do?"

"If we want to make sure Neville doesn't get expelled and sent to Azkaban? Two things," Hermione said grimly, eyes hard and expression stony. "We need to get Neville to keep his mouth shut and we need to make sure Ron Weasley never wakes up."

"Piece of cake then," he said, faintly.

"Nobody will be looking in Neville's direction, Harry, as long as he doesn't give them any reason to," Hermione said firmly, "and we need to make sure Weasley doesn't give them a reason to either by regaining consciousness."
"So while you were telling Snape that you didn't attack Weasley, you were planning how you're actually about to kill him?" Harry asked weakly.

"Well, I wasn't planning on doing it myself for obvious reasons, but yes." Hermione said, pausing slightly. "I suppose I can see the irony the situation."

"The situation being that we're planning how to murder one of our classmates!" Harry hissed.

"Well you can choose, then, Harry," Hermione snapped, "it's Neville or Weasley and I don't particularly care either way, but I rather thought you'd like to keep Neville around!"

"I– of course I'd pick Neville!" Harry protested.

"Then don't you judge me for coming to the logical conclusion of what will have to happen if we want to keep Neville from being charged with attempted murder!" Hermione hissed. "You don't get to be all self-righteous one moment and then expect me to solve all your problems the next!"

"I'm sorry," Harry said quietly, a sinking feeling in his stomach. Hermione's face was flushed with anger and she was glaring fiercely at him.

"You can be such a hypocrite sometimes, Harry," she said, her voice low and furious, "you judge Tom and I for what we do, but don't forget you're a murderer too. How many people have you killed? Do you even remember the number?"

Harry immediately wrenched his arm from hers, taking two big steps back and away from her.

"Don't talk about that!" He snarled.

"Well I remember the number. Do you want to hear it?" She snarled right back, "I can give you dates too, starting with June 6th, 1994; the day that you murdered Black!"

"Shut up!" He shouted at her furiously. "Shut up!"

"What is going on out here?" Snape demanded, storming out of Lucius's study. Harry realised he was panting with rage as he glared at Hermione who was glaring right back at him.

"Nothing Professor," she spat, "We were just discussing morality and hypocrisy. I'm going to find Tom; you go do what you like, Harry, but don't come begging for me to fix everything– whatever happens, whatever you decide, it'll all be all on you this time. No more hiding behind Tom and I, thinking you're so much better then us because your hands are clean– you're just as filthy as the rest of us and it's time you realise that!" Hermione gave him one last furious, contemptuous look before storming away.

"What," Snape said, in a very low voice, "in Salazar's name happened in the five minutes between you both leaving the study and now?"

"We had a difference of opinion," Harry said, furiously. Snape pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Astonishingly enough, that much was very obvious." He said, voice strained. "Care to extrapolate?"

Harry shook his head. "I can't."

"Of course not." Snape muttered. "Tell me, is this your first significant argument since you became... romantically involved?"
"Um," Harry said, his anger receding slightly as he thought back. "Yeah, I think so."

"So now I'm reduced to marriage counsellor." Snape said sourly. "Wonderful. Let me pass on some advice, Mr. Potter." Harry winced at the reversal back to his surname. By now he knew that that was a sign of how deeply annoyed Snape was.

"Advice, sir?" He asked, tentatively.

"I have known Lucius and Narcissa for many years now," Snape said stiffly, "and if there is one thing I have learned from observing their relationship, it's that in an argument Narcissa is usually right. My advice to you is that you think very carefully about what Miss Granger said once you have a clear head. Odds are that you'll find yourself having to figure out a way to apologise. Lucius usually turns to jewellery, but I have a feeling Miss Granger would prefer something different."

"Like sex?" Harry asked without thinking then immediately went red. Snape sighed heavily.

"Books, Mr. Potter." He said, a long-suffering expression on his face, "I was talking about books."

"Right," Harry mumbled, wishing the earth would just open up and swallow him whole.

"Teenagers," muttered Snape, shaking his head. "Only one thing on their minds."

"We also think a lot about Quidditch, Sir." Harry said before he could stop himself and Snape gave him a truly withering look, not even deigning to respond before striding off in the direction of the ballroom.

Harry sighed, slumping back against one of the walls and letting himself slide down it so he was sitting on the gleaming marble floor. It was cold and hard and Harry tucked up his legs so he could fold his arms over his knees and rest his chin on them. Without the anger that had exploded so suddenly and surprisingly out of him, he was able to think more clearly about the argument he'd just had. Snape, he thought forlornly, was probably right.

He was a hypocrite, judging Tom and Hermione for their lack of a moral compass when the fact he had a moral compass but chose to ignore it made him worse then them in a way. Hermione was right– he had blood on his hands too. Those people he'd killed in Riddle Manor were already half dead and finishing them off had been a mercy that most of them had actually thanked him for– the ones still conscious or able to talk, that is. Sirius Black, though, he had no real excuse for; he'd killed Black because he'd valued what the man's death could bring him more then he'd valued Black's life.

"Fuck." Harry said miserably. He felt like the world's biggest arse and wanted nothing more then to go hug Hermione but Snape was right. He needed some sort of gesture, to show her he was really sorry.

How difficult would it be to get to St Mungo's from here?

Finding Hermione was easier then Harry thought it would be. All he'd had to do was give Voldemort a pleading look when he returned to the ballroom and the Dark Lord had gestured in the direction where Tom was– Voldemort and Tom were always aware of each other's presence.

Both Tom and Hermione were standing near the room where guests hung up their cloaks and Hermione still looked furious. Harry gave her a meek look when she fixed that furious look on him, knowing he probably deserved it. "You were right," he said miserably, "I'm an arse. And a
"Yes you fucking are," she snapped while Tom leaned against the wall, apparently content to just watch them argue because he was also an arse.

"I'm sorry," Harry said, earnestly. "Really, I am. I didn't mean to lose my temper, it was just... a hard truth to come to terms with."

"Get over here," Hermione ordered, seizing a handful of the front of his robes as soon as he was in arm's reach. She dragged him into the cloak room, Tom following behind, and shoved him down so he was on his knees then gave him a sharp push that knocked him onto his back. She dropped down so she was straddling him, Harry gasping as she didn't try to soften her landing and the air was knocked out of him. Her movements were hard and angry as she pulled his pants and boxers down over his hips and flipped up her skirts. Harry had a moment to think that he’d been right earlier with Snape after all, and then she was jerking him with fast, rough movements.

Tom crouched down beside them and Harry hissed in pain as the older boy used his hair to pull his head up high enough that he could lean over to kiss him, hot and demanding, but he still kissed him back, opening his mouth to the wet slide of tongue that was hard and dirty and greedy.

Hermione didn't seem inclined to be patient, to take her time, and sooner than Harry thought was sensible she was sinking down into him. At the same time she leaned forward to catch the stretch of his neck bared to her by Tom's grip on his hair in a sharp bite. When she pulled back, her mouth was red and wet and when she licked her teeth and lips, his blood stained almost the same shade as her lipstick.

"F–fuck," Harry gasped, partly at the sharp burst of pain and partly at the sensations that accompanied the tight heat of Hermione squeezing around him. Hermione didn't give either of them time to adjust before she was rising her hips up again and starting up a punishing pace.

It was good, really good, but it hurt slightly– too much friction. And despite the way he was buried inside Hermione, it felt more like he was the one being fucked. The bite to the neck was only the beginning too, with Hermione sliding her hands under the sleeves of his blazer and shirt to score lines of nail marks down his forearms and causing tiny, piercing shocks to snap across his skin as she bit her way along his collarbone, not drawing blood but leaving behind small welts. She had trapped his hands against the ground and was gripping his wrists in a tight vice of fingers that caused a sharp grind of wrist bones when she moved up and down on him and it hurt, it hurt; it was fast and violent and far more painful then what he'd typically go for, but Hermione was so gloriously fierce and beautiful and all consuming that Harry didn't even care.

When Hermione leaned in close, her red shining lips at his ear, and ordered, "Bite my shoulder as hard as you can," Harry obeyed, setting his teeth to her trapezius and doing exactly as instructed and Hermione let out a harsh cry and came immediately, Harry following straight after.

They lay there panting for several moments before Hermione stood up and Harry managed to bully his limbs into doing the same, though his legs threatened to collapse out from under him as he did so. "Does this mean we're good?" He asked, his voice sounding punch-drunk. Hermione leaned forward and bit his neck in response, the same place as before, causing a sudden, startling lance of sharp, cutting pain. He hissed, wincing, but the pain only took a moment to turn to a steady burn. "Ow," he complained when she pulled back and smiled, her mouth wet and red.

"Now we're good," she said, kissing him again but gentle this time. Harry could taste the sweet-copper tang of his blood as she slid her tongue in his mouth but it wasn't a bad sort of flavour. Tom made a growling sound and Harry glanced over and realised just how aroused the older boy was,
his pupils so dilated they looked almost black with only a thin ring of crimson visible. "I think you should do this one, Harry," Hermione said suddenly, her voice sweet and expression mischievous, and Harry looked at Tom nervously but stepped forwards into the older boy's space anyway.

"Fuck," muttered Tom, expression hungry and predatory as he curled his hand in Harry's hair and yanked him into a greedy kiss before pulling back. With his hand still in Harry's hair, Harry knew instinctively what Tom wanted him to do. He took a deep, shaky breath as he lowered himself to his knees and his hands were trembling slightly as he unlaced the front of Tom's dress-robes. He then froze for a moment, just staring at Tom's exposed hardness. He knew that if he said he wasn't ready neither Tom or Hermione would push, but Harry thought maybe, just maybe, he was ready. Steeling up his courage, Harry leaned forward took Tom into his mouth.

It was not neat. It was messy, with spit and slime dripping down his face as he tried to make up for his inexperience with enthusiasm. Tom felt impossibly huge in his mouth and tasted salty and bitter. When the hand in his hair suddenly forced him to take more down his throat then he was ready for, Harry gagged, taken by surprise by the action and stopped sucking, pulling away so he could glare up at Tom. "Do that again and you can get yourself off," he snapped before returning to the task at hand. Well, the task at mouth.

It felt awkward and strange and like he was trying to fit something where it just didn't fit, but he eventually got a sort of rhythm going. Remembering how good it felt when Hermione swallowed his whole length, once he was a bit more comfortable with the new activity Harry tried curiously to do the same. He managed to get part of Tom's erection down before his throat constricted and he gagged. He tried a few more times to relax and swallow but didn't manage to get very far and the excess gagging caused more saliva to soak his chin, dripping down in strands. The constriction of his throat from his efforts seemed to be enough, however, and Tom's hand tightened in his hair, tugging sharply and causing sharp flicks of pain in his scalp. "I'm about to come," he warned and Harry considered pulling back but he wasn't quick enough to make a decision before Tom was spilling warm and salty in his mouth and down his throat. Harry immediately started choking and pulled off Tom so he could gag and cough for air.

"I did warn you," Tom said amused, tucking himself away before kneeling down to cup Harry's face in his hands as he wheezed for breath. "You've got come on your face," he said, sounding immensely satisfied by the fact. To Harry's surprise, the older boy then leaned forwards and licked it off before pressing their mouths together in a surprisingly slow, gentle kiss. Harry's mouth felt soft and swollen from his previous activities and Tom looked far too smug when he pulled back.

"You're such an arse." He muttered as the older boy helped him stagger back to his feet. He used the expensive sleeve of his blazer to wipe across his chin and prodded the silk collar of his shirt, pulling a face when he realised just how soaked in saliva it was. "Urgh," he groaned. "Great."

"Don't worry," Hermione said, voice laced with amusement as she fiddled with one of her hair combs, releasing a tumble of curls to cover up the hickey on her shoulder that would match Harry's teeth perfectly, "that was fairly impressive for your first try and you'll get better at it."

"Because I was worrying about that so much." Harry said sarcastically, though he actually did feel a bit relieved he hadn't just completely embarrassed himself.

"Here," Tom said, pulling out his wand and flicking it in Harry's direction. He felt his robes warm briefly and was relieved to feel the wet feeling around his neck disappear.

"Thanks." He said before turning to Hermione and meeting her eyes. "I choose Neville." He told her firmly and after a long moment she nodded.
"Alright," she said, "we'd better go find him. And then we have a murder to plan."

"Let's hope Fleur's having more luck then we are." Harry offered up weakly and Hermione grimaced.

"I'm still trying not to think about that."

Chapter End Notes

For anyone who is interested, the bondage tie used is called a "crab tie"—not a very sexy name, I know. It's a tie used in bondage to bind a person's wrists to their ankles and commonly adds rope bindings at the level of knees and elbows as well to keep the lower arms parallel to the lower legs. It's a surprisingly restrictive and confining tie when done properly and looks very elegant.
CHAPTER LIV:

_Fleur's POV:_

Standing alone before the handsome wizard in expensive robes, Hermione, Harry and the boy, Tom, having all filed out of the antechamber, Fleur felt... uneasy. Harry and Hermione's reluctance to leave her alone with Thaddeus Dagworth certainly did nothing to help that.

It took her a moment to pinpoint the source of her unease—Dagworth's emotions were _wrong_; they felt muted and shallow to her senses, and it made Fleur swallow nervously.

Tonks had been similar; the older witch's emotions burned fast and shallow, lacking any true depth bar from predatory lust. Dagworth had echoes of that same shallowness but he felt more removed then anything, both from his emotions and, it became apparent, in his regard to the other people in the manor— a pair of ball attendees walked close enough by the anteroom they were in that she could hear their chatting and Fleur had to hold back her shiver at the automatic, dismissive way Dagworth regarded them as nothing but insects.

Emotions didn't lie and his spoke of a chilling disassociation from the passing attendees— and from her— as fellow human beings even, and Fleur had the sinking realisation that Dagworth was likely too far removed from humanity to even comprehend human morals. She suddenly understood Hermione's warming and just why the younger girl had seemed so sure it would come down to wand against wand one day when they'd been discussing Fleur allying with Dagworth— Dagworth was the sort of man who wouldn't be satisfied with just leading the government of Wizarding Britain; he would want to rule it, to change and shape it to his image until eventually Britain alone wouldn't be enough.

Men like this, they didn't come out of nowhere. "'Oo are you?" Fleur whispered before she could stop herself.

A brief flicker of genuine amusement danced on the edges of her senses before fading but the older wizard's face could have been carved from marble, his expression not so much as twitching. "I should have realised Hermione would never bring me someone boring," 'Dagworth' mused, the smooth, light tone of his voice a jarring juxtaposition to the sheer cold blankness she was aware lay underneath his charming surface. Dark eyes fixed on hers and Fleur had to choke back the instinctual wave of fear that rose up inside her as the glamour he must have been wearing faded away, revealing bold red irises and slit pupils. "I am Lord Voldemort." He told her, his mouth stretching into a brief, terrible smile, and her legs felt like they'd turned to water. "I assume you have heard of me." He added, amusement flickering momentarily again before vanishing.

It took every ounce of strength she had to stay upright, though she still dipped in a deep curtsy. "M-My Lord," she whispered, wondering just how ghastly pale her face looked. She was grateful for how the long skirt of her gown hid her shaking knees as he looked down at her, though there was nothing she could do to hide the tremble in her hands from his cold, dispassionate stare.

"Part Four: The Goblet of Fire - Chapter LIV"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
It didn't matter that Lord Voldemort was a British bogeyman— even in France people knew enough of the man known as the Darkest wizard in history that Fleur knew to be very, very afraid.

She'd thought he was dead, though. There were whispers, of course, but there were always whispers; Fleur had disregarded them as empty rumours, desperate or devoted men and women trying to stir up fear or discord and using Voldemort's name to do so.

She had been so very wrong, though. And they had been right. There was no doubt in her mind that the wizard standing before her was the Dark Lord known as Voldemort.

"I want you to arrange a meeting for me," Voldemort said, and his voice had changed slightly as the glamour had dropped— it was silkier, more sibilant; the 's' sounds slightly elongated. "When Hermione wrote to... explain the situation, she said you created an organisation of veela and part-veela who were willing to actively do something about their dissatisfaction with the treatment of your kind."

"Y-yes, of course," she immediately agreed to his 'request', proud her voice only trembled slightly. She could hear her grand-mère's voice in her ear lecturing her— don't blink, Fleur. Don't fuss with your hands. Keep your back straight. Look them in the eyes. Always use your strengths— beauty, brains and birth; you have all of it, granddaughter, and you will use it to change the world.

Adèle Turenne had taught her what she needed to be in life— attentive, compliant, charismatic, confident, reliable, respectful and committed— and Fleur had always strove to do everything in her power to embody that young woman grand-mère was training her to be, to put on the perfect display required of her. She refused to let her grand-mère down now, not when they were so close to achieving what they needed, because she knew that if there was anyone who could bully the rest of the wizarding world into treating veela and part-veela as they deserved to be treated, it was Voldemort.

And so Fleur straightened her spine and forced her mouth to curve into the smile grand-mère had taught her, all sugar-sweet seduction with just a hint of teeth— a smile can be just as dangerous as a wand and you are beautiful when you smile, granddaughter.

"May I 'ave permission to speak, my Lord?" She asked, and this time her voice did not shake. Voldemort inclined his head in an affirmative and she took another deep breath before speaking. "You were always known for your focus on blood status, my Lord," she said softly. "Magical beings 'ave never been a priority of yours— at least not zat my research of Britain's 'istory regarding creature and being rights 'as shown."

"It's true that creature and being rights matter very little to me," Voldemort agreed easily enough, and Fleur felt her heart begin to sink only for the Dark Lord to continue talking. "But I don't need a personal stake in the issue to be able to have an interest in the welfare of magical beings and magical creatures in general. And when politicians come into power, both in the muggle and magical worlds, they make many promises about causes they aren't interested or have a stake in, for the sake of gaining votes— and if they're voted in then they fulfil those promises. If the veela pledge their alliance to me and my cause, then I will uphold the promises I make in return."

Fleur was quiet for a moment as she took that in. There was no fault in his words and the sinking feeling had been replaced with a nervous sort of excitement. Still— the thought of fighting the British government to help Lord Voldemort gain power was not one that appealed to her. A war was not something she was interested in getting involved in. "I 'ave anozzer question," she said carefully. "And may zink eet eez stupide, but I feel zat I must ask."

"Then ask." Voldemort ordered. "Stupid questions are the ones that in their stupidity people fail to
"I have little time or patience for stupid people."

"Eef you are alive, zen why are you not taking over zee Ministry by force?" she asked, fighting to the urge to flinch, afraid that he would find her question to not be in her place, yet she had to know if he planned for a civil war in their future.

Voldemort did not curse her, though, and he answered her question. "Bloodshed is not an integral aspect of all political manoeuvring," he said, his briefly stirring emotions ones of dark amusement. "Though it certainly is one of the more enjoyable parts."

"Ah," Fleur said, feeling a touch faint. She wasn't certain if he was making a joke or not, nor she was she quite sure which concept was more terrifying. "I weell arrange zee meeting wiz delegates from zee different branches of zee Les Lys," she told him, after taking a hasty handful of seconds to pull herself back together. "I return to 'Ogwarts in three days. Zee day before my return eez zee soonest I believe I weell be able to arrange eet."

"Two days from now will be acceptable," Voldemort said with a sharp nod, "if you owl Hermione and Harry with the details, they will be able to contact me. And I feel it is needless for me to warn you of the necessity of keeping my identity a secret– even from your organisation." He said with an all too pleasant smile. Fleur couldn't help her shiver as she hurriedly nodded.

"O-Of course, my Lord," she promised.

"l am being very generous and I am not a generous man, Miss Delacour," Voldemort said quietly. "An arrangement between your people and mine could prove very beneficial to us both. If you betray me, however, then I will kill every living member of your family down to third cousins and pets, as well as every last one of your 'Lilies'– and I will make each death last a lifetime, starting with handing that precious little sister of yours over to some of my more... unhinged Death Eaters to enjoy. Do we have an understanding?"

Fleur was certain her face was a ghastly white again, or maybe it was green because she thought she might actually be sick, and unable to find her voice to answer, she nodded wordlessly instead. Voldemort smiled again, and it was one of the most terrifying things she'd ever seen.

"Have a good evening, Miss Delacour," he bade her before exiting the antechamber. As soon as the thin door gently thudded shut behind him Fleur half collapsed against the wall, pressing her hands to her chest, over her tightening lungs. She could feel the mad galloping of her heart under her palms and dug her nails into the skin as she gasped for the oxygen that was attempting to evade her.

Adrenaline and fear had her entire body shaking violently as she steadied her breathing the best she could and Fleur gave up on standing, instead sinking down to the floor and ignoring the thought of the damage she could be doing to her expensive dress as she pulled her knees to her chest.

The reality of just who it was she was making a deal with crashed over her with the strength of a bludger and Fleur's head spun dizzily with it even as a bubble of hysteria escaped her lips in a giggle. It was unbelievable and overwhelming and terrifying, but she grounded herself in one simple fact– she didn't regret it.

She didn't regret what she was and she didn't regret the choices she'd made in her life, including the alliance she'd just forged, not that it would matter if she did. Fleur knew she was what she was, and she knew that even if she wanted to there was no going back. Not from this point.

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Remus's POV:

It was easy to slip unseen into the muggle police station, hidden from the detection of the constables within it by both a disillusionment charm and the relative emptiness of the building due to the hour of the evening. Remus knew he was late to the Malfoy's Gala—hours late, in fact—but the newspaper article currently folded in the pocket of his robes, the article that he had found just before his shift at the library ended, had shredded his plans for the evening to ribbons. In the face of what he'd just learned, the Gala, even if it had been his chance to see Harry, was the last thing on his mind.

**HERO OR VILLAIN?**

*Article written by J. Ruby*

It has been four days since the body of seven-year-old Iris Clancy was found beside that of her killer, forty-nine-year-old Mitchem Cortland, and in those four days London has been set abuzz by the old debate on vigilante justice.

Vigilantism is illegal to prevent people from taking the law into their own hands and getting vengeance disproportionally or against innocent people. But is there disproportionate vengeance when a pre-schooled aged child has been raped and murdered?

'It's not our position to judge people and take the laws into our own hands,' argues Chief Inspector John Gust, 'that is what the justice system is for'. Iris's foster parents, now under investigation for abuse following the autopsy of the seven-year-old runaway, declined to comment but Iris's aunt responded to Gust by saying, 'I know God is the only judge we have, but that don't mean I ain't glad someone took it upon themselves to set up Cortland's appointment with Him ahead of schedule!'

And take it upon themselves they certainly did, because it's clear that Cortland's death was no accident—his body was found with a significant amount of pre- and post-mortem damage, including genital mutilation, and the coroner has confirmed that the injury that killed the man was a switchblade forced through his eye-socket. A grisly end, but considering his semen was found inside a battered Iris, little sympathy has been shown to him and Londoners are demanding why the police are trying to solve his murder in the first place.

And what sort of progress are they having? The answer to that is the troubling kind, because evidence found at and around the crime scene suggest it wasn't a random act of vigilantism that ended Cortland's life, but rather his killer was quite possibly another of his victims. Why do they think this? Because footage found by the police indicates our hero/villain is quite likely a child themselves, a young girl barely older then Iris when she enacted her illegal 'justice'.

Was it really illegal, though? Our laws don't adequately lay out the basis for the use of deadly force against rapists but the current language that justifies the use of deadly force is 'a reasonable anticipation of imminent death or great bodily harm'. As such, I think it's pretty easy to come up with many scenarios in which a rape involves the reasonable anticipation of great bodily harm and would therefore justify the use of deadly force against the attacker.

Personally, I think the real question here is that of proportionality—was excessive force used in this case? I'm certain we can all agree that yes, it was, but Cortland's killer likely just witnessed the rape and murder of a seven-year-old child and chances were they believed they were next— is it surprising that this sort of grievous psychological trauma led to excessive force being used? Especially when police suspect the defender in question was also a child barely older then Iris
herself, quite possibly one who knew Iris well and was friends with her?

In the end, it's up to an individual to reasonably decide where that line is between self defends and excessive force, and it's also important to remember that that 'reasonableness' is usually decided by a judge or jury after the fact, but at the same time don't forget that old saying that it's 'better to be judged by twelve than to be carried by six'.

I don't regard vigilantism as morally wrong. However, I do think that it's unwise and counterproductive in terms of the goal of building a peaceful free society. We created, and I willingly abide by, a system of laws to try and move away from the original human system of kin, clan and feud. Experience has shown that people, including me, make mistakes, have hasty and poor judgement, and lack the ability to do the extensive analysis of criminal events necessary to actually arrive at the truth. So society discourages vigilantism to limit the errors and feuds that would otherwise develop. I concur with and abide by such efforts.

I don't think Cortland's killer is a hero or a villain– I think they're a survivor. And child or not, because of this I truly doubt they will be found. But if they are, if I serve on the jury I know exactly what my vote would be.

Do you?

At first the article had been just another of the hundreds of articles Remus had read through while investigating murders that had taken place over the last five years in England. He'd stumbled onto the name 'Iris Clancy' earlier that same day and her age and the location her body had been found in had been promising– 'Hero or Villain' had been the first article he'd found with a picture of Iris, after several hours of hunting, but it had also turned out to contain so much more.

Remus had wondered why Severus had been so reluctant to have him look into Iris's identity, and now he knew-- "the coroner has confirmed that the injury that killed the man was a switchblade forced through his eye-socket" the author, J. Ruby, had reported. Last year Severus had told him how "Granger and Harry got trapped in an empty classroom with a twelve foot mountain troll. She used a switchblade to skewer its brain... as it turned out, she carried several blades upon her person– a relic from her life on the streets, I imagine. Being a homeless is not safe for a child... She used one of those blades to pierce one of a troll's only vulnerabilities."

Remus knew far better then to believe in coincidences. Two of Hermione's 'enemies' had been killed by switchblades stabbed through their eye-sockets, and if Hermione had been able to take down a twelve-foot mountain troll as a twelve-year-old, then as a-- nine-year-old? Yes, she would have been nine– as a nine-year-old, he had faith in her ability to take down an adult muggle.

He shuddered, thinking back to the article detailing the 'damage' to Cortland's body– including the genital mutilation. And then he thought of Ruby commenting "evidence found at and around the crime scene suggest it wasn't a random act of vigilantism that ended Cortland's life, but rather his killer was quite possibly another of his victims" because the thought of little Hermione Granger being victimised by the man responsible for the child's corpse that her Boggart had turned into, the image of which haunted his nightmares still... It made him want to be sick. It made him think of the pale, haunted look on her sweet face after she faced the Boggart-Dementors, of the fit she'd had on his classroom floor when unexpectedly exposed to their effects, and of the dead-eyed expression on her face afterwards.

Remus's immediate thought had been to go straight to Dumbledore with what he'd found– he knew Dumbledore would expel Hermione immediately, would get her far away from Harry and possibly even start legal proceedings against her. But... but his instincts had held him back. His instincts and his knowledge that if he did such a thing, the relationships he was building with Harry and Severus...
would be irreparably destroyed.

And because he remembered Hermione putting herself between the Boggart-Dementor and Harry. He remembered Severus telling him about the twelve-foot mountain troll she had fought without a wand in her first year to protect Harry. He remembered the grief and terror on her face when Harry fell off his broom during that Quidditch Game, and how she'd practically drained herself dry using accidental– or wandless or a combination of the two, no one was quite sure– magic to slow his fall enough to save his life.

Whatever it was she'd done in her past, Remus knew, he just knew, that she would never hurt Harry, ever– he was sure that she'd die first.

Hermione Granger was not evil; he was sure of this. Was she a good person? Probably not, he could admit.

"I don't think Cortland's killer is a hero or a villain– I think they're a survivor."

'Survivor' was perhaps the best word he could think of to describe Hermione Granger. Because she was– she could be ruthless and fierce and protective and loyal, and above all else she would keep Harry alive in a world that had far too many people in it who wanted him dead. And Remus was selfish enough that for that alone, he could probably ignore the murder of Cortland.

And he was fond of her, damn it! He liked the acid-tongued, sharp-witted survivor that Hermione was. He liked how despite the fact she had no great personal fondness for him– he wasn't a dunderheaded moron, despite what Severus may think– because she knew Harry did like him, she'd supported him in all the ways that she could. She did the same with Hagrid, protecting the half-giant from himself in a way; her work with Draco Malfoy following the hippogriff attack being an example, having apparently convinced the blond not to try pressing charges, as well as her ruthlessly writing out lesson plans for Hagrid to follow and teaching him how to set and mark tests, essays and assignments. All that effort for someone she didn't like, just because Harry did like him.

How could Remus ever live with himself if he was responsible for taking that away from Harry?

But... but Cortland's murder was still just that; murder. And despite everything, it was something that struggled to sit right within him. Which was why he'd broken into the muggle police station responsible for the investigation into the Iris Clancy and Mitchem Cortland murders.

Finding the records room was simple, though Remus did feel guilty for the confundus charms he'd cast on the defenceless, unsuspecting muggle police constables.

Only, to Remus's shock, all the records were gone– not just misplaced, misfiled or withdrawn, they had been completely erased.

...of course, he realised with a soft groan; Severus had identified Iris Clancy over the summer holidays and there was no chance that his old classmate would have left evidence of Hermione's past 'wrongdoings' available for anyone to access. Remus's difficulty in initially identifying Iris was starting to make more sense too, if Severus had been as thorough in erasing all evidence of the crime as he suspected the man would have been.

A rough laugh escaped him and Remus shook his head wearily. He needed to speak with Severus, he decided. There was only a handful of days left of the Christmas– no, it was Yule now– holidays. Arranging to have a face-to-face meeting with the man after the school term began would be difficult, and Remus honestly didn't think he had the patience to wait that long. Except he was fairly certain that Severus spent all holidays but the summer ones living at Hogwarts anyway,
which meant he'd have to owl him to start arranging that meeting after all.

Except... except tonight was the Malfoy's Gala. It was late now, very late, and Remus had practically forgotten about the party by this point—investigating Iris and Cortland's murders and Hermione's involvement in order to make the massive choice he'd found himself faced with had taken priority— but he knew for a fact that Severus would be attending the Gala. It would be his chance to confront the man, to demand answers.

And if the answers weren't acceptable then despite everything, despite the fact he knew Harry could never forgive him and Severus would never speak to him again, Remus knew he would have no choice but to go to Albus with what he'd found.

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Tom's POV:

Tom wouldn't deny that listening to Harry talk about murder lit a fire in his veins that made him want to do wicked, wicked things to the younger boy. It didn't help that their previous activities had left him appearing so debauched; Harry's hair was damp and sticking to his forehead in long, dark strands and his face was flushed with bright spots of pink on his cheeks and the tip of his nose. He looked so sweet and submissive that the sight of him alone had Tom aching to push the boy down and fuck him so hard they'd both feel it the whole next day and left him wanting nothing more than to decorate that pale body however he liked, turning it black and blue and painting it with red.

It was immensely frustrating, to say the least. Tom wanted the younger boy, no he needed him; the brief tastes weren't enough, not anymore. He needed Harry under him, needed to leave him strung out and completely wrecked; bruised and damaged and marked. He craved his pain and his pleasure, his tears and his gratification, he wanted to fuck him so it hurt and ached and left Harry limping; wincing when he sat, crying out when he moved too quickly. He wanted everyone to know just how used he was; how Tom owned every single part of him.

He wanted to carve his name into Harry's skin the way Harry had somehow carved out a place for himself under Tom's skin, finding places to hide between his bones and inside his veins so that tearing him out now would be more than a little bloody for both of them.

Harry, however, had different plans entirely; the younger boy's attention was fully focused on finding Longbottom. It wasn't difficult to locate him either; the boy was lingering awkwardly one of side of the magnificent ballroom, his eyes anxiously scanning the crowd and visibly lighting up when he spotted their approach.

"Harry! Hermione!" he greeted them, and the relief was clear on his face. "Guess what? Gran got me a new wand!"

"She did? That's excellent!" Harry beamed at his friend. "She wasn't too mad?"

"No, Daphne was right— all the women she socialises with kept coming over to congratulate her on raising such a handsome, talented grandson." Longbottom said, blushing slightly. There was a bit of anger in his eyes too that Tom easily picked up on as the boy spoke of his grandmother, and a brief flash of resentment. Interesting. Workable.

Beneath his outward cheer, the boy was obviously under a great deal of stress. There were dark smudges under his eyes that were badly covered up and Longbottom seemed equal parts keyed up
and jittery and utterly exhausted. Tom doubted he'd slept much since finding out about the hospitalisation of the Weasley boy.

Tom's lips twitched slightly at that. He'd known about Ronald Weasley's transfer to St Mungo's almost immediately after it had happened— the original soul had 'feelers' everywhere and Tom had immediately seen the opportunity and had made sure to act accordingly, ensuring the Gryffindor boy remained in his coma as he started mapping out a plan.

He'd erroneously assumed that Hermione and Harry had been involved and had been waiting for them to learn the news— informing them of the Weasley's condition himself would have ruined the illusion he knew nothing about it, an illusion he wished to keep. Learning only minutes before of Longbottom's involvement had genuinely surprised him, something that wasn't easy, but Tom was already adjusting his plans in accordance to the new information— Harry's surprising but clear attachment to the Gryffindor made it very easy to do so.

And as Gryffindors went, he would reluctantly admit that Harry had chosen an acceptable one to form an attachment to. Underneath Longbottom's scared, bumbling exterior was something Tom recognised from Hermione and Harry both: the boy shared with them the same wary stare of a dog who'd been beaten one too many times, and Tom was well aware that there was only so much abuse a beaten dog would take before it started biting back.

The lurking whispers of Darkness in abused and neglected children and, to a lesser degree, in anyone who'd witnessed or experienced a trauma was so easy to bring out and in most cases it was such a simple thing to manipulate the half broken souls, to twist his influence into their minds until he had them dancing on invisible puppet strings. Breaking people who were already half-broken while pretending to save them and then piecing them back together in his image was something he had always excelled at.

There were a small percentage of the damaged souls, however, who had already learned how to hold all their jagged pieces together— Hermione being an example. If you hurt me you will bleed, was the silent promise in the shadows behind her eyes, in the strength and skill of those slim hands scarred by violence, pain and death, and in the bloodshed staining her smile; if you hurt me you will bleed, and if you try to break me you will die.

It was a good thing he liked her so much the way she was, no matter how thrilling the idea of breaking her was, the thought of the battle of wits that would erupt between them both exhilarating and arousing.

Now wasn't the time for those thoughts, however, and Tom focused his attention back to the nervously shifting Longbottom.

"C-Can we speak privately?" the boy requested softly, fidgeting with the sleeves of his robes.

"About Weasley?" Harry asked, his voice hushed, and Longbottom swallowed hard and nodded.

"Y-You heard?" He whispered.

"Snape just asked Hermione if she was responsible," Harry explained. "Apparently there was an article in the Prophet too, but we didn't see that."

"By Rita Skeeter," Hermione added, her expression turning thoughtful. "That woman certainly does have a way of getting into places she shouldn't."

"Come on," Harry said, giving Longbottom an encouraging look, "there's a private lounge not far
They ducked out of the ballroom once more, and Harry led them to the lounge. Despite looking like it hadn't been used in a while, the room was as elaborate decorated as the rest of Malfoy Manor with its elaborate, richly woven tapestries, steel engravings, luxurious handmade French Declercq silk tassels, antique furnishings and grand stone fireplace.

"If Weasley wakes up and tells everyone it was you, then you're going to be expelled and possibly sent to jail." Hermione said bluntly, wasted no time after pulling out her wand and casting a quick series of silencing charms to summarise the situation Longbottom was in. Longbottom made a broken, despairing sound, half collapsing on one of the smooth leather couches and burying his head in his hands.

"Wait– couldn't we sneak into St Mungo's to obliterate him?" Harry asked suddenly, visibly lighting up at the thought of not having to kill Weasley like they'd discussed. Tom cut in smoothly.

"That wouldn't work, I'm afraid," he lied easily, arranging his features into a grave expression as he met the eyes of both Harry, Hermione and Longbottom, who'd looked up at Harry's words, in turn. Hermione had arched an eyebrow at him but there was no doubt of the truth in his words present in either of the boys' eyes, only fear in Longbottom's and resignation in Harry's.

"Wh-why wouldn't it work?" Longbottom stammered.

"Because memory charms can be undone by a witch or wizard skilled enough in the mind arts," Tom 'explained' to him, "Dumbledore is a Legilimency master and if Weasley claimed to have no memory of the incident he would know to examine the boy's mind, where he'd be able to find evidence of the obliteration and eventually then be able to undo the magic."

That wasn't a lie, not entirely; memory charms could be pulled apart by a skilled Legilimens and the memories they'd hidden be revealed, but Tom had failed to mention that the process of doing so in most cases would inflict significant mental damage to the one who'd been obliterated. For all that Dumbledore would be eager to uncover the culprit behind Weasley's assault, he wouldn't reduce the boy to even more of a drooling moron in order to do so, so truthfully a memory charm actually would work well in these circumstances. The memory loss could even be put down to the head injury, though even if it was realised that an obliviation charm had been used there would be nothing the Healers or Aurors could do about it.

That wasn't what Tom wanted, however; he wanted Weasley dead, not only for the damage it would deliver to Dumbledore's reputation but also in retaliation to the boy's constant disrespect toward Harry and Hermione and his assault on Harry two years ago– and the reason he hadn't just had one of his people currently keeping the boy in the coma finish Weasley off or gone and done it himself was because he wanted either Harry or Hermione to be the one to do it.

It wasn't a test, not entirely, but Tom had seen the opportunity and he curious to find just how far he could push the two– and to see just how Dark his lovers would go. He knew Hermione had no issues with torture and murder when it came to acts of revenge, and although Harry may hate killing he had certainly proven to be capable of it, however Tom wanted to see just how it was they reacted when it wasn't a near-stranger they were faced with, but rather someone who was their age and they saw nearly every day. And when the opportunity had presented itself, Ron Weasley had seemed an ideal place to start as Tom knew neither of them were fond of the Gryffindor.

Longbottom's involvement could make things... trickier then he'd first thought, but overcoming Harry's innate reluctance to take a life had gone much more smoothly then he'd expected– it had taken much less convincing then Tom had prepared for to get Harry to the point where he was
open to the notion of killing Weasley. It was, he suspected, the protective angle involved—whether he liked it or not, there was a part of Harry that was undeniably 'heroic' in nature. Well, a type of heroic, anyway; like Hermione, Harry had proven willing to kill to protect the people he cared for, and Longbottom had managed to find himself in the enviable position of being someone Harry cared for.

"Oh Merlin," croaked Longbottom meanwhile, his face going bone-white. "I'm going to Azkaban!"

"Never!" Harry snapped in response, his green eyes flashing in fierce determination. "I will kill Weasley before I let them send you there, Nev!"

"Which is good, because it sure sounds like that's what we're going to have to do." Hermione said, and Tom certainly didn't miss her wording—'it sure sounds like' left him little doubt that she was aware Weasley's death wasn't actually necessary, but she didn't seem about to argue otherwise.

There was something in Harry's eyes that Tom couldn't identify as he turned his attention to the other boy but Harry finally exhaled and nodded. "How do we do it?" He asked quietly and Longbottom made a soft sound like he was going to be sick.

"In a way that witches and wizards will have a hard time detecting," Hermione replied, "we do want to actually get away with it, after all."

"You're talking about a muggle poison," Tom realised, approving of where her thoughts were going— the Healers were less likely to detect a muggle poison rather than a magical one and they were also a lot less likely to figure out how to treat it. "Innovative. I like it." By Harry and Longbottom's expressions, neither of them liked it but both of them stayed quiet, not making any protest.

"We should pick a toxin that has been biochemically altered," Hermione said, with a sharp, vicious grin, "that way even if St Mungo's does figure out what's wrong, they won't be able to produce an antidote."

"You've got something in mind already," he observed and Hermione's grin widened to show teeth.

"I do– dimethyl mercury."

"Mercury poisoning," he mused, holding back his own grin– he thought that might be pushing things for Harry. Still– "Not a pleasant way to go," he couldn't help but comment.

"And dimethyl mercury is a synthesised version of mercury." Hermione explained. "It's highly toxic and much faster acting, with exposure to only very small amounts of the chemical able to result in devastating neurological damage and death."

"Mm, keep talking dirty to me," he purred, licking his lips, and Hermione laughed. Longbottom looked horrified though, so Tom glanced over at him and let just a glint of the violent predator inside shine through his eyes, and he was satisfied when the boy flinched back from him.

"Okay, we've figured out what we'll do, now we have to figure out how," Harry said hastily, having observed the interaction.

"Getting into St Mungo's will be difficult," Tom said immediately, which was a blatant lie this time. "Neville has a perfect excuse to visit, however, and nobody would think twice about him bringing a friend along." He added, with the slightest of smiles.

Longbottom looked equal parts awkward and terrified and Harry grabbed both of the other boy's
hands firmly in his own, squeezing them gently and looking Longbottom straight in the eye. "You don't have to do this, Nev," he said firmly. "I-- I'll do it for you." Longbottom's eyes widened.

"H-Harry!" he choked, "I-- I-- oh Merlin, I can't ask you to do th-that for me!"

"You're not asking, I'm offering, Nev," Harry said firmly. "You're one of my best friends and I'm not going to let you be hurt for this-- Weasley is an awful person and I choose you over him every time! And yes, I feel sick about what has to happen but we can regret what we have to do for the rest of our lives and feel always feel awful about it, or we can stand by why we choose to do what we have to do and move on. I want to protect you and keep you safe, Nev, and if k-killing Weasley is what it takes to do that, then I will and I'll stand by those reasons for my decision!"

Longbottom looked at Harry with wide, tear-wet eyes that were filled with something close to worship. "Y-You'd really do th-that for me?" He breathed.

"I would. And I will." Harry said firmly. Longbottom made a weak sound but then he nodded.

"Then I-- I'll h-help you," he whispered. "I'll help you get into St Mungo's and take you to where R-Ron will be."

Very pleased with the outcome unfolding before him, Tom resisted the urge to smirk. "We'll have to act quickly," he said instead. "You're lucky Weasley hasn't woken up yet-- he could at any moment." Actually, he wouldn't until Tom stopped paying that Healer to keep him in the coma, but that wasn't information Harry or Longbottom needed.

"How soon can we get the dimethyl mercury?" Hermione asked briskly.

"Tonight, probably," Tom said with a slight shrug, not foreseeing any difficulties in getting his hands on some.

"You'll need to find a muggle science lab currently storing some," Hermione told him, "I'll make you a list of places to search that are likely to have it. We won't need much."

"Then you can solve your problem tomorrow," Tom suggested, now really having to work to hold back his smile. "We'll meet outside St Mungo's at noon-- can you convince your grandmother to take you, Neville?"

Longbottom hesitated slightly then nodded. "I'll figure out a way," he said, looking a bit like he was going to be sick but his expression was filled with determination anyway.

"We should rejoin the party now," Tom said, satisfied and gleeful as triumph stirred inside him.

"Actually, can I talk to you and Hermione for a moment?" Harry said, giving Longbottom a quick, reassuring smile before standing up from the sofa and moving over slightly. Tom followed, Hermione a half step behind him, and Harry lowered his voice to speak, his expression very serious. "You two should go back to the ball, but I'm going to stay with Nev for a bit," he told them quietly. "He'll need to talk over this and, if I'm being honest, I'm still angry at you both. Maybe I messed up with the whole being overly judgmental deal, but you guys fucked up too-- you should have told me about the Ring. I'll meet you in the floo-room at a quarter to twelve, okay?"

"Alright." Hermione said, after a brief hesitation. "Come find us immediately if anything happens or if you need anything."

"I promise," Harry vowed.
Tom frowned, reluctant to leave Harry, but Hermione was insistent and she gave his hand a sharp tug when he hesitated.

"I don't like this," he told her sharply as they both left the lounge and started to make their way back to the ballroom. He saw Harry and Hermione so little that it didn't sit right with him, leaving Harry now.

"Tough," Hermione replied shortly. "You should have considered possible consequences like Harry being upset before giving him that bloody Ring in the first place— of course he's going to be pissed!"

Tom narrowed his eyes at her as they stepped back into the large room filled with people and music and food. If anyone else dared speak to him like she was, he'd hold them under the Cruciatus until their brains started leaking from their ears. As it was, a familiar anger twisted with violence had his hands trembling slightly with the need to strike out, ready to hurt, to cause pain, and Tom grimly held onto his self-control. Hermione seemed to sense the shift in his mood and she turned slightly, glancing back up at him. Whatever she saw in his eyes had her pausing and Tom half expected for her to step away from him.

But she didn't. Instead the girl just looked up at him without a drop of fear in her, not an ounce of worry that he might actually hit her. Just trust. And acceptance. It made him want to wrap his fingers around her throat, just to watch what happened to that trust as her face tinged blue and the blood vessels in her eyes stood stark against the bulging whites.

They were a mirror image of crushed glass and barbed wire on high walls, the pair of them were—Hermione knew Tom's jagged edges and cutting points because she had plenty of her own hidden under her fair skin. There was so much potential for pain in both of them if a hand slipped, if attention wandered at all while scaling those walls. But they both knew that, and it made the ascent more familiar than daunting.

Harry was different. Once Tom would have called him weaker for the stubborn, desperate way he clung onto his morals and beliefs, even as they twisted and changed and slipped through his fingers. The other boy was so focused on doing what was 'right' and 'good' and it was both sickening and boring, in a way, but Tom hadn't started caring for Harry regardless of the boy's character; he cared for him because of it.

By some standards, perhaps, Harry could be considered weak, but there was a part of Tom that genuinely admired the good, earnest nature of the other boy. He knew just how breathtaking Harry was covered in blood and could only imagine just how intoxicating it would be to witness Dark magic falling casually from his lips, but most of the time he was pleased with how Harry was. A Dark Harry was tempting, certainly, but in the same way a rich dessert was; it was the sort of treat better consumed only occasionally, to follow the metaphor.

Tom hadn't approved of Voldemort giving Harry the horcrux ring because he'd wanted to change the boy's fundamental nature; he'd done it because he'd been genuinely afraid that otherwise Harry would end up destroying himself. The younger boy wasn't a Dark wizard; he just wasn't wired to enjoy or to even just accept what he'd been forced to witness every day at Riddle Manor, and Tom hadn't wanted it to break him. Just as with Hermione, he liked Harry the way he was.

"Come on," Hermione murmured, slipping her hand into his and gently pulling him towards the part of the ballroom where couples were swaying together to the tunes the string quartet struck up. "Let's dance." She suggested and Tom nodded, adjusting his position and moving his hand to her hip. Hermione smiled up at him from under her eyelashes as she pressed her body to his, threading the fingers of their joined hands together and resting her free one on the small of his back.
Hermione danced with him like a lover; she melted against him and stayed there, pliant to his smallest motion, her legs and cheek against his, her fingers brushing the back of his neck. They were gathering looks, of course; Tom was not ignorant to his eye-catching appearing and Hermione was growing to be a gaunt, sinewy beauty; switchblades for cheekbones, deceptively innocent doe-eyes, pale, slim wrists that appeared so easy to pin down yet were anything but, and sweet glittering smiles that hid the blood on her teeth.

The first time he laid eyes on her in the Chamber, she'd been such a delicate, pretty little thing, a pale slip of a girl he'd dismissed as yet another paper cut-out– until she'd pressed a knife to his abdomen, threatened to gut him, and had exploded into color. And as she grew, she lost none of that color; she was a creature of sinew and steel, a bright, visceral streak of red against the dull, grey world they inhabited.

"You knew I was lying," he observed out loud and her glossy, shining lips curved up as her slender shoulders rose and fell in an elegant movement that timed well with the swelling sound of the string quartet.

"I did."

"And you didn't say anything."

"Are you asking a question, Tom, or just stating facts?" She asked pointedly, letting him dip her gracefully, and a part of Tom purred in satisfaction as she trusted him not to let her fall. Another part had automatically started plotting how best to use that trust before he reluctantly pushed it aside.

"Cheeky."

"You like it."

"My life would be much less interesting if you were boring." He conceded. "Sometimes I think I've solved you, but then you go and do something that turns all my supposed answers upside down again."

"I'm not some maths problem you can solve, Tom," Hermione said, looking amused. "I'm not an equation with numbers and rules that stay the same. I'm more of an essay; I've got four ways to place citations, eight ways to incorporate references and several thousand grammatical rules that each have at least a hundred odd exceptions."

"You're infuriating, is what you are." He told her.

"And I'm fairly certain Harry knows you were lying too," She remarked and he frowned.

"Why would he go along with it?" He asked and Hermione's mouth quirked.

"I don't know if it was the Ring's influence or if he's just less good then we seem to think, but I get the feeling his reasons lie with Neville."

"Protecting him?" Tom questioned and Hermione made a soft, amused sound.

"Not quite, I think." He was confused a moment before comprehension dawned and he couldn't help his delighted laugh as a mostly foreign sensation crept up from the depths of the frozen, twisted, malformed thing that resided in his chest. The feeling it gave as it washed over him was one of pure pleasure.
"Oh that clever, wicked boy," he said, hungry and gleeful, "he's making sure Longbottom is his."

"I think he's creating the sort of debt between that even Neville's morals won't be able to stand up against." Hermione agreed. "Nothing quite binds people together like murder-- especially if Neville thinks Harry is doing it for him and is at least partially complicit in the actual act itself."

"Longbottom will never leave him." Tom murmured, "no matter what happens in the future; he'll never be able to leave." A frustrated sound escaped him as arousal flushed through him. "I really want to fuck him right now." He complained and Hermione laughed, her smile pulling back red lips to reveal hungry teeth. Burning eyes met his, and without another word, Hermione kissed him-- hard-- and Tom's grey world filled with her colours.

There was no love more intense and terrifying than absolute obsession, he mused as he drank her in, wanting to fit himself into her bones and go so deep that she couldn't tell where he ended and she began. And obsession was really the only kind of affection he ever cared to participate in.

They'd only danced three songs when the part-veela found them, the young woman gracefully approaching them with an empty champagne flute in her hand.

"Zere you are," she said to Hermione, relief clear on her beautiful face. There were two wintry-pink spots high on her cheeks and a subtle sway to her movements that spoke of a slight alcohol overindulgence. Hermione apparently spotted the same thing, confusion briefly flitting over her face before it was replaced by understanding.

"You found out who He is," she observed and Fleur nodded, her expression clearly stating another of champagne flute would be appreciated at the reminder. Tom bit back his smirk at the fear the original soul had struck in the French girl.

"May I 'ave a private word?" the part-Veela asked, her eyes flicking between them, and Hermione immediately nodded.

"Of course, Fleur," she said, and Tom bit back a scowl as she released his hand, reaching for Fleur's instead. Fleur tugged Hermione over slightly, though Tom was gratified that she didn't move them away far enough that he was unable to pick up what the two young women were saying with his sharp hearing.

"He didn't hurt you, did he?" Hermione asked.

"Non, non, we just 'ad a conversation. 'E weeshes for me to arrange a meeting wiz zee Les Lys," Fleur explained. "]E did, ah, pass on a warning zough, about what would 'appen if I betrayed 'im. Eet was... descriptive. And, I weell admit, very 'orrifying."

"Well He is the kind of Sun Tzu quoting, take no prisoners bastard that one should expect to ignore all boundaries of moral decency." Hermione commented quietly and Tom bit back a smirk.

"Sun Tzu?" the part-Veela inquired, sounding confused. Hermione's reply was clearly surprised-- Tom wasn't sure why; surely the girl remembered 'The Art of War' wasn't written by a magical author. He'd have been surprised if the French girl actually had known it.

"It's an old book, a muggle one, but I think you'll enjoy it."

"I weell 'ave to remember eet," Fleur agreed.

"You look pale." Hermione observed. "And slightly drunk." Fleur let out a shaky laugh.
"E eez an... intimidating figure."

"He does scare me a little." Hermione admitted.

"But 'e weell 'elp us." The part-veela said softly. "And zat eez enough. Eet eez more zen anyone else 'as." She sighed, a quiet, mournful sound, before straightening up, new determination crossing her face. "Enough of zis," she said firmly, "we are at a party and I am in zee progress of organising an alliance zat weell 'elp my people intensely– zis eez an occasion to be celebrated!"

"Well the champagne here is apparently excellent," Hermione teased and Fleur laughed.

"Yes, yes eet eez, so let us drink and gossip as we ought to at a party– zat 'andsome young man 'oo eez trying not to glare at me, 'e eez your paramour?"

"He is," Hermione confirmed.

"Zee way zat 'e looks at you and 'Arry... zat boy does not undress you wiz 'is eyes, no, 'e unmakes you; I 'ave a 'unch zat 'e eez one kinky le salaud," Fleur teased and Hermione's laughter was bright and genuine in a way Tom could admit he was mostly unfamiliar with.

"You certainly have a keen eye, Fleur– remind me never to play poker with you!"

"Oh? What eez zis... 'poker'?" Fleur questioned.

"You're joking!" Hermione sounded shocked. "Well that's unacceptable– I take it back entirely, we have to have a poker night as soon as possible, one like back the way I did it on the streets: muggle cards, hard cash and harder booze."

"Oh? Sounds exciting." Fleur said, playful leer back in place, and Hermione laughed again.

"You'll love it, Fleur."

"Ah, love," Fleur said softly. "Your boys, 'Arry and Tom, you love zem zen?" Hermione's smile wavered slightly.

"Yes," she said quietly, "I really do."

"And zey love you?" Fleur pressed gently.

"One of them would die for me, and one of them would kill for me." Hermione said simply. "And I don't know if that's love, but I'll take it. They're mine."

Tom would take it too. He didn't know anything about love; it was a foreign emotion to him with little value outside of how he could use it to manipulate others. He did know covetousness, though, and obsession, and he was both obsessed by and coveted his lovers to the point of no return.

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Severus's POV:

The Gala was nearly over, finally, and Severus was in excellent spirits. Hermione hadn't been the one to beat Weasley into a coma after all, and he'd seen her and Harry talking together in the ballroom following their startling 'tiff' outside Lucius's study. The weight had been lifted from his shoulders and as midnight neared, Severus started to plan his departure to return to his home and
consume a large amount of the expensive mourvèdre he'd been saving for an occasion to celebrate. Of course, that's when Lupin decided to make his appearance. Severus hadn't thought the werewolf had turned up, but it was undeniably his old classmate who was hurrying towards him as he started making his way towards the exit of the ballroom.

"Lupin, I have received some truly excellent news this evening and plan to drink several glasses of truly excellent wine to celebrate now that this blasted event is almost over, so make it quick," he said briskly, not even bothering to stop and face the other man.

"Iris Clancy." Lupin said quietly and Severus felt himself freeze. The genuine gladness he'd been feeling abruptly disappeared like a flame doused with water and he slowly turned around to face the ex-Gryffindor. Rage rose up inside him to replace his good cheer and he could feel the slight tremor in his hands as he fixed his old classmate with a truly venomous look.

"You couldn't just leave it alone," he hissed, low and furious and ready to murder Lupin. And he didn't mean that metaphorically either– if Lupin was going to endanger Hermione with the knowledge he now possessed, then Severus was fully willing to kill him to keep her safe.

Lupin, now that he'd taken the time to actually take a proper look at the man, looked grey and drawn. The dress-robes were far too loose on his thin frame and there were faint bruises under his eyes.

"I haven't told anyone," the man whispered, shame coloring his face, and Severus released the breath he hadn't realised had been trapped in his chest. His heart was still in his throat, though, as his panic for Hermione remained strong inside him.

"And you absolutely cannot," he told his old classmate fiercely. "Albus is accusing her of attacking Ron Weasley and the boy has had to be hospitalised—she has an alibi that can't be argued, but if that incident came to light, then things could get needlessly tricky. Albus is trying to get rid of her and if you tell him about Iris and Cortland then you'll be giving him the ammunition he needs to get it done!"

"Did you destroy the police files when you stole them?" Lupin asked quietly.

"Most of them." He admitted, after a short, assessing pause.

"Can I see them?" Lupin pressed and he looked at the other man incredulously.

"Why in the seven hells would I give you access to that sort of evidence against her?" He demanded.

"Because I'd make an Oath not to steal or copy them," Lupin said stubbornly.

"Why do you even want to see them?" Severus asked, frustrated, "what do you gain?" And are you planning to tell Albus? He added silently, not yet ready to ask— not when he wasn't sure where Lupin's head was at.

Lupin opened his mouth, probably to answer in some annoyingly vague manner, but whatever he said Severus didn't hear because that was the moment the most unexpected, horrifying thing he'd not been at all prepared for happened; his Dark Mark began to burn.

He was being summoned.

Lord Voldemort was summoning him.
"–erus! Severus!"

Severus snapped his attention back over to Lupin whose eyes widened dramatically, making him wonder just what sort of ghastly expression was on his face. "I need to go." He said hoarsely. Lupin's brow furrowed in confusion, but Severus didn't have time for this; not right now. "Meet me at the Hog's Head tomorrow at eleven," he ordered. "I'll– I'll bring everything I didn't destroy. Just keep quiet about it until then and I swear I'll give you all the answers I have."


"I have to go," Severus repeated his earlier words, turning on his heel and starting a swift walk to Lucius's study that threatened to turn into a jog. He half expected Lupin to follow him and continue badgering him with questions, but thankfully the werewolf stayed in the ballroom where he left him. Small mercies.

Severus wondered if he'd actually even be alive to meet his old classmate tomorrow. And if he wasn't alive, if Lupin would go straight to Albus with what he'd found.

Perhaps he should have just killed him before leaving, he thought grimly, and was actually considering turning back to do just that when Lucius appeared. The blond's face bone-white and his handsome features stiff with terror.

"Severus!" The aristocrat hissed, grabbing onto his arm the moment he was within reach. "Severus, He's in my house! The Dark Lord is in my house!"

"What?" breathed Severus, feeling his eyes widen with horror.

"Have you not tried apparating to His side yet?" demanded Lucius, "I didn't even leave the manor!"

"Lucius— Harry," Severus said urgently, panic rising up within him again, thick enough to choke on and drown in. "Harry is here!" Lucius exhaled, the sound short and sharp.

"If I'm horribly murdered for this, I blame you!" He snapped before shouting, "Dobby!" The house elf appeared with a small pop and cowered before his panicked Master. "Find Harry Potter and get him out of here," Lucius ordered briskly, "I don't care where, just find him and get him away from the Manor immediately!"

Severus felt relief restore feeling to his numb fingertips as the wide-eyed house elf nodded hurriedly, its large ears flapping with the movements before it disappearing with another pop. "Thank you," he said hoarsely and Lucius let out a harsh laugh.

"Thank me if we're both still alive in an hour's time." He said grimly, before closing his eyes. "I can feel the pull." He murmured, shuddering slightly. Severus could feel the faint tug in the magic of the Dark Mark too– a tug that would lead him to his Lord, who was apparently within the building.

"Come," he said quietly, resting a hand on Lucius's shoulder and squeezing briefly. "There's no point in delaying the inevitable."

It was time for them to face Lord Voldemort.

Chapter End Notes
So just to let people know, I'm going to be aiming for fortnightly updates– which means this chapter is technically a day early ;D

Also, the quote in the newspaper from Iris's aunt actually came from Steven Sandison, a prison inmate who murdered a man serving a sentence for first-degree criminal sexual conduct against someone under the age of 13. When asked why, Sandison said: "I just did what I thought was best in the time I was given. I've been getting these emails saying that, you know, it's not my position to judge anybody. I want to make it quite clear that I didn't judge him. I know God is the only judge we have. I just set the appointment up." Despite the seriousness and sensitivity of the subject matter involved, I did find a great deal of humour in that quote!

I hope you enjoyed the chapter <3
~Cheshire Carroll
Part Four: The Goblet of Fire - Chapter LV

Chapter Notes

Warning for gore and bad BDSM etiquette.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER LV:

Severus's POV:

The Dark Mark was a complicated piece of magic. It was more than just a symbol, more than just a tattoo that burned when he was being summoned; the magic that made up the Mark was tied to Severus's own magic and would pull him to Voldemort's side. Usually he just had to apparate, letting the pull direct him to the location where the Dark Lord was expecting him, but he wasn't feeling a pull on his magic currently; it was more like a tug.

Lucius was right– Voldemort was close, almost definitely in the Manor somewhere. And Severus had a fairly good idea of just where the Dark Lord would be.

Lucius's fanciest dining room was very nearly empty, with a single exception. Lit only by three low-burning fat, white candles set at the center of the large antique table, the dim room seemed almost eerie, an impression that wasn't helped by the way the flickering flames of the candles made the shadows around the room creep and dance. The heavy seat positioned at the head of the dining table was turned away from the doorway and Severus could only make out the dark silhouette of the man seated on it.

No, not the man seated on the closest thing Lucius owned to a throne– the Dark Lord seated there.

His Lord.

Beside him, Lucius's breath was quick and shallow and Severus realised they'd both come to an abrupt halt, just inside the doorway. Neither of them dared to say anything, or to take another step forwards. There was ice in Severus's stomach as he realised that he could die in the next few moments, but to run would be useless. Running wouldn't help Harry or Hermione.

With each racing heartbeat against his ribs, the sound of it pounding in his ears, the tension in the room seemed to rise; fear and anticipation were both thick and heavy in the air and Severus felt simultaneously lightheaded and like he might choke on it.

And then a chillingly familiar voice spoke, the chair bathed in darkness slowly turning around to face them.

"Lucius... Severus..."

Severus choked and beside him, Lucius sounded as if he'd done the same. Face half-cloaked in shadows but unmistakable nonetheless, Thaddeus Dagworth smiled at them with burning crimson eyes.
"This is how my loyal followers greet me, after so many years?"

"My Lord," breathed Lucius reverently, falling to his knees. Severus followed suit, tamping down the hysteria bubbling up inside him. He could panic later, right now he needed to focus on surviving the next... however long this would be. Then he would find where Dobby took Harry and Hermione and wring both their necks.

Dagworth— no, Voldemort rose to his feet in a single, graceful movement. Severus vaguely recalled seeing the man earlier, laughing and conversing with the crowd of ball attendees. He thought he remembered the Minister of Magic's wife Tullia Fudge grabbing onto Dagworth's arm at one point, twittering and giggling madly. The thought almost made him shudder, made him want to question what lay beneath the surface of every face he passed. To think he could have missed something like this!

Dagworth's appearance so soon after the Dark Mark had reappeared should have been a red flag, but the idea of the Dark Lord playing politician had been too fanciful to even consider. Severus doubted even Dumbledore had connected Dagworth to Voldemort. The last Severus remembered of his Lord was a terrifying military general crossed with a ruthless tyrant and a terrorist leader. Voldemort had been far too impatient to even consider taking over Britain via political means; the new society he envisioned where he ruled supreme couldn't wait. So what had changed?

Severus thought he might be sick as Dagwo— Voldemort made his way over to them, movements unhurried and lazy, almost. From where their shoulders were brushed together, Severus could feel Lucius shaking, though he wasn't sure if it was from fear or anticipation or both.

"Hold out your arm." Voldemort said softly and neither he or Lucius wasted time asking who the Dark Lord was referring to, both of them lifting their left arms up while reaching across with the right to pull down the sleeve.

His Dark Mark was jet black against his pale skin, the snake winding through the skull, and Voldemort's red eyes glittered slightly.

"They will have all noticed." He said softly. "And now I shall know how many will be brave enough to return... and how many will be foolish enough to stay away. Drop the anti-apparation wards, Lucius. It's time."

Severus remained where he was as Lucius pulled out his wand, the blond having to clear his throat a few times before he could undo the spell-work that prevented people from apparating uninvited into his Manor. "I-It's done, my Lord," he said after a minute, carefully returning his wand to its place inside his cane. Voldemort smiled, a look of almost cruel satisfaction on his handsome face.

The Dark wizard turned, walking back to the head of the table. He didn't order them to move or to cover their Marks back up, so Severus stayed kneeling on the hard ground with his left sleeve rolled up above his elbow and a dreadful sort of anticipation piercing him with every breath.

And then the room around him started filling with the swishing of cloaks as witches and wizards Apparated in. All of them were hooded and masked and one by one they moved forward... slowly, cautiously, as though they could hardly believe their eyes. Voldemort stood in silence by the head of the table, waiting for them. Then one of the Death Eaters fell to his knees, crawled toward Voldemort and kissed the hem of his expensive robes.

"Master...Master..." he murmured.

The Death Eaters behind him did the same; each of them approaching Voldemort on their knees.
and kissing his robes, before backing away and standing up, forming a silent circle around the large antique table, leaving gaps for those who were either dead, had been imprisoned or were too afraid to turn up. Lucius nudged him before standing, cautiously closing half the distance between him and their Lord before dropping to his knees once more, crawling the rest of the distance to kiss the hem of his robes. Severus followed his friend's example, mercilessly crushing his pride as he knelt at Voldemort's feet before taking his old place in the circle.

It was so easy, so natural, to fall back in place that it shocked him and he absently conjured up his old mask as Voldemort looked around at the hooded faces with his own cold and carved from ice. There was no draft in the room, but the circle shivered—Severus included. He almost flinched when Voldemort finally broke the weighted silence that had settled over the room and he wasn't the only one.

"Welcome, Death Eaters," he said smoothly, his red eyes burning in the flickering candlelight. "Thirteen years... thirteen years since last we met. Yet you answer my call as though it were yesterday, we are still united under the Dark Mark, then! Or are we?"

He smiled, bland, empty of emotion and utterly terrifying. "I smell guilt," he said softly, almost mockingly. "There is a stench or guilt upon the air."

A second shiver ran around the circle, as though each member of it longed to but did not dare step back from him. Severus felt like his limbs had turned to stone. The only part of him that could still move was his heart, which was colliding with his ribcage with enough force to shatter the bone and so thunderous it felt like it must be audible to every witch and wizard in the room.

But the only sound anyone seemed to be able to hear was Voldemort's voice, the even, conversational tone deceptive as the terrible, accusatory words dripped from the Dark wizard's mouth. "I see you all, whole and healthy, with your powers intact—such prompt appearances! And I ask myself... why did this band of wizards never come to the aid of their master, to whom they swore eternal loyalty?"

No one spoke. No one dared even take a breath, to disturb the stillness, the weighted silence.

"And I answer myself," whispered Voldemort, "they must have believed me broken, they thought I was gone. They slipped back among my enemies, and they pleaded innocence, and ignorance, and bewitchment..."

"And then I ask myself, but how could they have believed I would not rise again? They, who knew the steps I took, long ago, to guard myself against mortal death? They, who had seen proofs of the immensity of my power in the times when I was mightier than any wizard living?"

"And I answer myself, perhaps they believed a still greater power could exist, one that could vanquish even Lord Voldemort... perhaps they now pay allegiance to another... perhaps that champion of Muggles and fools, Albus Dumbledore?"

At the mention of Dumbledore's name, the members of the circle stirred, and some muttered and shook their heads. Voldemort ignored them.

"It is a disappointment to me... I confess myself disappointed...."

Severus wasn't surprised when one of them broke, the hooded man he recognized as Avery flinging himself forward. Trembling from head to foot, he collapsed at Voldemort's feet.

"Master!" he shrieked, "Master, forgive me! Forgive us all!"
Voldemort began to laugh. He raised his wand.

"Crucio!"

Severus stayed silent and still as Avery writhed and shrieked on the ground. It seemed to stretch for an eternity before Voldemort raised his wand and Avery lay flat upon the floor of Lucius's dining room, gasping.

"Get up, Avery," said Voldemort softly. "Stand up. You ask for forgiveness? I do not forgive. I do not forget. Thirteen long years... I want thirteen years' repayment before I forgive you."

And then Voldemort moved, beginning a slow, purposeful walk around the circle. Some of them he passed in silence, others he paused and spoke to. "Macnair...destroying dangerous beasts for the Ministry of Magic; you shall have better targets than that soon..."

"Thank you, Master... thank you," murmured Macnair.

"And here"— Voldemort moved on to the two largest hooded figures, the silhouettes of both Gil Goyle and Vaughn Crabbe unmistakable—"here we have Crabbe... you will do better this time, will you not, Crabbe? And you, Goyle?"

They bowed clumsily, muttering dully.

"Yes, Master..."

"We will, Master..."

"The same goes for you, Nott," said Voldemort quietly as he walked past a stooped figure in Gil's shadow.

"My Lord, I prostrate myself before you, I am your most faithful—"

"That will do," said Voldemort. He paused at a gap. "The Lestranges should stand here," he said quietly. "They were faithful. They went to Azkaban rather than renounce me... I have freed them, along with the others who stayed faithful. They have been honoured beyond their dreams and wait on safe grounds..." he moved on, "and Lucius; Lucius, my slippery friend." Severus wasn't at all surprised that Voldemort halted before Lucius, who stood by his right. "I am told that you have not renounced the old ways, though to the world you present a respectable face." Voldemort murmured. "You are still ready to take the lead in a spot of Muggle-torture, I believe? Yet you never tried to find me, Lucius... Your exploits at the Quidditch World Cup were fun, I daresay... but might not your energies have been better directed toward finding and aiding your master?"

"My Lord, I was constantly on the alert," Lucius said immediately, and Severus bit back a groan at the answer he already knew was the wrong one. "Had there been any sign from you, any whisper of your whereabouts, I would have been at your side immediately, nothing could have prevented me—"

"And yet you ran from my Mark, when a faithful Death Eater sent it into the sky last summer?" said Voldemort lazily, and Lucius stopped talking abruptly. "Yes, I know all about that, Lucius... You have disappointed me... I expect more faithful service in the future."

"Of course, my Lord, of course... You are merciful, thank you..."

Severus's overwrought heart leaped to his throat as those burning red eyes met his own dark ones, but to his shock and relief Voldemort moved on, over to the gap beside him, the largest in the
broken circle. He stood surveying it with his blank, red eyes, as though he could see people standing there.

"And here we have five missing Death Eaters... three dead in my service. One, too cowardly to return... he will pay... and one, who remains my faithful servant, and who has already re-entered my service."

Severus frowned slightly under his mask, trying to recall the Death Eaters who'd stood to his left but only able to remember Karkaroff, who he assumed was the one too cowardly to return.

"But perhaps it is time to fill some of these gaps," Voldemort said, suddenly. "Your arm, Severus."

His sleeve was still rolled up to his elbow, so it was an easy thing to lift his left arm up. Voldemort's finger was cold as it pressed against the Dark Mark that had faded to red, only to flare jet-black again at the touch. Severus bit back the sharp, pained sound that wanted to escape him, instead focusing on the way the air was once again filled with swishing—only this time, none of the Death Eaters who appeared were masked.

Apparently even months away from Azkaban had yet to fully return the flesh to the gaunt faces of those who'd been imprisoned there, but all the expressions ranged from fiercely pleased and satisfied, ecstatically jubilant and wildly triumphant. Bellatrix's ringing laughter was a familiar cackle, a hint of madness dancing on the shrill edges as her eyes gleamed and she bared her yellowed teeth in an eager, malicious grin. The reason for her glee was fairly obvious too—because bound from head to toe at her side, face bone-white and expression twisted into one of pure terror, was Igor Karkaroff.

Severus knew, instantly, that Karkaroff wouldn't be leaving the room alive—and the man wouldn't get to die easy either.

"Ah, you brought the traitor." Voldemort's voice slid easily over the noise in the room and everyone instantly went silent, all except Bellatrix who eagerly replied,

"Yes Master, Junior brought him to the Manor as you instructed."

Severus was confused for a moment—he knew of only one Death Eater that Bellatrix could be referring to as 'Junior', but the boy had died in Azkaban—only to gasp as from among the new arrivals stepped out a grinning Barty Crouch Junior.

"You did well, my servant," Voldemort praised and Barty's grin widened to a beam.

"I live to serve you, Master," he said and Voldemort gave him a satisfied look before turning his attention to Karkaroff. The man's eyes were wheeling about frantically, spittle flecking at the corners of his mouth and lightly spattering the ground before him as he tried to speak through the silencing charm.

Voldemort flicked a hand lazily and suddenly Karkaroff's babbling was audible to the room.
"Please, Master, please, I beg of you—" the man was pleading, desperation etched across every line of his face. "Let me serve you once more, let me make amends, I will be your most faithful serv—"

Bellatrix let out an angry, hissing sound, like a scalded cat. "Silence, you worthless worm!" She shrieked, grabbing his jaw with her thin, bony hand and shoving up hard enough that the click of Karkaroff's teeth meeting was audible. A small bit of blood escaped the corners of his mouth, Bellatrix's rough silencing having resulted in his teeth cutting part of his mouth—his tongue, Severus was guessing. "You don't deserve to speak in His presence!" Bellatrix was ranting, but
Severus was more focused on Voldemort.

"There is no second chance for traitors," the Dark Lord said coldly and a high, keening sound of terror ripped from the back of Karkaroff's throat as Voldemort smiled, dark and handsome and cruel. "You betrayed us. You sold out your brethren to save your own skin. I think before our evening is through, I'll have Bella remove that skin you valued so much from your still breathing form. First, though—every witch and wizard whose name you gave over to the Ministry will get their turn with you. Barty, as you brought him here you may begin the proceedings."

"Yes, my Lord!" Barty Junior's eyes gleamed as he turned his wand on Karkaroff's bound form. Bellatrix released her grip, her nails leaving gouges in the man's face, and stepped back with a rapturous look on her face as the torture began.

As Barty started crucioing Karkaroff, Lucius's whisper was hidden by the sound of the man's screams and the cheers from those watching. "Didn't Igor name you, Severus?" He asked in undertone.

Sudden dread pooled in his gut and Severus wanted to start swearing. "Yes," he murmured back, just as quietly as Lucius. "He did. Damn it.

He stood still and stiff as Karkaroff was passed around, now all too aware that he would be expected to participate. "Don't look so glum," Lucius remarked quietly, his old friend knowing him well even if the blond couldn't see his face under the mask. "You should actually try to enjoy getting some licks in. Salazar knows I would!"

Oh when Karkaroff had first started shouting his name for the courts to hear, Severus had been more than willing to curse the man within an inch of his life, but as the huddled, tortured form of the now ex-headmaster of Durmstrang was dropped at his feet, more then anything Severus just wanted to put the wretched man out of his misery. He had to picture the look of disgust on Karkaroff's face as he'd sneered at Harry and Hermione out in the rose gardens after the Yule Ball to summon enough will to actually get the Cruciatus to work.

"Crucio!"

It had been years since he'd used an Unforgiveable, and it was almost disheartening to realise it was just as easy to cast now as it had been thirteen years ago. He watched stone-faced and dispassionate as Karkaroff convulsed, coughing and choking and screaming, drenched in a mess of his own bodily fluids—saliva, urine, blood...

It was a relief to pass him on to the next wronged party—and there were a lot of them. Karkaroff had sold out everyone he could to save himself from Azkaban, and nobody had forgotten it.

It felt like an age before the half-dead, unrecognizable lump that had once been a human being was dumped at Voldemort's feet. The Dark Lord's earlier horrifying threat had been carried out, Bellatrix having skinned Karkaroff alive with the sort of skill Severus found himself reluctantly—very, very reluctantly—impressed by. She'd managed to keep him alive too, but there was nothing human left about the discarded, bloodied mess of muscle, sinew and bones that had previously been Karkaroff.

"Let this be a reminder to you all," Voldemort said, his voice ringing in the room that had been filled with Karkaroff's screams, "of how loyalty will be rewarded... and treachery punished—Avada Kedavra!"

The flash of green light was a relief but breathing didn't come any easier to Severus, who was far
too aware of the fact he could be considered a traitor. He had sided with Dumbledore for over a decade, after all– it hadn't been until Harry started at Hogwarts that things started to change.

That could have very easily been him– it still could be.

After the mess of Karkaroff's remains were vanished, Voldemort had instructed them to take a seat. He'd then revealed to them all the bare bones of his plans– which were, to put it simply, take over the Ministry of Magic without anyone realising he'd done so.

"You have all sworn yourselves to me because I have sworn to preserve our way of life. I do not, however, wish to waste any more men fighting a needless battle and spilling valuable magical blood when there are other methods to achieve our goals," had been his only explanation for why they weren't taking over by force.

Voldemort was, apparently, still amassing an army though– envoys were to be sent to the giants, dementors and vampire clans. The werewolf packs had already been contacted and, to Severus's surprise, Voldemort also mentioned an alliance with a prominent veela group being formalised. Dementors, giants, vampires and werewolves had all fought for the Dark before Voldemort's temporary defeat, but the veela hadn't been involved in fighting in Britain at all.

And then Severus thought of the clever, cunning French champion with her sharp smiles and friendship with Hermione and realised exactly how the veela had gotten involved.

"Veela, my Lord?" Macnair spoke up, the dislike clear in his voice.

"I plan to preserve all the aspects of magical society, including the beings so many of you are foolishly ready to dismiss as less then human and therefore less intelligent then you," Voldemort said, his voice sharp and dangerous. "Veela have the potential to be devastatingly effective allies and in their blood is pure magic. Why would I not propose an alliance with them?"

"Of course, my Lord, you are right, my Lord--" Macnair stumbled over himself repeatedly in his efforts to apologize. Voldemort ignored him, instead steepling his long fingers together.

"Before I dismiss you for the night," he said, "there is one final topic that must be discussed. And that is the case of Harry Potter."

Severus's blood ran cold once more as the table went silent. Voldemort smiled, a cold, terrible thing as he surveyed them all with burning red eyes. "If," he said softly, "any of you touch a single hair on that boy's head then what I will do to you will make Karkaroff's fate seem like child's play. Am I understood?"

Severus didn't know whether to be relieved or even more afraid as the Death Eaters all hurriedly voiced their agreement, swearing to stay away from Harry. It was exactly what he wanted, after all, but he couldn't help but feel there had to be a price– and he was very concerned about just who it was who had to pay that price.

It was around two AM that they were all dismissed. Bellatrix had blown him and Lucius bloodstained kisses before apparating away, only moments after Voldemort himself had disappeared.

Severus didn't wait for the room to empty or try to talk to anyone, instead he made an abrupt exit. He intended on going straight to Lucius's study and breaking out the most expensive scotch he could find, only to halt abruptly. Lucius, who had only been a few steps behind him, swore colourfully as he almost crashed straight into him.
"Call Dobby," he said shortly, "I need to have a *conversation* with those two."

Lucius nodded, clearing his throat. "Dobby!" he barked out and the bedraggled creature appeared, only to yelp and cower. There were fresh bandages on its fingers and ears and Lucius let out a disgruntled sound at the sight. "What have you done now, useless creature?" he demanded.

"Dobby is sorry, Master!" wailed the house elf, visibly distraught. "Dobby tried to find mister Harry Potter sir but Harry Potter was not in the Manor and Dobby could not find him! Dobby has punished himself for his failure, Master!"

"Get out of here!" Lucius snapped and the house elf squeaked in alarm and vanished. Severus stared blankly where it had stood a moment ago.

"They're gone again." he said flatly. "We've just found out Dagworth is the Dark Lord and they've disappeared."

"I think you need to put a leash on them." Lucius grimaced.

"I get the feeling they would enjoy that far too much," Severus muttered darkly before he could stop himself. And of course, it was that moment that Draco came upon them– what else should he have expected, with how his night was going?"

"Father? What are you doing up, it's past two in the morning– and you look awful!" exclaimed the boy, alarmed. "What's wrong? Did something happen?"

"Nothing happened, Draco, I'm fine," Lucius said briskly. Draco looked doubtful but didn't press.

"You disappeared from the ball hours ago– mother's furious with you," he instead warned his father and Lucius sighed.

"I will explain to her why I had to leave. There was a... rather sudden meeting I had to attend called by Mr. Dagworth– Draco? Are you alright?"

Severus narrowed his eyes slightly as he registered how pale Draco had abruptly turned, his godson's eyes going wide with what looked suspiciously like fear and horror. "You know who Dagworth is." He realised in shocked disbelief and Draco ducked his head, unable to meet his eyes.

"What?" Lucius asked, sharply. "Draco?"

"I... uh..." Draco bit his lip, still looking at his feet.

"Is this true?" Lucius demanded. "Speak up at once and answer me!"

"I couldn't tell you," Draco said in a small voice. "I promised I wouldn't."

"Promised who? And how long have you known that Mr. Dagworth is– is *Him*?" Lucius hissed.

"Harry and Hermione I presume," Severus said darkly when Draco continued to hesitate. The boy nodded, looking very guilty as he glanced back up at them both.

"Over summer I overheard you both talking. Uncle Severus said he could confirm that the D-Dark Lord was alive," he said and Severus held back a slight wince at the thought of their carelessness, "I– I went to go talk to Harry and Hermione, about Harry agreeing to stay neutral and making the same promises that the Greengrass and Zabini families did in the last War. Blaise's mother and Daphne and Astoria's parents all agreed to vouch for him, to the Dark Lord."
"Really?" Lucius interrupted, eyes wide. Severus was startled too, though mostly at just how much the troublesome two meant to their fellow Slytherins. Draco, Zabini and Miss Greengrass having stuck their necks out for the pair like they had was a level of loyalty that honestly surprised him.

"Blaise and Daph really like him and Hermione," Draco said with a slight shrug and when Lucius continued to look disbelieving Severus thought about pointing out the man had sent Dobby earlier to go get Harry out of Voldemort's reach but decided against it. He was more interested in where Draco's story was going, because as far as he was aware the time-lines between what Draco was saying and what little he knew about how long Harry and Hermione had been in contact with the Dark Lord didn't match up.

"I thought I was going to have a heart attack when Harry told us none of that would be necessary." Draco admitted, twitching slightly at the memory. "I beg– asked him to reconsider, but he said it wasn't necessary because it was already sorted."

"What?" Lucius looked almost faint.

"I was just as surprised," Draco said with a short laugh that wasn't at all humorous. "I just kind of stared at him until Daphne demanded to know what the hell he was talking about– Hermione explained to us that they didn't want to lie to us so they couldn't tell us much, but she promised that the Dark Lord was not going to try and kill Harry."

"If they couldn't tell you much, then how did you know about Dagworth?" Severus asked.

"I actually figured that bit out on my own," Draco said, perking up slightly as a look of pride crossed his face. Severus raised an eyebrow at him.

"Oh?"

"Well, mother asked Hermione if she and Harry were safe with 'Mr. Dagworth' after the last Gala, back before the school year started," Draco explained, "and Hermione said 'Mr. Dagworth' couldn't harm them. Mother noticed her wording– she said couldn't, not wouldn't, and Hermione sort of joked that she didn't take anyone's word for granted. I confronted her after mother left; I reminded her that she told Daphne, Blaise and I that the Dark Lord wasn't going to try and kill Harry and then she just said that she wouldn't take someone's word for granted, and if that was true, then why would she take the Dark Lord's word for granted? And seeing as she just said that Thaddeus Dagworth couldn't hurt them, not wouldn't– well, I really was hoping I'd just jumped to a stupid conclusion, but she didn't reply fast enough. And then I started freaking out and she warned me not to say anything." Draco laughed again, a nervous, stressed sound. "I told her she was insane, living in the same house as the Dark Lord with the Boy-Who-Lived, so she added that all the Death Eaters who'd been broken out of Azkaban were there too."

Because of course, it wasn't enough that they lived with the bloody Dark Lord himself, they had to go add all the unhinged lunatics from Azkaban as well. It wasn't that he hadn't speculated the possibility, but it was quite another to have it confirmed. Though hearing about the supposed vow or oath that Voldemort had taken had actually lifted a weight off Severus's shoulders.

"I'm going to go steal a large quantity of your scotch," he informed Lucius.

"And I'm going to talk to Narcissa. She'll want to hear about Bella," Lucius said and Severus nodded in agreement. "And you're going to bed," Lucius added, giving Draco a stern look. Draco pouted but nodded and Severus bid them both a brief goodnight before heading straight to Lucius's office and the alcohol inside it.
Only, when he roughly shoved the doors open it was to find himself face-to-face with the very 'man' he'd thought he'd escaped for the night.

"Severus," Voldemort greeted him from Lucius's office chair. "I believe you know exactly what it is I wish to discuss."

Severus nodded numbly, unable to speak, and wondered if this was the moment he died.

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Hermione's POV:

At a quarter to midnight she and Tom bid Fleur farewell and went to find Harry. The ballroom was starting to empty but the gala didn't officially end for another forty-five minutes so there was still a fair number of people milling about. Both Harry and Neville had emerged from the disused lounge room and were talking with the other Slytherins. Harry glanced up when they approached and awareness dawned on his face.

"Is it almost midnight?" he asked in a hushed voice and Hermione nodded, turning to Draco whose attention had been drawn when Harry dropped his voice.

"I'm afraid we have to leave," she told him apologetically. Draco's eyebrows drew together and he looked confused.

"You're not staying? You always stay," he said.

"Well," Hermione replied, glancing back at Tom who inclined his head slightly, "we might not need to anymore. We... sort of have a house now."

"It's not a house, it's a countryside manor home." Tom corrected and Hermione shrugged slightly, not interested in the public assertion of wealth. Technically speaking, after all, she was still completely broke—she had no money of her own, despite her new material possessions. She supposed she had been gifted with plenty of items that could be pawned for a decent sum, though. The thought was cheering and she started mentally sorting through what she wouldn't mind selling so she could build up a 'nest egg' of her own.

She knew that both Tom and Harry would be happy to give her money if she asked, of course, but Hermione could also acknowledge that the independent streak resulting from her unusual childhood had her shying away from the very idea of having to rely on someone else. It was something she was working on—she allowed Voldemort to provide her with a wardrobe and pay her school fees and supplies, for example, and hadn't argued about Tom getting them a goddamn manor to live in— but having money made by her own means was important to her.

"That doesn't mean you still can't sleep over here!" Draco was arguing with Harry, the blond looking a moment away from pouting. "Mother would be devastated if you just abandoned us!"

"Hermione didn't mean we'd never stay here again," Harry tried reassuring Draco as Neville watched on with wide-eyes, seeming bewildered by Draco's whining—she realised that seeing the Malfoy heir without his usual haughty and somewhat cruel Pureblood demeanour must still be a bit of a shock to the Gryffindor. Blaise, Daphne, Tracey and Theo all just looked amused, well used to Draco's dramatics, and little Luna, who Blaise was currently resting his chin on the top of her head, looked dreamy and unfocused. Hermione half wondered if the girl had some sort of brain damage—surely that wasn't normal, even in the magical world?
"Harry, it's eight minutes to midnight," Tom cut into the conversation and Harry winced a little.

"Sorry, we really have to go– we'll see you guys in two days, though," he reminded Draco who gave into the pout but flapped one of his hands in a dismissive gesture anyway.

"Fine," he huffed, entirely the spoilt little diva that she would forever deny being so fond of. "Just go then!"

"How are you getting home, Nev?" Harry asked Neville who looked a little surprise to be asked. His self-esteem really was sad.

"One of gran's friends is here," the Gryffindor told Harry, "she said she'd apparate me home after."

After sharing their final farewells with the group, they headed to the Manor's floo room. "Will you be going to the meeting?" Harry asked Tom quietly as they walked through the empty corridors, picking up their pace slightly once they were out of sight of the slowly emptying ballroom.

"Not this time," Tom replied, just as quietly. "The Death Eaters Voldemort plans to summon are the ones who evaded Azkaban. They are strangers to me and the... conversation he wishes to have with them will not just be business. They renounced him, after all. He will not be leaving that unaddressed."

"He's not going to kill them, is he?" Harry gasped, wide-eyed and alarmed as he jumped to the worst possible conclusion from Tom's words.

"They may have erred, but they are still his Death Eaters." Tom said, which wasn't exactly an answer. Hermione thought it was probably a 'no' though. Harry seemed to think so too, because he relaxed slightly then asked;

"Does he actually, you know, like his Death Eaters?"

"I hear they make for quite the diverting company," Tom answered, smirking slightly. Hermione bit back a snort.

"So basically he doesn't give a shit about any of them," she translated, her face relaxing into lines of amusement, and Tom's smirk widened.

"Generally, no; no he does not. There are the rare exceptions, of course, but they are, by their nature, rare."

"He won't hurt Professor Snape, will he?" Harry asked, all anxious again.

"So long as Snape hasn't betrayed him." Tom told him and Hermione, thinking about Snape's fierce protectiveness of Harry who most people would think was Voldemort's arch enemy, didn't find that as comforting as Tom seemed to think they would. Going by Harry's expression, he didn't either.

There was only a minute or two left till midnight as they arrived at the floo room, and Hermione didn't waste any time throwing a handful of floo powder into the large fireplace. The flames flared green and she quickly spoke their address before stepping into the fire.

The sensation of being sucked through the floo network was as unpleasantly disconcerting as usual, but at least she managed to stay on her feet as she was shot out in their living room. Harry wasn't so fortunate– magical transport seemed to hate him.

Of course, now that they were in the privacy of their own home– and that was a phrase that still
succeeded in both quietly thrilling and terrifying her— there was no reason to put off the conversation any longer. Hermione was glad to see that Harry didn't look angry still; time seemed to have let the flames of his temper burn off rather then fanning them.

Still– she wanted to get ahead of this. "I didn't tell you about the Ring because I wanted to protect your feelings," she told him, choosing to be bluntly honest. "I didn't want you to feel betrayed by Tom and Voldemort, so I asked Blaise to help me transfigure a look-a-like to replace it with."

"You didn't think it was something I should know, that Tom and Voldemort tried to use some sort of magic on me?" Harry immediately demanded, his eyes narrowing.

"The magic in the Ring was never intended to hurt you," Tom interjected.

"And you think that makes it okay!?" Harry asked incredulously.

"You weren't... coping particularly well with what you were experiencing at Riddle Manor," Tom said delicately. "The Ring was merely supposed to help you adjust, so you didn't end up... damaged."

"You couldn't have just, I don't know, talked to me about how I felt?" Harry asked sarcastically. "You know, like people usually do when they're worried about how their friends are dealing with something hard?"

"I thought this would be better for you," Tom answered.

"And I think that you should both stop making decisions for me," Harry countered. "I might not be as smart as you two, or as mature, but I'm not actually a fucking child!"

And the fact that Harry hadn't just let go of the whole issue suddenly made a lot more sense to Hermione. Harry wasn't the sort to hold grudges— the alliance he'd made with his parents' murderer being an excellent example of that fact— but she could understand now why he was holding onto this. She and Tom had both treated him like a child, 'protecting' him and making decisions for him without his consent. And maybe his upbringing hadn't forced him to grow up quite as fast as she and Tom had, but that didn't mean he was an ordinary fourteen-year-old either— abuse left its mark.

"I'm sorry." She told him honestly and Harry sighed, the anger draining from his face as his shoulders slumped down.

"Yeah, I know." He replied. Tom made a short, sharp sound under his breath.

"I won't apologize," He said bluntly to Harry. "But I will give you my word that I won't do it again."

"Right," Harry said, rolling his eyes slightly. "Well, I need my own space right now. Are any of the other bedrooms in this place set up, or should I find a couch?"

"Why would you do that?" Tom immediately demanded, "you'd be punishing yourself too!"

"I'm just that determined to make you suffer," Harry said sarcastically, with another roll of his eyes. "Bloody hell, Tom, I'm not punishing anyone— it isn't a crime to want my own space!"

"There's a bedroom set up on the floor above us," Hermione cut in before they could start arguing. Harry nodded.

"Thanks," he told her.
"Want a hand finding it?" She offered and he shook his head.

"I'll be fine. Goodnight guys."

"Wait, before you go--" Hermione quickly caught Harry's shoulder as he turned to leave, pulling him back around and stepping forwards to press her lips lightly to his. The kiss was brief, lasting only a handful of seconds before she pulled back. "Happy New Years, Harry," she said and his eyes widened in surprise.

"I forgot about that," he said, turning slightly so he was facing Tom. Hermione was pleased to see her boys put aside the differences of the night long enough to share a brief kiss before Harry exited the room. She waited until she couldn't hear his footsteps before sighing.

"That could have gone a lot worse," she commented, turning to the other remaining occupant of the room. Tom was looking a lot less pleased with the outcome of the fight.

"I don't like him running from us," the older boy said, with a slight growl to his voice.

"He's not running from us," Hermione told him, resisting the urge to roll her eyes only because she could see Tom was genuinely vexed by Harry's decision to sleep apart. "It's not like we argue that often and he just wants space and privacy while he processes what happened tonight-- we're practically living in each other's pockets right now, after all, and we're all still young. Maybe it would have been a good idea to have our own rooms, just for when we need some alone time."

"Or maybe I should drag him back to our room and tie him to the bed," Tom said, his irises briefly flickering red. Hermione tensed.

"That would be a very bad idea," she warned. "It would make Harry very, very upset."

"I am aware of that," Tom said through gritted teeth, "I am just struggling to care. Besides, once he's trapped I'm sure it wouldn't take much encouragement to talk him into 'forgiving and forgetting' and all that--"

"Tom!" she interrupted, "you cannot just manhandle or manipulate the people you care about like that!"

"I could just make him forget he was ever upset," Tom suggested. "That wouldn't hurt him at all."

"But that's even worse!" Hermione exclaimed. "Fucking hell, Tom!" She couldn't deny feeling shaken by Tom's words and had to take a deep breath. "You understand why that would be considered a violation of Harry," she said, trying to sound calm.

Tom narrowed his eyes at her. "To ordinary people, maybe, but none of us can be considered such a thing." He argued and she shook her head.

"Fucked up in the head or not, it doesn't matter," she told him firmly. "Look, I know you're aware that it is considered wrong to mess with other people's emotions and memories, even if you don't fully understand why. And I also know it's not in your nature to follow the rules of others-- moral ones included-- so you're just going to have to challenge yourself to set your own rules to protect Harry and I from, well, from you. I want to be able to trust that you'll respect my rights to my own thoughts and emotions, and I want to be able to trust you'll do the same to Harry-- not just be a slave to your own emotions and desires."

"Did you just call me a slave?" Hissed Tom, his eyes now completely red. Hermione swallowed and shook her head.
"No, I asked that you think before you act. That you be rational, not reactive."

"You are treading on thin ice," Tom warned and Hermione narrowed her eyes at him.

"I thought I was having a conversation with my boyfriend." She said sharply.

They were both silent for a long moment, their eyes not leaving each other. Hermione stood firm, but she was still relieved to finally see some of the stiffness leave Tom's shoulders. "I don't want to hurt you," he said slowly, "either of you. Well, not in a way you don't consent to." He added, lips curling in a brief smirk. Hermione rolled her eyes at him before concentrating on the more important part of his statement.

"And the logical part of you has to recognise that using magic to mess with Harry's mind would be hurting him, even though it isn't actual painful," she said and his lips thinned.

"I am attempting to." He said, flexing his long fingers slightly.

"Just... think about what I said, alright?" She said with a sigh. "I can't be your moral compass-- I'd be bloody awful at it. I probably need one of my own, to be honest. And I couldn't contain you, even if I tried. Only you can. Create boundaries, ones you challenge yourself to follow. Don't... don't make us regret trusting you."

"Do you trust me?" Tom asked, looking genuinely curious. "Harry has said that he trusts me, but you never have." Hermione blinked at him, honestly shocked.

"Tom," she said incredulously, "I let you tie me up and hurt me-- if that doesn't say 'I trust you', then what the fuck does?"

"Even when I'm a 'slave' to my emotions and desires?" Tom pressed, sneering slightly in distaste as he said it. Hermione rolled her eyes again.

"I'm still here arguing with you, aren't I?" She countered. "If I thought you might snap and hurt me one day, do you think I'd be standing here and basically antagonising you while you're already pissed off?"

"For Harry? Yes." Tom said bluntly and she groaned.

"Oh for god's sake-- fine. Fine. You want proof that I trust you? Then let's do a scene, right now. I'm sure you're in the mood for a little stress relief, anyway."

Tom's eyes snapped over to meet hers, practically pinning her in place with the intensity in them. "Are you sure?" He demanded, voice low. Despite the tension ratcheting up inside her, Hermione gave a seemingly careless shrug.

"I've got my safewords. And I trust you, Tom."

Tom's answering smile was less then comforting and part of Hermione knew that they really should at least be negotiating right now, that their current mental states were far from ideal for what she'd just proposed, but she wanted to make a point and refused to back out now, smart thing to do or not.

Because fuck it, she did trust Tom. She trusted him, trusted that even if he did end up breaking her apart he wouldn't abuse the emotional she could end up as; no, she really believed that he would put all her pieces back together, would fix her up, build her back to her normal-- closed off, defensive, paranoid and somewhat traumatised, though she'd never admit that out loud-- state.
She trusted him and that was a weighty thing; to someone like her, that meant more then 'I love you'. It meant everything.

Letting Tom fasten her wrists above her head in the cuffs was no less nerve-wracking then when she'd let him tie her up with rope and Hermione closed her eyes and concentrated on evening out her breathing, slowing her heart rate back down. The cuffs were attached to a chain Tom had conjured to hang from the ceiling and the length of the chain meant she had to stand on her tip-toes to keep the weight off her shoulder sockets as her wrists were trapped above her head.

The sound of Tom walking in a slow circle around her wasn't helping in her efforts to stay calm and collected, nor did the swish of the cane in his hand as he swung it lightly through the air. Unbidden, a shudder rippled through her suspended body.

"Tell me your words," Tom instructed and she shuddered again as she felt the tip of the cane tap against her chin.

"Green for go, red for stop," she said clearly, before she forced her slightly numb fingers to click twice.

"Good girl," Tom praised, pausing behind her and tilting his head down to brush his mouth along the curve of her neck, his lips lingering over the pulse-point. Hermione let out an unsteady breath she hadn't even realised had been trapped in her throat as his tongue lathed over the skin.

"Are you ready, darling?" He asked, and against the now-wet skin his breath felt icy cold. "Yes or no."

"Yes." Hermione said hoarsely, nearly trembling from nerves and anticipation, opening her eyes again. Tom pressed one last wet, open-mouthed kiss against her pulse before he stepped away. The sight of the cane in his hands had Hermione's heart start thudding unevenly and she watched as he swished it through the air theatrically, building up her anxious anticipation before stepping forward swiftly and striking.

The first blow was harsh and strong, Tom holding nothing back, as was his nature. Hermione hissed in shock at the line of fire the thin rod left on her skin, her entire body flinching as a vicious-looking red welt formed on the back of her thigh. She could already tell this was going to hurt much worse then the wax had and the pain left her momentarily stalled, mouth parted in something like shock as she quietly gasped. Tom waited for her, his eyes dark with lust and something deeper, something much more terrifying. Trust, Hermione thought to herself, and nodded. "Green." She said, her voice shaking but clear, and Tom's mouth curled into a dangerous smile that had her shivering and bracing herself for the pain that would follow. He didn't disappoint.

Tom brought the cane down hard and fast, striking burning lines of fiery torment along the sensitive flesh of her upper thighs over and over. The pain stung and burned hot and refused to ebb, each blow dragging bitten back groans and sharp hisses of pain from Hermione until at strike number nineteen she finally let out a proper cry. Tom paused and between one gasping breath and the next she choked out, "green!"

She didn't stay as silent now, the blazing lines of agony causing whimpers and sobs to escape her lips as she struggled uselessly in place with each brutal blow. Tracks of tears stained her face and she could feel small trickles of blood running down her legs from where the cane had broken skin.

Her skin felt like it was burning, like hungry flames were licking along the backs of her thighs and
each strike from the cane was like a knife against the ravaged skin; or a red-hot poker stoking the fire, adding new trails of blazing agony and sending small splatters of blood flying. By the time Tom stopped Hermione's tears were really falling and the skin of her thighs was stained bright red with welts, her skin broken in places and lightly bleeding, dark shadows of bruises already forming. She was slumped in place, all her weight supported by her bound and suspended wrists as she panted raggedly and choked back her sobs. Her head was spinning, the heady blur of pain caused by the caning leaving her wrecked.

The rope suddenly lengthened and Hermione stumbled, not able to support herself on her trembling legs and falling to her knees. Her arms were still trapped above her head, the pressure on her wrists and shoulders a dull, throbbing ache that was barely noticeable compared to the blazing agony of her thighs.

"Hermione," Tom said, his voice firm, "Hermione, tell me your safewords." Hermione just panted and Tom frowned. "Words, Hermione. We can't play if you can't use your words."

Hermione shuddered and gasped and when she spoke, her voice was cracked and broken and absolutely fucking beautiful. "Green for go, Red for stop."

"And?"

Hermione forced her mostly uncooperative fingers to click twice and Tom smiled, dark and predatory, murmuring something under his breath she couldn't hear.

For a moment nothing happened and then the choker around her neck changed, the lace seeming to turn to a steel band, something which would have confused Hermione if it wasn't for the slightly more important fact that it had started to strangle her. As she wheezed for air Tom fisted his hand in her hair, tugging sharply to bring her head up to look him in the eyes. He looked hungry, focused on her slowly suffocating with his pupils blown wide.

"You look so fucking filthy and perfect," he hissed and the steel choker loosened enough that she could finally take a gasping breath. "Safeword?" He demanded and she managed to force her uncooperative lips to move, to make her voice work.

"G-G-Green," she wheezed and he immediately tightened his grip and pulled her head down onto him, thrusting into her mouth with one quick stroke that went hard and deep and hit the back of her throat. Hermione cried out in surprise but her voice broke as she was suddenly choking. The grip in her hair didn't falter though and Tom pulled out, giving her just enough time to breath before he rammed back in. And then he did it again with a graceful roll of his hips, and again and again and again. He was relentless and uncaring, alternating between shallow, fast penetrations and deeper, heavier ones as Hermione remained utterly pliant, all her weight on her suspended wrists as she breathed when she could. Her brain felt like it was running in vapours and all she could concentrate on was trying to breathe.

And then Tom pulled out completely, yanking harshly on her hair to bring her dazed attention back to him. "Take a deep breath," he warned, "it'll be the last one you get for some time. Deep breath, darling."

It took a moment for the order to really register in her dazed mind but then Hermione inhaled deeply and Tom smiled. "Good girl," he murmured and then he rammed back into her, far too deep and all at once, and she gagged on it, the sudden jolt of helplessness making her already clouded mind spin. It was only the ropes around her wrists that kept her suspended upright as the next thrust went so deep that her air supply was completely cut off, Tom forcing his hard length down her throat, through the frantic contractions of the tender walls of her oesophagus until his groin was
pressed firmly to her nose. Tom wasn't small by any means and to be forced to take all of him so deep made Hermione feel split open and torn apart and utterly desecrated.

She couldn't breathe, not when her nose was stuffy from her earlier crying during the caning, and she had no control of anything, not even her teeth she was gagging so hard. Tom held her hair in an iron grip as he fucked her throat with fast, deep thrusts, in and out, sharp jolts of pain on her scalp she barely registered. Strings of drool, mucus and precome were dripping from her chin and her vision was starting to swim, only she wasn't sure if it was because of the lack of oxygen or the tears from her excessive gagging that were running down her cheeks and mixing with the saliva.

The rough blow job seemed endlessly long; the onslaught so harsh and deep and ongoing that her oesophagus had stopped contracting properly, the muscles too exhausted. Lack of oxygen made her head spin wildly, made her mind unable to properly focus as dizzying emotions tangled and tore inside her chest. She was sobbing silently, violently shaking all over as her body desperately tried to dry heave, and she was just so fucking gone.

The grip on her hair tightened, becoming so demanding it felt like Tom was going to tear it out, and Hermione made a choked keening sound, fresh tears from the pain streaming down her cheeks to mix with the mess of already on her jaw and chin. It felt as if each and every one of her senses was in complete overdrive and at the verge of collapse.

And she still couldn't breathe; the edges of her vision had turned fuzzy and she was starting to see spots through the blur of tears. Her body's automatic urge to struggle finally kicked in, her chest heaving soundlessly as true panic tore through her.

She tried to yank her face away but Tom just clasped his hands and forearms around her struggling head in some twisted version of an embrace, keeping her trapped and still, his thrusts now short and deep. Her throat was so full and pushed so wide Hermione felt like she was going be ripped apart any second unless she died first of asphyxiation. She couldn't even produce one sound, so full and lost and blured and starting to just slide into blackness.

Tom let out one last gasp and came to a stop. He stayed buried deep for a couple of seconds and then drew out with a groan. Suddenly, Hermione's mouth was flooded and she actually had to work to swallow everything down her poor abused throat despite the burn of the come against the irritated inner walls of her throat and her reflexive choking and retching. She was sobbing, shaking and panting, trying to use her lungs without coughing while every breath felt like sandpaper down her throat. She barely even noticed the ropes hauling her back to her feet.

Once the coughing stopped she went quiet, the tears sliding soundlessly down her cheeks while her breathing went soft and mute with only the slightest of wheezes. Tom tipped her chin up, forcing her to meet his gaze. Hermione's eyes were clouded and distant, her entire body slack, and she was dripping sweat, blood, tears, come and snot. Tom carefully slid his fingers into the heat of her, curling them while his thumb rubbed against her clit.

"Come for me, beautiful girl," He murmured after a few minutes, barely audible at all. Hermione shuddered and obeyed, her orgasm silent as she fell limp, her body fully supported by her wrists. Tom held her through it, and when she was finally spent he murmured the counter spell. The rope released and she collapsed into Tom's waiting arms, the sockets of her arms burning from the stretch and pins and needles vicious under her skin. Tom cradled her close and carried her over to bed, laying her down on her stomach to avoid aggravating the injured skin of her thighs.

Hermione felt boneless. She wasn't sure when she'd been laid on her side but the steel collar was gone, replaced by the familiar band of lace and long fingers were stroking her hair, rubbing tenderly at the sore spots on her scalp. Lips pressed soft kisses to her bruises and Hermione blinked
blearily up at the person the mouth and hand belonged to. Tom's eyes were a burning crimson. "You are so filthy," he breathed. "It's a beautiful look on you, my clever, darling girl. So fucking filthy and used. My broken, beautiful piece of perfection."

Hermione closed her eyes again. Tom's hands felt wonderful on her forehead and running a damp cloth over her face, cleaning the excess of fluids there. He stroked his hands through her sweat-soaked curls, centering her as the messy tangle under her skin unraveled, each feeling, sensation and emotion fading until she felt raw. Opened and exposed and raw.

"Beautiful girl, clever girl, so perfect," Tom murmured, over and over. He pressed a cup of water to her lips and Hermione drank it down eagerly, not realizing just how thirsty she'd been until the first mouthful slid down her scraped raw throat. Before wrapping her in a blanket, Tom started healing the welts, bruises and broken skin of the back of her thighs, Hermione watching over her shoulder through half-lidded eyes as the wounds seemed to age, looking days old not brand new. Once he'd finished, he wrapped her up, tucking her knees up so she wouldn't be putting any pressure on the back of her thighs and then hugging her when the shivers started, careful touches and quiet words reorienting and reassuring her as she drifted back up into herself; comfortable, wrapped in warmth and softness and a hand stroking through her hair, fingers light against her scalp.

"Back with me?" Tom asked eventually and Hermione made an agreeing humming sound before speaking.

"Yeah," she said, her voice hoarse and scratchy, and Tom's mouth twitched.

"Throat sore?"

"You're a fucking arsehole." She muttered in response, glaring half-heartedly at him but feeling too wrung out and floaty to really be mad. She winced as she ran her hand over her neck, feeling raised lines from the steel collar and then barely brushing her fingertips to the back of her thighs. "Fucking ow." She muttered. "What the shit? Oh, stop looking so smug, you bastard!" She added, scowling weakly at Tom. "You're such a fucking sadist."

"And you love it," Tom said lazily before reaching over to tug her close, taking the pressure of her thighs as he pulled her so she was mostly settled across his chest, her ear over his heart, her favourite place to rest her head. She winced as Tom skimmed his fingers over the backs of her thighs, turning her head slightly to nip the skin of Tom's chest in punishment hard enough to make him grunt, but she didn't actually tell him to stop and eventually she dozed off to the sensation of Tom's fingers exploring her heated, abused skin, any fears and anxieties miles and miles away.

And the fact Harry was still wearing the Ring had escaped her mind completely.

Chapter End Notes

So it's actually on schedule! Yay! Hope you all enjoyed the update :D

~CC
Part Four: The Goblet of Fire - Chapter LVI

Chapter Notes

To make up for the fact this update is late, I've posted the next two chapters (which were originally one chapter but ended up being nearly 20,000 words and even for me that's too long so I split it in half and thought about posting the second one in a fortnight but decided not to be cruel). I hope you enjoy them!

~CC

CHAPTER LVI:

Voldemort's POV:

Severus Snape looked pale and afraid. It was immensely satisfying to see that all the time his spy had spent around Albus Dumbledore hadn't done anything to diminish the boy's fear of him. Well, Severus wasn't quite a boy; not anymore.

The reminder of the lost years almost made him frown. Voldemort didn't like thinking about that lost decade with his powers reduced to almost nothing, less then the meanest ghost; just a shade clinging to existence and constantly experiencing pain and suffering as he held on to the mockery of life he'd been cut down to.

It was oh-so tempting to rage at anyone who'd played a role in his temporary (no, he refused to call it a "downfall") his temporary hiatus, such as Harry Potter for rebounding the curse, Pettigrew for revealing the location of the Potters and leading him to the boy, Severus for bringing that thrice-cursed prophecy to his attention... yes, he was certainly tempted to raze them all to nothing, but he'd stilled his temper and instead focused on the puppet master responsible for pulling the strings of all three—Albus Dumbledore.

Of course, with the knowledge of Dumbledore's secret actions in the Wizengamot, he'd hit a stumbling block when it came to the old man. Without knowing Dumbledore's true goals, he couldn't completely rip everything away from the old man and destroy everything he'd ever cared about before taking his life.

It was annoying, to say the least, having his plans momentarily thwarted.

He did have Harry Potter, though, and he knew for a fact that Dumbledore cared for the boy—obviously not his wellbeing considering the muggles who'd raised him, and if Dumbledore was aware of Harry's status as a Horcrux then he certainly didn't care for his life either, but the boy did matter to his plans and for that Voldemort would shower Harry Potter with gold and gems, teach him all the magic he wished to learn and firmly seduce him to the Dark side, granting him a place of power in his ranks that most would kill for.

Tom was certainly making the seduction to the Dark easy too, though he'd admit to have been
startled by the odd little relationship that had developed between Harry, his living Horcrux, and the piece of his soul gained physical form.

He himself hadn't desired matters which pertained to the flesh for... decades now. Not since around the time he'd created his third Horcrux.

That thought made him frown but he cast it aside for now to concentrate on the terrified but desperately trying to hide it Severus Snape.

Of his many Death Eaters, Severus was one of the very few he'd be sorry to kill. Once he'd talked himself out of razing the boy-- now man-- to ashes for the part he'd played in the Halloween debacle, Voldemort had been able to focus on the many qualities he'd actually appreciated about the younger wizard; his skill in potions, his steadfast loyalty, his lack of bloodthirstiness and hunger for violence-- often a refreshing break, considering the majority of the company he kept-- and his dedication. And if he identified with the man because of their shared blood status, well, that was certainly something he would never, ever discuss with another living soul.

Of course, he was very aware of just how Severus's bone-deep loyalty could be turned against him; the man had loved Lily Potter née Evans and Voldemort knew just how stupid that ridiculous emotion could make people. Hermione Granger was a perfectly intelligent girl, for example, yet despite knowing much, much better, because of love she'd been willing to make deals with the devil-- him-- to keep Harry Potter safe. Ridiculous.

Ridiculous but something he'd always made sure to keep note of. And despite his original intentions and the promise he'd made, he had killed the Potter woman. Severus would, no doubt have viewed that as a betrayal and Voldemort would admit to being unsure whether the man's loyalty to the Dark would have been enough to get him to move past that-- or if Dumbledore had taken advantage of his absence to dig his hooks into his Death Eater. The old bastard stealing Severus wasn't an impossible scenario, he was all too aware.

He could cut his losses with Severus-- there was no real need to keep such a risky piece on the chessboard; war, even ones without bloody battlefields, had no places for a wild card. Yet if Severus was still one of his, then the man's services as a spy would be very valuable and he was in the perfect position to keep watch over his Horcrux-- over Harry.

It was... a difficult decision. Tom had advised keeping the potion's master but Voldemort suspected that had more to do with Harry and Hermione's affections for their Head of House then strategy.

In the end, Voldemort had decided the benefits currently outweighed the risks. He needed a spy inside Dumbledore's precious Order and inside Hogwarts. Even if Severus really was playing the double agent, he'd still have to pass on enough information about the Light that Voldemort wouldn't get 'suspicious'.

He could always deal with the man later, after all.

And, of course, there had been that article in the Prophet-- the interview Harry had given. Voldemort certainly didn't believe in apologizing to those under him, but that didn't mean he couldn't confirm the truth. And if that truth managed to have a desirable impact on his servant then that was just convenient, wasn't it?

"I assume you read Harry Potter's interview in the Prophet," Voldemort broke the long silence that had stretched out between them. Severus flinched slightly at the sudden sound, his mouth tightening slightly as old grief flickered in his dark eyes.
"I did, my Lord," he answered in a stiff voice and Voldemort nodded. Good.

"Lily Potter's death was never my intention." He told the younger wizard. "I planned to spare her." That was the closest he would give to an apology and far more then what most could ever receive, but if Severus really had chosen to ally with Dumbledore, well, Voldemort intended to twist the metaphorical knife first before moving on to business. "You'd think Dumbledore would have had more respect for her dying wish," he said lazily, watching in amusement as Severus straightened imperceptibly.

"My Lord?"

"She sacrificed herself so her son would live; her life for his," he mused, "it's almost amusing how Dumbledore plans to sacrifice her son in turn so the rest of his precious Light can live."

Horror, disbelief, mistrust, wariness, betrayal, anger... Voldemort was careful to keep the enjoyment off his face as he watched the emotions flicker across Severus's face, almost too fast to really track.

"I don't understand, my Lord." His Death Eater finally admitted.

"I've become aware of... specific circumstances... surrounding the boy that I have little doubt Dumbledore is too. Due to these circumstances, I can state with absolute certainty that Dumbledore doesn't expect– nor desire– for the boy to survive me."

Ah, the rage in Severus's eyes was very satisfying to see. There was still mistrust, of course, but that was to be expected. Still, he'd planted the seeds of doubt and Severus could do with them as he wished. The truth was on his side, which was admittedly not something that happened often, so he wasn't afraid of what the persistent man could dig up. Dumbledore, on the other hand, should be.

"I assume the Order has re-formed?" he questioned his spy, abruptly bored with needling the man, despite the entertaining silent torment. Severus seemed to shake himself from his thoughts, focusing back on their conversation and apparently remembering the danger he was technically in if the way he paled slightly was any indication. The man had no way of knowing Voldemort didn't actually intend to harm him, after all. Well, not permanently– if used in short bursts the cruciatus didn't leave any long term damage.

"Yes, my Lord, Dumbledore has recalled all the disbanded members of the Order as well as recruiting several new ones," Severus answered, a touch hesitantly. Voldemort frowned. He'd suspected, of course, but it was still frustrating news.

"He gathered them after the Philosopher's Stone went missing, no doubt," he said sourly. "No matter, he has yet to make any real trouble. Nobody in the Ministry believes I'm alive and he obviously has not connected Thaddeus Dagworth to my return."

"He is coordinating efforts to defeat Dagworth's– your– proposed legislations, but no more then he does with Lucius," Severus offered up and Voldemort nodded, pleased. "Most of the meetings have been in regards to locating Harry Potter," Severus added, hesitant again. Voldemort resisted the urge to smirk.

"Ah, yes, the little disappearing acts... yes I am aware of those, Severus." He watched Severus hastily hide the wariness and trepidation on his face. "When I ordered my Death Eaters not to touch a hair on his head, it wasn't so I could be the one to kill the boy." He told the man, amused by the caution his spy was trying to hide from him. "I do not intend to harm Harry Potter while he stays out of my way."
And he didn't expect that to change anytime soon— or at all. Harry seemed content with staying out of the fighting and while he would have enjoyed having the boy fight for him, Harry choosing the Dark was enough. For now.

"You will let him live, my Lord?" Severus asked quietly.

"I am a merciful lord," Voldemort replied, "I do not hold his actions as an infant against him. The boy is one of us; he is a Slytherin. And as I said in the meeting, I no longer wish to spill needless magical blood."

The strength of the badly hidden relief on Severus's face was curious and Voldemort made a note to discuss it with Harry and Hermione when he spoke with them. Apparently the bond between his spy and the boy went deeper then the fact Harry was the child of the woman Severus had loved. But that was of little matter now. "I want full summaries of every Order meeting since it was reformed," he ordered, getting back to business.

"Of course, my Lord— I will get them to you as soon as possible," Severus promised. His spy then cautiously added, "Karkaroff's sudden disappearance will gain Dumbledore's attention, my Lord— and it will raise eyebrows among the wider magical community. Possibly even internationally."

Voldemort made a dismissive gesture in response to that. "Barty will pose as Karkaroff for a few days," he said carelessly. "He'll announce he's been struck violently ill with an irreversible condition, likely dragonpox, that requires his immediate retirement from duty and a retreat to a quiet, countryside house where he can live out the rest of his days in peace. This house will be highly warded, of course, so no one will know it's location and Karkaroff will rarely leave it. People will quickly forget him— despite the prestigious position he managed to gain, he never truly amounted to much. He won't be missed."

"No, he certainly won't." Severus said, his tone unmistakably sour— reminding Voldemort that Severus had been one of his Death Eaters that Karkaroff had sold out. "But Dumbledore will still be suspicious."

"He still holds you in confidence, yes?" Voldemort enquired, raising an eyebrow.

"He does," Severus confirmed.

"Then I expect you to work to dissuade him from his suspicions." He ordered. "I do not want Dumbledore to learn I have summoned the complete Inner Circle again, not yet— nor that I am confident enough to kill a headmaster of an influential magical school right under his nose."

"So I shouldn't inform him of any of tonight's happenings?" Severus confirmed and Voldemort nodded sharply.

"I want him still thinking I'm regaining power, too weak to risk calling my followers to my side," he said, sneering slightly. "When I start making my bigger moves, I want him taken completely off guard."

He wanted that old fool blindsided when he swept control of Wizarding Britain out from beneath his crooked nose, wanted to see the horror in his twinkling eyes as he realised just who it was who'd bested him.

Rising to his feet, Voldemort nodded shortly at Severus. "I expect those summaries before the Hogwarts school term starts," he warned before twisting on the spot, apparating back to Riddle Manor and leaving his Death Eater with quite a bit to think about.
He would be very disappointed if Severus ended up making the wrong choice.

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**Harry's POV:**

The last thing he remembered was closing his eyes in one of the spare bedrooms in his countryside home, but when he opened them he found himself in Riddle Manor... except it was different. The colors were faded, almost, like he was looking at his surroundings through a filter. The painting on the wall was frozen, like a muggle one– except there were definitely no muggle paintings in Voldemort's house.

"Hello," a familiar voice greeted him from behind. Harry turned to face Tom and was confused to see him wearing Hogwarts robes. He also looked... off, just like the Manor looked off. Different in a way Harry couldn't really pinpoint, standing there and smiling, his long fingers fiddling with something.

Despite the weirdness, Harry still smiled at his boyfriend. "Hey Tom," he greeted him, about to step over and kiss the older boy when he remembered technically they'd just had a fight. He'd also just noticed what it was that Tom was fiddling with– the older boy was turning the Ring around over and over in his hands. "Wait, is this a dream?" he asked, confused. "Is this my brain's way of processing?"

Tom, whose off-smile had wavered slightly as for some reason he looked surprised to be addressed, visibly smoothed his expression out, off-smile reappearing.

"And why would you think this is a dream?" He asked, voice strangely smooth. Harry shrugged, looking around at his surroundings.

"Because you're acting weird– well, weirder then usual, no offense– and the Manor looks different. I'm pretty sure these candelabras are all supposed to be silver, not brass, and they had little snakes engraved on them."

"You've been here before?" Dream-Tom demanded, brief shock flickering over his face. The sudden impatience in his voice was much more familiar then the odd tone from before. Still, that was a bizarre question for him to ask.

"Definitely a dream," Harry said, eyeing his mind's apparent representation of his boyfriend oddly. "Of course I've been here before– we all spent the summer living here!"

Dream-Tom's eyes glittered strangely with something Harry couldn't quite figure out and the older boy started moving forwards, slipping the Ring onto one of his fingers as he did so. Was that some kind of dream symbolism that he wanted Tom to step into his shoes? Harry wondered, still eyeing dream-Tom strangely. "You know me," Tom murmured and Harry frowned at him.

"I'd hope so. We are dating, not that you'd ever deign to call it something as plebeian as that."

"We're sleeping together?" Tom asked, now only about a foot away. He stopped, head tilted slightly. "You seem young." He didn't sound condemning of that, merely like he was surprised.

"Well, we haven't had sex yet, but we've done pretty much everything else." Harry admitted. Tom frowned.
"Then why haven't we fucked?"

"That's... kind of a good question," Harry sighed, scanning the room for a chair to slump down on. Maybe his brain actually did know what it was doing, he mused as he located an elegant winged armchair over by the bay windows. He crossed over to it and flopped down before turning his attention in earnest back to his dream-therapist version of Tom. Who happened to look really bewildered right now. "It's not that I don't trust you," he told Tom, "because I do, but I'm scared. What if I'm really awful at it? Do you realise how embarrassing that would be? And obviously you're going to top, so I'm pretty sure it's going to hurt too and I'm not exactly into pain. Well, I don't think I am anyway, but even if I was, which I doubt, it wouldn't be that sort of pain. And I guess I'm scared you'll be impatient and not be careful enough because I keep putting this off, but of course that means I'm putting it off even more which just means you're getting even more impatient."

He slumped back into the chair, which was surprisingly comfortable, as Tom continued to look at him in bewilderment. "I think I'm ready," he mumbled, "I just... I don't want it to be a let-down."

"You could always practice in a dream like this," Tom suggested, suddenly all sly-eyed with an unsurprisingly tempting smirk on his face. "A dream is practically a mindscape, after all," he said, with a flash of humor in his eyes like he'd just said some joke only he understood, "and mindsapes can be controlled. If you don't want to feel pain in it, then you won't."

"You think I should have dream sex with you so I'll be less scared of having real-life sex with you?" Harry clarified before shaking his head slightly. "God, this really is the weirdest dream I've ever had," he muttered. Tom's smirk widened.

"I didn't hear a no."

"You didn't hear a yes either," Harry pointed out, amused that apparently the Tom his mind had conjured up was just as not-subtle as real-life Tom. His subconscious had got that part right at least. "We had an argument tonight, Tom, and I have to go kill someone when I wake up-- I'm not really in the mood."

"And I am really not ready to talk about the premeditated murder of a classmate I'm going to be committing tomorrow," Harry told him. "And as for the argument," he sighed and shrugged, "staying angry at you is too tiring. I've gotten as much of an apology as I'm ever going to get for the whole Ring deal, and Salazar knows I'll never get one from Voldemort in a million years--"

"Voldemort?" Tom interrupted sharply. Harry rolled his eyes.

"Yeah, the one who actually gave me the Ring? Your 'counterpart' as you call him? Or 'the original' when you slip up?" He said sarcastically. Tom gave him a very long, unsettling look.

"Interesting," he said softly. "That's very interesting." Harry eyed Tom strangely again.

"Seriously-- weirdest dream ever." He said and Tom smiled oddly at him.

"Perhaps it's time for you to, ah, 'wake up', then," he said. Harry opened his mouth to tell him that's not how dreams worked, not even weird, lucid dreams like this one, but the world around him started to suddenly blur and then dim. The next thing he knew, he was blinking against the dawn light creeping in from the cracks in the heavy drapes.

He sat up slowly in the bed, reaching out for his glasses. The world swam into sharp focus and he
shook his head slightly, as if clearing his head from cobwebs. He reached up to push his hair out of his eyes and in doing so, noticed the ring still sitting on his finger. The real ring— he'd never taken it off, he realised. Well, it wasn't like Tom or Hermione had said anything about needing to and Tom had definitely said it wouldn't hurt him.

And to be honest, if the magic on it was supposed to have helped him cope with Riddle Manor, then he could probably use it to help cope with what he was going to have to do today– and a shudder ran through Harry at that thought and he swallowed dryly.

It had been the fact that Hermione and Tom had both lied to him and treated him like a child that had upset him— not the ring itself; not exactly, anyway. Yes, the idea of a spell been put on him was a bit unnerving, but he did trust Tom— and he trusted Voldemort to an extent too. If they said it was to help, then... well, then he'd believe them until they proved otherwise.

There wasn't a lot that could make Harry forget about a meeting with Voldemort, but it seemed premeditated murder qualified— which was why it was such a shock to go down for breakfast and see Voldemort already sitting there with Tom and Hermione, reading a copy of The Prophet and drinking a coffee in an almost eerie déjà vu of the summer holidays at Riddle Manor.

Pretending he hadn't almost had a heart attack at the unexpectedness of the sight, Harry sat down and quietly served himself up some toast, mumbling a good morning. By what seemed to be an unspoken, unanimous agreement, neither he, Tom or Hermione mentioned the argument from the night before, nor did anyone mention the purple bruising on Hermione's neck, the awkward way she was sitting or the small, airtight muggle glass bottle placed that had been placed in the middle of the dining room table, filled with about 10mL of clear, unidentifiable liquid.

"I read your article." Commented Voldemort, breaking the slightly awkward silence (well, he and Hermione had been sitting awkwardly; Tom just looked amused) as he folded his paper and placed it on the table. It was an oddly domestic thing to witness the Dark Lord do. "The one in The Prophet. That friend of yours– Greengrass– will have a place in the Ministry once it's mine."

"Daph'd be terrified but delighted to hear that," Harry said honestly and Voldemort gave him a look that seemed equal parts amused and suspiciously fond in response.

"The article itself was impressive too– that Miss Skeeter is quite the talented journalist. I've read her work; she could be very useful."

"And I would love to know how she gets into all those places she shouldn't and overhears everything that she does." Tom commented.

"Yes, it is suspicious– and convenient," Voldemort agreed with his counterpart, the two of them trading significant looks with each other. Harry bit back a smile at the nearly identical expressions on the two Dark Lords' faces. He'd realised over summer that discussing and plotting all sorts of nefarious and insidious deeds was their version of discussing the weather and Harry relaxed slightly from the familiarity of it.

Well, he relaxed until Voldemort commented how protective Snape had seemed of him last night, wondering out loud just how much it had to do with his love for Lily Potter.

"Wait, what?" He gasped. "S-Snape was in love with my mum?"

"He never told you? Well I suppose that's not a conversation you have with the child of your lost
love and childhood bully." Voldemort noted. Disregarding the 'childhood bully' comment for the
time been, Harry concentrated on the shocking revelation that had just been thrust upon him.

"Snape was in love with my mum?" He repeated weakly.

"He begged me to spare her," Voldemort told him. "Did you not wonder why I gave her three
chances to step aside that night?"

"I try not to think about the night you murdered my parents at all," Harry muttered, staring down at
his half-eaten toast and feeling a bit like he'd just run into a wall or something. He barely heard
anything else the others talked about until Voldemort brought up the veela, his mind was spinning
so much.

"I'm meeting with the delegates of the French champion's activist group to discuss the terms of an
alliance later," Voldemort told them and Harry straightened up in his seat, shoving his confused
thoughts off to a corner of his mind as Hermione's eyes sharpened with interest.

"Fleur will be pleased," she commented and Voldemort nodded slightly.

"If everything works out how I'm expecting it to, then the alliance will be finalised by the end of
the day."

Harry immediately nodded, as did Hermione before she cleared her throat slightly. "We didn't
intend to speak for you," she said carefully, her shoulders tense. "When we gave Fleur our word to
help her, we were only referring to ourselves."

"But you're not lone wolves anymore, Hermione," Voldemort said in his soft, dangerous voice,
cold red eyes too sharp by half. "If you fight, there are people now who will follow you– and you
have sworn to give your public support to 'Thaddeus Dagworth'. Your choices will have
consequences that affect more then just Harry and yourself, and as 'Thaddeus' gains more and more
power and influence, as his niece so will you. What you say and do will reflect on him– I don't
think I have to explain just how... upset I would be if something you did reflected poorly on
'Thaddeus'."

"I... I understand." Hermione said quietly. "I'm sorry. I made a mistake– a stupid one. It won't
happen again."

"And I was the impulsive one," Harry added, not flinching when Voldemort's intense gaze flicked
to him. He met the Dark Lord's eyes with a calm he didn't really feel but a determination that he
did. He wouldn't hide behind Hermione; his mistakes were his to own up to. "I told Fleur we'd help
her right after hearing her story, Hermione was the one to get a deal out of it and demand some sort
of exchange in trade for our assistance."

Voldemort was silent for a seemingly endless moment before he spoke. "You are not a Gryffindor,
Harry Potter." He said. "Think before you act– you are not the only one who could pay the price
for any foolish actions."

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Later, with Voldemort's warning in his head, Harry couldn't help but question if killing Weasley counted as a 'foolish action'. He thought it probably did. When Weasley woke up from the coma, he'd name Neville as his attacker and then Neville would be expelled and probably arrested, but nothing would happen to him or Hermione; there was no real need for Harry to insert himself into the situation, especially in such a drastic way. Except Nev was his friend and the idea of just abandoning the other boy to his fate was abhorrent to Harry—so that just left foolish actions as the way to go.

Foolish actions that Harry was going to have to carry out personally. Of course, he understood why Hermione couldn't be part of the murder—she would need to be able to vow her innocence in the matter when Moody inevitably questioned her—but he did have the sneaking suspicion that if he really wanted to, Tom could easily get into St Mungo's to, er, 'deal' with Weasley. Apparently, however, Tom wanted Harry to carry out the murder instead. He would wonder what the purpose of that was, except summer at Riddle Manor had already shown him just how much Tom liked to get him to dirty his hands—the answer being very.

If he refused to go along with it—or maybe if he actually just asked Tom—Harry was (mostly) certain that Tom would murder his comatose classmate for him. But back at the gala, while Tom was talking about why killing Weasley was their best option, Harry had seen Neville's face and the realisation had struck him that this was a very real opportunity to tie Neville close to them, tangling the other boy with secrets and ensuring he couldn't leave. And even though they were talking about Weasley's life and some quite frankly horrible manipulation, Harry was selfish enough to go along with it, as he was genuinely afraid of losing Neville. Neville was a Gryffindor—he was good and Light and Harry knew he had to do something drastic to dig his claws into the other boy if he didn't want to lose him. And killing Weasley? That was definitely drastic enough to work.

And he wasn't just talking about in the practical sense, making Nev an accessory to murder—sure, there was a (much bigger then he'd admit) part of him that was pleased to tie Neville to the actual crime itself, but killing Weasley would do more then just make him an accessory and tangle the Gryffindor to him with secrets.

Before that lesson in DADA where Moody had shown them the Unforgiveables, Neville had been alone and lonely. Harry had changed that; he'd given the Gryffindor a taste of what real friendship was like—just like Hermione had to him, back when he was eleven and just as alone and lonely. Her kindness... it had been the first Harry had known and he'd have died for her long before she'd risked her life with that mountain troll for him. And after the troll, he hadn't just been prepared to die for her—he'd have killed for her too. Murdering Weasley would be more then just a shared crime, would mean more then just the debt Neville would feel; it would be their mountain troll. It would be Harry's gesture—his demonstration of just what their budding friendship meant to him and the lengths he was prepared to go for it.

And Harry was definitely Slytherin enough, and he knew Neville enough, to know it would work.

"You look like you're thinking heavy thoughts," Tom commented from where he was standing, ready to go.

"Yes, well, that's what happens when you're about to murder someone," Harry said dryly.

Tom smirked. "Oh I don't know about that—murder gets me all warm and fuzzy inside."

"First, that sounds so wrong coming from you," Harry commented with a slight shudder, because Tom and 'warm and fuzzy' just didn't fit together—ever. "Second, I happen to be very morally ambiguous, likely the result of spending my childhood in a cupboard, not a psychopath, so unlike you murder doesn't get me off."
"I never said anything about a sexual reaction," Tom pointed out.

"No, I just know you that well." He sighed, before adding, "and the fact you're not denying it is a bit of a give away."

Tom actually laughed, before he apparated them both to what seemed to be a busy section of muggle London. The older boy's lip immediately curled up in obvious distaste as he glanced around them at the bustling muggles. He'd applied disillusionment charms to them before they left, which was a good thing considering they were both dressed in wizarding robes.

"What are we doing here?" Harry asked, his hand tight and sweaty around the handle of his wand.

"The Ministry of Magic had to find a good location for the hospital," Tom explained quietly as he led them along a broad store-lined street packed with muggles. "There wasn't anywhere in Diagon Alley large enough and having it underground like the Ministry of Magic wouldn't be healthy for patients. They ended up deciding to purchase a building in muggle London. Sick witches and wizards can apparate in or use the floo and visitors can either floo or come and go via the hidden entrance, blending into the muggle crowd."

Despite the situation, Harry couldn't help but snort. "Wizards blend in with muggles? Yeah, I can definitely see that happening."

Tom smirked. "The Ministry's idiocy should be of no surprise to you."

"Definitely not at this point." He agreed before the nerves in his stomach seemed to double as Tom stopped outside a large, old-fashioned, red-brick department store called Purge & Dowse Ltd. The place had a shabby, miserable air; the window displays consisted of a few chipped dummies with their wigs askew, standing at random and modelling fashions at least ten years out of date. Large signs on all the dusty doors read: 'Closed for Refurbishment'.

"Horribly distasteful, isn't it?" Tom said, his lip curling again as he beckoned him towards a window displaying nothing but a particularly ugly female dummy. Its false eyelashes were hanging off and it was modelling a green nylon pinafore dress. Harry pulled a face and nodded his agreement as Tom leaned close to the glass, looking up at the very ugly dummy with his breath steaming up the glass. "I'm here to visit Frank and Alice Longbottom," he said clearly. Harry wondered how Tom could expect the dummy to hear him talking so quietly through a sheet of glass, with buses rumbling along behind him and all the racket of a street full of shoppers. Then he reminded himself that dummies couldn't hear anyway. Next second, his mouth opened in shock as the dummy gave a tiny nod and beckoned with its jointed finger.

"You're meeting Neville in the lobby." Tom reminded him, taking a step back and turning to face Harry again. "Do you have what you need?" He added, with a significant look. Harry reached into his pocket with the hand not still wrapped around his wand handle to brush his clammy fingers against the glass bottle in his pocket and nodded, feeling a bit like he'd been punched in the chest as he did so. Tom smiled— it was sharp and unnerving and far too cruel on his handsome. "Good." He said, reaching forwards to seize Harry's jaw lightning-quick and forcibly tilt his head up to look him in the eye. "Make me proud," he whispered before kissing him with bruising force, pressing their lips together in a slide of lips and tongue and sharp teeth that left Harry dizzy.

All too soon Tom pulled back and before he could even adjust, he undid the disillusionment charm and gave him a quick, hard shove towards the glass. Harry, lips wet and still parted and his head still spinning, fell towards the window and braced himself for falling against it. Instead of glass, though, it was like he'd just tripped through a sheet of cool water, emerging quite warm and dry on the other side where he managed to regain his balance, cursing Tom out under his breath as he did...
There was no sign of the ugly dummy or the space where it had stood. He was now in what seemed to be a crowded reception area where rows of witches and wizards sat upon rickety wooden chairs, some looking perfectly normal and perusing out-of-date copies of Witch Weekly and others sporting gruesome disfigurements such as elephant trunks or extra hands sticking out of their chests while witches and wizards in lime-green robes with an emblem embroidered on their chests of a wand and bone crossed were walking up and down the rows, asking questions and making notes on clipboards.

The room wasn't much quieter than the street outside as many of the patients were making very peculiar noises: a sweaty-faced witch in the centre of the front row, who was fanning herself vigorously with a copy of the Daily Prophet, kept letting off a high-pitched whistle as steam came pouring out of her mouth; a grubby-looking warlock in the corner clanged like a bell every time he moved and, with each clang, his head vibrated horribly so that he had to seize himself by the ears to hold it steady.

A plump blonde witch was seated at a desk marked Enquiries where a large queue was formed. A large sign to the left of the desk had the floor guide on it while the wall behind the witch was covered in notices and posters saying things like: A CLEAN CAULDRON KEEPS POTIONS FROM BECOMING POISONS and ANTIDOTES ARE ANTI-DON'TS UNLESS APPROVED BY A QUALIFIED HEALER.

There was also a large, empty painting which was labelled:

Dilys Derwent
St Mungo's Healer 1722-1741
Headmistress of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry 1741-1768

Thinking of the portraits of past Hogwarts headmasters and headmistresses in Dumbledore's office, Harry blanched and quickly hid his face from the empty portrait just in case Dilys felt like visiting the frame. He had to take a few calming breaths; his skin felt too tight drawn over him, clammy and covered in cold sweat.

A sudden voice directly beside to his side made him jump and he exhaled sharply in relief as he recognized Neville's pale face, the other boy having approached him and quietly called out his name. "Sorry," the Gryffindor said meekly and Harry forced a smile on his face.

"Not your fault, I'm just a bit jumpy." He said. Neville's strained laugh sounded wet and thick.

"Yeah, me too." He confessed. They both stood there for nearly a minute before Harry realised he was going to have to take charge. It was... an odd feeling. He was used to either Hermione or Tom leading. Swallowing, he steeled himself and gave Neville what he hoped was a reassuring look.

"Come on," he said, "let's get this over with." Neville gulped but nodded, determination settling onto his now faintly green face.

"A-Alright– I'll show you where h-he is."

Harry followed Neville as the Gryffindor led the way around the desk, off down a sloping corridor. Once they were out of sight of any patients, visitors or healers, Harry pulled the Invisibility Cloak out of his magically expanded pocket and threw it over them, being careful to check that both their ankles were covered before they set off again, for Weasley's room.
Watching Neville navigate his way around the hospital with such ease was sort of heartbreaking; it was clear in the subtle confidence Neville had as he walked, never hesitating or slowing, that the other boy had spent far too much time in St Mungo's over the years.

In his pocket, the dimethyl mercury felt like it weighed a ton despite there only being about 10mL of liquid in the glass bottle barely bigger then his pinky finger. With Hermione promising that as little as 0.1mL of the toxin was deadly enough to result in severe mercury poisoning, even half as much as what he had would be enough to deal swiftly and fatally with Weasley.

"B-Because the d-damage to Ron was physical, they'll probably be keeping him on the Artifacts Accidents floor," Neville whispered to him as they paused to wait for a witch in lime green robes to pass. "Artifacts Accidents deals with stuff like cauldron explosions, broom crashes and wands backfiring, so they're the best suited for dealing with b-broken bones and i-internal b-bleeding."

Neville sounded a bit like he'd be sick as he spoke about Weasley's injuries and Harry reached out to squeeze his shoulder. Under the cloak, Neville gave him a grateful look that had his stomach twisting with enough guilt he thought he might actually be sick.

Neville led them to the intensive care ward of the Artifacts Accidents floor where they started looking for the ward Weasley could be in. Only one room had a guard and seeing it, Harry was immediately certain that that had to be where Weasley was. After double-checking both he and Neville were completely invisible, he grabbed Neville's hand, whispered to him what they were about to do and then they carefully approached the guarded room together.

Harry didn't recognize the wizard acting as sentry, a middle-aged man with deep-set eyes and brown hair speckled with grey. Thankfully, the man seemed bored and wasn't paying an awful lot of attention to his surroundings as he mostly kept his eyes trained on a blonde female Healer– well, on her nicely-shaped buttocks, anyway, as she bent over.

Still, even with the guard paying very little attention, Harry's heart raced in his chest as he and Neville carefully crept past the wizard and even when they were inside the room, he couldn't relax. Adrenaline and sickening fear was making his veins boil and his bones tremble. He wasn't sure what sort of expression was on his face but he automatically knew that he had to hide this weakness, that he had to act collected and in control to keep Neville calm. Idly he wondered if Hermione had ever felt she had to act like that with him and felt a flicker of shame inside his chest as well as a new, harsh resolve that he wouldn't be her Neville– he wanted to be her equal, both her and Tom, and not the one they thought they had to protect.

Approaching the bed, still under the Invisibility Cloak with Neville, Harry examined its occupant. Weasley looked... surprisingly small. He seemed almost shriveled into himself, flaming red hair limp on the starch white fabric of the pillow. Magic had healed any cuts or bruises, but his skin seemed waxy and washed out.

Neville made a small, sick noise beside him as Harry pulled out the glass bottle. Hermione had explained that all he had to do was get it on Weasley's skin but that he had to make sure he didn't put it anywhere that someone else might touch as even that sort of minimal skin-to-skin contact could be enough to poison them too. Steeling himself for what felt like the umpteenth time in the last ten minutes alone, Harry carefully tilted Weasley's head so that his ear was exposed. His hands shook slightly as he undid the small bottle and pressed the glass rim to Weasley's ear.

Doing this would be irreversible in so many ways, yet even if he stopped now and begged Tom to do it instead, Weasley's blood would still technically be on his hands– no more hiding behind Tom and Hermione, Harry thought fiercely, then he let his hand tip.
It was almost anti-climatic, the way the clear liquid dripped into Weasley's ear canal, leaving no sign it was ever there. As soon as the bottle was empty, Harry hurriedly replaced the lid then waited, counting to twenty in his head before he adjusted Weasley's head so that his classmate looked the same as he had when they'd walked in.

Hermione had told him she didn't know how quickly the toxin would act and that once he'd administered it he should get out—fast. "Come on," he whispered to Neville, grabbing the other boy's hand again and coaxing him into getting moving. Slipping back past the guard was just as easy as entering the room, and once they were a corridor away from Weasley's room they broke into a run that didn't slow until they'd reached the sloping corridor near the lobby again.

"Alright," Harry said, relieved that his voice managed to stay steady despite 'cool, calm, collected and in control' been the last things he was feeling as he pulled the Invisibility Cloak off them and bundled it back into the magically expanded pocket. "That's done. It's time for our cover."

Hermione and Tom were both confident that St Mungo's wouldn't figure out Weasley had been poisoned, that the Healers would consider his death to be from further complications from the internal bleeding that had caused the puzzlingly persistent coma. However, just in case there was an investigation into who'd visited the hospital that day, Harry's excuse for being there was to be that Neville had taken him to visit his parents— and to make sure the cover story actually checked out, they needed to visit Frank and Alice Longbottom, no matter how uncomfortable Neville was with it.

His friend looked as pale and shaky as Harry felt as he led them back through the busy lobby and then through a set of double doors to a rickety staircase lined with portraits of brutal-looking Healers. As they climbed it, the various Healers called out to them, diagnosing odd complaints and suggesting horrible remedies. A few of them, Harry realised after two flights of stairs, were winking at Neville though and one witch even whispered a quick 'hullo dear– have a nice Yule?' to his friend.

"Your gran didn't think it was weird you wanted to come here alone or anything, did she?" Harry asked quietly as they climbed. Neville shook his head.

"She doesn't... she doesn't really like to visit them much." He muttered. Harry didn't ask for more information— Neville could share if he wanted to but he wasn't going to pry the issues Neville had with his grandmother out of his friend. Besides, this really, really wasn't the time for any sort of heart-to-heart— they'd just fatally poisoned someone and were setting up their cover story to explain their presence.

Harry's legs were relieved when they finally stopped on the landing of the fourth floor, where a small window was set into the double doors that marked the start of a corridor signposted SPELL DAMAGE.

"My parents, they— they don't really do much," Neville whispered, looking determinedly down at his feet. "Mum's usually a bit better then dad but... she can't talk or anything."

"I'll follow your lead," Harry promised and Neville nodded but hesitated again, glancing back the way they'd come.

"Do you... is it quick, do you think? Th-the stuff in the bottle?" he whispered. Harry winced.

"I really don't know," he admitted. Neville bit his lip but nodded, turning back to the double doors which swung open for them. They'd barely taken a dozen steps inside when a motherly-looking Healer approached them.
"Hullo Neville!" she greeted his friend warmly, before turning delighted eyes over in his direction. "Oh, and you brought a friend! Alice will be delighted!" she exclaimed, "and what's your na... oh my Merlin, you're Harry Potter!" The woman gasped, pressing both her hands over her generously-sized bosom. Harry was alarmed to see her tear up, her warm eyes overflowing.

"Maisie, I was just going to introduce Harry to my parents," Neville said hastily, and Harry gave silent thanks to his friend as the Healer – Maisie – sniffed but pulled herself back together.

"Oh, of course, of course," she said, conjuring a large pink handkerchief which she used to dab at her eyes as she smiled tearfully at them. "We'll do that right away– it's so lovely to meet a friend of Neville's, Mr Potter, I'm Healer Briggs but please call me Maisie."

"Um, please call me Harry– it's nice to meet you too." He said and Maisie sniffed again, lifting the handkerchief to wipe away fresh tears before leading them to a locked set of doors on which the words 'Janus Thickey Ward' were emblazoned. The healer waved her wand to undo spells that Harry guessed were to keep the residents in before gesturing for them to go in.

Once inside, Harry looked around curiously. The ward bore unmistakeable signs of being a permanent home to its residents, with many more personal effects around the beds than Weasley's ward had had.

The ward wasn't too full either, as far as he could see. Most of the occupants were unremarkable, but there were a few who were more noticeable, such as a sallow-skinned, mournful-looking wizard who lay staring at the ceiling, mumbling to himself and seeming quite unaware of anything around him, as well as a witch two beds along whose entire head was covered in fur. The beds Neville was leading them to were right at the end of the ward and Harry almost gasped when he got his first look at Neville's parents.

Frank Longbottom was so thin he looked a bit like a skeleton dipped in wax. He was hunched in an armchair, his skin ashen grey, no hair on his head and his eyes horribly vacant and as lifeless as glass.

Next to Frank, Alice Longbottom almost seemed healthy... except she really, really wasn't. Her face was thin and worn, her eyes seemed overlarge in her washed-out face and her white hair was wispy and dead-looking.

"Frank isn't doing too well, I'm afraid– not quite over his flu," Maisie said softly, "Alice has been very active, though; she's been doing some painting, actually."

Alice noticed them, then, and Harry was sure her vacant eyes seemed to focus on her son for a moment. Her timid mouth curled a bit and she stood from her flowery armchair and tottered over to them in a pair of fluffy pink slippers, stopping just a bit under two feet away. "I'll leave you both to it – just give us a shout if you need anything." Maisie said. Harry barely noticed her leave, however, as he was so focused on Neville and Alice.

Alice had reached out with a bony hand and Neville, his face soft yet strong in a way Harry hadn't seen it before, reached out to gently grasp it in both of his. "Hey mum," he said quietly, "this is Harry– I told you about him, remember? He's– he's Lily's son." Neville glanced over at him, his cheeks flushing slightly. "She's not very good with short term memory, but she was friends with your mum at Hogwarts." He explained in a whisper.

Alice had turned slightly towards him too and Harry tried to smile at her, even though he felt more like crying. Alice lifted her free hand, extending one twitching finger and making a timid pointing motion at his face– no, at his eyes, Harry realised. Because–
"They're mum's eyes," he said, unable to help but smile slightly, "I have her eyes– Lily's eyes."
Alice leaned forwards slightly, seeming to sway almost as the tip of her finger very carefully
brushed against his skin just below his left eye. Her skin was cold and bone-dry and Harry
carefully didn't react to her movements, other then to keep smiling at her and Alice's timid little
smile seemed to grow just that much bigger in return.

They only stayed there for about half an hour but afterwards, Neville looked up at him with wet
eyes and one of the biggest smiles he'd ever seen on the other boy's face. "Thank you," he
whispered, sounding hoarse and Harry just nodded, suddenly too choked up to speak.

Neville's gran collected his friend from the lobby, Harry meeting the other boy's guardian for the
first time. Augusta Longbottom was a formidable-looking old witch who was wearing a long green
dress, a moth-eaten fox fur and a pointed hat decorated with what was unmistakeably a stuffed
vulture. "Ah, yes," were the first words she said as she looked closely at him before sticking out a
shrivelled, claw-like hand for him to shake. "Yes, yes, I know who you are, of course. Neville
speaks most highly of you."

"Er– thanks," said Harry, shaking her hand, relieved when she released her startlingly strong grip.

"I'm afraid we have no time to talk now," Augusta said briskly, "perhaps next holidays we shall
arrange for a brunch. Come along, Neville."

"Bye Harry," Neville mumbled as Augusta's claw-like hand seized his upper forearm and started
dragging him away. Harry could only wave as the old witch twisted, disapparating both her and her
grandson away.

Honestly a bit spooked by Augusta and more then eager to leave St Mungo's, Harry was glad to
slip out of the hospital and back into muggle London where Tom was waiting.
CHAPTER LVII:

Harry’s POV:

Harry was actually surprised that Tom managed to hold off until he’d apparated them back to their home before demanding, "Is it done?"

"I'm fine thank you," he muttered sarcastically. "Yes, Tom, it's done."

"Are you alright, Harry?" Hermione asked, concerned.

"I..." For a moment Harry thought he was about to cry, but instead he blurted out, "Weasley didn't actually have to die, did he? We could have just wiped his memory."

He wasn’t sure whether he wanted to laugh or scream or sob when Tom nodded. "An obliviation would have worked– it wouldn't be suspicious for an attacker to obliviate their victim and using Legilimency to pull apart a memory charm in a majority of cases causes a significant amount of mental damage. For all his eagerness to be rid of Hermione, I doubt Dumbledore would have dismissed Weasley as collateral and risked leaving him even more of a vegetable then he already is." Tom paused, a cruel, malicious smile curving his lips. "Or was." Before Harry could say anything about that, Tom spoke again, his eyes shrewd. "But you knew that already. Not the specifics, but you knew enough and you killed him anyway."

Harry closed his eyes, partly in shame but partly to hide what he was afraid Tom would see in them.

All his life, Harry had never been the sort to crave power. Acknowledgment, yes; and there'd always been a part of him that had thirsted for greatness, that had desired to prove himself, but power? It was never something he'd really dreamed of or desired– which was why he was finding it so damn confusing that there was a part of him that hadn't been disgusted by what he'd just done. Oh he felt horrified and sort of panicked and definitely sick to his stomach, but there was also a thrill buzzing through him– having the power to decide that someone would die was terrifying, but part of the reason why was because there was a part of Harry that had almost enjoyed that power.

It scared him and thrilled him; not in equal measures, but enough to for him to notice in the aftermath. Enough to make him feel guilty and genuinely afraid of himself. Over the summer he'd never found any enjoyment in dealing death to Tom's victims– not even in killing Greyback. There was something very different, though, about Weasley's death; in the cold efficiency of a premeditated murder, planned and carried out not in the heat of the moment or as an act of pity or mercy, and it was something that had affected him in a way he didn't think he'd ever be able to say out loud. But he could answer Tom's question.

"I killed him despite knowing I probably didn't have to," he whispered, opening his eyes again to meet his lover's burning gaze, "because he was worth more to me dead then he was alive."

And that was the truth, plain and simple.
"You shouldn't be ashamed," Tom said, a bit dismissively. "You were helping Longbottom."

"Except I wasn't thinking of Neville when I agreed to kill him, I was thinking of myself," Harry confessed and Tom made a low noise. His eyes were hungry and cruel and Harry's breath caught in his throat as the older boy lashed out suddenly, long fingers gripping him by the wrists and yanking him forwards into a hungry, bruising kiss that stole the breath right from his lungs.

"You have no fucking idea what you're doing to me!" Tom snarled when he pulled away so they could breathe, and Harry wanted to answer that maybe he didn't, not exactly, but Tom's tone and expressions were giving him a fairly good indication. The words, however, were lost to him as Tom hissed, "I want to fit myself in your bones– I want to go so deep you can't tell where I end and you begin!" He emphasised this by tightening his grip enough that Harry was pretty sure the bones in his wrists were grinding together.

It was, quite possibly, the worst dirty talk he had ever heard– and at the worst possible time too– but there was something raw and honest about the words that made them gritty and real and resonate with him in a way all Tom's sly insinuations hadn't. And maybe it was because he wanted a distraction, or maybe he just felt like he deserved to be hurt, but before Harry could think the better of it, he found himself blurting out, "I want you to." Hermione, from where she was remaining a silent observer to their interaction, made a shocked sound and Tom's face slackened slightly as he seemed stunned.

"What are you saying?" he demanded, the shock he wore so clearly more genuine then the majority of his expressions. Harry took a deep breath.

"I want you to fuck me." He said before he changed his mind. Tom's reaction was instant, his mouth pressed urgently to his again, leaving his lips bruised and stinging.

"No changing your mind," he hissed, and it wasn't a question, not really, it was a warning. Harry swallowed and nodded, letting Tom apparate them to their bedroom, apparently too impatient to even walk there, and then strip him in rough movements. The older boy's face was all sharp, hard hunger as he pushed him down onto the bed.

Harry wasn't hard, far too nervous to be properly aroused, and when Tom noticed he immediately shoved at his thighs, forcing them open. Harry couldn't help the scared sound that escaped him and he abruptly wanted to open his mouth, to tell Tom to stop, that he wasn't ready after all, but Tom leaned back over him and kissed him hard and deep, forcing any words to back down and setting Harry's skin ablaze.

The older boy pressed his body against his, crushing their mouths together roughly, but he found the weight of him was reassuring, somehow... anchoring, maybe. Tom's fingers slid down his side to glide across his groin and as the long, clever digits moved along him, a tangle of half-terrified arousal started to build up inside Harry, leaving him trembling and starting to stiffen.

Nerves and tension made every exhale unsteady and too quick and Harry let out a shocked sound when Tom suddenly slid a long, slicked-up finger all the way inside him, his movements quick and dirty and not quite as gentle as he'd been hoping for. He barely managed to bite back the whimper that wanted to escape as his body tensed and had to remind himself to relax and breathe, to let his body adjust and convince his muscles that there wasn't really any need to be strung so tightly.

He knew it was going to hurt, but he wouldn't back out, not now. He breathed in, breathed out and relaxed as another finger slid in beside the first. It burned and went deep, too deep, but just like last time Tom had done this, it suddenly turned good. Harry started biting back moans instead of pained sounds, pushing back against the press of fingers. Tom was murmuring low, meaningless things in
"Tom." Harry's throat was choked up and he couldn't manage anything else. Tom groaned like he understood anyway, his fingers sliding free as he moved up, fingernails digging into Harry's thigh while his other hand dropped to stroke over himself. Harry wanted to beg for more lube but then Tom was pressing against him, hard and blunt, and instead he forced himself to relax as much as he could and breathe through the pain.

It was a slow push that dragged a groan from Tom and a shocked, unhappy sound of pain from him. It felt like forever and it hurt, a horrible stretching burn that sort of felt like a bad muscle cramp, but Harry held back the 'stop' and 'no don't' that wanted desperately to burst free and instead just took it, choking on a sob, his eyes wet. Tom leaned into him, crushing him to the mattress, and Harry just surrendered completely to the steady, slow but insistent push deep inside him.

It took about half a minute of uncomfortable, painful thrusts before the good feeling from before jolted through him again. Harry made a startled sound at the unexpected burst of pleasure, then let out a groan at the next and after that it only took another minute of thrusts before he was fully hard again and left gasping and wrecked with every push of Tom's hips.

Harry hadn't really expected to enjoy it. He'd mostly been anticipating for it to hurt but the pain was disappearing more and more with each thrust and soon it felt so good that actual moans were escaping him as he lost himself in the raw, greedy heat of it. The intensity was dizzying, the hurt and spikes of pleasure tangling up and leaving him humming between the two. Every quick push went so deep it sent fire along his spine, across his thighs and deep in his groin until he was gasping and pretty confident he was about to come just like that.

Right on the edge, he grabbed the back of Tom's head and pulled him into a clumsy kiss. It was sloppy and wet, more tongue than lips, but it caused that little bit more of a connection. "Tom--" he choked, a garbled mess of a word, but Tom once more seemed to understand, reaching down and wrapping those long fingers around him, and that was it. Harry gasped and moaned his way through his release, the sensation of it frighteningly intense, and he was grateful that Tom had paused in his thrusts.

He was still trying to figure how to breathe again when Tom started moving again. He made a sound of protest, far too sensitive for it, but Tom didn't stop and he was left gasping and twitching at every new thrust that felt far more like pain then pleasure. Tears blurred his vision and he tried to get his uncooperative limbs to lift up and push Tom off or move him away, but by the time he'd regained his motor control the pain of the overstimulation had started to edge closer and closer to pleasure once again.

"I can't." He choked, overwhelmed by the sensation of too much. "Can't."

"You can." Tom panted. "You can. Tell me to stop, I'll stop, but do you really want me to?" Tom ran his fingers feather-light over his sore length and Harry had to close his eyes, his nerves raw and on fire. "Do you want me to stop?" Tom whispered, never slowing his thrusts as he started to squeeze and stroke and Harry actually arched his head back and cried out.

"D-Don't stop," the words spilled from his mouth before he'd even decided what to say. "Please don't stop, please..."

"I didn't think so," Tom grinned, cruel and triumphant. Harry could only moan, a sob tearing free as Tom's grip around him tightened and the overstimulation caused sharp flares of pain to twist into the pleasure of the touch. Surrendering to it, Harry leaned up to find the heat of Tom's mouth but Tom pushed him back down onto the mattress and held him there, pushing into him harder, and
there was something wild and anticipatory in his rhythm now, rough enough to drive a gasp out of Harry. To leave him groaning through every hard, aching push, pain mixing with overwhelming pleasure until he was crying out his second orgasm, tears spilling freely.

And then Tom's rhythm was falling to pieces and he was buried inside him, hot and too deep and Harry listened to the faint groaning noises the older boy made while his thighs ached under his tight grip.

A wave of drowsiness washed over him as Tom pulled out. The feeling left behind was strange and wet and Harry winced slightly at the sting of it but he was mostly just breathless and wrung out and so, so blissed out. Hermione's lips pressed against his cheek, against his forehead, her hands stroking his chest as she murmured sweet, reassuring nothings to him.

And then there were arms around him, pulling him up and cradling him to a warm, solid chest, soft words of encouragement being murmured into his ear while Hermione's lips peppered him with kisses. It took Harry a moment to realise there were tears dripping down his face, though he wasn't quite sure why he was crying; it didn't hurt anymore, not really, it was just all so very overwhelming.

Between the two of them, Tom and Hermione held him up, Tom with his arms under his and Hermione with her arms around his waist, cradling him. Harry swayed, leaned back against Tom, and they stayed there for a while, two sets of fingers carding through damp hair, Hermione's lips on his cheek as she whispered, "beautiful," and Tom's lips at the nape of his neck as he breathed, "ours."

Severus's POV:

In the aftermath of the previous night's revelations, Severus might have forgotten about organising to meet Lupin if the threat the werewolf posed hadn't been so urgent and immediate. Lupin possessed the information needed to send Hermione to Azkaban if he couldn't talk their way out of this.

Thankfully, as a Slytherin and a double–now triple–agent, Severus was well practiced at talking himself out of dangerous, delicate situations and he grimly set off to meet Lupin at the Hog's Head and put those skills to use.

Lupin was already waiting there when he arrived, looking as underfed and ill-rested as was usual for the man. Lycanthropy had prematurely aged him well beyond his years, not unlike how the stress of being a spy and the grief and guilt from Lily's death had aged Severus. He hadn't truly begun healing from either for a decade and a half; Lupin, he suspected, would never get that chance. Lycanthropy wasn't something that one could be healed from.

"Severus, are you alright?" Lupin asked before he could even sit down, "you left very quickly last night."

It was only the fact that his old classmate looked genuinely worried about him that had Severus refrain from snapping at the other man. "I'm fine," he said instead, brisk and slightly awkward. "I lost track of the time and our conversation prompted me to recall the time-sensitive potion I'd left simmering. If I hadn't returned when I did my house would require significant reconstruction right now."
"Ah," Lupin said, looking genuinely relieved. "I'm glad you're okay. I was quite concerned."

"Yes, well," Severus cleared his throat, feeling awkward. "I brought the case files." He placed the manila folder on the Hog's Head table, just out of reach of Lupin. "I don't know why you want it." He added with a slight scowl.

"I just need to be sure," Lupin said softly.

"Sure of what?" Severus couldn't help but push, scowl darkening.

"I need to be sure that Hermione Granger isn't some murdering psychopath and that she actually does care for Harry!" Lupin retorted, now scowling too.

"Being a murderous psychopath and being able to care about someone aren't actually mutually exclusive," Severus pointed out, eyes narrowed.

"Psychopaths don't care." Lupin said firmly and he scoffed.

"Psychopaths can care very much. Loss of morals does not mean loss of feelings." He asserted, a dark warning in his voice. "That being said, I don't believe that Herm– Miss Granger is a psychopath. Just a decidedly damaged individual who is capable of great violence."

"Isn't that basically the definition of a psychopath?" Lupin asked.

"Not even close." Severus said, dryly. "Though I will admit Miss Granger has certain psychopathic tendencies." He reluctantly admitted.

Lupin immediately looked concerned. "Psychopaths aren't capable of love or friendship. Just manipulation," he said with an unhappy frown and Severus made a frustrated sound.

"That is a misconception," he retorted, irritated. "Like I said, loss of morals does not mean loss of feelings! Psychopaths are capable of all manner of emotion, though with the obvious exceptions of empathy and remorse. But as I also said before, I do not believe that Miss Granger is a psychopath, despite what Cortland's murder might lead you to believe."

"And what is it that makes you so sure?" Lupin demanded, worried.

"I need you to swear by Lily's grave that you won't share with anybody what I'm about to tell you," he said, invoking Lily's name so that Lupin would understand just how serious he was. The werewolf's eyes widened, shock visible on his prematurely aged face.

"It– it doesn't involve anything illegal, does it?" Lupin had the presence of mind to ask, which reluctantly impressed Severus.

"Nothing that you would feel honour-bound to report," he answered and Lupin slowly nodded.

"Alright," he said, a touch hesitantly. "I– I swear by L-Lily's grave." Lupin stumbled over Lily's name so that Lupin would understand just how serious he was. The werewolf's eyes widened, shock visible on his prematurely aged face.

"It– it doesn't involve anything illegal, does it?" Lupin had the presence of mind to ask, which reluctantly impressed Severus.

"In the summer after Harry and Hermione's second year, Lucius received an urgent summons via owl." He told Lupin quietly. "He answered it, apparating directly to Diagon Alley where he found that Hermione had been attacked by a man in Knockturn Alley. She was unconscious, her clothes were disheveled and badly torn and she was bleeding from both a head injury and a bite mark on
her shoulder. Narcissa was the one to heal her and while she was doing so she performed an old pureblood charm that verifies her purity to ensure the man hadn't succeeded in his attempted assault. The charm did confirm that she hadn't been assaulted, but it also made the unexpected revelation that she lost her purity years ago— at age nine, to be exact.”

"You think Cortland ra–hurt her first," breathed Lupin, wide-eyed and horrified. His fingers were clutching onto the table with a white-knuckled grip and he looked like he was about to be violently ill.

Severus honestly wasn't sure on that point. He had a myriad of suspicions as to how Hermione could have lost her 'purity', each of them as unpleasant as the next, but he had absolutely no compunctions in pushing forwards this particular theory to make sure Lupin kept his damn mouth shut.

"I think that the amount of anger and hatred present in her attack on Cortland was very telling," he replied in an unapologetically leading fashion. Lupin looked physically ill as he stared at the manila folder on the table before them.

"Has she talked to anyone about what happened?" He asked suddenly, his voice very hoarse-sounding. "Mrs Malfoy, maybe?"

Severus sighed, letting his shoulders slump slightly. "This is Miss Granger we're talking about," he said heavily. "As far as I'm aware, she's never spoken a single word about any of it to anyone, and it would honestly shock me to learn otherwise."

"She needs to talk to someone," Lupin said, very quiet as he kept his eyes down. "I cannot stress that enough. I know just how much damage bottling that sort of pain up inside you can do." Lupin looked up then and Severus had to smother the sound of shock that almost escaped him, because he'd never seen his old classmate looking so haunted. Lupin's mouth curved into a smile as brittle as glass, his eyes miles and miles away. "When people talk about Greyback, they always mention how he likes to go after children." He said quietly. "It's what he's known for, after all. What they don't like to talk about is how he doesn't just like to bite them."

Severus looked at Lupin in horror as his old classmate turned his haunted gaze back down at the folder. "If I'd had the chance to castrate Greyback and then stab that son of a bitch through the eye, I wouldn't have hesitated for a moment." Lupin spoke so quietly he could barely the words. The other man then stood, looking very tired and far too old. "Get that child the help she needs, Severus." He said, reaching down to push the folder back over to him. "Or it will destroy her."

Before he could even reply, Lupin had turned and left, exiting the Hog's Head and leaving Severus feeling like nothing in the world could ever shock him more.

Of course, that's when Fawkes flamed into the bar carrying with him a message from Albus— *Ron Weasley is dead. I need you to get to St Mungo's immediately.*

Severus groaned and pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes. "One stress-free day. Just one. Is that too much to ask for?" He asked the merciless gods above in despair.

"One for the road," Aberforth said gruffly, slamming an unopened bottle of spirits in front of him. "Dealing with Albus— you're going to need it," the old barkeep grimaced, his face twisting into a sneer. Severus accepted the bottle, standing and digging into his money pouch to pull out a handful of galleons.

"Keep the change." He said dully. Old Aberforth just gave him a sympathetic look.
St Mungo's was a bustle of activity and the morgue was no exception. Ronald Weasley's body was almost entirely unmarked, only faint bruises left from his encounter with whoever it was who'd beaten him severely enough to rupture his spleen, causing internal bleeding severe enough to send him into a coma and land him in St Mungo's.

Except St Mungo's had healed the spleen and fixed the damage, so Weasley should technically have woken from the coma days ago. Severus hadn't really thought about why it was the boy had stayed persistently unconscious, other then to be glad about the continuous comatose state giving him time to get in contact with Hermione. Now however, when faced with hindsight, he was starting to get suspicious that the awfully convenient coma hadn't been as 'natural' as it had seemed.

And was it really a coincidence that the day after he'd spoken to Harry and Hermione and had alerted them to Weasley's hospitalisation that the boy had died? Merlin, he hoped so.

"Ah Severus," Albus said, from where he'd seemingly finished running diagnostics over Weasley's body. The headmaster was frowning heavily and there was a dark anger in his eyes. Molly and Arthur Weasley, who were also both present, were in tears. It made something in Severus's chest twist, because while he'd been so concerned for his two Slytherins, he'd completely overlooked the fact they'd just lost their child. He didn't– hadn't– liked Ron Weasley and had thought the Gryffindor was a lousy human being, but the loss of life, the loss of one of his students, of a child, did still sit poorly with him.

"What in Merlin's name happened here?" He demanded quietly to Albus, not wanting to be overheard by the dead boy's grieving parents.

"Ronald woke briefly from his coma earlier today, but he was quite delirious," Albus replied, just as quietly. "An attempt to use Legilimency revealed the delirium wasn't a result of any sort of mind altering magic, but a genuine medical issue. The poor boy died within an hour of regaining consciousness." Albus's face turned harder, his blue eyes like chips of ice behind his half-moon spectacles. "The Healers found no evidence of it but I suspect poison," he said grimly. "Possibly a muggle one. I asked you to come here because you're one of the foremost potions experts in Britain as well as being far more familiar with muggle chemicals then I am. Severus, I want you to search for evidence."

"How can you be so sure there really is a poison?" Severus had to ask, regardless of the fact he unfortunately agreed with the headmaster.

"Call it an old man's intuition," was Albus's grim-faced reply.

And when, after several hours of testing, he did positively identify off the chart levels of mercury in the body, Severus wasn't at all surprised by the confirmation of Dumbledore's intuition. Ron Weasley had indeed been poisoned. And when, after several more hours had passed, he told Albus that he hadn't identified anything unusual and it appeared Ron Weasley really had died as a result of complications from the internal bleeding, he could only hope the old man still trusted him enough to believe him.

It was a grim realisation to have, that despite the revelation Voldemort wasn't about to start hunting Harry down he still had to protect his students from a highly influential magical titan. A grim and upsetting revelation.

He really was going to throttle Harry and Hermione both when he saw them next.

-
Fleur's POV:

The dawn of morning did little to improve the icy cold weather but gaps in the heavy clouds allowed short bursts of the bright, pale winter sun to shine through. If Fleur had time to be poetic, she might compare the way the sun's rays pierced the heavy grey as a symbol of how hope for the veela was starting to pierce through their current darkness, but as it was she was far too busy and stressed to even remember to wear gloves, having to liberally apply warming charms to her hands instead as she rushed around.

It had taken a great deal of work in the twenty-four hours following the Malfoy New Years Gala to organise a gathering of the main delegates from each of the main clans—the Bulgarian clan, the Egyptian clan, the American clan and the French clan. There were other veela communities out there of course, smaller ones, but Les Lys didn't have a large enough international presence to have gained representatives from them yet.

Fleur had managed to organise it, however, having arranged for the delegates to all gather in England to meet the Dark Lord, her grand-mère, Adèle, having provided a location—one of her holiday cottages, though 'cottage' was a somewhat misleading name and nobody but her knew that it was Voldemort who they were meeting.

Her grand-mère was already there when Fleur arrived at the cottage at just a bit past nine in the morning, already stressed and trying not to panic. Adèle Turenne née Bellerose, from the Bellerose full-blooded French veela family, was in her mid-seventies but appeared very nearly ageless. Her pale hair was still almost fully blonde with only the occasional threads of silver, and her face was only faintly lined across her forehead and around the corners of her eyes. She was a sharp-eyed, sharp-tongued woman with no patience for shortcomings and Dieu pardonne anyone who managed to find themselves on her bad side.

Fleur had arrived along with Les Lys' representative from the French veela clan. Like all veela and part-veela, Calice Bellerose was heartbreakingly lovely. She was clad in a jewel-toned silk-satin dress with tumbling waves of rose-gold hair that fell past her hips, flawless ivory skin and pale blue eyes like chips of ice. Calice was Fleur's second cousin, the granddaughter of her grand-mère's sister. Calice was a full-blooded veela as unlike Adèle her grand-tante Alaine had married within the veela clan.

"You are being very secretive about this meeting, Fleur," Calice noted, not for the first time since they'd met up at the Delacour château. Fleur gave her cousin a stiff smile.

"It is a big opportunity for us." She repeated her earlier replies, honestly unsure of just how much information she was allowed to reveal and not willing to say anything that could possibly put Gabrielle's life at risk.

"Be secretive, then!" Calice exclaimed with a dramatic flourish of her hands, visibly frustrated with Fleur's reticence.

"The others have arrived," Adèle said, cutting into the conversation before Calice could continue to press. Fleur nodded gratefully and followed Adèle to the formal dining room where the other three delegates waited.

Les Lys comprised mostly of the younger generation of veela, those not prepared to sit back and live the same lives of limitations as their parents and grandparents before them, so it wasn't a surprise that the chosen delegates were all in their twenties. Apart from Adèle, the oldest present
was Krasimira Desislava, the Bulgarian representative, at twenty-eight. Bewitchingly beautiful, Krasimira had dark hair, radiant porcelain skin and soft, droopy lilac eyes. She was wearing a white cloak lined with pale fur over a dark blue saya dress and her full lips, which curved into a smile as Fleur, Adèle and Calice entered the room, were painted a bright cranberry red.

The other dark-haired veela was Desdemona Papadakis, the twenty-five year old Egyptian representative. Desdemona was darker then the others with her olive-toned skin and long, curly black hair, both of which were set off perfectly by her loose, flowing dress, woven from rainbow-bright fabrics. Her eyes were a bright turquoise like the ocean on a clear summer's day and with her high forehead, straight nose and strong features, she resembled one of the ancient Greek sculptures of the goddess Aphrodite.

Last of their group was Emily Walker, the American representative. Unlike the other three young women, Emily wasn't a full-blooded Veela. The shortest in the room at 5'2", Emily was curvy with very fair skin, pink cheeks and a soft face framed by shoulder-length light blonde hair. She had dressed in a far more modern style then the others for the meeting in a short black dress with a thick silver belt that emphasised the generous curves of her hips and had a sleek black cloak folded over the curve of one arm.

"Zank you for all coming on such short notice," Fleur told them.

"You said it vos important." Krasimira replied. "And you have not led us wrong yet."

Taking a deep breath, Fleur glanced briefly over at her grand-mère who nodded at her, a proud glint in her azure eyes.

*Keep your back straight. Look them in the eyes. You will change the world, my darling.*

"I 'ave found us an ally," she announced, "one 'oo I believe will 'elp us achieve what we 'ave only dreamed of– a society where we 'ave equal rights to witches and wizards!"

"'Oo eez zis ally to promise such a zing?" demanded Calice, her disbelief obvious.

"That would be me," a smooth, familiar voice that had Fleur holding back a shudder answered. She turned to give Lord Voldemort a strained smile as he strode into the room like he owned it, his dark cloak flowing out behind him.

"T'addeus Dagwort'," Adèle identified him and Voldemort's smile was a cold slash on his handsome face as he nodded at her sharp-eyed grand-mère.

Calice didn't seem to notice the coldness beneath his expression, though, or the horrifying distance between the charming (chilling) smile and Voldemort's glacial emotions. "*He is handsome,*" she muttered to Fleur in French instead. Fleur didn't have the heart to tell her cousin that Voldemort could probably speak French.

"What eez eet zat you are offering veela, Mr. Dagwort'?" Adèle enquired.

"An alliance between your group and mine," Voldemort answered her, having easily captured the full attention of each of the delegates with his dramatic entrance and the force of his presence alone, "one that would prove very beneficial to us both."

Fleur stayed silent as Voldemort explained his terms, the new laws he would implement– including ones regarding immigration for veela so they could move to his Britain– in return for their backing and support. Listening to him, it was very easy to realise just how this man had gathered so many supporters, back during Britain's magical civil war. He was charming, convincing, passionate and
painted a picture of everything she'd ever dreamed of when she first started gathering like-minded veela youth for what would become, in time, Les Lys.

After he finished talking there was a very long moment of silence that was broken by Emily. "I don't think you're being honest with us," she stated, her pretty blue eyes narrowing behind the slender frames of her glasses, and Fleur pre-emptively winced.

Fleur was all too aware of the fact that Emily was the sort of person who was more than willing to call others out on their "bullshit" as the American liked to phrase it. It had always been a useful trait during Les Lys meetings, but a somewhat less useful one when face-to-face with a Dark Lord in disguise. She desperately hoped that the Dark wizard didn't kill her friend for what she was about to say, but that hope rapidly dwindled as Emily fixed her skeptical look directly on Lord Voldemort himself.

"Your tactics of gaining sources of unconditional support and funds while simultaneously gathering political influence makes it seem less like you're planning on being elected Minister, and more like you're planning some sort of coup," the American said sharply. "Or possibly world domination." She added after a brief pause.

Fleur relaxed slightly, because that hadn't been as bad as she'd dreaded. Also, she wasn't entirely certain Emily was wrong— for all that the Dark Lord was talking of peace, he was also gathering an army and that... that was a touch concerning, to say the least. At least as part of that army the veela would be guaranteed a place in the new society, she reassured herself.

"World domination is such an ugly phrase. I prefer to call it world optimisation," Voldemort answered Emily and Fleur once again found his twisted sense of humour genuinely terrifying—mostly because she honestly wasn't entirely sure he was joking.

Emily had raised an eyebrow, looking a little impressed despite herself. "So you're admitting you're not just after the Minister of Magic position?" she pressed. "Because I'm pretty damn sure you're not a politician."

"Oh I'm much, much worse," Voldemort agreed and Fleur felt her breath catch in her throat as his eyes gleamed a sudden, dangerous crimson. "I am Lord Voldemort and I am going to replace the pathetically inept current ministry and its useless, out-dated laws entirely."

Following the shocking announcement was a silence that, once again, was broken by Emily. "Well," she said wryly. "This time I don't call bullshit."

"You and your people are welcome to be part of that change," Voldemort told them. "You can carve yourselves a place in the new society I create where veela are considered equal to witches and wizards. Or you can choose to stay out of this entirely and continue whatever it is you're currently doing to change your circumstances. And the third option, of course, where you side against me and betray me to Dumbledore or the current Ministry of Magic and I destroy you all, from your youngest of infants to your most ancient and venerated elders."

The truly frightening part, Fleur thought, was how his expression didn't change, nor did his emotions flicker, as he told them if they stood against him he would send their race to extinction. And she could tell that he wasn't bluffing.

"Vot vood you vant us to do," Krasimira asked abruptly, "if ve allied vith you?"

"I'm not planning on starting a war," Voldemort answered her. "To fight a war means the real, secret war has already been lost— there would be... missions I'd assign; veela are, in a way, uniquely
qualified for certain information gathering ventures, and I will not promise that there won't be any fighting– and if there is, I'd expect you to fight for me."

"And vot vood ve get out of that?" Krasimira pressed boldly.

"Equality to witches and wizards wherever I rule," Voldemort replied, "and my assistance given to your causes– you track down brothels where veela are being detained and smuggle them to safety, do you not?"

"Oui," Fleur confirmed when the other delegates kept to tense silence, ignoring the uneasy looks this earned her from her people.

"I'll offer my people to assist in freeing yours– and ensuring that the owners of the brothels don't ever buy or sell a veela again." Voldemort stated. He then smiled– it wasn't a nice smile. "Perhaps a show of faith, of sorts, could be arranged. I did not come to this meeting empty handed; I've learned the location of one such brothel from a ministry acquaintance who frequents it. I'm willing to supply you both the location and a team of my Death Eaters to assist you– consider it an offering; a demonstration of Lord Voldemort's generosity to those faithful to him."

"How soon can you organise your people, your Lordship?" Emily asked sharply, trading concerned glances with the others at the news of another of those hated brothels.

"My forces are prepared and can be mobilised within fifteen minutes on my signal." Voldemort replied. Fleur gave him a shocked look and he sent her a darkly amused one in response. "I was very confident about the outcome of our meeting today, Miss Delacour."

"Though I warn you, my people will use deadly force."

"Otlichen!" Krasimira flashed her pearly white teeth in a vicious grin. "I do not argue with that! Vitches and vizards have certainly done us no favours– ve owe them nothing! They treat us like animals; I will not care that they are slaughtered as such in turn!"

And Fleur couldn't help but agree entirely.

After that, the meeting was temporarily put on hold as preparations were made, and in a little under an hour Fleur found herself standing mere yards away from the brothel, hidden amongst trees and Disillusioned along with the rest of those preparing for the attack. Ten members of Les Lys stood with her, all of them as bewitchingly beautiful and grim-faced as she herself, and a group of fifteen Death Eaters joined them, all dressed in full black with skull-like masks. Fleur had hesitantly asked if wearing the full Death Eater regalia was a good idea if they were keeping their return incognito and Voldemort had given her a darkly amused look.

"It doesn't matter what they wear," he'd told her, "only the veela will be leaving there alive."

The Death Eater sent to scout the building reappeared then, his dark eyes gleaming behind the shining silver mask. "There are only three customers inside, as well as the two men and the woman running the place and the eight assorted veela and part-veela being prostituted." He reported.

Fleur felt rage simmer inside her, red hot and burning. 

"Ow old are zey?" she asked quietly, needing to prepare herself for what she was about to see.

"The youngest looks about seven or eight, while I'd say the oldest is in her mid-teens– possibly sixteen or seventeen at the most." The Death Eater informed her and Fleur hissed under her breath, distantly wondering if she'd ever be surprised by the new lows humanity sank to in regards to her people. She felt sick to her stomach and had to swallow thickly several times and take a handful of
deep breaths to keep from vomiting all over the ground at her feet.

In an effort to distract herself, she scanned her surroundings again-- the house doubling in use as a brothel wasn't quite a manor but it had three floors and was built on a large estate with beautiful, well-kept grounds. The trees were tall and lush, the gardens filled with bright and colourful flowers and there was a large pond with a surface covered entirely by lilies. Strong wards had been set up on the grounds but unknown to the brothel-keepers and their 'customers', they had been dismantled and replaced by a barrier and anti- apparation and portkey wards that would prevent anyone without a Dark Mark from leaving the grounds-- those from Les Lys had to be given portkeys made specifically by Voldemort that exempted them from being trapped too.

"Is everyone ready?" demanded the only female Death Eater in the group. She was wearing a mask too but her long black hair, the frizzy curls spilling wild and unkempt over her shoulders and down her back, gave away Bellatrix Lestrange's identity. Mrs Lestrange sounded breathless with excitement, the older witch practically vibrating in place.

"Yes ma'am. Everyone is where they are supposed to be. They are waiting for your signal." The Death Eater scout told Mrs Lestrange. Fleur couldn't see the woman's smile but she could sense it.

"Excellent!" Mrs Lestrange hissed, raising her wand into the air. Fleur felt her stomach clench with a mixture of nerves and anticipation as a shrill bird-like noise rang out briefly through the clearing; the signal had been given.

The Death Eaters moved like a well-oiled machine; the dark row of masked, cloaked figures was an intimidating sight and Fleur was frankly relieved they were on her side.

She and Les Lys approached second, letting the Death Eaters advance first and blow aside the front door. While the Death Eaters were there for the fighting, it was the job of Les Lys to recover the veela being prostituted-- of course, that didn't mean they weren't all very ready to serve out some damage of their own and Fleur knew as they stepped inside the brothel-house that none of them would hesitate to cut down their opponents; the exploiters, kidnappers and rapists of the defenceless.

Despite the apparent wealth outside, the inside of the house was very bare, with dull-painted walls and cheap-looking furniture. The heavy scent of perfume hung in the air, clogging Fleur's nostrils as she breathed and making her almost dizzy. Screams started echoing through the building as the Death Eaters split up down the corridors that branched out from the entrance room, all of them narrow and lined with locked doors.

Fleur followed Mrs Lestrange and the three Death Eaters with her. Mrs Lestrange was skipping along and blasting open each locked door as they passed, but so far they were empty.

"What are you doing here?" a woman's voice shrieked, the clicking sound of high-heels rapidly approaching, "how dare you break into our ho-- AHHH!" the loud protests cut off abruptly as the lady rounded the corner and froze in horror at the sight of the Death Eaters. Sour-faced and pale-eyed, the woman went white and Mrs Lestrange let out a cackle of laughter, brandishing her wand almost lazily. "Bombarda!" She sang out with undeniable glee and the woman's chest exploded in a mess of bone, blood and shreds of meat as a hole was blasted straight through her upper torso. Fleur's stomach rolled violently and she turned away from the sickening sight, concentrating instead on the next locked door and using a small blasting hex to force it open.

She then almost lost control of her stomach for the umpteenth time. Apparently the rooms had silencing spells on them to prevent disturbances-- Fleur assumed this anyway, because she hadn't heard anything from the other side of the door until it had been forced open and the man inside the
tiny bedroom hadn't paused from his activities until she'd burst in, by the stunned look on his face he'd apparently had no idea that the brothel had been invaded and that one of the owners had been messily murdered only a half dozen feet away from where he'd been about to rape his victim.

As her mind tried to register what it was she was seeing before her, Fleur felt a red haze wash over her vision. It had been some time since she’d manifested fire outside of her body, but the burning flames leapt eagerly from her fingers as she lunged forwards and grabbed the foul, pitiful excuse for a human being by his head.

He screamed as the disgusting, sickly smell of sizzling flesh and burning hair filled the small quarters, but the enraged Fleur ignored it, digging her fingernails-turned-talons in hard and latching on grimly as the man's head turned to a ball of fire. She didn't let go until his screams had long since died out, having to work to yank her hands free as her nearly inch-long formed talons had pierced so deep into what had been a human head and was now a blackened skull they'd gotten stuck. Letting the body drop to the ground, Fleur turned her attention to the child on the bed.

Because she was still a child, one no older then Gabrielle; so small and only half-dressed in an appalling skimpy pink nightie that had been pushed up to her starkly visible ribs. She was far too skinny and her glassy eyes were comparatively huge and dark in her thin face. The rings of her irises were a sliver of pale, pale blue around the black of her dilated pupils, the darkness of them striking against her pale skin, so ghostly-white and fragile-looking. With her perfect beauty the young girl was clearly a full-blooded veela, her facial features fine-boned with a thin nose and a sharp chin. Her silvery-blond hair was dirty and unkempt, the long tresses clumped and matted by fluids Fleur desperately avoided identifying.

"Comment tu t'appelles?" Fleur asked, the use of her mother tongue coming to her unthinkingly and automatically in her distress. There was just something horrifically jarring about the sight of the small girl who reminded her far too much of her sister locked up in this brothel of horrors. The little girl blinked blearily up at her and Fleur was getting suspicious that the glassiness in her eyes was perhaps less to do with any sort of shock or trauma and more to do with some sort of potion. And then she opened her mouth and answered, startling Fleur with the French that rolled so easily off her tongue as she answered Fleur's question about her name.

"Je m'appelle Felicienne," she slurred and Fleur tried to smile at the sweet, little child.

"My name is Fleur," she introduced herself in French.

"Bonjour Mademoiselle Fleur," Felicienne whispered.

"Just Fleur is fine," Fleur's lips trembled as she forced them to stay curved upward. "Would you like to come with me, Felicienne? We can go far, far away from this place."

"Away?" Felicienne sounded confused.

"Far, far away and you will never have to come back here ever again-- I promise you. You will be safe." Fleur said and Felicienne's mouth trembled.

"I don't understand." She whispered and Fleur's heart broke. Casting a quick cleaning charm on her hands and concentrating for a few moments to turn the talons back to her now-ruined manicure, Fleur took a very slow step towards Felicienne, fully prepared to stop and move backwards. Felicienne didn't flinch, though; instead she leaned forwards, lifting her skinny arms and carefully wrapping them around Fleur's waist. Fleur gently rested the hand not holding her wand lightly on Felicienne's back and desperately hoped this wasn't part of the little girl's 'training'.

Swallowing her nausea at the horrifying thought, she tried to concentrate instead on helping Felicienne stand. The pink nightie shifted back down past her narrow, bony hips as Felicienne rose to her feet, but the skimpy and nearly transparent material fell only to the child's mid-thigh. Fleur was about to pull off her cloak to wrap around the girl but paused, not wanting to start undressing in front of Felicienne, not knowing what sort of response that would cause in the little girl. Instead, she carefully transfigured one of the sheets on the bed into a light purple blanket which she could then wrap around Felicienne like a cloak. Felicienne slowly released her hold around Fleur's waist, her skinny hands moving to touch the blanket.

Fleur eased back slightly so she could kneel in front of Felicienne, helping readjust the blanket slightly so the young veela wouldn't trip over the ends as she walked. "Are you ready to go?" she asked and Felicienne nodded soundlessly.

Stepping outside the room, Fleur was hit by a wall of noise. Horrific, pain-drenched screams rang through the house and she winced as Felicienne cringed into her side, the girl slamming her little palms over her ears. While Fleur approved of the Death Eaters extracting their bloody, brutal pound of flesh from the brothel-keepers and half wanted to go watch– or join in– Felicienne was clearly terrified, so she kept moving towards the exit. When they stepped outside everything abruptly went quiet again– only the gentle sounds of the nature around them was audible; more silencing spells at work, hiding the grim secrets of the house.

Only one member of Les Lys was standing out there. Emily was splattered with blood and holding a tiny veela who looked like a bucket of red paint had been tipped over her. Fleur honestly wasn't sure what color the tiny girl's hair or skin were, but the wide, terrified eyes were a soft honey-gold. She was wrapped in a presumably newly conjured up fluffy red blanket, the colour chosen, Fleur guessed, so that the blood wouldn't show quite so obviously as it soaked into the fabric, turning patches of it darker and wet-looking.

"She's too afraid of magic to let me clean her or activate the portkey," Emily said quietly when Fleur approached. "She barely even let me touch her with the blanket– she's not speaking much either. She said her name's Lala, but I don't know if it's really hers or just the one they gave her– she's Bulgarian, I think. Her English was pretty mangled."

"Zis eez 'orrible." Fleur whispered and Emily laughed shakily.

"Yeah, yeah it really is."

The two young women shared a grim look. "We chose zee right zing, allying wiz zee Dark Lord." Fleur murmured and Emily slowly nodded.

"Krasimira was right– we don't owe witches and wizards anything. They never did shi– uh, anything about this," she nodded in the direction of the brothel, "so they can hardly blame us for finally taking action. Fu– hell yeah we made the right choice."

And even though Fleur already knew there was no turning back from this point, she still felt a weight lift from her shoulders at Emily's strong declaration.

"So we will agree to 'is terms?" She asked softly and Emily nodded.

"Yeah. Yeah, we will." She said and Fleur sighed in relief.

"I zink she eez asleep now," she gestured at Lala. The tiny child's head had lolled against Emily's chest and her eyes were closed.
"I'm pretty sure they were drugged," Emily muttered, shifting her grip on the child slightly so she could pull out the portkey. "See you in a minute, Fleur. Portus."

As Emily vanished, Fleur pulled out the portkey she'd been given and knelt again. Felicienne was visibly trembling so she explained slowly and thoroughly how the portkey worked before coaxing the little girl into using it. After returning to the cottage, Felicienne was hustled off to be cleaned and healed while Fleur headed back to the formal dining room where she spent a long, exhausting afternoon filled with negotiations and the writing of an iron-clad magical contract alongside her grand-mère, Voldemort and the other delegates. By the end Fleur felt emotionally drained and physically exhausted but undeniably hopeful and triumphant.

Felicienne and two of the other rescued veela with French origins, thirteen-year-old Jessamyn and fifteen-year-old Suzette, joined her, Calice and Adèle in their return to France. None of the three girls had a home to return to and her grand-mère had offered their home in France as a safe place for them to stay while arrangements were being made with the French veela clan.

As they all appeared in the floo room of the Delacour Château, despite knowing the two rescued girls would have to be settled in all Fleur really wanted was to go to bed. As if reading her mind, her grand-mère placed a hand on her shoulder and smiled at her. "Go and sleep, Fleur," Adèle said, "you have worked hard today and will be returning to school tomorrow. I will look after the children."

"Thank you," Fleur said relieved as they all exited the room, Felicienne clinging onto the silken skirts of Adèle's robes while the pale-faced Suzette and Jessamyn desperately clutched each others hands.

Apolline appeared then, having been alerted to their return by one of the elves. Her maman's expression tightened at the sight of the three unfamiliar veela as she quickly drew the correct conclusions surrounding the circumstances of their presence.

"I hope you know what you're doing," she said, the disapproval heavy in her voice. Fleur flinched back slightly from it, but found comfort in her grand-mère placing a hand on her shoulder again and squeezing gently.

"We are doing something, my child." Adèle replied calmly, looking straight across at her daughter. "And that is better then nothing at all."

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Charlie's POV:

Charlie was handling (playing with) a clutch of Peruvian Vipertooth hatchlings when he got the news, having to rescue Errol from Tupac's tiny, needle-sharp fangs as the baby dragon pounced on the old owl that had collapsed on Charlie's lap, poor Errol practically dead to the world in his exhaustion. A small snout full of bitten-off feathers later, Errol was safely out of reach of Tupac and his two sisters, Illary and Nayaraq, and Charlie was using one hand to unroll a letter from his parents.

The content had his chest twisting uncomfortably as a sense of shocked disbelief filled him; Ron was dead— and apparently Hermione Granger was the main suspect.

Reading through the information on the beating on the night of the Yule Ball and then the sudden
onset of symptoms that had occurred that had been followed by the death of his younger brother, Charlie frowned. He wasn't a healer by any means, but he certainly knew enough to know it was unlikely that a beating, even one resulting in a ruptured spleen like the Healers had concluded was the cause of death, wouldn't have led to the sort of neurological symptoms Ron had suffered. His first instinct was poison, but he knew St Mungo's would have run a very thorough test for any potions and poisons in Ron's system.

Except... Charlie clearly remembered during his sixth year how a seventeen-year-old muggleborn had overdosed on muggle drugs and neither Madam Pomfrey or the St Mungo's staff had had any idea what was wrong with his housemate. Muggle poisons wouldn't be too difficult to get ahold of, if the witch or wizard knew what they were looking for and he suspected Hermione Granger would have known what to look for.

The parchment crumpled as he clenched his hand into a fist. The emotions whirling inside him were a confusing mess. He hadn't liked Ron; his youngest brother had been arrogant and self-entitled and he'd rarely spent time with the boy. But he'd still been his baby brother. Maybe he'd grown up to be a little shit, but Charlie still remembered the chubby baby with his tufts of red hair who'd giggled madly whenever anyone touched his toes; he remembered the little toddler with his pink cheeks and round tummy who'd waddled around the house with his orange blanky dragging along after him, trying to copy whatever it was that his big brothers were doing.

But Charlie had always been busy, and always 'too cool' to 'waste' his time playing with his baby brother. Ron had been shuffled to the side by older brothers not interested in yet another younger sibling, by a mother who was too focused on the infant daughter she'd always wanted and a father who was too busy working full time to support his large family.

Tears burned in Charlie's eyes, and not the good kind of burn, as he was faced with the gut-wrenching realisation that the innocent baby from his memories had been murdered.

And then the twisted up emotions in his chest twisted even further as he found himself equally faced with the second realisation that in all honestly that little boy had been dead a long, long time now, replaced by someone greedy and selfish and cowardly and who'd embodied the Gryffindor pigheadedness and bigotry in the very worst of ways.

"Fuck," he muttered quietly out loud. Illary made a curious clicking noise and Nayaraq slithered her way up the front of his jacket, the tough leather having been charmed to be protected from her sharp talons, the prick of which he could feel against his skin even through the unbreakable material. Her long forked tongue darted out to flick along his cheek and it took Charlie a moment–and a hasty readjustment of his hold on the still-unconscious Errol later–to realise he was actually crying and the curious little hatchling was tasting his tears.

He cupped the hand not holding Errol out of reach of the baby dragons over the hatchling’s knobbly back, the weight of her pressed up against his chest a comforting one. Her scales were hot under his palm and the thrill of having those dangerous viper-like teeth so close to his vulnerable, unprotected throat was a familiar rush that never got old. Faded in intensity over the years, maybe, but still present even now. She let out the rusty, grumbling sound that was her species’ version of a purr, her tongue flicking out again, this time over the thin, fragile skin of his throat, before she pushed her sharp little snout against the hinge of his jaw. He winced a little at the sharp jab, but the brief flick of pain was grounding in a way, pulling him out of his memories and grief and anchoring him to the present.

"Right," he muttered, gently lifting Nayaraq so she was draped over his shoulder, before scooping the other two up with the hand not holding Errol and letting Tupac slither up his arm to join
Nayaraq while Illary wound herself tight around his forearm. He started heading back for the nursery, already planning in his head what he needed to do after putting them back in their enclosure– first and foremost on the list been to organise his return to Britain.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you all enjoyed the chapters! I'm too tired from editing to write a meaningful author's note here, but sorry again for the delay <3
~Cheshire Carroll
Part Four: The Goblet of Fire - Chapter LVIII

CHAPTER LVIII:

Harry's POV:

Harry really thought that with everything that had changed he would feel different. He'd killed a classmate in cold blood, had dragged Neville with him to the point of no return-- whether the other boy realised it or not-- and had then had sex with Tom. Everything should have felt turned upside down and inside out, but it just... didn't. After the murder, after the sex, nothing had changed; he'd woken up from his post-coital doze for dinner then gone back to bed, slept dreamlessly and wandered to the kitchen for breakfast after waking up the following morning. Everything felt normal, felt ordinary and unchanged; only the open copy of Prophet on the dining room table where he usually ate with Tom and Hermione was different to any other morning at their countryside manor-home.

A MURDER AT HOGWARTS! The headline blared. SCHOOL STUDENT SUCCUMBS TO FATAL INJURIES!

"Harry?" Hermione asked, her voice soft and face visibly concerned. Harry swallowed roughly, pushing the paper away and standing back up.

"I'm not actually hungry," he mumbled. "I'm just– I'm going to go have a shower."

Locking himself in the bathroom attached to their bedroom, he turned on the shower to drown out any noise and then sat on the closed toilet lid and waited for the tears. Despite the way his mind was spinning and his breath was short, no tears came.

His chest felt a bit like it was full of broken glass, shattering and shifting under his ribcage as he tried to breathe and Harry forced himself to inhale deeply as he touched the cuff fastened securely around his wrist, almost startlingly dark against his pale skin. The feel of the smooth, buttery leather against his fingers centred him as guilt wormed its way into the corners of his heart and mind and pulsed there, sharp and relentless. And yet he still didn't feel upset. Guilty yes, but not any more so for Weasley then he'd after Tom's victims, or even Black. He'd just planned and carried out the premeditated murder of his classmate and he didn't feel any grief, regret or remorse over it as he sat on a loo and waited for tears that just weren't coming. And it was with a heavy, sick sort of feeling that Harry faced the realisation none would come.

That almost did make him get a bit weepy, but even in his confused, emotional state he realised just how ridiculous it was to cry over not actually crying and shoved it away. Maybe... maybe he was closer to being like Tom and Hermione then he'd ever realised. A sick sort of laughter wanted to bubble out of him at that thought and he wasn't sure whether or not to just let it.

Someone knocked sharply on the bathroom door then and Harry didn't bother to hide the fact he was dry and fully dressed as he reluctantly opened the door when the insistent knocking continued. Tom raised an eyebrow but Harry didn't even acknowledge it and Tom sighed.

"I hoped we could avoid this," he murmured, more to himself then to Harry. "Come on, silly boy--"

Harry let Tom strip him then push him under the warm spray of the shower, unsurprised when the older boy shed his own clothes and stepped in after him. He was surprised, though, when Tom kept
his hands firmly above his waist, instead simply standing under the water with him, his slender arms wrapped firmly around Harry in a way that made him feel oddly secure.

It was probably wrong that he felt so safe in Tom's arms while knowing just who and what the older boy was, but he did and he couldn't resist turning and pressing a soft kiss at the base of Tom's neck, in the little hollow where he could feel the vibration of the older boy's breath. It made Tom seem more... vulnerable, wasn't the word—human, maybe? Yes, it made him seem more human.

Tom stayed surprisingly placid, keeping his hands above Harry's hips, and it was that silent acknowledgment and respect of his boundaries gave Harry more courage then he'd have had otherwise. He wanted to lose himself, to forget the turbulent emotions lurking inside his head, and Hermione had always advocated sex as a way to do that— he saw no reason why he shouldn't try it.

Carefully, Harry pushed Tom back so he was braced against the wall and the older boy kept himself still as Harry first mouthed a line of kisses along his jaw and then kissed down his neck, over his collarbones, over a few faint scars left over from his orphanage days, then even further until he had to take his hand away from Tom's chest to kneel.

He pressed his lips to Tom's jutting hipbone for a moment and then eased his mouth over where the older boy was already half-hard. Tom swore softly under his breath and Harry pressed his hand firmly to his hip, keeping him in place, and closed his eyes as he started to work his tongue and jaw. Tom's stifled sounds were almost covered by the sound of the water but Harry heard them just fine and committed them blissfully to memory as he worked Tom to aching hardness.

Tom was gorgeous to touch and Harry could feel his pulse thundering hard and fast through his tongue. He swallowed back his own groan as he kissed away the beads of fluid collecting at the head before opening up his throat and taking Tom in as far as he could. Tom's ragged gasp sent shocks all through Harry, a heady thrill that he was doing this, that he had this power to take Tom apart in this way; he was almost overwhelmed by the feeling of Tom in his mouth and the sounds he was making.

He wanted Tom to come undone and the thought was suddenly an obsession, so he sucked harder, worked his tongue faster, faster, until Tom gasped and his spine suddenly arched, his hips jerking forward despite Harry's hand pressing them to the shower wall. Harry swallowed down as Tom gave over to his release, hot liquid splashing in his mouth. He continued to kiss and suck and swallow as Tom shuddered himself to stillness, running his tongue over the softening length until Tom reached forwards to give his hair a sharp tug and he moved back.

Tom looked dishevelled and so utterly, undeniably human with a flush all over his face and neck, his pupils blown wide, his chest heaving for breath and his thighs shaking in hard spasms. Harry watched him and marvelled, licking his lips to clean up the last few errant drops that had escaped as he felt raw need burn through him.

Tom practically dragged him up by the hand still gripping his hair, kissing him hard as he roughly jerked him off. It didn't take long until Harry reached his own orgasm, slumping up against Tom as he did so. "I love you," he breathed, the words half muffled from where his face was pressed against Tom's neck, the warm shower water sluicing down over them both and washing away the slick mess. Pressed up against him, Tom went very still for a long moment.

"I don't love you." He said eventually and Harry couldn't help the amused sound he made against the older boy's skin, his head still pleasantly warm and buzzed from his climax, before pulling back slightly.

"Such a romantic." He teased before shrugging. "And I know that. Does it matter?"
"I think it would to most people." Tom replied dryly and Harry snorted.

"I killed one of my classmates yesterday, you're working to take over the government– then the world, probably– and Hermione is, well, she's Hermione; none of us are 'most people', Tom. What we have works. Love isn't the be all and end all of a relationship– attachment, fascination and possession all work fine."

"You believe I have an attachment to you, then?" Tom asked, his tone a combination of teasing and curious. Harry shrugged.

"Well you'd be upset to lose us, right?" He asked and Tom pulled a slight face.

"'Upset' is likely an understatement." He stated flatly and Harry nodded.

"See? You're attached– and so are we. You don't have to love us for this to work. And I don't need you to love me to be able to love you in return."

Tom gave him a long, unreadable look. "I think," he said, finally, "that Hermione and I both forget sometimes that you spent your childhood locked in a cupboard."

"Yeah," Harry agreed, closing his eyes and tipping his head up so the warm water was running over his face. "Sometimes."

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Their final day of the holidays passed in a surprising sort of serenity, all things considered. After the shower (and mutual exchange of orgasms), the turbulent confusion of emotion churning inside him had faded down. Harry wasn't expecting it to stay gone, it'd rear its ugly head up again sooner or later, but for now it was all tucked away at the back of his mind.

He'd thought about going for a fly over the grounds one last time but ultimately decided to spend the afternoon with Tom and Hermione instead. Tucked up in the library with the new books his lovers had received at Yule, Harry's broomstick servicing kit and a pack of Exploding Snap, the three of them lazed the afternoon away, trading the occasional easy, languid kisses but not going any further then that. Harry had no doubt that before he and Hermione left the next morning the three of them would all end up in bed together– or at least on a relatively flat surface somewhere in the house– but for the moment everything was just quiet and peaceful (excluding the occasional small explosion from the playing cards).

Instead of the apprehension he'd been expecting to feel at the thought of more sex with Tom, especially now that he was intimately aware of the initial pain and discomfort involved in it, Harry found himself instead feeling surprisingly anticipative of what the evening would bring. He'd enjoyed the day before, though upon reflection that shouldn't surprise him as much as it had. He'd been sexually active for long enough to have a fairly good idea of where his tastes leaned towards; he enjoyed getting a little used and feeling wrung out, enjoyed being handled, to have someone move and shape him and tell him what they were going to do to him while he shuddered and took it. Hermione taking charge when they had sex wasn't just because of her experience, not anymore; he liked her being on top just as much as she liked to be on top, and that such a preference was compatible with Tom was hardly surprising.

Of course, Tom was certainly more... extreme in his own tastes, and while Harry couldn't deny being uncomfortable with the thought of sadism and masochism, he also wouldn't deny feeling a certain niggling curiosity about it all too. Giving and receiving pain was predicated on tangible trust, of knowing and respecting the other's edges and allowing to be pushed to the brink of too
much but not over. He trusted Tom, trusted that the older boy would always stop if he asked, but he
sincerely doubted such things would do anything for him. For Harry, pain was pain. He wasn't
wired for it like Hermione was; he could get right on board with biting and rough sex and even
small doses of deliberately inflicted hurt, but what Tom liked was not that.

But he wouldn't worry about that now, he decided; not yet anyway. Tom wouldn't push, he trusted
that. Push boundaries, yes definitely, but the older boy wouldn't try to pressure Harry into anything
he wasn't ready for or willing to do-- and not just because Hermione would do her damnedest to kill
him if he did.

Hermione had been... quiet that day, in a way that was equal parts concerned and contemplative.
Every now and then she'd glance over at him with an unreadable expression on her face but it
wasn't until after dinner when they'd returned to the library that he caught her eye on one such
occasion and lifted an eyebrow in silent question.

"How are you feeling?" She asked instead of answering, the slight smile tugging at the corners of
her mouth telling him that she was aware he was aware she'd just dodged his question. Harry rolled
his eyes before shrugging slightly.

"Okay. Better then this morning." He told her and she nodded and leaned forwards so she could
brush her lips gently against his cheek but he turned into the kiss, meeting her lips instead. They
made out for a few minutes, Hermione nipping at his lower lip and tugging on it with her teeth
before they moved apart.

"We should go to bed," she suggested and there was no mistaking exactly what she meant by 'bed'
as she gave him a sly look. "That would cheer you up."

"You think sex will be the solution?" Harry teased and she smirked at him.

"Of course-- sex is the solution to everything."

"What if it doesn't work?" he challenged and her smirk widened.

"Try more sex."

Harry laughed and when she stood up, he let her pull him up too. "Come on, Tom!" She called over
her shoulder as she started to pull him after her out of their home library, to the older boy still
sitting on the couch and completely absorbed in reading a dusty old tome written in a language
Harry didn't even recognise. "Books can take you many places, but Harry's arse isn't one of them!"
She added, wickedly cheerful, and Harry let out a mortified squawking sound, his face flaming a
brilliant, burning red.

Hermione, evil woman that she was, just laughed, barely waiting to reach their bedroom before
stripping out of the dress she'd been wearing, her underthings following only moments later. Harry
almost commented when he saw her body, his eyes widening in shock at the sight of her as she had
a spectacular necklace of mottled purple under the delicate-looking lace of the choker and the
bruises on the back of her thighs looked almost muscle-deep.

Hermione definitely seemed to be in an impatient mood, however, because when she realised he
hadn't even started to undress she made a hissing sound under her breath and just vanished his
clothes before pushing him down so he was sitting on the bed and then straddling his lap, pressing
her mouth to his. As she licked her way into his mouth she stretched her fingers to run them along
his sides and Harry groaned, rocking his hips slightly so he was rubbing against where she was
already hot and wet.
In response, Hermione dug her nails into his back, dragging them up his spine and he breathed in harshly through his nose, flexing his shoulders and pressing closer to her, shivering. He moaned as she scratched at him again then bit at his lip hard enough to draw blood, the sweet copper tang of his blood on their tongues causing her to pant harshly and rock her hips. Harry tangled his hands in her curls, yanking on them with a roughness that surprised them both as he kissed her hard and a little desperately.

The sound of Tom's predatory laugh sent a thrill up Harry's spine. He glanced up to see that Tom had followed them from the home-library after all and had undressed at some point then settled back on the bed, propped up by the pillows so he could watch them as he stroked himself. Harry accidentally dug his fingers in none-too-gently against Hermione's hips at the sight but she just moaned so he used his grip to tug her in closer and she obligingly wrapped her legs around his waist, keeping their bodies pressed flush against each other. He pulled her hair again hard enough to cause tears to well in her eyes and she bit down on his shoulder in response, tightening her legs further and using her heels to shove down on his lower back so she could grind up against him. "Hermione-" he started to moan but she cut him off with her lips and he keened against her mouth. Tom laughed again, causing Harry to peek over at him. The older boy was still watching them intently and Harry could see the hunger on his face, could spy the darkness so visible in his eyes. It made his breath catch, his heart almost skipping a beat, and Tom's smirk widened. "So many things I want to do to you both," he purred before rolling onto his hands and knees and prowling over to them. Harry was pretty sure that sort of move would look overly ridiculous if anyone else tried, but when Tom did it, it was like seeing a lethal wild cat in action, an apex predator stalking towards its prey. The older boy's eyes were sharp like cut glass and there was the suggestion of something hard and dangerous in the lines of his face as he approached them both.

"Hermione," he murmured when he was close enough to touch, to lean forwards and drag his teeth over the bruises he'd left on her neck. Hermione shuddered and Harry could feel the muscles in her bruised thighs, still wrapped tight around him, clench. She nodded at whatever unspoken command Tom had given and Harry almost whined as she moved off him, immediately missing the heat of her body pressed to his. Tom gave his shoulder a nudge though, tugging him back. "Come, lean back," he said and Harry scooted back to the middle of the bed and as he laid down, Tom looming over him, he suddenly understood why Hermione had moved off him.

The realisation of where things were going sent a sharp, hot jolt of fearful want through him and Harry made a kind of low, twisting noise. Tom smiled in response, a smug flick of his pretty mouth, and the older boy nudged Harry's legs so he could settle between them. Harry couldn't help but feel very vulnerable in that position, his arms rested at his sides with his palms up, his tender stomach exposed and tense and his head tilted back, showing his throat. He could feel the weight of Tom's eyes on him and it practically pinned him in place.

Slightly unnerved, Harry glanced over to find Hermione and saw that she had taken over Tom's spot from before, having reclined against the headboard of the bed like it was a throne with her legs casually splayed open. One of her hands was caressing her breasts while the other moved between her thighs as she watched them both with heavy-lidded eyes; possessive and lust-filled, pupils blown wide and dark. Something about that raw, hungry look, directed toward him, made Harry shiver and almost automatically he reached a hand back towards her. Hermione's face softened and, her hands busy, she leaned forwards to kiss his fingertips then nip at them softly.

"I want you to come apart underneath me," Tom said suddenly, dragging Harry's attention back to him, and the older boy smirked slightly as he reached forwards to drag his nails lightly over the pale expanse of Harry's defenceless belly, causing the muscles to tense and pink lines to rise along the white flesh. Harry inhaled sharply and Tom's smirked widened at his reaction before he
continued. "I want you to come apart," he said softly, "and beg for more and more until you can't even talk any more, can't even think, can barely breathe, and my name is all you know."

Harry hadn't realised dirty talk could be so hot until this moment and he almost growled in frustration when Tom suddenly paused, eyes sharp as they looked down at him. "Do you want that?" He asked and Harry didn't even hesitate before nodding. "Use your words." Tom ordered, and for a moment Harry thought the older boy was asking him to beg. He was nowhere near gone enough for that, though, and was about to tell Tom just where he could take his kinky, controlling bullshit when he thought of Hermione's talk about safe words and the importance of communication. What he and Tom had was still very new and Harry guessed this was the other boy's way of making sure he didn't mess it up and scare Harry off by missing something and pushing past where he was comfortable.

"I do, I want it," he told Tom honestly, moving the same hand Hermione had been playfully nibbling towards the older boy, intending to pull Tom's head back down to kiss. Instead, Tom caught his hand in an iron grip, his nails digging roughly into the softness of Harry's wrist as he smiled down at him in a way that looked far too pleasant to be safe or reassuring.

Before he could react, Tom then seized his other wrist too and in the space of a moment had trapped both of a surprised Harry's hands in just one of his, long fingers like bands of iron around Harry's wrists, and then shoved them down to the mattress above his head and pinned them there. A breathless sound ripped from Harry's throat at the casual manhandling and heat flared hot and bright in his stomach, spreading out like fire along his nerves. With his free hand, Tom grabbed him under the chin, his steel fingers pressing hot dots of pain into Harry's jaw as he turned his head so he was forced to look him directly in the eye. Harry gave a low moan as the dark, hot pleasure in Tom's eyes kept him from struggling, kept him pinned in place just as surely as the older boy's iron grip, and Tom smiled back down at him.

"Good boy," he said simply before releasing his chin and leaning forwards to scrape his teeth along Harry's collarbone, then retracing the slight sting with his tongue. Harry made a sound suspiciously close to a whimper and Tom made one that was far too close to a laugh but before Harry could complain about it there were lips on his neck and mouth, wet and hot and starving, and he just surrendered to it all.

He wasn't sure at what point magic replaced Tom's hand in keeping his wrists trapped above his head (he suspected the wrist cuff had something to do with that particular piece of spell-work) as he lost himself to Tom's mouth as it kissed, licked, bit and scraped across his neck and chest, lost himself to the feel of rough palms kneading against him, to long fingers pressing light bruises and surprisingly sharp nails dragging pink raised lines over his pale skin, as well as the tantalising and far-too fleeting brushes against where he was hard and aching, teasing and tormenting him. Bit by bit he fell apart under Tom's touch, let the older boy strip him of both his higher thought and inhibitions with his actions and reduce him to something desperate and shameless and far too willing to beg for more, more, please more–

And Tom gave him more, pressed slicked fingers inside him and it burned, it did, but Harry couldn't keep his hips still. His body was confused, sending mixed signals of pain and pleasure, and he was too hazy to know whether he was actually pushing into the intrusion or away from it. Tom was holding him down with a firm hand on his abdomen– which probably shouldn't be as hot as his body seemed to think it was– while twisting and sliding his fingers until Harry was so close to sobbing, to coming, that he almost didn't feel it when Tom pulled out his fingers and replaced them with something bigger, pushing into him in a single, almost brutal stroke.

It hurt less then the day before, whether that was because of the added preparation involved, how
much more aroused he was or simply because he had a better idea of how to relax himself, Harry wasn't exactly sure. Either way, it took far less time for the burn to spike into slippery, greedy pleasure and Harry was already so close, could already feel himself falling apart as Tom trailed his fingers along his skin, not stopping until his palm was resting over his throat. As Tom's hand slid tight around his neck Harry considered panicking or struggling, but as he spluttered at the pressure of the fingers pushing against his Adam's apple, his brain got stuck in a fuzzy, messed up spin that had him coming before he even really realised it was happening.

It was the sort of intense orgasm that had him seeing stars—though that could have also been the oxygen deprivation—and the world span out of focus for a bit. Harry didn't slide back into awareness until he felt Hermione mouthing at his neck. Vaguely he registered Tom say something but in the aftermath of the somewhat earth shattering orgasm and with Hermione's mouth pressed to the side of his neck, licking and biting the skin, leaving a wet trail all the way down to the protruding bones of his clavicle, Harry was finding it difficult to keep a hold on both his dignity and brain functions and he just mumbled some sort of assent, too far gone to answer properly or to even really notice what it was Tom had said.

He certainly did notice, however, when Hermione's mouth moved down from his neck and instead to where he was soft and spent after his earth shaking, star seeing, blacking out momentary-type orgasm. It was too much, definitely too much and it was too soon and it sort of like his nerves were on fire. Harry's whole body shuddered at the overstimulation that was as confusing as it was overwhelming and brutal, the harsh bites of pain mixing with sharp jolts of pleasure. He whimpered and writhed, wanting to buck away from the sensations but was kept trapped in place by Tom, who was still buried inside him though thankfully keeping still— for now, at least. Harry got the feeling that particular generosity wasn't going to last.

Tom made shushing sounds in response to the wide-eyed, sort of stunned and definitely overwhelmed look Harry gave him, leaning down to gently run his fingers along Harry's face, edging them along the jawline before carefully cupping a cheek, his touch strangely soft and gentle. And at that moment Harry knew he would go through with whatever his lovers wanted, whatever they had planned, if only to continue being held and touched like that, like he was something so precious.

"Shh, shh, everything is perfect. You are perfect. You're doing so well, Harry." Tom gently stroked his face, calming and soothing him until he was fully hard again and Hermione was pulling off and away. Harry wasn't sure if the sigh escaping his lips was relief or frustration from the loss but before his sluggish mind could figure it out, Tom had moved his hand away from his face and then Hermione was swinging a leg over so she was straddling the curve of his hipbones and Harry let out a choked sound as she lowered herself down on him.

His mouth moved soundlessly as he tried to adjust to the sensation of the wet tightness around him and the heavy fullness inside him and the burning heat everywhere, then he was yanking uselessly at the magic keeping his wrists trapped against the mattress above his head as Hermione twisted so she and Tom could meet in a kiss that was both messy and biting, their hands roaming each other's skin as they both started to roll their hips. It wasn't much movement at first, just slow circles, but neither of his lovers were restrained, gentle people and Harry's eyes felt like they were going to roll up into the back of his head as the slow, sensual movements sped up, Tom slamming into him while Hermione rode him.

He felt like he was been swept away in a tidal wave, blown through by a hurricane. If he hadn't already come once he would never have lasted, especially as Hermione leaned down and practically ravaged his mouth in a bruising kiss, a tangle of tongues and saliva until he could taste blood in both their mouths.
At one point, Tom did something out of Harry's view that caused Hermione to suck in a shocked breath and Tom seemed to take that as encouragement. Never slowing his hard and fast movements, the older boy leaned slightly forwards to hook his hands under Hermione's arms then straighten out, pulling her tight against him with one hand curled at her hip and the other wrapped around her already bruised throat hard enough to add to the purple marks there.

Hermione clawed at his fingers as she gasped for air and before this moment Harry had never known that choking could be so attractive. But on Hermione, whose soft skin was flushed a darkening pink, it was beautiful. Hermione had lost her rhythm, her hips stuttering and her body jerking as she moaned, breathless and broken, her breasts heaving and glistening with sweat. Tom's hand tightened around her throat further, cutting off her strangled whine, and her eyes fluttered shut.

Harry wanted to lean up, to press a kiss to her open mouth and tell her how beautiful she looked, but as her hands scrabbled uselessly against his chest, her nails raking along his skin, that was it. Harry came for the second time—hard. Full body shuddering, seeing stars, groaned scream tearing through his throat hard.

The orgasm ripped through him and over the rushing of his own blood in his ears he vaguely heard Tom swearing and felt Hermione clenching vice-like around him, but he was too wrapped up in his own climax to notice much except himself.

He must have dozed off for a second because when he came to his hands were free, all the mess and stickiness had been cleaned away and Hermione and Tom were lying on either side of him. Tom, noticing he was mostly aware again, leaned across slightly to kiss him with about as much tenderness as the older boy could probably manage. It was too greedy still; too much tongue and teeth and barely restrained urge to own and consume, but Harry didn't mind. Breathless and wrung out, he let his eyes drift shut and Tom moved away. "So pretty," he murmured and Harry thought about complaining—'pretty'? Really?—but could only summon enough energy to make an unhappy grumbling sound. Tom laughed softly. "Sleep, Harry." He chided and Harry left the lure of oblivion tug him away.

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When he opened his eyes, he knew he was dreaming because he was in the strange, off version of Riddle Manor again. Dream-Tom was there too, looking at him with slight amusement on his handsome face. Harry looked down at himself and blushed when he realised he was as naked as he'd been when he fell asleep, only the wrist cuff still present.

"This weird dream again?" He mumbled, wondering why he was so embarrassed to be naked in front of a figment of his own imagination but feeling undeniably awkward about it nevertheless. "I guess it has been a big couple of days." It made sense his brain had provided a space for him to make sense of things, he thought.

"Big days?" Dream-Tom asked and Harry made his way over to the same chair he'd sat in last time, trying not to feel awkward about the way Dream-Tom's eyes tracked him.

"Busy too." He told the figment, wondering if it was possible to use magic in his dream to summon a blanket or something to cover himself up. He settled for using a strategically placed cushion instead.

"You did mention planning a murder last time," 'Tom' said and Harry sighed, slumping in place.

"Yeah, that was... that was really something." He mumbled.
"So you did it," 'Tom' looked fascinated by that for some reason. "Any regrets?"

"Only that I realised a few things about myself that I'm not really comfortable knowing," Harry admitted.

"Such as?" Prompted 'Tom'.

"Like that killing Black wasn't a one off sort of thing," Harry said so quietly he could barely even hear himself. "That I'm capable of being selfish enough that if someone has more value to me dead then alive... fuck; that can't be normal, to be able to take a life so easily! I mean, I don't even feel that bad about it— I feel worse about not feeling bad then I do about killing someone!" His voice rose as he spoke, panic rising up inside him. He dropped his head, pressing the balls of his hands against his eyes. "It really scared me," he admitted to 'Tom'.

"Because you liked it?"

"What?! I didn't say that!" Harry exclaimed, sitting bolt upright to look over at 'Tom', aghast. 'Tom' looked far too calm as he met his gaze, an odd sort of smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

"You're distressed because it was easy, far more so then you had expected," he said softly. "That ease upset you and so did the fact you felt nothing for your victim. You've realised you don't fit into society's definition of what makes a person 'good' and that makes you unhappy. But none of that is what scares you. You're too accepting of it; you didn't have any trouble looking me in the eye until the moment you admitted you were scared. That tells me you're ashamed of something, which is interesting considering you just told me you murdered someone and didn't feel bad about it without even blinking."

'Tom' had moved forwards as he spoke and Harry felt frozen in place as his subconscious construction approached. "You don't have to be scared or ashamed, Harry," 'Tom' said, his voice switching to something soothing as he reached out to gently touch Harry's cheek. Harry automatically leaned into the touch and 'Tom' smiled. "You can tell me, sweet thing— it's just us here."

Harry shuddered, closing his eyes. Dream-Tom's fingers immediately tightened and Harry made a surprised sound, his eyes flying open again, and 'Tom' made an approving sound, still looking down at him calmly. Harry shuddered again, confused. "I did like it," he whispered, "and it scares me, that I can enjoy doing something like that."

"It's a heady sort of power, isn't it?" 'Tom' agreed quietly. "Control over life and death... it's terribly, wickedly exciting, the sort of thrill that gets your blood racing and your heart pounding and it scares you, makes you ashamed, that doing something you know is bad can make you feel at all good."

"I guess I always thought I was a good person. Not a saint, but not a– a monster." Harry whispered. "Guess I was wrong."

'Tom' laughed. "Oh Harry," he said, an almost fond look on his handsome, sly face. "I know monsters, silly boy, and you're far from one of them."

Harry was comforted by that declaration for a moment before realising— "of course you'd try to make me feel better," he mumbled, "you're part of a dream my brain imagined up to make me feel better about this."

'Tom' gave him a look that was almost oddly pitying. "Silly boy," he said again, this time under his
breath like he was speaking to himself.

"I'm evil, aren't I?" Harry said, the panic starting to build up inside him. "Fuck, I killed someone and liked it-- I'm evil!"

'Tom's' grip on his face tightened suddenly, his thumb digging in to the joint of his jaw until Harry was gasping in pain, eyes madly watering as he tried to pull away but found himself trapped.

"Have you stopped panicking?" 'Tom' asked sharply when he tried to open his mouth to demand 'Tom' let go and Harry made a small, surprised noise as he realised the panic that had been building inside him had dissipated. "Good, then listen to me," 'Tom' ordered, seemingly getting his answer from Harry's expression, "you're not evil, despite what society may try to tell you. From the time we're children we have the mundane concepts of 'good' and 'evil' stamped into us, but the truth is there is no good or evil in this world, there's only power and those who are too weak to seek it."

"That seems like a cop-out," Harry mumbled then winced when 'Tom' dug his thumb into joint of his jaw again, a hiss of pain escaping him. He glared when 'Tom' let go, reaching up to rub where his jaw ached. "Even in my dreams you're such a bastard!" He complained and 'Tom' laughed, low and amused.

"Yet you didn't pull away," he said, playfully almost, and Harry felt the blood rush to his cheeks. "And that must be mine," 'Tom' mused, touching his fingertips to the wrist cuff.

"Yes, but it's not like that, though," Harry protested, his face burning even hotter. 'Tom' laughed again before tilting his head.

"I think it's time for you to wake up, Harry," he said.

"This is the weirdest fucking dream." Harry muttered to himself, scowling at Dream-Tom who just shook his head, still amused.

"Until next time," he said and Harry had a moment to realise just how strange that was for a construction of his own mind to say before he was blinking in the sight of his bedroom.

"Time to get up, Harry," the real Tom was saying from somewhere to his left. Harry tried to sit up and immediately groaned, the pain and soreness radiating though his body making him regret trying to move. He made a miserable sound and Tom laughed, heartless bastard. Harry turned his head so he could scowl at the older boy who was stretched out languidly over the bed and looking equal parts entertained, smug, possessive and satisfied as he watched him. Hermione was noticeably absent but Harry could hear the sound of the shower—she'd always had an easier time getting up in the mornings then he had. "Mm, I'll have to get some bruise paste for your face," Tom noted and Harry frowned slightly.

"What?"

"I didn't realise I'd held tight enough to leave bruises there." Tom said in explanation, which was about the closest to an apology as he'd give. Harry's frown deepened, because Tom was usually careful about leaving visible marks... and that sounded really awful; a better way of phrasing that would be that Tom was careful about leaving marks from their very consensual shagging in places where other people could see them.

Lifting a hand, he prodded along the side of his face and was surprised by the tenderness, actually wincing when he touched the hinge of his jaw. An uneasy feeling was beginning to stir inside him.

"Good dreams?" Tom asked lazily, causing Harry to glance back over at him. "You were very
restless– I'd have thought all the fucking would have knocked you out. You certainly went out like a light."

"Weird dream," Harry corrected the other boy. "I got into a debate with... myself, I guess, about good and evil." Except it hadn't really been a debate and his jaw twinged again while his cheeks heated up just thinking about it.

Tom scoffed. "There is no such thing as good or evil," he said dismissively, "there's only power– power, and those who are too weak to seek it... Harry? Are you okay?"

All the warmth had left Harry's cheeks, the blood having drained away and left his face feeling like ice as panic froze his lungs.

Harry wasn't sure why he did it, but his hand had been lingering on his face and without even really thinking he pushed down on the hinge of his jaw where he felt impossibly bruised– 'impossibly' because it was a dream, and dreams couldn't bruise you. The sharp jab of pain worked just as well as it had in the dream to halt his panic and his lungs started to work again.

"I need the loo," he blurted out, unable to meet Tom's eyes and stumbling off the bed, fleeing from the room. As Hermione was already in the bathroom connected to their bedroom he found a different one to lock himself into, feeling a bit of déjà vu from the previous morning. Crossing over to the mirror, he examined his reflection and his heart sunk as he took in the small, round bruise over the hinge of his jaw– the same shape as a thumb, but one too large to be his own. The faint shadows on his jaw also matched where 'Dream-Tom' had gripped his face and he shuddered, confused and disturbed and on the verge of panicking again.

"Harry?" Hermione's voice was calm as she knocked lightly. "I have the bruise paste. Can I come in?"

Silently, Harry unlocked the door and his best friend stepped into the bathroom, closing the door behind her. She'd clearly just stepped out of the shower; she was wearing only a towel and her hair was wet and dripping, plastered to her neck and shoulders. "Want to tell me what spooked you?" She asked, placing a small hand on his shoulder and squeezing gently. Her mouth quirked up. "Tom is trying to act tough and not panic but he's pacing like a mad thing in our room." She added. "He actually pulled me out of my shower to come find out what's wrong."

"Er, sorry about that," Harry mumbled and she laughed.

"Oh it's fine, I'm just glad Tom isn't too proud to admit when it comes to emotional displays in others he should seek expert help and not try to deal with it himself."

Harry could feel himself relax slightly as Hermione teased Tom, which he had no doubt was her aim in the first place. Taking a deep breath, he touched the bruises on his face again. "I've been having these weird dreams," he told her quietly. "They're set at Riddle Manor and Tom is there, but it's... really off and both don't look right. And they're really, weirdly lucid..."

"You think they might not be dreams after all?" Hermione asked, frowning. Harry shrugged helplessly.

"I don't know, but the Tom in my dream said something about good and evil and when I woke up, Tom said pretty much the exact same thing verbatim. And in the dream, Tom grabbed my face and when I woke up..." he gestured to the bruises and Hermione's frown deepened.

"When did you first have one of those dreams? And how many have you had?" She asked sharply.
"Two." Harry answered. "The first one was after the New Years Gala."

"After you started wearing the ring again," Hermione said and Harry sucked in a shocked breath as the hand the ring was on suddenly felt heavy as a bludger.

"You think–?"

"I think the next time Tom comes to visit us at Hogwarts, we're going to have a long conversation." Hermione said grimly. "The fake copy of the ring is still in my trunk– we're going to swap it over. Don't tell him."

"Can we talk to him about it now?" Harry asked. His stomach felt a bit like he'd swallowed live snakes and he wanted to sort this out, to find out what the hell was going on.

"Tom should be visiting us tonight," Hermione said. "And we have to get ready to leave– you realise the chances are I'll be arrested as soon as I set foot on Platform Nine and Three Quarters."

"What?!" Harry demanded loudly and furiously, anger momentarily drowning out all the anxiety as he was distracted from the ring and the dreams entirely.

"Weasley is dead and Dumbledore will want my head for it." Hermione said, far too calmly in his opinion.

"But you didn't do it!" He protested. "And you're supposed to be Dagworth's niece– he can't just arrest you!"

"I suspect he and Moody will take me back to Hogwarts– like you said, I'm supposed to be Dagworth's niece so they won't want to take me to the Ministry until they have their confession." Hermione continued like he hadn't interrupted. "The flaw to his plan is, of course, the fact I am innocent, but that will likely take some time to clear up. Hopefully by the time the train arrives at the school it'll be sorted."

"I want to come with you," he said immediately and she shook her head.

"They won't let you," she said frankly and he scowled.

"Do you ever wonder what it would be like to have a peaceful life?" He asked and Hermione actually laughed.

"Oh hell, imagine how boring it would be!"

Harry couldn't help his smile and he could feel some of his tension drain away as he accepted the bruise paste Hermione was holding out for him. Still– "you don't have to do that, you know," he told her.

"Do what?" Hermione asked, looking genuinely confused.

"Put on a brave face to try and make me feel better," he said, "you don't need to protect me."

Hermione's face fell slightly, the corners of her mouth turning down. "There's no need to be worried, though," she said, clearly speaking more to herself then to him. "It's ridiculous to be nervous– there's no logic to it."

"Yeah, but emotions aren't logical," Harry pointed out. "And we can't help how we feel– we shouldn't be ashamed of it either."
Hermione's eyes were a bit too perceptive as she looked over at him then. "Speaking from experience?" She asked and Harry shrugged.

"I've got stuff to work through about the whole Weasley thing." He said vaguely, not wanting to go into that right then. And whatever the hell 'Dream-Tom' was, seeing as he– it?– wasn't some sort of construct of his imagination after all, he–or it– had been useful in helping him sort through and accept the emotions of it all.

"I... I'm not afraid of Dumbledore or of the actual murder or assault charges," Hermione said, slowly. She was clearly hesitant to open up, to admit to feeling out of control in any way, but Harry couldn't help but feel proud that she was trying. "It's Moody who unnerves me." She admitted quietly. "Living on the streets, the police were the enemy. They weren't always kind to the girls working the corners, or to thieves. It never felt like they tried to solve the murders of any of my friends– the druggies, whores and homeless weren't worth their time... and being a runaway meant that if I was caught then I'd be returned to an orphanage or group home. There were good ones out there, of course, but they weren't the ones who usually interacted with the sort of people I was around."

Hermione shuddered a bit, wrapping her arms around herself. "When I was younger especially, I was terrified of the police." She said quietly. "I was so, so terrified they'd find me and take me back to St Agnes's, and later I learned to be afraid of them for different reasons. Moody is– or was– law enforcement and he's just as biased towards Slytherins as the police were towards the homeless, prostitutes and addicts. He's already shown he's got no reservations against cursing children and because he's an ex-Auror, he was able to get away with hurting me. It's... very unpleasant to think he'll have any sort of power over me, no matter how briefly, especially during an interrogation."

Harry swallowed thickly, feeling nauseous. As she spoke, Hermione's eyes had gained that shadowed, distant look they sometimes got when she talked about certain aspects of her past. He suspected there was a bigger story behind her quiet statement of learning to be afraid of law enforcement for different reasons then what she'd already given, but he knew better then to push, the same way Hermione never demanded details about his own demons. It made him furious though, to think that her experiences with the magical world had shown her that witches and wizards were no better. It certainly made him really look forward to whatever shape or form the curse on the DADA position was going to take this year– he just hoped it was either extraordinarily painful or very fatal. Or both.

"Snape will be there," he told her, firm in his belief that no matter what their Head of House wouldn't let Hermione face Dumbledore and Moody by herself, and that he would never, ever let them hurt her. Snape had warned them at the gala and he would make sure the other two men didn't lay a finger on his best friend. Hermione's moth twitched into a weak smile.

"I guess I'll just have to trust him." She said.

And Harry would just have to trust him too.
CHAPTER LIX:

_Hermione's POV:_

Sometimes Hermione hated being right. It was rare but it did happen and this was certainly one of those occasions.

Being escorted in grim silence by Moody and some younger Auror, a witch with a shock of almost violently purple hair, from King's Cross Station was uncomfortable but not unexpected—and as predicted, despite 'arresting' her Moody failed to take her to the Ministry of Magic to be properly processed then interrogated, instead apparating her to the gates of Hogwarts and making the long trek up to the castle.

"Take a good long look around, because this'll be the last time you set foot on these grounds," Moody grunted with a lopsided, self-satisfied smile on his hideously scarred face as they passed Hagrid's hut. Hermione's fingers twitched for knives she wasn't carrying (and didn't that make her feel so naked?) as the tempting thought to add her own marks to the tableau rose forcefully up within her. She had to work to keep her palms flat against the sides of her dress, shivering slightly at the bite of the wind through the cotton and silk blend of the material.

She'd worn something white and chaste that she hated and then wrapped white ribbons in her twin braids for the occasion. The dress was wildly inappropriate for the weather; a sweet, simple ruffled design with a collar, front pearly button fastenings, long, wide sleeves with button cuffs, a cinched waist and a flared, pleated skirt that reached halfway down her shins. The white-glossed leather sandals with their thin, delicate straps, slight heels and decorative pretty silk flowers were little better and her toes were already numb. She felt stupid and childish in the outfit but seeing as that was the point, she ignored her discomfort. The youthful, innocent look she was portraying was more important then comfort.

She was wearing an emergency portkey too, because Tom was paranoid—something she wholeheartedly approved of—and it was hideously babyish, a diamond 'H' pendant that must have cost a fortune but looked more like it belonged to the prepubescent offspring of a pair of wealthy nobles. She'd chosen not to take off the lace choker, instead hiding it under the dress's collar along with the marks on her neck. Several applications of bruise paste had only succeeded in turning the bruising to a brownish-yellow collar, still far too distinguishable against her pale skin to have in plain view.

Tom had been... particularly _possessive_, the night before with her and Harry. She understood, though, just how much he hated them been taken away from him and couldn't blame him—she'd left her own share of marks on her lover's skin the night before, him and Harry both, doing her best to leave indents of her teeth in their flesh she wished would never fade—but the bruising was inconvenient to cover up.

"In fact, you better get used to dressing warmer too—surrounded by the North Sea's much colder then a Scottish winter." Moody added, all nastily smug, presumably in response to her icy silence,
or maybe her slight shivering.

"If I was actually guilty of whatever it is this is all about then perhaps that would scare me," she drawled, careful to keep the disdain and dismissiveness in place and not reveal the burning rage nor the freezing hatred she felt on her face.

The violet-haired witch had been giving her strange looks that Hermione couldn't quite identify the entire 'march' up to the school, but Hermione didn't miss the flicker of amusement on her face. Moody, however, snarled in response to her words, reaching out to grab her by the forearm and gripping her with hard fingers, unknowingly directly on top of a bruise Tom had left by doing the exact same thing. The sheer difference between her body's reaction to being handled like this by Moody then by Tom was staggering; it felt like she'd been plunged into a lake of ice cold water (she was sure Harry could sympathise) and her stomach twisted up so violently she almost thought she'd start gagging.

Her free hand immediately went for a knife that wasn't there as Sting and Rottie's lessons on how to free herself from being grabbed started flashing through her mind, actions that were simply second nature by now as she knew full well just how crucial it was to react as quickly as possible when attacked—there was finger wrenching, the pulling and twisting of finger joints, a surprisingly painful move where she could force Moody's little finger down across the back of his hand until it snapped and he released her; a compression blow, involving slamming her hands sharply against Moody's ears and taking advantage of the balance disturbance that would follow; a head butt, where she could simply break Moody's nose with her forehead and use his distraction to get free—and she settled for the option that caused the least amount of damage possible, remembering even through the threat of burgeoning panic to portray the image of least harm possible.

She spun in place as fast she could, turning away from Moody and continuing the movement even when the friction made her skin burn, while lashing out with her free hand, the one clenched to hold a knife that wasn't there, jabbing Moody straight in the solar-plexus. If she'd been holding one of her switchblades, she'd have caused significant damage to his abdominal aorta with such a strike. As it was, a proper blow to the solar-plexus was extremely painful and stopped any assailant in their tracks; the diaphragm spasmed when hit which made it impossible to breathe, and seeing as muscle couldn't develop over the area even well-built people could be taken down by a well-placed hit with the right amount of strength behind it.

It would also cause the recipient to end up doubled over, which combined with his sudden inability to breathe meant Moody had bigger issues to worry about then keeping his hold on her. Hermione moved swiftly out of range the moment he let go, careful to watch the female Auror for any sign of retaliation.

The violet-haired witch looked more impressed then anything, though she did give Hermione a warning look that clearly said to stay put and not try to run as she checked on the gasping, wheezing Moody. Hermione remained stiffly in place, though her body was tensed ready to move and she regretted not getting some distance between them when Moody finally managed to straighten back up and made to step towards her with a murderous look on his face.

"Keep your hands off me!" She snarled, taking several swift steps back as she brought her hands up in front of her. The ex-Auror had confiscated her Ollivander's wand at the train station and she'd left her illegal one with Harry, which meant all she had to defend herself was her body.

It was a good thing wizards were so useless at any sort of hand-to-hand combat.

"What is going on here?" A sharp voice suddenly demanded and Hermione wondered if she'd ever
been gladder to hear Snape's voice.

"Professor Moody! What on earth did you do to her!??"

And on this occasion, McGonagall's dulcet tones were just as welcome.

"She assaulted me!" Moody growled, a hint of breathlessness still audible in his voice; a nearly imperceptible wheeze that made her want to smirk.

"He grabbed onto me!" Hermione pitched her voice purposefully higher and more fretful than it would ever be naturally. "He hurt me!"

Predictably, both professors faced went thunderous. "She's under arrest—" Moody started to defend himself, but Snape interrupted the man.

"If she was truly under arrest, then you'd be required by law to take her to the Ministry of Magic," he said coldly, his dark eyes glittering with what was undeniably hatred as he stepped between her and the DADA professor. "As you are not escorting her there, then I can only make the sensible assumption that this is a formal inquiry as to her whereabouts during the fatal assault on Ronald Weasley, nothing more."

Moody glared back at Snape with just as much undisguised hatred. "She'll be at the Ministry for processing by the end of the night," he growled and McGonagall drew herself up tall.

"She is innocent until proven guilty, Alastor," the Deputy Headmistress snapped severely, "and if you cannot respect that, then I'm afraid I'll have to contact Madam Bones and express to Amelia I believe you cannot remain impartial."

"Albus said—" Moody started to protest but McGonagall interrupted him.

"As he is not an Auror or a member of the DMLE, Albus has no authority on this matter." She told Moody sharply. "And it would do both you and he well to be reminded of that fact. Now follow me— keeping our hands to ourselves; we are civilised people, not a rowdy bunch of bickering, barbaric baboons."

McGonagall turned sharply and gestured for Hermione and Snape to go first, fixing Moody with a hard, beady look when he appeared to be about to move after them. With Snape by her side and McGonagall between her and Moody, Hermione felt the sharp anxiety that had wedged its vicious claws into her chest, tightening her lungs and speeding her heart, start to ease.

"You are going to give me a heart attack someday," Snape told her as they made their way up the stairs to the large front doors of the castle. He was speaking quietly enough that only she—and perhaps McGonagall—could hear what he was saying.

"That's rare for wizards your age, professor," Hermione said 'innocently' and Snape narrowed his eyes at her.

"Hence why it's just so astounding that you'll manage it." Hermione bit back the inappropriate laughter, her mood lifting slightly. Snape had a certain gift for doing that, she'd realised, though it was one he rarely implemented.

When they reached the gargoyles guarding the entrance to Dumbledore's office, Snape waved along McGonagall, Moody and the violet-haired Auror whose name Hermione still didn't know.

"I wish to have a brief word with my student," he told them and when Moody immediately started
to protest he fixed the ex-Auror with a withering look. "Does I have to remind you again that this is not an official interrogation?" her head of house asked, his tone impatient. "Because if you've changed your mind about an arrest then I'll acquiesce to surrendering my student to your custody as you transport her to the Ministry of Magic— where I guarantee that the best lawyers Lucius Malfoy's money can buy will be waiting, along with her legal guardian the Senior Undersecretary to the Minister of Magic."

Hermione could feel herself just about basking in smug satisfaction as Moody clumped over to the gargoyles, barked out 'fizzing whizbees' and practically stormed up the rotating staircase, the violet-haired Auror following after him. McGonagall went to join them, only pausing slightly to give Snape a grim, significant look. Snape dipped his chin slightly and she nodded at him before disappearing up after Moody.

Snape immediately pulled out his wand and cast a series of quick privacy charms. "Eavesdropping spells," he clarified, seeing her confused look. "Minerva was reminding me. Now, tell me you had nothing to do with Ronald Weasley's death, less then twenty-four hours after I alerted you to the fact he was hospitalised int he first place."

"I did not kill Weasley." She said calmly.

"Do you know who killed Weasley?" Snape pressed and she blinked guilelessly at him.

"I don't see why it's plausible that I'd know such a thing."

"The fact you're avoiding answering my question is very concerning." Snape said through gritted teeth.

"Should person A have suggested a way that person B could be encouraged to cease breathing and person C decided to carry out such... encouragement, that does not make person A either involved in the situation or responsible for said cessation. Hypothetically, of course." Hermione said, her voice and expression ones of earnest innocence.

"That is a matter of perception," Snape said through gritted teeth, "and person A has just made things much more difficult then needed."

"I have an alibi for the assault and I have never once set foot inside St Mungo's." She said calmly. Snape seemed unimpressed.

"But you know who attacked and murdered him." He said sharply and Hermione shook her head.

"I do not know for a fact who did it and I am not required to pass on my guesswork or assumptions to the DMLE." She said, dropping the act and letting her voice go hard and cold. "It's hardly my job to do their investigation for them, especially after how their investigator has treated me."

And that wasn't even a lie— as per instructions, Harry had never verbally confirmed to her that he had killed Weasley. Oh she knew, of course, but she didn't know-know. And she wasn't required to pass on anything that wasn't one hundred percent fact.

"And they can't use Veritaserum without officially arresting me, and even then they wouldn't be able to use it without permission from the Wizengamot, which Voldemort and his people practically runs— there was a reason so many Death Eaters avoided Azkaban." She added.

Snape flinched slightly at the sound of Voldemort's name but Hermione didn't hold it against him — her circumstances and experiences regarding the Dark Lord and her Head of House's circumstances and experiences with the wizard were two wildly different things that condoned two
widely different reactions.

"I sincerely hope there was a reason this had to happen, not just on a whim." Snape said quietly and Hermione's eyes widened slightly in understanding.

"There was someone who had to be protected." She said, after a brief pause.

"So the person who assaulted Weasley and the one who dosed him with mercury were two different people, then." Snape stated and Hermione felt herself go very, very still. Snape, seeing her reaction, rolled his eyes slightly. "Relax, the Healers didn't pick that up. Dumbledore had me examine the body and I didn't reveal those specific findings to him."

"Thank you." Hermione said, after a short pause. She remembered Harry's earlier words, the ones about trusting Snape and her own promise to try. Trust... did not come easily to her, but Snape was proving to be a deserving recipient.

"We've delayed here long enough, I'm afraid. Do me a favour and try not to act in a way unbecoming for a Slytherin in there." Snape warned and Hermione gave him her best innocent, little angel smile.

"The only thing 'unbecoming' in this meeting will be the sight of Moody's— and possibly Dumbledore's— guts spilling on the floor when I eviscerate them." She said in a voice so sweet it made her teeth hurt and Snape looked like he wanted to close his eyes and count to ten. She let her smile widen, let her teeth show. "After all, there's no need to practice 'constant vigilance' against dead enemies."

"If you can do me one favour in this life, Hermione, it will be to never say that within the Headmaster's earshot." Snape said flatly, but she could see the reluctant amusement in his eyes. She wondered if he realised just how much he oscillated between using her– and Harry's– first and last names depending on his mood, or if he was even aware that he did it in the first place.

Snape lifted his hand then, hesitating for a moment before very lightly placing his palm between her shoulder-blades and giving her a small nudge towards the revolving staircase. Hermione froze for a moment, her brain seeming to stall at the touch before she did as bid.

The four people waiting in Dumbledore's office were doing so with varying levels of patience and Hermione made sure she was standing tall and strong, her chin lifted and a hint of haughty arrogance visible on her face as she pulled on her 'pureblood princess' mask, as Harry was fond of calling it. "As I am a suspect in the murder of Ronald Weasley I am willing to hand over my memories of the day of Weasley's attack to the investigators to clear my name." She said calmly, immediately smug at the reactions of Moody and Dumbledore— both men were aware that her willingness to hand over her memories made her a much, much less likely perpetrator. "I will not willingly submit to veritaserum," she continued, "as the use of it will be unnecessary following viewing my memories, nor do I consent to letting someone use Mind Arts on me; I will remove the memory in question to place in a pensieve so it can be viewed. However, I am certainly not comfortable with Moody being the one to do so."

"And why would that be?" Dumbledore asked, his tone colder then she'd ever heard it before— which was certainly an accomplishment on the Headmaster's behalf.

"Because during the time in question I was having sex with my boyfriend."

The reactions of Dumbledore, Moody and McGonagall almost made her laugh out loud. McGonagall looked scandalised, Moody seemed disgusted and Dumbledore appeared equal parts
horrified, slightly sickened and furious. It was McGonagall who broke the stunned silence that had followed her declaration.

"That— that is inappropriate, Miss Granger! I never— I am very disappointed— such activities are not acceptable for someone your age—"

"With all due respect, Professor McGonagall, there is nothing in the Hogwarts rules about engaging in consensual sexual intercourse," Hermione interrupted, making sure to keep her tone polite. She didn't blame McGonagall for her reaction; she was aware of how both the time and community that the Transfiguration Mistress had grown up in would colour her views on both underage sex and sex between an unmarried couple. Hermione also knew, as reluctant as she was to admit it, that McGonagall's reaction came from a place of genuine care for her students wellbeing.

"I— yes. Yes, you are correct. That will have to be ammended, but you cannot be punished for such activities, as tremendously ill-advised and irresponsible as they happen to be." McGonagall said, after a brief pause in which her nostrils flared in a way Hermione was very familiar with.

"And your terms are acceptable— as Professor Moody is one of your teachers, it is entirely within reason for you to request someone else to view your memories. Alastor," she turned to Moody and Hermione had to admire the way the older woman commanded the attention and respect of the room, "is your trainee capable of reviewing the authenticity of the memory?"

Moody, who looked furious and was glaring at Hermione like he wanted to throttle her, gave a slow, reluctant nod. "Tonks is about to graduate the Auror trainee program— she has experience with the spells involved with verifying memories as alibis." He said gruffly.

"Miss Granger, do you need assistance with retrieving the memory in question?" McGonagall asked, turning back to her after nodding briskly at Moody, and Hermione shook her head.

"My uncle taught me the procedure after a conversation we had about a trial he assisted in." She said. "Moody has my wand, though."

"Professor Moody," McGonagall corrected and Hermione pressed her lips together in a thin line but didn't comment, instead glancing warily over at the suspiciously silent Dumbledore. His eyes were cold and hard behind his half-moon spectacles and as their gazes met she let him see the pure loathing in her own eyes before turning back. McGonagall had procured her wand and was summoning a pensieve— Hermione was reluctantly impressed that Dumbledore actually possessed one of the rare magical items, though she supposed she shouldn't be surprised. All the 'bells and whistles' in his office clearly showed that the headmaster was a collector of magical artefacts.

Taking out the memory of the very enthusiastic and exploratory sex marathon she and Harry had engaged in the night of the Yule Ball, following their encounter with Snape and Karkaroff in the rose garden, was a strange feeling. The memory was still present and accessible within her mind but it was faded and the emotions connected to it were gone completely.

The purple-haired witch— 'Trainee Auror Tonks', apparently, and that name was familiar for some reason Hermione couldn't quite identify— was submerged in the memory for nearly twenty minutes. It was a very tense twenty minutes spent mostly in strained silence. Dumbledore still had yet to address her directly but Hermione could feel the anger practically rolling off him and she wasn't ashamed to admit that it scared her. There was a reason that Dumbledore was known as the one wizard that Voldemort was afraid of. Tom's violent reaction following his-encounter with Dumbledore at the Malfoy's showed that was a fear that had started young and she wondered just what the— deputy, at the time— headmaster had done to invoke such a lasting fear in the Dark Lord.
"Definitely real," Tonks announced, as she suddenly pulled her out of the pensieve. She had a bright, cheerful voice and Hermione turned her attention to the purple-haired witch as young woman shook her head a few times. She then swallowed a gasp as the witch's purple hair seemed to just change to a deep magenta instead of its bright violet.

Metamorphmagus, she realised, instantly intrigued and suddenly much more interested in Moody's protege. To be a metamorphmagi was a hereditary trait passed down only in some of the old pureblood lines—most prominently the Blacks and the Calderons. She'd assumed Tonks was a muggleborn going by her surname but clearly at least one of her parents was a pureblood.

"Are you sure?" Moody immediately demanded and Tonks grinned, her bright green eyes (Hermione was fairly sure they'd been blue earlier) clearly amused.

"I double-checked the spells to verify time and date as well as the authenticity of the memory," she said, "and I can also confidently state that Miss Granger was nowhere near where the victim was assaulted during the window of attack."

"Confidently?" Hermione was unable to help but ask, a smirk tugging at her mouth despite the situation.

"Very confidently." Tonks said solemnly, though her eyes were definitely laughing. "That was some pretty vivid recall you had."

"It was a... particularly memorable night." Hermione told the now magenta-haired witch.

"Never let that boy go," Tonks advised, which made the other adults in the room finally react.

"Miss Tonks!" barked out McGonagall.

"Ah, sorry," Tonks said sheepishly, rubbing the back of her hair which seemed to fizz almost to a shade of pumpkin orange. "That was inappropriate of me. I apologize, Miss Granger."

"Oh it's fine," Hermione said, smiling sweetly at the room. "In fact, I completely agree with you—and I don't intend to ever let Harry go."

And oh, the enraged expression on Dumbledore's face was so, so very satisfying.

"That," Snape said tightly as she exited Dumbledore's office with him, leaving McGonagall, Moody, Dumbledore and the trainee Auror behind, "was a ridiculous thing to do."

"I know, sir. I was there." Hermione replied with a slight scowl. The injustice of it all was rather infuriating— and, as Snape had said, utterly ridiculous. Despite the fact her name had been 'cleared' Hermione had no doubt that Dumbledore wasn't going to put this behind him.

"Your body may have been there," Snape snapped, "but I have no idea where your mind was!"

For a moment Hermione was surprised and confused, then—ah, she realised; apparently Snape wasn't actually referring to the literal 'witch hunt' she'd been the target of, but rather her... well, in hindsight "less then ideal" did neatly summarise the final jab she'd left about never letting Harry go.

"That wasn't very Slytherin of me, losing my temper like that." She admitted.
"No," Snape sighed, looking very, very weary, "no it was not." He then shook his head. "But we can worry about possible consequences later. First we need to talk."

Hermione nodded and followed Snape down the short trek to his office. Once there, he gestured for her to take a seat at the desk before sitting across from her and looking down at her with an expression she couldn't quite identify but made her feel very uneasy and she pushed down the anxiety that had her wanting to shift uncomfortably in place.

"There's no easy way to do this," Snape said finally, his hand disappearing out of view momentarily before re-emerging with a manila folder that he placed down on the desk before her. Hermione eyed the obviously muggle documents warily, before looking up at her Head of House who sighed wearily. "Open it." He instructed, and she did as he instructed, reaching out and opening the folder only for her whole body to freeze when she saw what was inside.

Adrenaline roared through her limbs while ice twisted around her heart. She'd stopped breathing, a very faint, distant part of her realised, but she couldn't make herself take another breath when it felt like her lungs had turned to lead in her chest.

Nymph's little face smiled up at her, green eyes bright and her deep red hair fanning over her shoulders. Hermione forced her uncooperative fingers pull the photo closer to her, only for her hands to start trembling as she saw the crime scene photo that had been under it, the crime scene photo of that man.

Numb, she pushed Nymph's photo to the side and started flipping through what she now realised was some sort of police file. Forensic reports, photos, interviews and surveillance photos; a series of grainy black and white stills from security footage—she recognised the jacket she was wearing, the same one she'd been wearing when she met Snape for the first time.

Finally, after what felt like a short eternity of steadily building dread and wild, barely concealed panic, Hermione closed the folder and pushed it back across Snape's desk, keeping the photo of Nymph. Closing her eyes, she let her face rest on her hands. Her body was badly shaking and her breathing was shallow and afraid. She hated being afraid.

"I never knew his name."

Hermione didn't realise it was her who had spoken, that had said those damning words, until Snape spoke too.

"Nobody can ever know about this."

She lifted her head from her hands, opening her eyes to look at a grim-faced Snape.

"You're not going to tell anyone?" She asked, her voice timid in a way that she loathed. Her eyes strayed back to Nymph and a terrible pain clenched her heart, digging its cruel claws into the meaty flesh to twist and gouge at the meat of it, and the pain had her blinking back rare tears as a gasping sound torn from her protesting throat.

"We're going to make a deal." Snape said calmly, audible over the roaring in her ears through its sheer controlled calmness alone, and Hermione felt all her defences spring into place. She carefully wiped her face clean of the maelstrom inside her and sat up straight.

"Do you want sex? Because I don't have any money," She said, keeping her voice as blank as her expression. Snape leaned forwards abruptly, his dark eyes furious.
"I'm going to pretend you didn't say that," he said, lowly. "Because if anyone ever attempts to force you into having sex with them, then I not only give you full permission to do to them what you did to that piece of scum Cortland, but I will give you an alibi. Is that understood?"

Hermione let a half-broken sound escape her and she sagged back in her seat, all her energy gone. "Yes, sir." She whispered and Snape leaned back again and nodded, steepling his fingers.

"The type of deal I am referring to, Miss Granger, is that you will not be disappearing off again. I am fully aware that you and Harry can take care of yourselves and that it is safer for you to not have people know where you are, but I want to always be able to get in touch with you. If an emergency ever comes up again, I can't be stuck waiting for a pre-organised meeting." Snape hesitated briefly, before sighing. "Miss Granger... Hermione. The war has started and even though the Ministry is ignorant to it we are both aware of this fact. It can be hard to know who to trust, no matter alliances made or loyalties sworn. But I want you to know, that for me whichever side wins this war is secondary to my purpose— I made a vow, many years ago, that I would protect Harry and I intend on doing just that. Light or Dark, that doesn't matter— what does matter is that Harry lives, and I've grown fond enough of you that I'd prefer you did too."

Hermione looked up at Snape, downright stunned by his declaration. A vow was a very serious matter, especially a bloody Unbreakable Vow, and she realised that this was Snape firmly drawing a line in the sand on where he stood.

"Alright," she said carefully, once she'd managed to wrangle her thoughts somewhat to order. "I... I don't think I can give you an address, because it isn't just Harry and I who live there, but I... I am certainly willing to work out a way to keep in contact with you."

"I can deal with that side of things," Snape assured her. "I just want your agreement."

"You have it." Hermione said, honestly. "You would have had it, even if you hadn't brought up Nymph." She added quietly, unable to help the shiver of hurt inside her.

"Hermione," Snape said just as quietly, though his voice was gentle where hers had been sharp with personal grief. "I'm far too Slytherin and care about you far too much to just take your word for it."

Reluctantly, Hermione could see his point– and even more reluctantly, she could even admit, perhaps, that her head of house was right. It was baffling, really, the way she could go from feeling offended and violated about something to downright... well, touched if she was being honest with herself. Maybe it was because with that sort of leverage, Snape could have asked anything of her and he'd used it to try and keep her and Harry safe. One of the best tests of someone's character was to see how they reacted when given power; Snape had just passed that test with flying colours.

"I also wished for you to understand the importance of my request," Snape said, his voice still shockingly gentle, "and that I am not the only one who has been investigating your past— I've done my best to hide what I can, but you need to be aware and you need to be careful."

"It's because of that fucking boggart lesson, isn't it?" Hermione asked, her mouth tight and angry.

"Originally," Snape agreed. "Your boggart was... noteworthy enough to gain attention."

"Shit," Hermione breathed, panic tightening around her lungs again.

"I've done damage control and Lupin believes firmly in confidentiality, but there was an entire classroom who witnessed your greatest fears." Snape said. "I believe the dramatics that occurred
afterward with Harry's boggart is what most of your peers remember, but it would be foolish to not be prepared for the worst case scenario."

"Welcome to my life." She muttered darkly.

Following that, Hermione spent the next five or so minutes cycling between furious plotting, panicking while keeping a blank face and murderous fury. Snape was surprisingly—or perhaps not so surprisingly—very patient with her as she dealt with the whirlwind of emotions. He also helped her break the cycle by handing her a stack of end of term first and second year papers and telling her to grade them. "You've been helping Hagrid grade sixth and seventh year essays and tests for over a year, I think you can manage to mark eleven and twelve year old Gryffindors." He told her, before glaring slightly and adding, "and it's because of all the trouble you and Harry caused me that they're not already done yet!" Hermione had agreed to help and found it surprisingly cathartic to go over the tests with a large pot of red ink (she was gleefully aware that Snape choosing the Gryffindor papers for her to mark was no accident).

She was so wrapped up in brutally dissecting the tests that Snape actually surprised her when he cleared his throat, prompting her to glance up at him. "It's time to return to the dorms and change into your uniform for the welcome back feast," he told her when he saw he had her attention. Startled, Hermione cast a quick tempo and realised that several hours had passed and the Hogwarts Express would be pulling in at the school's little platform any minute.

"Thank you, sir," she told Snape, genuinely appreciative for his work in distracting her (she hadn't missed the way the pile of tests and essays had never seemed to run out, despite how many she'd marked—or that some of the latest ones seemed suspiciously like he'd started adding the work of higher year levels to the stack).

"You're quite welcome, Miss Granger," Snape said and Hermione was pleased to see the slight smile on his face. Well, most people wouldn't call it a smile, but in Hermione’s experience it was one of the closest expressions that Snape had to one—he was more of a smirker, really. It was… nice to know that he'd either forgiven her (and Harry) for their involvement in the Weasley mess, or at least he was willing to move past it. Either way, it was with a lighter heart (and a pocketed photograph of Nymph that she knew she'd rarely ever look at but was pleased to have anyway) that she exited his office.

The Slytherin dorms were usually close to empty over the holidays but more students had stayed behind after the Yule Ball then she'd realised and Hermione had had to stop and greet a number of people before managing to escaping the Common Room. Lilyan and Millicent were both in the fourth year dorm and Hermione traded swift but polite enquiries as to how their holidays had gone with both girls before changing out of the detestable white dress and yanking the ribbons from her hair and untangling the braids. Dressed much more comfortably in her school robes, her hair long and loose, Hermione left the Slytherin dungeon, intent on making her way up to the Great Hall to where Harry was hopefully waiting.

Her plans were interrupted by a newly familiar figure intercepting her. "Trainee Auror Tonks?" She asked warily as she spotted the increasingly familiar-looking witch who was now supporting long, startlingly red ringlets instead of the violet or magenta from before.

"Please, just call me Tonks." The metamorphmagus said cheerfully and Hermione could swear she felt the fine hairs on the back of her neck prickle at the witch's approach. She'd learned to trust her instincts over the years and there was something about the mild-mannered, cheerful and oddly talented woman that made something in her sit up and pay attention, something that had her feeling strangely defensive and on edge in her presence. Hermione found herself wanting to both snap and
snarl at the woman, to show her teeth as she threw barbed words sharp enough to draw blood with her metaphorical claws and fangs, while simultaneously there was a part of her wanted to roll over and show her vulnerable belly.

Hermione certainly wasn't in the habit of submitting to predators, however, and had no intention of starting now.

"I'd invite you to use my name but I'm afraid I have no interest in making further acquaintances with Moody's little protege." She said with her best razor sharp smile. Tonks just grinned back at her, flashing bright white teeth. Hermione resisted the urge to step away, knowing better then to show her throat to another predator.

"You're fun," the older witch said, "let me walk with you to the Hall."

"Is that an offer I can actually refuse?" Hermione asked dryly and Tonks just smiled in response. Hermione sighed but didn't make a fuss, instead continuing towards the Great Hall, hoping Harry would be waiting.

"The old men are trying to figure out if the healers messed up the timeline of when the kid was attacked," Tonks said as she fell easily into step alongside her. Hermione felt her mouth tighten.

"So they still think I did it."

"Without a doubt." Tonks confirmed.

"Well then this is either the least thought out undercover job or you're breaking probably about a half dozen laws regarding ongoing investigations." Hermione commented and Tonks tilted back her head slightly to laugh.

"The latter. And I think I'm actually closer to breaking about twenty then half a dozen." She said, playfully almost. Definitely teasing. It made Hermione feel on edge, her hackles rising.

"I didn't do it." She said through gritted teeth, speeding up as she heard the sound of chattering up ahead as they drew closer to the Great Hall.

"Oh I know," Tonks said, far too cheerfully, before leaning in and to say in a loud stage-whisper, "and just between us, I didn't think Nev had it in him!"

Hermione instantly froze, her fingers reflexively tightening around her wand, very aware of the switchblades pressed once again to her skin, hidden under her robes. Tonks grinned, still playful but there was something sharper about it now, something wilder and sly. "I don't know what you're talking about." Hermione said flatly, despite knowing that her instinctive reaction had already given away her words as a lie.

"I was at the Yule Ball, you know," she said coldly, meeting Tonks’s eyes with an indifferent gaze.
"You did have a conversation with my date, though. You made quite the impression on Charlie, you know," Tonks said and Hermione recalled Charlie's comments, the ones she'd dismissed with everything else on her mind— "my date would have been quite taken by you, if she hadn't found that French bird first. She's got a thing for pretty, dangerous people". It only took her a moment to piece together the wider implications of Charlie's statement with the further information available; Hermione knew just which Beauxbatons student could be considered 'pretty and dangerous', the same one who incidentally happened to have been accompanied to the Ball by 'Nev'.

“You became… acquainted with Fleur.” Hermione said, choosing the more polite description of what she imagined would be better described as ‘you fucked Fleur’.

“Very well acquainted,” the metamorphmagus gave a dirty grin, “Neville escorted us back to the Beauxbatons Carriage after the Ball finished, just past midnight; he said goodbye to us minutes before the Healers estimate Ron was attacked.”

“Is that supposed to be some sort of proof?” Hermione asked, tone purposefully dismissive.

“Maybe not; well, if it weren’t for my Auror training, that is– I can tell when some jealous, untrained kid is following me and trying to hide," Tonks said, sounding amused by it. "Well, following Fleur and Neville, anyway.”

"And you didn't think to mention it to the boy walking back alone in the dark?” Hermione asked. Tonks shrugged.

"I'd just met the kid. I had more of an obligation towards Ron, for Charlie's sake."

"That's cold," Hermione observed, though she couldn’t deny the truth to Tonks’s’s words. If she’d been in the same situation she doubted she’d have acted any differently. Tonks winked.

"I'll be around for a few weeks. Maybe by the end you’ll— how did you put it again?— change your mind about making further acquaintance.”

And before Hermione could do or say anything else, not that she knew what she would have, Tonks was gone, disappearing into the Great Hall and leaving Hermione to stare after her.

"Well... shit." She muttered. Another fucking complication– just what she needed.

- 

When she entered the Hall, Hermione saw at once that the usual decorations were missing. The Great Hall was normally decorated with the House banners— or, if it was the Leaving Feast, with the winning House’s colors. Tonight, however, there were only black drapes hanging above the four tables and on the wall behind the teachers' table. She knew instantly that they were there because of Weasley and it made her want to roll her eyes at such a fuss. There was a part of her who realised this was a very unhealthy opinion but she honestly didn’t care and, unlike Harry, couldn’t be bothered trying to find it in herself to feel bad about it.

"You're in one piece," Daphne said as she approached the Slytherin table, the pretty blonde smiling up at her. "The way Harry was panicking on the train, I was starting to worry."

"Mostly one piece," Hermione corrected her with an exaggerated wince of remembrance after giving a sheepish Harry an exasperated look. "I may have been a touch on the deliberately provocative side when chatting with Dumbledore and Moody and Snape ripped me a new one afterwards in his utterly calm voice. It's truly baffling how he can sound like he’s shouting when he's practically whispering.”
"And he makes you feel about two feet tall while doing so," added Harry with a slight shudder of remembrance.

“Well I wouldn't know," Daphne said, amused. "You see; unlike the pair of you, I actually don't go around doing things that will piss him off."

"Things must have gone well, though," Blaise noted, visibly satisfied. "Dumbledore looks like he's in a particularly shitty mood."

"So does Moody," Tracey observed smugly, sounding fiercely gleeful about the fact. Glancing at the two men in question, Hermione agreed with her fellow Slytherins’ observations. Dumbledore's face was stormy, his blue eyes like chips of ice in his wrinkly face, and Moody's lopsided mouth was twisted in a dark scowl. Their eyes met briefly and Hermione could feel her own expression darken to match the loathing on his face.

With the previous calm she'd gained from marking the Gryffindor’s Potions work gone, she was left wallowing in the aftermath of what had been a particularly shitty day, what with Harry’s concerning not-dreams, Moody putting his hands on her, the unfair interrogation, Snape practically ambushing her with the photograph of Nymph and warning about what she did to that scumbag, then the trainee Auror's revelation that she knew who'd beaten up Weasley— and the beating was officially considered to be the cause of death. Her emotions were off kilter, her head hurt and she wanted to stab something.

"One day," she said darkly as she turned away from Moody, "I am going to rip that man down, physically, mentally and emotionally, so he is nothing. In the meantime, I'll dream of breaking both his collarbones, pulling them out of his body and using them to blind him before tearing his spine out through his throat."

“Hermione,” Draco said seriously, “I mean no offence when I say this, but your mind is an honestly terrifying place.”

Hermione smiled ‘sweetly’ back at the blond. “Draco, your face is an honestly terrifying place,” she said and the others laughed while Draco huffed.

“Oh screw you, Hermione.” He said and Blaise snorted.

“No, that's Harry's job.”

Hermione could feel the tension inside her start to unwind as she listened to her friends bicker, but the uneasiness didn't fade entirely and any progress was immediately halted by Dumbledore standing up, causing the Hall to immediately go silent.

"There is much that I would like to say to you all tonight," said the headmaster she loathed, "but first I wish to acknowledge the loss of a very fine person, who should be sitting here," he gestured toward the Gryffindors, "enjoying our feast with us. I would like you all, please, to stand, and raise your glasses to Ronald Weasley— and the beating was officially considered to be the cause of death. Her emotions were off kilter, her head hurt and she wanted to stab something.

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Hermione knew better then to do otherwise, though she was tempted, instead reluctantly rising to her feet. The sound of the benches scraping as everyone in the Hall stood sounded uncomfortably loud and as everyone raised their goblets to echo in one loud, low, rumbling voice “Ron Weasley” she sought out Tonks. It took her a moment to spot the metamorphmagus, who had a very solemn look on her face and a short, spiky black cut in place of the red ringlets. The trainee-Auror had been placed a few seats down from Moody and as Hermione watched, she saw Tonks meet the eye of someone at the Ravenclaw table and wink. Hermione didn’t even have to look over to know it
was Fleur and resolve settled in her, a plan beginning to form.

“Ronald, or Ron as he preferred to be known as, was a student who exemplified many of the qualities that distinguish Gryffindor house,” Dumbledore continued, dragging her attention reluctantly back to him. "He was a brave and courageous boy, one not afraid to stand up for his friends and family and for what he believed in. There are many rumours going around surrounding the circumstances of his death due to the article published in the Daily Prophet, and I wish to not only clear up any confusion from the incomplete reports but I believe you all have the right to know exactly how it came about."

Hermione could feel the undeniable tension return as Dumbledore’s icy cold eyes briefly met hers. Determinedly, she kept her chin high and didn’t flinch from the old bastard’s stare.

“Ron Weasley,” Dumbledore said, his eyes not leaving hers, “was murdered, here on our very grounds. He was viciously beaten on the night of the Yule Ball, a night that should have been one of grand memories, then left out on the grounds overnight. He regained consciousness only once, nearly a week after the terrible assault, but died less then an hour after from the damage.”

An urgent whispering swept through the Great Hall and Dumbledore didn’t speak again until they’d muttered themselves into silence. “I am deeply upset and disturbed to say that the person responsible for the horrendous crime has yet to be identified by Aurors. Your Heads of Houses will discuss the new safety measures that are to be implemented; for our foreign guests, your headmaster or headmistress will discuss both the safety measures and your options for if you wish to continue your school year at Hogwarts, though the Champions themselves cannot leave and I urge their fellow students to remain to support them. The Triwizard Tournament's aim s to further and promote magical understanding. We should not let such evil take away the chance to form such ties.”

Dumbledore then paused for a moment, as though considering his next words. “The Ministry of Magic,” he said, finally, “did not wish for you to be told that the danger has not passed. It is possible that some of your parents will be horrified that I have done so, young as you are. It is my belief, however, that the truth is generally preferable to lies, and that you should be aware of the terrible event that took one of our own from us.”

Dumbledore finally sat down and although the welcome back feast appeared, there was no usual explosion of chatter. Everyone seemed subdued as they served their dinner and it took Hermione every bit of self-control she had not to start screaming at Dumbledore in outrage.

“I think,” she said through stiff lips, “that the only part of that stupid speech I fully agreed with was how Weasley truly embodied the qualities of a Gryffindor.”


“There’s no need to bring his name up,” she said, her thin lips forcing a mean smile on her face. “He was an idiot who deserved to die for choosing the wrong side.”

“Exactly.”

This gained her a few chuckles, though there were also more calculating looks turned in her direction then she would have liked. She’d have to make it clear— and quickly— that she had been otherwise occupied when Weasley was getting the shit beaten out of him. And, she realised as Blaise gave her a knowing look, she’d have to talk to all those who’d been in their compartment on the Hogwarts Express heading back to London the morning after the Yule Ball— all those who knew very well it had been Neville who’d done said beating. She trusted to an extent that none of them would volunteer the information to Dumbledore, Moody or any other Auror, but there was no harm in reiterating to them all that she’d appreciate them keeping it quiet.
"Come on," she muttered quietly to Harry when the desserts vanished and everyone started standing up, "we need to talk to Fleur." Beside her, Harry winced.

"Last time you said we had to talk to one of our friends using that tone it was because you'd figured out Neville almost killed someone." He whispered.

"Well, this time I've figured out that someone else knows that Neville almost killed someone." She whispered back. Harry paled.

"Oh shit."

"Oh shit." She agreed.

Chapter End Notes

This specific arc is nearly over and then it will be time for the Second Task! (I'm excited) Also, I'd like to apologise for the lack of communication as RL has been shitty and I've been focused on other things. I still appreciate the time people take to leave comments and promise that I will be going through and responding. Thank you for all your wonderful support <3

~Cheshire Carroll
CHAPTER LX:

**Tonks's POV:**

Hermione Granger and Harry Potter walking in on her with Fleur in the Beauxbatons' carriage wasn't a shock, not exactly. Tonks hadn't *not* been expecting an interruption at some point that evening, though she hadn't realised they'd be so impatient about it (and Fleur had frustratingly immediately demanded to be freed which was *very irritating* considering Tonks had just spent the last fifteen minutes using a series of loops, knots and weaves to tie up the French girl, and the midnight blue rope was *just so pretty* over her flawless, ivory skin, and her stillness and compliance were *even prettier*–

Plus they'd nearly reached her *favourite* part too, that *lovely*, *delicious* final constriction where her partner was no longer their own person and became Tonks's to do with as she pleased; that *perfect* moment that turned the evening from two equals *playing a game* to one having *complete power* over the other–

It was with a very disappointed sigh that she'd undone the ropes, letting her nails drag briefly over the faint marks welted into the creamy skin as she did so. There'd be more marks by the end of the night, she consoled herself).

Harry Potter had gone adorably red at the sight he'd walked in on but Hermione Granger had remained stone-faced and guarded, her hands so tense her knuckles had bled white. Tonks wasn't surprised by the wariness displayed by the girl– she had good instincts, much better then most. Seemingly instinctually, the clever (*dangerous*) little schoolgirl had picked up on the animal dichotomy inside Tonks's skull, all those predatory beasts (*monsters*) prowling the thick jungle of her *untasty* (well, that was a *matter of opinion*) thoughts, while nearly everyone else just saw silly, clumsy, bumbling Tonks.

The first glance she got of the girl, she'd immediately understood why Charlie had said she'd like her– there was murder behind Hermione Granger's eyes; the girl was positively dripping in it, her smile a bleeding knife wound that both *remembered* and *promised* pain, teeth sharp to cut (she'd always be a sucker for *pretty girls* with *dangerous smiles*). Later, as they'd walked together to the Great Hall while trading quips meant to wound (just to see the other *bleed*), Tonks had been intrigued by the way the girl's eyes flickered between animal fury, cold intensity and calm precision.

She certainly hadn't missed the fading marks under the school robes (such a *shame* the girl had changed, she'd liked the *deceptiveness* of the *white*, *innocent*, *little girl* dress while under it Hermione Granger wore bruises shaped like fingers pressed into her *flesh*, against her *bones*) and Tonks could practically *see* slick, dark blood dripping on pale skin as Hermione moved (such a beautiful, *broken* little doll, all steel and knives, glass shards and serrated edges– and a will as strong and wild, as fierce and savage as a raging storm).

Charlie's instincts had been *perfectly* on the mark. Hermione Granger was a little *hellcat* and Tonks already liked her.
And Harry Potter was... interesting. Surprisingly difficult to get a read on, which was unusual for Tonks. She put it down to a contradictory sort of nature; Harry Potter was a good boy who was prepared to do bad things. He wasn't a predator, wasn't a carnivore like his lover, but he wasn't one of the herbivorous sheep of the magical world either. There was a steel in him, lacing his spine and keeping him upright in a world that wanted to crush him down.

"You're not planning to turn us in. Why?" Hermione Granger asked bluntly, as entirely unaffected by the scene she'd walked in on as Tonks would have been in her place. Harry Potter was still red-cheeked. It made Tonks want to bite him, just a little. She enjoyed contradictions. They were interesting.

"I like it when people are interesting." She answered Hermione Granger honestly. The girl kept her face blank but Tonks could see the disbelief and traces of fear on Harry Potter's face. "Besides, Nev didn't actually kill him." She added cheerfully (or possibly playfully and teasing). "Whoever poisoned him did."

"Are you talking about zee boy 'oo was murdered? Neville did zat?" Fleur asked, surprised. Harry Potter was the one to answer her as Hermione Granger maintained a guarded silence.

"Weasley attacked Nev after he escorted you and, um--"

"Tonks," Tonks said with a wink that obviously startled the boy.

"–you and, er, Tonks back to the carriage after the Ball. Weasley tried cursing him from behind. Nev didn't actually mean to hurt him so badly, but..." Harry shrugged a bit, which was a deliciously contradictory bit of disregard for the pain and suffering of a classmate. "He was moved to St Mungo's– the British wizarding hospital– and we... well, we couldn't let him wake up when Dumbledore had already announced that the person responsible would be expelled and sent to Azkaban for attempted murder."

We? Tonks thought, amused. Well now, wasn't that an interesting choice of wording.

"You could not 'ave used magic to alter 'is memory?" Fleur asked, not sounding judgmental, wrapped up in her silk sheet with her silvery hair spilling over her bare shoulders, just curious.

Where were all these morally defective children when Tonks had attended Hogwarts? (She could have had so much fun!)

"There were reasons." Hermione Granger said, intentionally vague, while Harry Potter looked like he wanted to be sick for a moment before he steeled himself. "If you tell anyone about this, you'll die." Hermione Granger continued, meeting her eyes fearlessly. "That's not a threat, it's a fact. Harry and I have very powerful protectors who aren't afraid to get their hands dirty."

Which, mused Tonks, made the fact that both their hands were dirty anyway just that much more interesting. She didn't voice that, though, just continued to smile.

"Like I said before, I like interesting people. Moody won't hear anything from me."

Neither teenager looked particularly comforted but there wasn't anything else to do or say. Hermione Granger met Fleur's eyes and lifted an eyebrow. Fleur nodded, soft pink lips curving into a slight smile, and Hermione Granger finally relaxed somewhat.

Seeing her eyes lose some of that coldness made Tonks think of that memory, of that pretty, icy face all loose and open while lost in passion and pleasure, the Potter boy's blood painting a red smear of passion on her lips. Hunger and lust stirred within Tonks and if the two Slytherin students
didn't leave soon Tonks was going to be fucking Fleur with an audience.

...not a bad idea, actually.

Except the two teenagers were leaving then and Tonks couldn't exactly be disappointed by that when Fleur was letting the sheet fall, exposing all her delectable curves.

"Alone again at last," Tonks purred, reaching for the discarded rope again, as well as— "I got you a Yule present, pretty girl; what do you think?"

She let the dim light of the room in the carriage catch on the silver blade of the dagger, raising an eyebrow in silent question. Fleur sucked in a breath, obviously startled. Her attention fixed on the dagger for a long, long moment before her eyes, sapphire and sparkling, met Tonks's and the part-veela smiled; a bewitchingly beautiful sight, white teeth like the pale curve of a scythe in the darkness.

"Oui," she said, her voice as soft and pretty as the rest of her, "do eet. Make me scream."

And that was a challenge Tonks was more then glad to meet.

Afterwards, when both of them exhausted but sated, Tonks admired the view of Fleur laid out in the centre of the bed like a fallen angel, all pale skin and paler hair, the gentle swells of her breasts casting shadows from the flickering candlelight. Even with her lust and hunger so sated, the sight of her stole Tonks's breath. The French schoolgirl's blood was dark, pooled in spots like jewels over her breastbone, smeared in a soft, brighter lines where Tonks had dragged her fingers over the slim lines she'd cut into the younger woman's abdomen (causing flames to flicker at the part-veela's fingertips at the time before Fleur had pushed them away).

Leaning forwards to drag her tongue over the shallow cuts, Tonks wondered how much more Fleur would let her get away with next time. She was already looking forward to their next little dalliance; the part-veela was beautiful and deadly, the embodiment of the near-death high, the thrill of adrenaline in her veins that Tonks had been chasing for as long as she could remember. Anyone with a hint of intelligence would walk the other way (should run away, far and fast) because Fleur was a fire with the potential to consume everything and everyone who came too close.

But pain made Tonks feel alive, was one of the only things that made her feel anything but shallow amusement or interest or lust, and she couldn't wait to burn.

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Severus's POV:

Severus liked to think he had a handle by now on the masks that Hermione wore. He'd seen her playing the angel, he'd seen her vicious, he'd seen her protective and he'd seen her prepared to kill. He'd seen her look like a pureblood princess, like a starving street-rat and absolutely drenched in (troll) blood.

Today, though... today had been new. White wasn't exactly a colour he associated with Hermione, but she wore it well— and he suspected the innocence of the look wasn't a coincidence. The pretty necklace with its childish 'H' pendant set with sparkling diamonds and the way she'd fastened her long curls in plaits that framed her face and were tied with white silk ribbons really only confirmed his suspicions. She might appear young, fragile and guileless but Severus had seen that exact sort
of deception in her before, in the porcelain doll-child she'd posed as before slitting Greyback's throat open from ear to ear without even flinching.

Hermione was no innocent child; she was a survivor, a serpent with porcelain skin covering her sharpened steel, and he was fiercely, protectively proud of her. She had faced impossible obstacles and been marked with horrors and experiences that grown wizards had never witnessed, and yet here she still was, refusing to buckle down under the weight of her life.

Facing off against Moody and Dumbledore, despite her sweet smile, Hermione's face had been cold and her eyes hard. And then Severus had watched her smile grow, change into something gruesome and ghastly as she leaned forwards to directly challenge the Headmaster with the sort of recklessness and devil-may-care he'd normally have associated with a Gryffindor as she told Dumbledore to his face that she would never let Harry go.

Both Harry and Hermione were equally thorns in Dumbledore's side, but what Hermione didn't have was the protection of a prophecy– a 'protection' that was both a sword to cut Harry and a shield to keep him safe.

Thinking of Harry, of the madmen he needed to protect his charges from, made Severus remember the question the Dark Lord had asked him when he'd delivered his reports of the Order missions earlier that day.

"What would you do if I ordered you to kill the boy right now?" The Dark Lord had asked him, smooth and dangerous.

Despite thinking that the Dark Lord might actually kill him for his answer, Severus had been honest– "I would die." He'd told his master.

And the Dark Lord had smiled, a sight as terrifying as it was unexpected, before dismissing him.

Severus still wasn't sure whether he'd passed or failed the test.

Weary and wondering what his two most troublesome students had planned this term to give him a heart attack– apart from the Second Task, because he had no illusions that they would be content to just have him panicking over that– Severus retired to his private quarters after the meal, despite Minerva's invitation to join her, Poppy and Pomona for drinks.

In the privacy of his rooms, the heaviness of the past few weeks weighing down on him, Severus poured himself a generous glass of Odgen's Finest and almost without thinking located a quill, some parchment and an ink-pot and began to write.

_Lupin,
I showed Hermione the file today. She reacted better then I thought but it was disturbing to see her so close to a panic attack...
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Tom's POV:

Death had always been a part of Tom's life. He had killed his mother when he came into the world, he'd killed a mudblood girl to create himself/Horcrux/the diary and the original soul– Voldemort– had 'died' killing someone. Murder was part of who he was. He didn't– couldn't– understand Harry's aversion to it, but he was well aware of its existence which was why he'd been surprised by
how well Harry had coped with murdering his classmate in cold blood.

He should have realised there was another factor in play. The Ring Horcrux (had Harry honestly expected him not to eavesdrop? Really, the boy should know better by now).

That the soul piece in the Ring was... *interacting* with Harry was not something Tom was particularly pleased with. At all.

It shouldn't be sentient, not like he was. The Diary had always been different to the others; it had been designed that way. Its purpose, *his* purpose, had always been more then just a safeguard against death.

*Tamper with the deepest mysteries-- the source of life, the essence of self-- only if prepared for consequences of the most extreme and dangerous kind.*

For all the research he/the original soul had done, soul magic was one of the more mysterious and obscure branches. He/the original soul had resigned themselves to the side effects, as protecting himself/themselves from death had been the highest of priorities. Now he wondered if it was time to revisit his/their past Horcrux research. He/they were older, more powerful and influential with far greater resources then his/their teenage self had had.

It was just past midnight when he arrived at the Slytherin dungeons. Breaking into Hogwarts was as simple as ever. It was a disgrace, really-- though Tom begrudgingly had to give credit to Harry's father and his friends for finding and marking down the passageways into and out of the school. It had taken very little work to fix the cave-in of a passage that led almost directly to the platform where the Hogwarts Express stopped. In this case, Dumbledore's security blunder was his gain and it made Tom smirk to think about one day rubbing it in the old bastard's face.

Harry and Hermione were in Harry's dorm, both still awake as he slipped past the curtains to slide into the bed. Harry looked tired but determined and Tom bit back a sigh as he prepared himself for the inevitable confrontation. Before he started demanding explanations, however, Harry narrowed his eyes for a few moments then let out a huff.

"You eavesdropped." He said, a statement not a question that he accompanied with a roll of his eyes. "You're bracing yourself for me to start yelling, you utter arse."

Tom didn't try to stop the slight curve of his lips. To him, the vast majority of people were dull and simple creatures, mere clusters of predictable social synapses always firing off in typical directions. They were merely flimsy tissue and fragile bone waiting to be cracked open, boring and barely a challenge to manipulate and bend to his will. This made surprises rare, which was certainly a good thing as he rarely appreciated being surprised. He wouldn't deny, however, that when it was Harry or Hermione doing the surprising-- because *no one* he ever chose could be dull or simple-- he enjoyed the occasional surprise. Harry wasn't as naturally observant as he and Hermione were, so it was always a pleasant surprise to witness him not only pick up on the visual cues Tom had let slip but use the evidence he'd observed to come to a conclusion as to *why*.

"The Ring is appearing in your dreams," Tom confirmed.

"What is it, why is it doing that and what's the purpose of it?" Harry asked with a calm that Tom wasn't expecting.

"It is," he said, slowly, "an infinitely complicated piece of magic, one that most witches and wizards would not dare to attempt."
"Are you trying to get us to stroke your ego?" Hermione asked, sounding amused as she lounged back against the headboard of the four-poster.

"I assure you, if I wanted you to stroke something there are a number of other parts of me I'd pick first." Tom replied and she laughed while Harry snorted in amusement despite himself.

"Harry," Tom decided to go for honesty, as it seemed to be working surprisingly well so far, "I did not realise that the magic involved would choose to... communicate with you. Neither did Voldemort." An acknowledgment of the oversight was as close to an apology as he was willing to give– he hadn't realised that the Horcrux was sentient enough to communicate so he wasn't at fault. There was no cause for apology. "The magic won't harm you, that's not its purpose– well, not unless you're thinking of trying to destroy it then it will turn very nasty– but if you'd prefer not to wear it Voldemort would certainly understand, considering the circumstances."

"I..." Harry hesitated before shrugging his shoulders slightly. "I don't really mind it." He admitted. "I did freak out at first, yeah, but that was mostly shock. It's... kind of nice, like having a therapist in my head."

"A therapist in your head?" Tom repeated in slight disbelief. "You do realise that the- magic has the personality-type as Voldemort and I– it's a psychopath, not a psychologist."

"Well yeah, dream-Tom is really weird and definitely an arse, but he– or, well, it– does a pretty good job of faking being nice. If I didn't know you and Voldemort then I probably wouldn't have noticed." Harry said. Tom resisted the urge to do something like throttle the stupid boy while he tried to wrap his mind around the idea of Harry treating one of his Horcruxes like a therapist. Though considering the boy held a Horcrux, was it really surprising that the other Horcruxes would be as drawn to him as Tom felt?

"So, that's sorted and with a surprising lack of shouting," Hermione interrupted his thoughts. "Harry, if you're keeping the Ring then you'll have to leave it in the dorm for Moody's classes. His eye would probably be able to see the Dark magic."

"Dark magic?" Harry's eyes widened for a moment before he seemed to deflate, letting out a loud sigh as he did so. "Of fucking course it's Dark magic, what was I expecting?" He grumbled. Hermione gave him a fond look before leaning forwards to tug at the buttons of Tom's travel cloak. "Come on, I know you'll have to leave early but lay with us for a bit, okay?" She coaxed and Tom hesitated for a moment, thinking of the Ministry official he had to go deal with before the fool went in for his next shift, then decided he could stay for at least an hour or two, by which time Harry and Hermione would likely have dozed off.

He let Hermione strip him down to his shorts then let her pull him into bed with her and Harry, the bossy little thing. His bossy little thing. Just like Harry was his, not the other Horcrux's– and not even Voldemort's. The three of them curled up together, legs and arms entwined, skin-to-skin, breath mingling, Hermione pressing her nose into the hollow of Tom's neck. Her hair tickled his nose and she kissed his neck, scraping her teeth lightly against his collarbone. For a brief instance, all he could think about was her covered in blood, dripping in it, tasting of it. The moment passed and Tom pulled Hermione as close as he possibly could, so close her hair tickled at his nose. Harry nuzzled his face in her curls and Tom reached out to tangle his fingers in Harry's hair too. "Sleep," he ordered them both, feeling the closest to content he could get with them both within reach, trusting him enough to fall asleep by his side.

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Charlie's **POV:**

Charlie had only been in England for about four hours and he'd already been reminded multiple times why he'd fled the bloody country in the first place. It was miserably cold, there were no dragons and his family was a *Fîrtat*-damned nightmare.

To be fair, his mum and dad had just lost a child– their second one in two years, in fact– so it did make sense for them to be clingy, but his mum had already asked him five times to quit his job and move back to England. Frankly, he'd rather chop off his own bollocks before moving within a thousand miles of his parents and siblings for an extended period of time. He'd been given a month off work by the sympathetic manager of the dragon reserve to spend with his family mourning but Charlie was already ready to pack up and go home.

He wouldn't, though. His mum was a wreck and he might not always– or ever– get along with her, but she was his mum and she did love him so he and Bill were planning to get everything in order, that way she wouldn't have to stress about organising a funeral and dealing with the Aurors and his dad could concentrate on helping her. He couldn't in good conscience leave Bill to shoulder all that alone, especially with Percy being such an obnoxious little prick– Charlie didn't blame his younger brother for wanting some distance from their parents but Percy didn't have to bloody disown them completely.

Not that Charlie was bothering to waste time worrying about Percy when the twins had all but insisted on returning straight to Hogwarts– it could be to escape their mum's overwhelmingly overbearing presence, but he was far more suspicious that their desire to go back to Hogwarts only days after Ron's death was to do with a certain Slytherin girl suspected of the murder. Charlie hoped to *Fîrtat* that wasn't the case– in the span of just two years his parents had lost their youngest son and only daughter; he didn't want them to have to deal with the loss of the twins too.

With everything else's shit weighing down on his shoulders, an exhausted Charlie managed to duck out at a bit past midnight when his mum had finally cried herself to sleep, Bill and his dad having retired several hours before. Finding a muggle bar open past twelve on a Sunday night would be a challenge so Charlie made his way to the Hogs Head.

He was three tumblers of firewhiskey down when Tonks made her appearance. "Took you long enough," he muttered, voice only slightly slurred. "You're losing your touch."

"Fuck you," Tonks replied 'sweetly', no sign of any of those well-bred manners she'd been raised with.

"No thanks," he said, pulling a face. "Too many jiggly bits."

"Jiggly bits," Tonks snorted, looking amused as she stole his half-drained fourth tumbler and drained it completely. He glared darkly as she put the glass back down but she just rolled her eyes and he gave up. "So, Granger was interrogated today," Tonks said and Charlie made a rough sound at the back of his throat.

"Did she get away with it, then?" He asked, not sure what he wanted Tonks's answer to be.

"Actually," Tonks replied, "she wasn't the one who assaulted Ron."

"Of course that's what she's claiming," Charlie snorted.

"Yeah, but her memories of that time were pretty fucking clear," Tonks said, sudden amusement flickering in her eyes. "She and Potter spent the entire window of attack shagging like rabbits in his
Charlie waited for her to grin and say she was joking and it took him a moment to realise she was being serious. A thin relief had him exhaling slowly.

"That makes me feel slightly better," he said, and he meant it– he'd liked Hermione Granger.

"Plus I know who did assault him." Tonks chose then to tack on and Charlie closed his eyes.

"And you couldn't have led with that?" he asked through gritted teeth.

"I kinda like the kid who did it," Tonks admitted, much to his shock, and he opened his eyes again to see her fiddling with the glass, a sign of discomfort. "Plus I'm pretty sure your brother attacked him first." She added.

"Probably," Charlie agreed with a grimace. "But the beating wasn't what killed him."

"No, that was definitely some sort of poison," Tonks agreed, "St Mungo's ran a number of tests, though, and didn't find any evidence of any potions or poisons in his system."

"And we both can guess why," Charlie said pointedly and Tonks shrugged.

"Well, yeah. I can tell Moody it was a muggle poison if you want, but seeing as I'm pretty sure it was Harry Potter who actually did it, you may wanna think if that's really what you want."

"....The fuck? Harry Potter? The Harry Potter?" Charlie repeated in disbelief.

"He and the kid who beat Ron up visited St Mungo's earlier that day," Tonks explained. "Not to see Ron specifically, but I can't imagine it would have been difficult to sneak in."

"Not difficult? I thought Dumbledore posted a guard outside Ron's room!" Charlie pointed out, his voice harsher then he'd intended.

"And you think they wouldn't have been able to get around that?" Tonks demanded sharply, and Charlie glared at her. "I didn't think too much of Potter's presence there until I saw the boy earlier today– something he said made me suspect that he had a much bigger part in what happened then anyone would think."

"Do you realise how insane that sounds?" Charlie demanded. "Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, fucking murdering my baby brother!" Tonks rolled her eyes.

"Ron wasn't a baby and you didn't even like him."

"He was my family, Tonks! My little brother!" Charlie snarled before shaking his head. "Fucking shit," he swore, hands clenching into fists. "Shit, shit, shit!"

"I don't understand," Tonks admitted quietly, her face very blank as she studied him with flat, cold eyes, unhidden by any mask. Charlie exhaled loudly and wrapped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her in close to him.

"I know," he muttered. "It's all very emotional and irrational."

"I'm good with irrationality, but you've got me stumped at the emotions part." She grumbled, leaning into him.

Charlie personally thought that psychopathy in the right doses was actually good for society, likely
an opinion influenced by his long friendship with Tonks, as it allowed people to make difficult decisions quickly without the encumbrance of emotions, to be calm in stressful situations, and to be assertive when necessary— and society needed that.

On the other hand, if everyone was a psychopath then the world would be fucked, because whether they admitted it or not, deep inside practically every psychopath a monster lurked. Oh it could be kept entertained— going by his knowledge of Tonks a combination of drugs, alcohol, sex and adrenaline-inducing activities seemed to do the trick— but for all those psychopaths who didn't give in, there would always be a handful who, under the right circumstances, would.

Charlie sighed again, giving into the urge to massage his temples with his free hand. "Great. This is just fucking great." He sighed. Tonks just patted his head in a way that managed to only be mostly condescending (the "there, there" probably had something to do with that, but he got the feeling she hadn't meant that sarcastically at all).

After he'd pulled himself back together, while Charlie ordered them another round of firewhiskey Tonks pulled a couple of sheets of familiar-looking square pieces of rolling paper and a little baggy from her pocket. Charlie watched as she liberally applied what he could easily identify as cannabis to two of the pieces of paper before pinching the corners and tucking them in on themselves in single smooth, well-practiced motions, running her tongue along the loose edges.

"Really? In here?" He asked as she pulled a muggle lighter from the same pocket. Tonks shrugged.

"Old Aberforth doesn't give a shit what we do if we don't mess up his pub," she pointed out. Which was very accurate, Charlie thought, considering the number of times he and Tonks and so many other underage Hogwarts students had gotten utterly sloshed at the Hogs Head.

Tonks lit her joint and breathed in deeply, tilting her head back as she held her breath for a moment before leaning forward to blow the familiar-smelling smoke in his face. He glared half-heartedly at her and she wordlessly offered him the second joint. Charlie thought about how he was supposed to be going with Bill to speak to people running the cemetery where Ginny was buried once morning rolled around but he was already drunk and figured it didn't matter much at this point.

They didn't leave the pub until nearly three am, several joints and a couple more shots of firewhiskey later. It was cold outside but Charlie felt too relaxed and loose-limbed to care, spacing in and out as Tonks dragged him along,activating the portkey which dumped them both on the floor of her apartment. He didn't bother getting up from where he was sprawled out, too entranced by the sensation of the carpet against his cheek. Tonks curled up next to him, under his arm, turning so their faces were just inches apart. Her breath stunk of pot and booze and her eyes were unfocused and soft in the way that only drugs could really make them.

"How're you feeling?" She asked gently, her words managing to cut through the buzz. His mouth didn't really feel like working but he made himself answer her anyway.

"Angry," he said, his words definitely slurred now. "Pro'ly not sad 'nuff 'bout Ron." Tonks sighed quietly, making him wrinkle his nose slightly as her hot breath washed over his face.

"You'll figure it out, Charlie," she told him and he pulled her tighter to him, letting his face press against the sleek curve of her neck.

He hoped she was right, that after a good sleep he'd come up with a plan on how to deal with all this, but while Divination had certainly never been his top subject he got the feeling the morning would only make things more so much worse— and not least because Bill was going to be so pissed when he couldn't find Charlie to go visit the cemetery in... well, in less then four hours. Because
with how drunk and high he was right now? That was definitely not going to happen.

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Neville's POV:

He couldn't sleep. The dorm room was too quiet without Ron's snoring, felt too empty despite Seamus and Dean's presence.

Ron's death—his murder—lingered within Neville's conscience, having sunk its claws deep. The day it had happened, he'd fled to his room after his gran apparated him home from St Mungo's, curling up in a ball in his closet as it felt like something broke inside him. He wasn't sure whether it was his conscience burning itself to ashes or his soul falling apart like brittle stone, but a terrible, yawning emptiness had swallowed up his insides, leaving him breathless and gasping, then a tidal wave of grief had surged forth, breaking the dam.

It had been too easy. Too easy to do something so terrible, so wretched, so relieving. The fear weighing him down and relentlessly choking him was gone, but in its place was a whole new monster.

Neville felt like a coward; he'd been so afraid of facing the consequences of his actions that he'd driven his best friend to murdering someone— and he felt like his guilt would choke him when he couldn't help but be so relieved that Harry had done it anyway.

After tossing and turning for hours and hours, at around half past four in the morning Neville gave up on trying to get any more rest and slipped out of bed, changing into a pair of jogging pants, a t-shirt and his trainers before sneaking out of the Gryffindor Tower. Creeping through the dark corridors of the school, Neville's heart was in his throat but he didn't run into any patrolling teachers or Filch and the one cat he came across—one of the kittens that weren't really kittens anymore—just gave him a disdainful look before sauntering off.

The rush of cold air that greeted him as he slipped outside was refreshing and helped chase away the exhaustion that clung to him from his sleepless night. Running in the dark wasn't that different from running during the daylight hours. He had to pay more attention to where he was putting his feet, had to be more aware of what was around him, but that wasn't a bad thing. Neville ran until his lungs and legs were burning and his throat felt scraped raw then he made himself run further.

The sun had begun to steadily rise as time passed and when Neville took a break at one point, sucking in ragged lungful's of air, he watched how its rays tinged the sky, the bold, burning red and orange reminding him of fire. It was beautiful and Neville found himself staring at it a little longer then he meant to before he forced himself to start jogging again when thoughts of funeral pyres started creeping into his thoughts, of bodies turning to ashes and dust—

Neville was walking around the Black Lake to cool down, his chest feeling like it was being sawn in half while his legs felt like someone had cast a jelly-legs jinx on them, when he spotted the Bulgarian champion Viktor Krum (Ron had always raved about Krum, had had a model of the Quidditch player he'd bought at the Quidditch World Cup that had sat on his nightstand—) standing near the mast of the ship.

The older boy was dressed only in a pair of swimming trunks and Neville felt himself blush slightly at the sight, though that wasn't noticeable considering how flushed red he was from his run. Krum was built out of stocky, firm muscle and his skin was even paler then Neville's. He was
close enough for them both to be within talking distance, though the older boy hadn't seemed to notice his presence yet.

Steeling himself, Neville took a breath then waved. "G-Good morning," he said loudly, only stuttering slightly over his words. Krum looked up from the water, brief surprise flickering over his face before it was covered up by a polite neutrality.

"Good morning," the older boy greeted him. "You vent for run?"

"Er, yes," Neville replied. "What, um, what are you doing?"

"I vill go for svim," Krum said, gesturing at the lake beneath him. Neville's eyes widened.

"Isn't that cold?" He blurted out before he could stop himself. Krum, thankfully, just chuckled slightly.

"Is much colder at Durmstrang," he said, amused.

"I... I suppose it would be," Neville said, crouching down to curiously put his hand in the water. It was freezing, not surprising considering there was still snow covering the castle grounds, and he had to fight the automatic impulse to yank his hand straight back out, not wanting to embarrass himself– well, even more then he probably already had.

"Vot do you think?" Krum asked and Neville looked back up at him, smiling a bit nervously.

"It's really cold," he admitted, "you're much braver then me."

And of course he was, Neville thought, the guilt he'd tried to outrun slamming into him once more. Anyone was braver then him, then the boy who'd had to get someone killed because he was a coward.

"Vhy not try it?" Krum suggested suddenly, causing Neville's attention to snap back over to the Bulgarian champion. The dark-haired young man was watching him with a thoughtful look on his face and Neville's eyes widened at the thought of actually jumping into the freezing Lake. He swallowed nervously, glancing down at the dark water and trying not to shudder.

"I... oh Merlin, please don't let me drown," he exhaled shakily, making his decision. He was surprised by the sudden smile on Krum's face, small but genuine.

"I vill make sure," the Bulgarian promised and Neville sucked in a breath, bracing himself, and then, knowing that he'd never be able to walk into the Lake, he dived in.

Even with his head firmly above the water, the freezing cold of the lake shot through Neville all at once; brutal, and heavy and so very, very cold. It felt like knives stabbing into his skin and shoving messily down his throat as he spluttered his surprise. His jogging clothes were like frozen steel, his runners lead on his feet, and the water felt colder then ice as it splashed against his face.

For a moment he couldn't think, thought he might actually be going into shock, but he knew he had to move and he fought the paralysing cold, kicking out his legs and forcing his arms to claw through the water, to keep his head above the surface. His lungs felt ten times too small but he forced himself to inhale and again and again, until he had a shaky rhythm going.

Still spluttering and gasping, he treaded water and tried to convince himself he wasn't dying. Krum was treading water next to him, a look that could have been concern on his face. "You are okay?" He asked and Neville nodded jerkily, his teeth violently chattering.
"Y-Y-Yes," he managed to say, "j-j-just n-need t-t-o st-start m-moving."

"After me?" Krum suggested and Neville nodded, awkwardly kicking after Krum as he started to cut through the water like a fish. Krum, it quickly became apparent, was a very proficient swimmer. Neville was not and sheer bloody determination could only get him so far. He managed to stay in the lake for nearly twenty minutes before he had to swim to the shore where he'd jumped in, his exhausted limbs barely able to pull himself out of the water.

He collapsed on the edge of the lake, shivering violently and trying to remember the spell to dry himself, when a sudden heat enveloped him like he'd just been swaddled in a warm blanket, his hair and clothes dryer then they'd been when he'd jumped in, all soaked with sweat from his run. Surprised, he turned his head to see Krum had swum over and he managed to give the older boy a very weary smile.

"Thanks," he rasped and Krum smiled back at him, small but sincere.

"You are welcome." He said. "Vill I see you tomorrow?" Neville didn't even hesitate to nod and Krum's smile widened a bit more before the Bulgarian turned and swam away, continuing his laps.

Neville dragged himself to his feet and forced himself to stretch, knowing better then to skip it. The swim had been miserable in just about every way, but he couldn't deny how much better he was feeling. The punishing cold had done what even the run hadn't and despite feeling physically wretched, he felt emotionally better then he had in days– since the Ball, in fact.

It was nearing seven as he snuck back into the Gryffindor Tower and headed straight for the showers. The hot water felt scalding but wonderful and by the time he'd dried and dressed it was half past seven and the first prefect-escorted group of students was ready to head down to the Great Hall.

Unsurprisingly, Harry and Hermione were already there– they were usually among the first up– and as the Hall was still so empty, just a handful of students present from each House, Neville only hesitated a moment before going over.

"Hey Nev," Harry greeted him and Neville gave him a small smile.

"Hello Harry, hello Hermione," he said, sitting down beside Harry and trying not to feel too odd about sitting at the Slytherin table.

"How are you feeling?" Harry asked quietly and Neville lifted and dropped his shoulders in a jerky shrug.

"I've... been better. Nightmares and stuff." He mumbled and Harry nodded, face sympathetic.

"I've been there," he said, the honesty clear in his startling green eyes, and Neville felt a bit of the tension in his chest unravel.

"It– it's just... it was so easy," he said softly, needing to let someone know what was bothering him so much. He swallowed as Harry's eyebrows drew together in slight confusion. "It shouldn't be so easy," he tried to explain his thoughts, "to do something so– huge. So... final."

Harry's answering smile was tired, almost bitter. "Hurting other people is never as hard as it should be." He said, quiet and resigned.

"Neville," Hermione spoke up then, an uncharacteristically sympathetic look in her eyes– Neville wasn't an idiot, no matter what Ron liked to say... had liked to say. Sympathy, he'd realised, wasn't...
something Hermione was very good at either experiencing or expressing. Sometimes though, like after the DADA lesson where Moody demonstrated the Unforgiveables, she did show it— and this was apparently another of those rare times. "Look," she said, her voice gentle, "to put it simply, you'll always feel regret for killing a person, it just can't be helped. It's a biological mechanism; humans are uncomfortable with anything that reminds us too closely of our own mortality. It gets easier the more you do it, but it's always there. If you don't feel something during or after murder, then it means you have a serious problem. That you feel shitty? That's a good thing, even if it doesn't feel like it right now."

"It really doesn't feel like a good thing right now," he admitted.

"Neville," Harry spoke again, looking earnest but serious, his voice and expression both gentle, "it's alright to not feel good about what happened, but it did happen and you can either regret it and feel awful about it for the rest of your life, or you can stand by the reasons we made our decision and move on."

"But our reasons were that I'm a coward," Neville said, miserably. The buzz from his swim in the Lake was starting to wear off and he was beginning to just feel exhausted again. "I couldn't face owning up to my mistakes and I dragged you into my mess."

"Oh Neville," Hermione said, a bit pitying almost. "That is such a Gryffindor thing to say."

Neville couldn't help the slight snort that escaped him, even despite himself, and Hermione's mouth curved into a smirk, her amusement clear.

"For the record, I don't think it was cowardly, not wanting to go to prison for something that wasn't really your fault. Weasley attacked you first, not the other way around; we took the actions we did for the sake of protection, not malice... though I won't deny the malice was also there."

"It's the decision I made and I'm standing behind it and my reasons for it," Harry told him. He said it quietly but there was steel infused in his words, inflexible. The same steel and unbendable will that he always had when he spoke. "Can you, Nev?"

Could he?

Harry and Hermione were both broken and bruised, a bit cruel and a bit of wicked, but Neville couldn't help but think they cared more for him than anyone he had ever met in his life. They saw his potential when no one else had, they'd shown him what he could be, the greatness that he could accomplish, and they had given him friends.

Could he stand behind the reasons that he was an accessory to Ron's murder, that he'd assisted in the death of his housemate?

"I can." He said, because his reasons... his reasons were for friendship, and he'd stand by such reasons, morally wrong or not, always and without hesitation.

(Fourteen years was a very long time to be lonely)

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Hermione's POV:

Luna joined them at the Slytherin table a little after the rest of the Slytherin fourth years arrived,
though Neville had left when the Hall began to really fill up. The other students had all started to arrive, escorted in groups by prefects, and Luna had been trailing after several fifth year Ravenclaws when she spotted them and her little face lit up.

The little blonde didn't hesitate to turn away from the Ravenclaw table, making her way over to the Slytherin one instead and slipping into place beside Blaise.

"What are you doing?" One of the fifth year Ravenclaws Luna had been walking with demanded, visibly affronted.

"Eating breakfast with my friends," Luna answered softly, suddenly timid in a way that had Hermione's hackles rising.

"They're Slytherins, Loony," warned the same Ravenclaw– Hermione only knew her surname, Shepley. The three other fifth years with Shepley were Cho Chang, Marietta Edgecombe and Becky Arncliffe. While Arncliffe appeared bored by the whole budding confrontation, Chang and Edgecombe both looked uncomfortable and Hermione was a bit surprised by the panicked looks Edgecombe kept giving her.

"You should stay away from them," Shepley continued, "they're dangerous."

Blaise smirked at Shepley but Hermione could see the cold rage simmering in his jewel-bright eyes. "So we are," the Italian said, his tone not giving away the emotion lurking underneath as he snapped his teeth in Luna's direction and winked. "I bite."

Luna started giggling, lifting her hands to cover her mouth– and with no small amount of displeasure, Hermione noted the chewed fingernails; before the holidays Luna had stopped that particular anxious habit. It frustrated Hermione in a way that made her feel dark and cold that spending time at her own home could stress the little blonde girl out enough to make her hurt herself like that.

Shepley had gone pink in embarrassed anger and Hermione felt a brief flicker of wary concern stir inside her at the way the older girl fixed her glare on the still-giggling Luna, whose delight quickly faded to a badly hidden trepidation.

"If any of you dare so much as upset Luna then I will make you wish you were dead," she threatened them, a smile colder then death on her face. All of them flinched, Edgecombe even sucking in a breath and stepping back. "Only you won't be," Hermione continued, still smiling, "because I know precisely just how much I can make you bleed before it kills you."

Out of the satisfyingly intimidated Ravenclaws it was only Chang who managed to respond, the older girl narrowing her eyes before turning to Harry and smiling prettily. Hermione immediately wanted to curse her. "It's such a shame about Quidditch, right Harry?" Chang asked Harry 'sweetly'.

"Er, yeah, it is," Harry said, looking a bit awkward.

"I've been talking to some of the other teams," Chang continued, "and we think we should arrange a Quidditch game."

Hermione's hands twitched towards her blades as Harry's face visibly lit up. "That would be great!" He said eagerly, before turning to Draco. "You reckon Montague would be interested? He could ask the others--"

Hermione felt a great deal of satisfaction as Chang's face fell slightly when Draco started discussing the idea just eagerly as Harry. She didn't know why Chang seemed so interested in
Harry when she was with Diggory but the Ravenclaw Seeker had been overly interested in Harry since last year. It was frustrating and irritating—Hermione wasn't exactly sure why either. She wasn't a hypocrite; she wouldn't demand monogamy from Harry when she wasn't monogamous, but if she was ever interested in someone that Harry disliked or was uncomfortable with she knew that she wouldn't take things any further with them. Something about Chang ruffled her feathers and she would not allow the other girl to get her claws into Harry.

"Well... we'll talk about this sometime?" Chang said and Harry looked up from where he'd apparently gotten distracted with Draco, discussing if it would be possible to still book the Quidditch pitch.

"Sounds great," he said happily.

"I'd like to teach all the stronza who've bullied Luna a lesson in kindness— with my fists." Blaise said lowly to her as he watched the Ravenclaws leave, an arm wrapped protectively around Luna's shoulders.

"With a blade would be better." Hermione commented idly and Blaise smiled, relaxing a bit from his tense anger.

"Terrifying as ever," he said, sounding fond. "I really can see why madre likes you so much." He then dropped his voice to quietly add, "excellent work with Weasley."

"I have no idea what you're talking about." She replied, smiling sweetly.

None of the Slytherins would give them away, Hermione knew— and Luna had watched her torture someone with the cruciatus; she was confident that the little blonde wouldn't speak up either. She didn't know Flora and Hestia that well, Astoria either, but Daphne had vouched for them and the only others present in the compartment on the Hogwarts Express were loyal.

Loyal. It was an... interesting word. It made her think of what Voldemort had said— "you're not lone wolves anymore... If you fight, there are people now who will follow you."

Blaise, Draco, Theo, Daphne, Fleur and Luna... even Snape, Tracey, Neville, Vincent and Gregory; somehow, without even meaning to, she and Harry had managed to amass a group of friends, almost. Of people who cared about them and who they cared about in return. She would be genuinely unhappy if one of them was unhappy, would be downright pissed if they were hurt. For years she'd known better then to form attachments, but instead of the instinctive rush of apprehension she'd expected to feel, Hermione was instead... content. Satisfied, even.

There was a sort of peace in the knowledge that she didn't have to fight alone. That she didn't have to be on guard from everyone and everything, that there were people who had her back.

Sting would be horrified, she thought, grimly amused and a touch... not quite nostalgic, but wistful, perhaps. Not for the years she'd spent on the streets, she was glad to leave those behind, but for the boy— young man now— who had taught her nearly everything she'd known to live that life. To survive.

From age six onwards, Hermione had concerned herself with one thing: survival. She knew the concept like she knew every scar that marred her body and the feel of cold steel cutting into warm flesh. She knew how to survive, knew it intimately so; she knew how to stab a man to make him bleed out within moments or over days and she knew how to kill someone and barely leave a trace. The snik of a lock successfully picked, the dull, meaty thud of fists against flesh, the spray of blood blow-back, and the resounding finality of a person's death rattle were all sounds she'd been
familiarised with over the years.

Suspicion was something that had woven itself between her fingertips, burned behind her eyes and weighted down her tongue while trust had been feeling Sting's heartbeat against her ear on those icy winter nights, it was the back of his hand on the side of her face when she fucked up and his breath on her neck, hot and heavy, when he clung to her, drunk and crying silent tears.

She wasn't sure if he'd be pissed at her or not for the connections she'd made, the attachments she'd formed. Probably, she could admit. He'd warn her against trusting them, against trusting anyone but herself. He'd warn and two years ago, one year even, she'd have listened. She'd have agreed.

Now Hermione just wished that Sting had been able to get out of that life when she had and she reaffirmed the decision she'd made on the Hogwarts Express that next holidays she'd travel to London and find Sting, to give him enough money to get him off the streets.

"Don't be sad," Luna's soft voice and even softer touch to her arm tore Hermione from her thoughts, brought her back to the present. The small blonde smiled shyly at her, looking up under her eyelashes with her big silvery eyes.

Before Hermione could reply to the little Ravenclaw, though, she was rudely interrupted.

"Oi, Granger," one of the Weasley twins practically snarled at her, having stormed over to the Slytherin table once entering the Hall and spotting her. "We want a word with you!"

No time would have been a 'good' time for them to confront her, but while she was still quietly simmering about Chang and coldly furious about Luna's treatment, as well as feeling that hollow ache inside her that came from thinking about both Sting and her past, Hermione's thoughts were particularly sharp-edged and undeniably spiteful.

"You're welcome. That's two." She said to the Weasleys, her voice so sweet it almost made her teeth hurt. One of them went pale with what seemed to be a combination of rage and sorrow while the other turned as red as his hair and looked like he was about to actually lunge at her, forget magic.

"You--" he said, before breaking off, apparently too furious to even continue. Hermione let her smile widen, let her teeth show.

"I was sorry to hear about your brother," she added, still poison-sweet and cutting. "He had my prayers."

Prayers for a long painful death, that is.

"Fuck you!" The pale twin choked out, his voice thick with grief. "Fuck you, you fucking bitch!"

Hermione let her lip curl, let her expression arrange into one of cold dismissal. "Not even if you were the last person alive."

The twin who was flushed with rage, the one that looked like he wanted to strangle her with his bare hands, moved a half step forwards then stopped abruptly when she moved her hand to the handle of her wand, ready to defend herself if necessary.

"We're not idiots!" He spat at her and Hermione knew she should be de-escalating this, she really did, but the problem was she had a temper too.

So instead, she lifted her chin up, arched an eyebrow and drawled, "Well, that would certainly
depend on your definition of idiocy, I suppose.

The angry twin basically snapped then and the grieving one had to grab him when he tried to lunge at her. "You killed him!" He screamed, having lost it altogether. "You killed him, you evil cu–"

"Silencio!"

Startled, Hermione turned slightly to see Blaise standing with his wand out, something very dangerous present in his eyes.

"Because your brother just died, we'll give you this one pass," he said, speaking with a feigned disinterest yet there was an unmistakable, growled edge of a wolf circling a kill in his voice. "There are teachers coming over so leave. Now."

"This isn't over!" Hissed the twin being held back.

"Yes it is, Mr. Weasley," Snape's voice was cold and silky; a warning sign. Beside him, McGonagall's mouth was pressed in a thin line of unhappiness.

"Miss Granger has been cleared by investigators in the matter of your brother's death, Fred," she said, speaking far more gently then Hermione had expected.

"Then the investigators are idiots!" Shouted the twin– Fred apparently.

"You think Moody and the Headmaster are idiots? I suppose that's one thing you got right." Sniffed Draco, a look of supreme indifference mixed with utter disdain on his face. Hermione had to bite back her laughter as McGonagall fixed Draco with a stern look.

"That's quite enough, Mr. Malfoy," she said crisply. "Now come along, Misters Weasley."

The twins sullenly followed after McGonagall and once they were gone, all three out of earshot, Snape fixed each of them seated at the Slytherin table with a very serious look. "Watch each other's back when you're out of the common room," he warned them quietly. "Professor McGonagall will talk with the twins and their parents but it's very, very likely this will not end here– and our entire House could easily find themselves a target of the Weasleys', and perhaps even the entirety of Gryffindor House's, unhappiness."

It was Tracey who replied first, all those within earshot at the Slytherin table trading uneasy looks. "Don't worry, sir," she said with the fierce, grim look on her face of someone used to being a target of such hostilities. "Slytherins stick together."

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_Harry's POV:_

After the already eventful morning that had concluded with Snape's grim and concerning warning, Harry and the others set off to their lessons, weighed down with books, parchment and quills as usual. Snow was still thick upon the grounds, and the greenhouse windows were covered in condensation so thick that they couldn't see out of them in Herbology. Nobody was looking forward to Care of Magical Creatures much in this weather, though as Theo said, the skrewts would probably warm them up nicely, either by chasing them, or blasting off so forcefully that Hagrid's cabin would catch fire.
When they arrived at Hagrid's cabin, however, they found an elderly witch with closely cropped gray hair and a very prominent chin standing before his front door. "Hurry up, now, the bell rang five minutes ago," she barked at them as they struggled toward her through the snow.

"Who're you?" asked Harry, staring at her. "Where's Hagrid?"

"My name is Professor Grubbly-Plank," she said briskly. "I am your temporary Care of Magical Creatures teacher."

"Where's Hagrid?" Harry repeated.

"He is indisposed," said Professor Grubbly-Plank shortly. "This way, please."

She strode off around the paddock where the Beauxbatons horses were shivering. Harry, Hermione and the other Slytherins followed her, Harry looking back over his shoulders at Hagrid's cabin. All the curtains were closed. Was Hagrid in there, alone and ill?

"What's wrong with Hagrid?" he asked again, hurrying to catch up with Professor Grubbly-Plank.

"Never you mind," she said as though she thought he was being nosy.

"I do mind, though," said Harry hotly. "What's up with him?"

Professor Grubbly-Plank acted as though she couldn't hear him. She led them past the paddock where the huge Beauxbatons horses were standing, huddled against the cold, and toward a tree on the edge of the forest, where a large and beautiful unicorn was tethered. Many of the girls "ooooohed!" at the sight of the unicorn.

"Oh it's so beautiful!" whispered one of the Gryffindor girls. "How did she get it? They're supposed to be really hard to catch!"

The unicorn was so brightly white it made the snow all around look gray. It was pawing the ground nervously with its golden hooves and throwing back its horned head. It was beautiful, Harry agreed, but it didn't quite have the same devastating beauty of the dead unicorn from his first year; there had been something heartbreakingly tragic yet beautiful about the beast that he remembered even now. The slightly distant look in Hermione's eyes when he glanced back over at her made him think she was remembering the same thing.

"Boys keep back!" barked Professor Grubbly-Plank, throwing out an arm and catching Harry hard in the chest as he failed to stop fast enough in his distracted state. "They prefer the woman's touch, unicorns. Girls to the front, and approach with care, come on, easy does it..."

Hermione stayed with him, with a blunt, whispered 'it'd bolt from me' as Grubbly-Plank and the rest of the girls walked slowly forward toward the unicorn, leaving the boys standing near the paddock fence, watching.

Harry turned to her, frowning. "Why do you think Hagrid isn't teaching?" he asked, stomach twisting a bit with anxiety.

"You didn't hear?" Pansy sneered, still close enough to hear. "The truth came out about what that halfbreed monster really is!" Harry was confused but Hermione's face immediately sharpened.

"Hagrid's parentage is public knowledge?" She asked.

"What are you talking about?" Harry asked and Pansy turned her sneer towards him.
"Your pet professor is a half giant!" She threw the words at him like she was expecting him to flinch back, to gasp; to react in some way other then confusion.

"Well, yeah," he said, "have you seen how big he is? That's not normal."

"Mate," Theo said carefully, "giants are... people don't like them."

"Because fucking Wizarding Britain is full of stupid, narrow-minded arseholes!" Harry said furiously, anger welling up inside him. "Hagrid is the kindest, gentlest person I--"

"Except he's not a person," Pansy interrupted, her lip curled. "And Dumbledore had that disgusting beast teachi--"

"Parkinson, if you do not stop talking I will hurt you very, very badly," Hermione interrupted. The lack of a colorful wording to her threat and the calm, conversational tone with which she had delivered it somehow made her words far more terrifying then the occasional violent death threats. "And," Hermione continued, her eyes boring straight into Pansy's, "I happen to be very, very good at it."

Pansy's mouth clicked shut as the girl paled dramatically. Harry would feel sorry for her, being pinned under that stare, but he was too busy feeling furious. "What happened?" He demanded. "How does everyone know now?"

Theo and Draco glanced at each other and then Theo sighed. "I've got a copy." He said. "I thought this might happen."

"A copy of what?" Harry demanded again, stomach sinking.

It was a copy, it turned out when they returned to the Slytherin Common Room so Theo could fetch it from the dorm, of an article from the Daily Prophet-- an article about Hagrid.

**DUMBLEDORE'S GIANT MISTAKE**
Rita Skeeter

*Albus Dumbledore, eccentric Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, has never been afraid to make controversial staff appointments, writes Rita Skeeter, Special Correspondent. In September of this year, he hired Alastor "Mad-Eye" Moody, the notoriously jinx-happy ex-Auror, to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts, a decision that caused many raised eyebrows at the Ministry of Magic, given Moody's well-known habit of attacking anybody who makes a sudden movement in his presence-- in fact, there are unconfirmed reports that two students were attacked by the man within the first week and that he only escaped charges due to his status as a war hero.*

"Mad-Eye" Moody, however, appears downright responsible and kindly when set beside the part-human Dumbledore employs to teach Care of Magical Creatures.

*Rubeus Hagrid, who was expelled from Hogwarts in his third year, has enjoyed the position of gamekeeper at the school ever since, a job secured for him by Dumbledore. Last year, however, Hagrid used his mysterious influence over the headmaster to secure the additional post of Care of Magical Creatures teacher, over the heads of many better-qualified candidates.*

An alarmingly large and ferocious-looking man, Hagrid has been using his newfound authority to terrify the students in his care with a succession of horrific creatures. While Dumbledore turns a blind eye, Hagrid has maimed several pupils during a series of lessons that many admit to being "very frightening."
"His classes are just so awful," a fourth-year student said in confidence, too afraid of possible repercussions to let their name be printed, "we all hate him, but we're too scared to say anything."

Hagrid has no intention of ceasing his campaign of intimidation, however. In conversation with a Daily Prophet reporter last month, he admitted breeding creatures he has dubbed "Blast-Ended Skrewts," highly dangerous crosses between manticores and fire-crabs. The creation of new breeds of magical creature is, of course, an activity usually closely observed by the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. Hagrid, however, considers himself to be above such petty restrictions. "I was just having some fun," he says, before hastily changing the subject.

As if this were not enough, the Daily Prophet has now unearthed evidence that Hagrid is not— as he has always pretended— a pureblood wizard. He is not, in fact, even pure human. His mother, we can exclusively reveal, is none other than the giantess Fridwulfa, whose whereabouts are currently unknown.

Bloodthirsty and brutal, the giants brought themselves to the point of extinction by warring amongst each other during the last century. The handful that remained joined the ranks of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, and were responsible for some of the worst mass Muggle killings of his reign of terror.

While many of the giants who served He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named were killed by Aurors working against the Dark Side, Fridwulfa was not among them. It is possible she escaped to one of the giant communities still existing in foreign mountain ranges. If his antics during Care of Magical Creatures lessons are any guide, however, Fridwulfa's son appears to have inherited her brutal nature.

In a bizarre twist, Hagrid is reputed to have developed a close friendship with the boy who brought around You-Know-Who's fall from power— thereby driving Hagrid's own mother, like the rest of You-Know-Who's supporters, into hiding. Perhaps Harry Potter is unaware of the unpleasant truth about his large friend— but Albus Dumbledore surely has a duty to ensure that Harry Potter, along with his fellow students, is warned about the dangers of associating with part-giants.

"Right," Harry said furiously, his mind racing as his hands balled into fists, "how do I destroy Skeeter?"

"That," Daphne said immediately, her voice sharp, "is a very bad idea. If you try to take on Rita Skeeter, unless you kill her you'll lose. Harry, reporters are cold blooded sharks; they can and will tear you apart to know your private thoughts and then they will leave you cut open and suffocating when there's nothing else to bare, nothing left to hide. Skeeter has connections to powerful people— and, more importantly, she has blackmail on them too. You need to ally with her; you need to help her create a new story to tell, a new twist— don't act like a Gryffindor, act like the Slytherin you are."

Harry could feel himself trembling slightly with rage but he nodded shortly, seeing the sense in Daphne's words. "I'll arrange another interview," Daphne said calmly, "if you promise to keep your temper in check. Do not make an enemy of Rita Skeeter."

"Alright," Harry said, after a long, tense moment. "Alright, I promise."

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It only took a day for Skeeter and Daphne to arrange the meeting but it felt like forever. Harry had gone down to Hagrid's hut four times since the Care of Magical Creatures lesson the day before and nobody had answered.
He was in a right temper as he made his way down to the same place he'd met Skeeter last time but he remembered Daphne's strict warnings and tried to calm himself down. Hermione, who was wary enough after the confrontation with the Weasley twins the day before to not want to be separated from him, was accompanying him this time.

Rita Skeeter looked particularly well-dressed in a white fur cloak layered over a pressed-velvet robe the color of Aunt Petunia's favorite pink roses. Her blonde curls were so stiff they didn't even bob around her head as she moved and her shocking shade of vibrant pink lipstick matched her inch long nails and the spots of colour on her cheeks.

"Harry!" She beamed at him and Harry tried to smile back but couldn't quite manage it. Her wide smile flickered very slightly, but she hitched it back almost at once; she snapped open her crocodile-skin handbag, pulled out a quill, and said, "I can see you're a touch upset, so how about giving me an interview about the Hagrid you know. The man behind the muscles! Your unlikely friendship and the reasons behind it! Would you call him a father substitute?"

"Not a father substitute," Harry said stiffly, fighting back the uneasiness welling up inside him, "but one of my closest friends. He– he was the first person to ever give me a birthday present."

It went against nearly everything in him to reveal to a reporter about his life with the Dursleys, but for Hagrid Harry knew he would do it.

Behind her jeweled spectacles, Rita's eyes had popped almost comically. "What?" She demanded, apparently too shocked to dress up her question the usual way. Harry took a deep breath, reaching out to grab onto Hermione's hand. Her thumb dug against his pulse, the touch reassuring and grounding as he could feel his heartbeat against her skin.

"I don't remember the one birthday I had with my parents, obviously," he said quietly, "but since they were murdered, Hagrid was the first person to ever give me a present, the day I turned eleven."

"What about your relatives?" Rita asked, her face still openly shocked. "The ones you were raised by? Surely they gave you birthday presents!"

"I was raised by my mum's sister and her husband." Harry said, throat thick. "They– they're muggles and they don't like magic. I'm not saying all muggles are bad or anything, I had some really nice teachers in primary school, but my relatives... they hated anything f-f-freakish and that meant they hated me. For my birthday they'd give me old, used socks and broken toothpicks and stuff."

"Harry," Rita said, her voice startlingly hoarse. He was pretty sure that her horror was genuine though it didn't stop him flinching slightly when she reached for his shoulder. Her sharp eyes didn't miss his reaction and suddenly the horror was replaced by fury. "Did they– did they hurt you?" She demanded. "Where you abused?"

Harry looked at his hands, unable to look at her. "If by 'abused' you mean that they had me sleeping in the cupboard under the stairs, gave me one meal a day, worked me to the bone like a house elf and never allowed me to do better in school than their son..."

"Did they hit you?" Rita practically whispered, sounding afraid of the answer. Harry could feel his entire body stiffen.

"When something went wrong I was blamed." He could barely get himself to speak the words. "When Petunia burned the food because she was too busy gossiping with the neighbours, she
blamed me. When Vernon lost a deal, I was blamed. When Dudley broke something..."

"You were blamed."

"Exactly," Harry muttered. "I was the scapegoat, the one person they hated most. They called me a burden, called my father a useless, lay-about drunk and my mother a whore. They told me my father was responsible for killing them both, because he was driving while drunk and got into a car accident. They told everyone in the neighbourhood and at school what a wretched boy I was, dressed me in rags and forbade me to talk to people, to ask questions, to breathe. Yes, that actually happened— more then once. They locked me in my cupboard for days on end without food if I did something as simple as show up Dudley or have an episode of accidental magic. They constantly belittled me and tried their best to utterly break me— Uncle Vernon told Hagrid that when they were forced to take me in they swore to stamp the magic out of me. And their son... my cousin Dudley is a few months older then me, and he and his friends used to play this game called 'Harry Hunting' where they'd chase me and if they caught me two of them would hold my arms behind my back while Dudley hit me. Dudley and his gang would also beat up anyone who tried talking to me so I never had any friends— all the other children were too afraid to even look at me, in case Dudley saw. I'd never even seen a photograph of my parents until I was thirteen– I heard them be murdered, thanks to the Dementors, before I even knew what their faces looked like."

And that wasn't exactly the truth, but before Remus had started sending him pictures of his parents the only place he'd ever seen them was in the Mirror of Erised that one time when he was eleven.

"Have you told anyone about what your awful relatives are like?" Rita asked, blinking rapidly, her hands clenched in fists at her sides. Her cheeks were flushed and rage was visible in her wet eyes. "Do any adults know how you, how our saviour, is being treated?"

"Dumbledore says I have to return to the Dursleys for my own safety," Harry told her, not fighting the bitterness. "He said that I'm protected there by blood wards. Except those wards wouldn't have stopped someone from hurting me or kidnapping me while I was at school, would they? And they definitely didn't protect me from harm inside the walls of the house that was supposed to be my home. Sometimes I wonder if I wouldn't have been safer being kidnapped by Death Eaters than in the hands of Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia."

"How can nobody know about this?" Rita demanded.

Harry shrugged slightly. "I'm the Boy-Who-Lived. I'm not a real person to most witches and wizards, just this... story-book hero that they imagine when they think of Vol– You-Know-Who and his defeat."

"It is unacceptable!" Rita said fiercely, her eyes flashing with a murderous sort of rage. Harry forgot sometimes how much grown witches and wizards, specifically those who'd lived through the last war, practically worshipped him they were so grateful to him for ending Voldemort.

"And this isn't even what we originally asked you here to talk about," Hermione quietly intervened. Rita sucked in several deep, obvious breaths before nodding sharply.

"What else is there?" She asked and Hermione smiled tightly.

"It's about Dumbledore's questionable hiring of Hogwarts staff." She said. "And you may want to grab something to take notes with because we have quite a bit to tell you."
Harry felt exhausted and drained after the interview with Rita but he had a stop to make before he could return to his dorm to curl up in bed for several hours— it was time to talk sense into Hagrid.

The curtains of the hut were still drawn, but Harry could hear Fang barking as he and Hermione approached. "Hagrid!" he shouted, pounding on the front door. "Hagrid, that's enough! I know you're in there! Nobody cares if your mum was a giantess, Hagrid! You can't let all those horrible people out there do this to you! Hagrid, get out here, you're just being—"

The door opened. Harry growled, "About fucking time!" and then stopped, very suddenly, because he had found himself face-to-face, not with Hagrid, but with Albus Dumbledore.

"Good afternoon Harry," the headmaster said quietly, looking down at him. Harry wondered what sort of expression Hermione was making behind him and quickly decided that he should be the one to do the speaking.

"We, er, we wanted to see Hagrid," he said in what he hoped was a brisk but calm voice that displayed none of the rage he felt.

"Yes, I surmised as much," said Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling in a way that made Harry want to borrow one of Hermione's knives to do very unsavoury things. "Why don't you come in?"

He really didn't want to, not while Dumbledore was here, and he already knew Hermione would be furious at him for this, but Hagrid was his friend so he nodded shortly and stepped past Dumbledore.

The moment Harry was inside the cabin Fang launched himself upon him, barking madly and trying to lick his ears. By the time he'd fended off Fang, Hermione was a very unhappy presence at his side and Harry looked around for the person he was doing this for.

Hagrid was sitting at his table, where there were two large mugs of tea. He looked a real mess. His face was blotchy, his eyes swollen, and he had gone to the other extreme where his hair was concerned; far from trying to make it behave, it now looked like a wig of tangled wire.

"Hi, Hagrid," he greeted him and Hagrid slowly looked up.

"'Lo," he said in a very hoarse voice.

"More tea, I think," said Dumbledore, closing the door behind Harry and Hermione, drawing out his wand, and twiddling it; a revolving tea tray appeared in midair along with a plate of cakes. Dumbledore magicked the tray onto the table, and everybody sat down. Harry didn't touch any of the things Dumbledore had conjured up and neither did Hermione. There was a slight pause where no one spoke, and then Dumbledore asked, "Did you by any chance hear what Harry was shouting, Rubeus? He and... Miss Granger still seem to want to know you, judging by the way they were attempting to break down the door."

"Of course we still want to know you!" Harry exclaimed, staring at Hagrid. "You can't listen to what those worthless, gossiping shithats go on about! Trust me, I know what I'm talking about—every year I'm accused of something different, from opening the Chamber to entering my name in the Goblet, and I've learned that you can't take on board what people say. They're just sheep, bleating what they think everyone else wants to hear when nobody really even cares—though even if they did, it wouldn't matter! The Gryffindors, Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws all hated me after my name came out of the Goblet, but I had my real friends at my side and you've got your friends here for you too— I'm here for you, Hagrid, and so's Hermione and- and so's Professor Dumbledore."
Two fat tears leaked out of Hagrid's beetle-black eyes and fell slowly into his tangled beard as Harry paused in his rant to breathe.

"Living proof of what I've been telling you, Hagrid," said Dumbledore. "I have shown you the letters from the countless parents who remember you from their own days here, telling me in no uncertain terms that if I sacked you, they would have something to say about it--"

"Not all of 'em," said Hagrid hoarsely. "Not all of 'em wan me ter stay."

"You'll always have the bigots out there," Hermione said sharply. "There'll always be people who look down on you, for things that are entirely out of your control. If you wait for everyone to like you, then you'll be waiting forever."

"Miss Granger is correct," Dumbledore said and Harry was actually sort of impressed by the headmaster's poker-face, because for the old bastard to say those words must have been like pulling teeth. "Really, Hagrid, if you are holding out for universal popularity, I'm afraid you will be in this cabin for a very long time. Not a week has passed since I became headmaster of this school when I haven't had at least one owl complaining about the way I run it. But what should I do? Barricade myself in my study and refuse to talk to anybody?"

Harry traded a quick look at Hermione, both of them knowing that the answer they'd like to say to that was 'yes please!' but they both managed to control themselves as Hagrid said croakily, "Yeh--yeh're not half-giant!"

"And?" Harry demanded, leaning forwards in his seat. "What does that have to do with anything? We don't care! None of the people who actually matter care! Just-- please, come back and teach, Hagrid. I really miss you."

Hagrid gulped. More tears leaked out down his cheeks and into his tangled beard.

Dumbledore stood up. "I refuse to accept your resignation, Hagrid, and I expect you back at work on Monday," he said. "You will join me for breakfast at eight-thirty in the Great Hall. No excuses. Good afternoon to you all."

Dumbledore left the cabin, pausing only to scratch Fangs ears. When the door had shut behind him, Hagrid began to sob into his dustbin-lid-sized hands. Harry sighed slightly and started patting his arm until, at last, Hagrid looked up, his eyes very red indeed, and said, "Great man, Dumbledore...great man...."

"Yeah, he is," Harry lied through his teeth. They spent about an hour there, listening to Hagrid talk about his father, but what Harry really remembered was just before they left, when Hagrid's miserable face broke into a wide, watery smile and he said: "Tha's my boy...you show 'em, Harry, you show 'em yeh don' have ter be pureblood ter win. Yeh don have ter be ashamed of what yeh are. Beat 'em all."

Harry went back to the castle, unable to banish the image of the happy expression on Hagrid's whiskery face as he had imagined Harry winning the tournament.

Then the following day, Rita's article was published.

A CALL FOR JUSTICE
Rita Skeeter

Over the many years I have been a Special Correspondent for the Daily Prophet, I've covered a number of topics, bringing to light the truth our readers deserve. I am rarely surprised anymore by
what I hear, by the terrible and wonderful truths that people tell or try to hide from me. This particular grim tale, however, was something I could never have even dreamed of—something even I could never have expected.

All of us are aware that children are our future; they are our most precious resource, the ones we must protect. Most of us treasure our children—but there are those out there who do not. Some of the ugliest words in any language are 'child abuse', be it neglect or physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse, and the effects of such abuse on a child are serious and long lasting.

I am writing about this today because of a heart-wrenching interview I received yesterday; Harry Potter requested to talk to me about the article published regarding Rubeus Hagrid, the part-giant employed at Hogwarts. Indeed, our Chosen One's friendship with Mr. Hagrid was mentioned in my article and I was delighted for the chance to expand on it, to listen to the reasons behind the unlikely friendship; to learn about the man behind the muscles. It was as I asked Harry if he would call Mr. Hagrid a father substitute that the terrible truth came out, one that will shake the entirety of Wizarding Britain to its very core; "Hagrid's one of my closest friends—he's the first person to ever give me a present." Harry told me, not seeming to realise quite what he'd just said. To say I was stunned to hear such a thing is an understatement and as I carefully questioned Harry, the entire, unsavory tale began to unfold.

"I was raised by my mum's sister and her husband." Our savior told me, his voice hesitant and breaking off as he spoke. "They're muggles and they don't like magic. I'm not saying all muggles are bad or anything, I had some really nice teachers in primary school, but my relatives hated anything freakish and that meant they hated me."

As I listened, nearly speechless with horror, Harry recounted how for his birthdays and Yule he would be given old, used socks and broken toothpicks for gifts. How until he received his Hogwarts letter, he called a cupboard under the staircase his bedroom. How his relatives barely gave him enough food to keep him alive, how he would be blamed and punished for anything to go wrong, from burned food to a bad day at work. How he was bullied by a cousin who kept him isolated and friendless, constantly scaring away anyone who tried to talk to him and beating him. "They tried their best to utterly break me," Harry said, very softly. "Uncle Vernon told Hagrid that when they were forced to take me in they swore to stamp the magic out of me."

I honestly don't know if I've ever heard of anything as awful as a promise to 'stamp' the magic out of a child—and yet, as that wasn't all horrific enough, Harry then began to tell me just what those disgusting people did to the memory of our beloved Lily and James Potter. "They called my father a useless, lay-about drunk and my mother a whore," he told me, anger clear in his eyes. "They told me my father was responsible for killing them both, because he was driving while drunk and got into a car accident... I never even saw a photograph of my parents until I was thirteen— I heard my parents be murdered, thanks to the Dementors, before I even knew what their faces looked like."

Lily and James Potter sacrificed themselves for their son; their selfless act helped end the war responsible for the deaths of thousands, a large percentage of that number muggles. For the muggles who took Harry in to not only dismiss this but to actively attempt to convince the son of the brave young couple that his parents were anything but the heroes they were? Even I, a professional author, do not have the words to describe such a thing.

Reeling from everything I'd just learned, I demanded to know if Harry had told anyone what he'd just told me. "Dumbledore says I have to return to the Dursleys for my own safety," Harry said, the bitterness in his voice unmistakable and entirely reasonable. "He said that I'm protected there... but sometimes I wonder if I wouldn't have been safer being kidnapped by Death Eaters than in the hands of Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia."
How could nobody know this? How could this have happened to our savior, our cherished Boy-Who-Lived, the one to save us all? These are the questions I'm sure you're all asking yourselves; I know that I was. When I voiced them aloud, Harry gave me a sad, resigned look. "I'm not a real person to most witches and wizards, just this... story-book hero that they imagine when they think of You-Know-Who and his defeat."

I felt ashamed, in that moment. I felt furious and heartbroken. And, more than anything, I wanted—and I still want—justice for Harry; not our savior, not our Boy-Who-Lived, but the child we all overlook when we seek our 'story-book hero'.

I am calling for justice for Harry—why was he placed with muggle relatives, after He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named's fall? Who placed him there? What gave Albus Dumbledore the right to force an abused child to return to his abusers?

And why did the esteemed Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Grand Sorcerer, Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards and Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, fail to follow procedure and report a student's allegations of abuse?

"Well," Blaise said, from where he was pacing their dorm room, "you don't do things halfway, do you, mate?"

"I just answered her questions." Harry said, looking down at his hands from where he was seated next to Hermione on his bed. He'd taken two steps into the Great Hall that morning only for the entire Hall to go silent enough to hear a pin drop. He'd promptly turned around and retreated to the dorms, where he'd remained ever since.

Hermione pulled him closer to her and he pressed his head into the sleek curve of her neck. "This is going to be a shit show," she sighed, running her fingers through his hair in a soothing motion. "But it's a long overdue one. You're never setting foot in the Dursleys again."

Chapter End Notes

I hope everyone enjoyed the chapter!
I would like to make note that there will be no romance between Viktor Krum and Neville, just friendship because my poor Neville needs more friends.
Also, Fleur and Tonks are a perfect example of terrible BDSM etiquette. Their example is one that nobody should ever follow. Ever. Seriously (it's called communication, and it happens to be very important).
~Cheshire Carroll
CHAPTER LXI:

Voldemort's POV:

"I can't decide whether to be more impressed or annoyed," the Dark Lord commented idly as he placed that morning's rather surprising copy of the Daily Prophet down on the table before he accidentally set it on fire. "Though I do suddenly have the overwhelming desire to go and punish several filthy muggles for touching what isn't theirs."

"They could have at least given us some warning," his breakfast companion, 'Tom', replied, looking immensely frustrated as he did so. Voldemort looked at the younger soul-part in amusement as 'Tom' scowled darkly at the table where his own copy of the newspaper had been tossed.

He wondered if his Horcrux realised just how transparent he was being in this moment and, not for the first time either, felt a flicker of... perhaps unease as he was confronted with evidence of the depth of affection involved in that little trio. He disliked affection as a rule; he didn't mind it directed towards him, as such, and in fact rather enjoyed manipulating the power dynamic such an occurrence created. He did, however, mind being around people who felt such emotions for each other; affection made people unpredictable in the most unpleasant of ways– Lily Evans and Severus Snape were two prime examples of such... incidents.

He questioned at just how deep the attachment (he refused to call it affection) his creation had to the Potter boy ran– and if he should start growing concerned. While he'd like to think that a piece of his own soul would never think to place another above them or choose someone else over him(self), Voldemort knew far better then to fall into that trap. To trust nobody was to survive, to do otherwise was just asking to be stabbed in the back; as a part of his soul, 'Tom' would understand that just as well as he did.

"You realise Dumbledore is going to use this as an opportunity?" 'Tom' asked abruptly.

"Oh I do," Voldemort nodded. "And I intend to let him."

"Let him?" 'Tom' repeated incredulously. Ah child, Voldemort sighed internally. This was the second most irritating aspect of attachment (affection); the unwillingness it created to sacrifice other pieces on the board. It made life infinitely more difficult. He would never allow himself to fall into such a trap, but in terms of life and its experiences he did acknowledge that 'Tom' was still young. He did doubt that the... attachment the Horcrux had to the boy and his dear 'niece' was temporary– Voldemort knew himself well enough to recognise that he never let go of what he'd claimed as his own– but he did hold out a certain anticipation for age to temper such youthful impulses of protectiveness, oh-so jealously shielding such objects of attachment from any and all that might cause harm.

"Can you think of a more perfect spy?" He asked 'Tom' pointedly, reminding him of what was so crucially important at this stage in their planning. "Everything is unfolding as it should, but we can
leave nothing to chance; this is an opportunity we would be fools to let pass. And neither of us is a fool.” He refused to let attachment make him weak; either himself or the younger piece of his soul.

Tom looked furious, his eyes a burning, bloodied red like fresh-spilled blood, but he could also see the reluctant agreement on the sentient horcrux’s face.

Whatever else he was, whatever attachments he'd formed and youthful folly burned within him, at the very essence of himself 'Tom' was still Voldemort and he/they understood doing what needed to be done.

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Harry's POV:

"Mister Potter, do you understand the seriousness of the allegations you have made?"

The older woman looking down at Harry in McGonagall's office reminded him of the office's actual owner, who was also present. She had short, steel-grey hair, a lined face and a strict no-nonsense air about her. She'd introduced herself as Madam Bones, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, and Harry had immediately gotten the same impression from her that he'd gotten from McGonagall the first time he'd met her– that she was not a woman to be disrespected.

His temper, however, had a terrible tendency to have him overlooking his common sense– and his survival instincts. And right now Harry's temper was running high enough that that one word was enough to make him snap, regardless of who it was speaking.

"Allegations?" he repeated– loudly. "Allegations!??"

"To charge your relatives with a crime, the DMLE will require proof–"

"You need proof? That won't be an issue– I have over a decade worth of memories of proof!" Harry shouted, infuriated that they could possibly be questioning him, and damn it speaking up about this had been a mistake, he knew it, he knew it– "You'll find the ones from before my Hogwarts letter in particular will haves loads of proof–"

"Mister Potter!" McGonagall interrupted sharply and Harry shut his mouth with an audible click, though he remained entirely unrepentant of the sullen glare he knew was on his face. McGonagall's expression, however, inexplicably softened despite his rudeness. "Harry," she said, much more gently, "I understand that this is difficult, but Madam Bones is here to help you."

"I wish to understand what has happened and gather evidence so that it won't continue happening," Bones confirmed. Harry forced himself to take a deep, calming breath and nodded.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to yell." He apologised. "It's just... not easy to talk about this."

"Yet you managed to talk to Ms. Skeeter about it, and in significant detail too." Bones pointed out, her tone nowhere near as accusing as her question sounded. "I will admit, I don't understand why you contacted the press before talking to the DMLE."

"I didn't think there was anything the DMLE could do," Harry said, with a slight shrug. "I told Dumbledore what was happening and he said I had to go back anyway."
"Mister Potter," Bones said, her voice sounding a bit like she was forcing it to stay calm, "Albus Dumbledore is not the DMLE."

"Yeah, but he's Head of the Wizengamot, right? If he sent me back there then the Dursleys mustn't have been breaking any Wizarding laws," Harry pointed out, all 'earnest' and 'honest' as if butter wouldn't melt in his mouth while he dug out a few shovels of dirt from Dumbledore's grave-- he couldn't let Hermione have all the fun, after all.

Bones' lips pressed into a very thin, very pale line– it was almost scarily reminiscent of Harry's first three years at Hogwarts, all spent under McGonagall's highly disapproving frown. Now, though, things were very different with the Deputy Headmistress-- in fact, McGonagall was the one sitting with him in loco parentis as he met with Madam Bones to discuss the article and the 'serious allegations' he'd made in it.

That goddamn article. It had been two days since it had been printed and Harry had only left the Slytherin common room and dorms once in that time. It was all anybody could talk about and while he'd been delighted to hear about Dumbledore getting howlers and Hagrid being reinstated, he was significantly less pleased by all the staring and the rumors flying around and how the childhood he mostly tried to forget was suddenly the only thing anyone seemed to care about.

Nobody ever had before. Well, a few people had but pretty much everyone else had just seen him as this hero that he just wasn't. He wasn't a hero (no, he was actually a murderer who'd sided with his own parents' killer) and he didn't want to be one; he never had. He didn't want to be seen as peoples' salvation; he wanted them to see him as himself, as just Harry. He was a fourteen-year-old kid and he was fucking sick and tired of everyone only seeing the Boy-Who-Lived when they looked at him or heard his name.

He wanted people to see him as fallible, because he was, and he wanted them to judge him by what they saw, not by the pre-conceived notions everyone seemed to have of what he should be. He wanted to be seen as human.

At the same time, though, he didn't want to be seen as a victim-- and that's what people now did. It was like swinging from one end of the spectrum to the other.

Almost as if sensing the darkening path his thoughts were taking, McGonagall gently rested one of her hands on his shoulder and squeezed lightly. Harry surprised himself when he didn't immediately want to pull away-- he hadn't realised that he might actually... well, that he might actually trust the Deputy Headmistress. Huh.

"We don't have to go over everything today," the Head of Gryffindor house told him, her eyes surprisingly kind as they met his.

"Minerva is right," Bones agreed, and as Harry turned to look up at her he saw that her face was much warmer too. "All we need to do is establish that a crime has been committed. Later, there will be more interviews but for now we'll start simple. Is that okay with you?"

"Yeah, it-- that's okay." Harry said, nodding at her.

"Good. Now Harry, can you describe to me your first memory of your Aunt and Uncle?" Bones asked. Harry nodded again, unconsciously wrapping his arms around himself.

"I remember sitting on the floor next to Dudley-- my cousin. I don't know how old I was. Really little, I guess." He told them quietly. He felt sick talking about this, though he wasn't a hundred percent sure why. He just knew that if he never had to talk about what it was like living at the
Dursleys he'd be more then fine with it. "Dudley had all these toys that he was throwing around everywhere– he was having a tantrum, he had a lot of them. He was doing his usual screaming, hitting and breaking things routine. I remember I tried to pick up one of the toys– it was a stuffed bear. Dudley saw and wailed for his mum and dad. Aunt Petunia ripped the teddy bear away from me and Uncle Vernon grabbed me and shook me so hard my vision went black... I remember being so terrified that it was a relief when he locked me back in my cupboard."

McGonagall was a stiff, furious presence at his side that Harry couldn't even look at, while Bones' face was a comfortingly calm to look at, none of the disquieting rage present in the tense lines of McGonagall's stiffly-held body visible.

"Can you describe to me what you mean by 'your cupboard'?” Bones asked, her voice wonderfully calm to match her expression. Harry took another deep breath and nodded, opening his mouth to describe to her his bedroom of so many years, and later where his school things had been locked away from him over the summer.

He ended up talking for hours. By the end of the session that wasn't really an interrogation but had felt a bit like one anyway, Harry felt exhausted and drained and even a little afraid, but he also felt lighter. It was one thing to understand on some level that he hadn't been treated right by the Dursleys, but it was very validating to have an actual member of law enforcement confirm it, stating outright that the Dursleys' actions towards him had been illegal.

Still, he was relieved when it was over and when he finally got to leave McGonagall and Bones he fled straight back to the Slytherin dungeons where Hermione was waiting. Hermione was wearing a softer smile then her usual one (not a soft smile, though; Hermione didn't believe in soft smiles, especially in public) as he practically fell into the dorm-room. Harry knew what the smile meant, even before she lifted a piece of parchment up for him to see.

"Tom wrote– he wants to meet tonight. The usual place.” She told him and Harry felt his own smile cross his face, tired but genuinely pleased.

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**Hermione's POV:**

Hermione could see the relief on Harry's face when the first thing Tom did wasn't to start talking about the fucking goddamn article.

They'd met up with the older boy in the Room of Requirement. It had been transformed into that grand room again, with Tom pacing around in front of the huge marble fireplace as they walked in. "Delacour and Barty will be here soon," was the first thing that came out of his mouth, short and brusque. "We need to discuss the Second Task."

Hermione narrowed her eyes slightly. She could almost see the violence clinging to every sharp, prowling movement the older boy made; he was angry about something but she wasn't entirely sure that it was the article– that would have prompted a darker, more simmering rage then this sharp, barely restrained fury and she suspected he would have arranged to meet with them sooner if it had been the cause of his anger, not days later.

"It's good to see you too," Harry retorted grumpily, though she guessed that the tired scowl on his face more to do with his exhaustion from the day then any true exasperation at Tom's lack of a
greeting. Tom's face darkened in response, a sign of just how on edge the older boy was, and Hermione couldn't help the faint trickle of alarm she felt as she watched him seize onto Harry's arm, yanking the younger boy towards him.

She didn't try to step in and distract Tom– Harry had been firm about wanting to fight his own battles and she couldn't deny that he was right. If she always stepped between him and potential danger, he wouldn't be able to grow. And despite Tom's apparent temper, she did trust the older boy– and watching him pull Harry into a rough, bruising kiss was certainly a reward for her restraint.

Watching her boys kiss had the familiar heat pool between her thighs, leaving her tingly and hot with anticipation. Fleur and Barty's arrival, Barty polyjuiced as his father as per usual, was quite the disappointment as Harry, firmly not into voyeurism– not yet, anyway– quickly pulled back from Tom, who was reluctant to let him go but did so anyway.

"'Ermione," Fleur greeted her softly, pressing two air kisses on either side of her face. Hermione smiled up at the older girl, noting with sharp eyes the faint marks visible on Fleur's throat, just barely hidden by her collar. She wore similar marks and as such had a very good idea where they'd come from. She arched an eyebrow and Fleur's cheeks pinked. "Tonks eez a very passionné lover," she murmured.

"I think the word you're looking for there is 'kinky'," Hermione replied dryly, keeping her voice quiet to match. Fleur smiled, a touch sheepishly and very much besotted. It actually surprised Hermione.

"She 'elps me to, ah, forget everyzing in my 'ead." The French witch confessed. Her beautiful face creased slightly, shadows falling over her bright eyes. "Over zee 'olidades, wiz zee Deat' Eaters, Les Lys 'elped take down a brot'el. Eet was... 'orrible. Zey were all just leetle girls, much too small. I... I burned one of le salaud running zee place to deat' during eet. I 'ad no time to zen adjust to anyzing zat 'ad 'appened before I 'ad to return to 'Ogwarts. Tonks... she 'elped it all go quiet."

And Hermione understood. She clearly remembered how when she and Tom played her head would go to a space where decision-making of any sort– to move, to act, to do– was completely impossible, how all of her worries and fears would feel thousands of miles away, and just how freeing it was. It was like leaving the world for a while; she didn't have to think about anything, didn't have to worry about the Tournament or Voldemort's plans or the whole article aftermath situation– or what Dumbledore would try next. When she was tied up and being hurt, she could escape everything for a little while. It was like a mini vacation. She couldn't– wouldn't– deny Fleur that.

"You're safe?" She questioned and Fleur lifted her slim shoulders in a graceful shrug.

"Eet eez not a particularly safe sort of activity," the part-Veela said, a touch wryly with a hint of amusement glinting in her eyes. "But I do believe zat Tonks will not 'arm me. Not in a way I do not wish 'er to." She added with a playful leer. Hermione couldn't help her surprised laugh.

"Alright, alright," she said, still smiling at the French witch, "but if she steps out of line, tell me. Promise?"

"Oui," Fleur vowed, smiling beatifically at her. "I promise."

Satisfied, Hermione moved over to the fancy leather couches where the boys had been waiting for her and Fleur to finish their conversation. The polyjuice had worn off Barty, returning him to his usual slightly unkempt but fairly attractive appearance.
Hermione was slightly bored as they all started to go over the Second Task. It was a fairly straightforward challenge and much less terrifying to contemplate then Harry going up against a fucking dragon. Tom had tried to make Fleur be some kind of bodyguard for Harry during the Task but Harry had reacted poorly to the suggestion– he was uncomfortable enough with what he saw as 'cheating', Hermione knew, and the idea of Fleur sabotaging herself for his sake had him aghast.

"I will not be very useful in zis Task anyway," Fleur admitted to them. "Veela are beings of fire. I will be weakened, no matter what I choose zat will let me breathe under zee water."

Hermione very carefully hid her frown at hearing that. She knew very well that she couldn't deny her attachment to Fleur but it unnerved her, the very real concern she was feeling for the older girl.

"About that, how exactly do we breathe underwater? I've only just learned to swim– barely, at that, and you're saying that the mer-village is right at the bottom of the Lake." Harry pointed out, a slight frown on his face.

"There's a number of ways a magical can survive underwater for a length of time," Barty immediately informed him, before starting to go into surprisingly eager detail on the different methods Harry and Fleur could use, from bubblehead charms and partial self-transfigurations to several different potions and plants.

Tom rose to his feet as Barty lectured to the rapt Harry and Fleur and Hermione tracked his movements, far more interested in watching him then in the current conversation between the two Champions and the 'judge'. He seemed restless, agitated– and if he was being this obvious about it, then there was something definitely wrong.

Standing too, as she moved to join Tom over where he was pacing Hermione noted that up close he smelled of the sharp, coppery tang of blood. "Something's wrong," she said quietly to Tom as they watched Harry, Fleur and Barty discuss the specifics of the Third Task. "Something you're not telling us."

"Yes," Tom agreed, just as quietly. "But it isn't something we can fight. Not yet, anyway."

"Isn't? Or won't?" She asked pointedly. "You're pissed– you've been pissed all evening, and it's not the article, at least not what was written in it. You've heard most of what Harry had to go through already."

"Perceptive as always," Tom muttered before grimacing slightly. "Occasionally, Voldemort and I... do not agree on a specific course of action. This happens to be one of those times."

"And it's got something to do with your attachment to us?" Hermione guessed and Tom nodded.

"Which is why I've gone along with his judgment." He said and it was her turn to grimace.

"How mad am I going to be at you?" She asked and Tom laughed, the sound sharp and humorless.

"About just as furious as I'll be with myself and certain other parties." Tom then paused before saying, rather suddenly, "get Skeeter to look into Sirius Black."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at the older boy. "Should I ask why?"

"No. And don't tell anyone I suggested it." Tom warned, which had her guess that by 'anyone' he was really referring to Voldemort. It made her shift uneasily, the idea that Tom was... not exactly going against his counterpart, but undermining a decision that the Dark Lord had made.
A decision concerning Harry, she reminded herself, which made it not that very surprising at all; Tom's possessiveness was just as extreme as her own— which was why she chose to trust him in this.

"Alright." She agreed. "I'll see to it." An idea then struck her and she tilted her head slightly. "There's something I need your help with too." She said and Tom's eyes sparkled with interest, mouth curling up.

"Oh? Do tell, darling."

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**Tonks's POV:**

Tonks was enjoying Charlie being in Britain again. One of the main reasons was because it meant that they could spend nearly every night together (usually at a bar), and tonight was no exception.

They'd found themselves one of the shady (and by 'shady' she didn't mean 'protected from the sun') tables in the corner of the Hogs Head, one of the ones that were out of immediate view, and had ordered several rounds of drinks so they didn't have to keep getting up while Charlie complained about how much Bill had complained about him missing some stupid funeral planning appointment (or something like that). Tonks was considering how to spice up their evening before Charlie started getting maudlin (talking about the funeral seemed to do that, despite the fact he hadn't even liked Ron— normal people confused the fuck out of her sometimes... well, most of the time) when they were interrupted.

"Nymphadora Tonks, Charles Weasley," a smooth, pleasantly silky voice from behind them had her swiftly turning to face the approaching stranger, her hand going straight to her wand.

She didn't recognise the dark-haired youth before her. He was strikingly attractive with his sharp, angular features, handsome in a very classical, aristocratic manner, but he was particularly alluring to her in a very familiar way— familiar, because Tonks had always been attracted to things that were dangerously enthralling; beautiful and deadly like wildly burning fire, or the sharpened edge of a silver blade (the sort of allure that screamed dangerous! and hissed at her that touch me and you'll burn and you'll bleed; touch me and you'll hurt; touch me and you'll feel).

If asked, Tonks wouldn't be able to explain just why she found the youth dangerous (she never could, not really, not outside that instinctive recognition), but she trusted her instincts— instincts which were currently screaming at her (very, very loudly).

In the dim lighting of the Hogs Head, unusual (interesting) violet-shaded eyes fixed on hers and Tonks' breath caught in her throat, her heart speeding in her chest as surprised laughter bubbled up inside her. She bit the laughter down, but her hunger had roared to life.

**Violet eyes.** She'd bet her wand arm those eyes had once been blue, years and years ago now. See, Tonks might have been raised mostly Grey, but her mother was a Pureblood daughter of the Ancient and Noble House Black and Tonks was training as an Auror; she knew what Dark magic did to users, she knew what signs were there for those who knew how to look, the main ones being pale skin, mood swings, mania or depression, increased sadism and eye colour changes— specifically, a change from whatever the irises originally were to red (and blue and red mixed together made purple; even children knew that).
The dark-haired Dark Magic user's pretty mouth curved into a knowing smirk, like he could hear exactly what she was thinking. Tonks felt like prey under his violet-eyed predator's gaze, but instead of scaring her, she found it absolutely exhilarating; it sent a pleased thrill down her spine, that of one dangerous animal recognising another (Mother would be groaning and shaking her head right about now—Charlie too, in all likelihood, if he realised what was going on... *hmm*, that probably said something that she was *Not* going to think about, *thank you very much*).

"You know," she said *cheerfully*; all *bright* and *beaming* and so painfully *fake*, "when Hermione said that she and Harry had very powerful protectors who weren't afraid to get their hands dirty, I wasn't exactly expecting a visit from one quite so soon."

"Oh?" the boy asked, clearly amused. Beside her, Charlie had gone very still in recognition of the danger that they were in (well, *probably* in; Tonks didn't think she'd done anything that would have Hermione Granger wanting her dead quite yet).

"I wasn't lying when I told her I wouldn't say anything." She said, speaking honestly (for once). "Interesting people are so rare—having one arrested for murder would be such a waste."

"There are so few real people in this world of paper cut-outs," agreed the dark haired youth, violet eyes piercing. "So much grey, not enough color."

"*Oh,*" Tonks said, and her surprise was startlingly genuine. Others didn't usually understand how *boring* and *flat* the world was, they didn't *see* how it was filled with so many *boring, flat* people—'paper cut-outs' was actually a really accurate description of the colourless, two-dimensional objects. They were boring, useless and uninteresting; grey bits of scenery to be meaninglessly *shoved aside*. Drugs and alcohol gave people *color*, made them *warm* and *real*, but it always faded once the buzz was gone.

Except the rare, few interesting people. The *real* ones.

Tonks eyed the dark haired youth with new eyes, warier ones. She'd already recognized him as dangerous; realizing they shared *similarities* (by which she meant *psychopathic traits*, Charlie's voice in her head clarified) made him just that much more obviously a threat. And the *eyes*. The purple (*blue-red*) irises that told her while she dreamed of murder, going by the intoxication of Dark magic the youth had near-about drowned himself in it.

The dark haired youth smiled again. It was not a nice smile; too many teeth for that, too much threat. His violet (*cruel*) eyes glinted in the candlelight and Tonks had to bite back the answering grin she wanted to give, loose and wild and *hungry*.

"Are you here to kill us?" She asked bluntly. Charlie made a soft sound beside her but she didn't look, kept her eyes trained firmly on the youth instead. His lip curled slightly.

"I don't want your lives, I want your silence." He said. "And I'm afraid your word alone just isn't good enough," he shook his head, a mock-sympathetic look on his face. "Normally, at this point I would just kill you— it would save time and, as they say, dead men tell no tales. Luckily for you both, I happen to have some extra time on my hands tonight— and conveniently, there are three of us here. If you both make an Unbreakable Vow then you get to walk away from here. If not, the owner of this... establishment will be sweeping your corpses out with the rest of the rubbish come morning." The youth paused, violet eyes flicking carelessly around them. "Actually, considering the state of this place your bodies could go unnoticed for months. Possibly years."

Tonks considered refusing. Considered making a scene, getting in a fight. She didn't care about the Vow, or Ron getting justice; she just wanted to see the younger wizard in action. She wanted to see
him move, all sleek, prowling actions, that beautiful grace and deadly swiftness, she wanted to
fight

"We'll make the Vow," Charlie said, one of his hands clamping down over the nape of her neck, the callouses on his palm rough and his fingers firm. Tonks felt a bit like a kitten or puppy being held by its mother, which was almost enough to make her protest except her whole body felt like it was buzzing; she felt wild and feral and starving, like she could rip someone apart with her hands and bathe in the blood–

It wasn't until after the Vows, and after the youth had left, that Tonks' head started to clear, that she managed to claw her way back to proper self-control, sliding her usual bubbly facade back in place, and she realised it had been the Dark magic clinging to him that had practically drugged her out, leaving her hungry and bloodthirsty. Her skin still felt tight and electric, her mouth tasted like thick, sweet poison and she was so fucking wet.

Charlie was much, much less enthused in the aftermath of the encounter. "Bloody hell, we just met the male version of you," he groaned, resting his elbows on the table– a bit of a risky move in the Hogs Head– and his head in his hands. "Powerful, dangerous and a total fucking psychopath." He shook his head, almost like he was amazed. Tonks was actually flattered by the comparison, but more then that she was sharply, singularly focused.

"I want to fuck him," she told Charlie who lifted his head, saw the seriousness on her face and groaned again.

"Morgana's tits," he muttered, "of-fucking-course you do. Bloody hell, you just love playing with fire."

Tonks smirked at that, looking slyly up at her best (only) friend from under suddenly long and thick eyelashes. "So do you." She purred and Charlie blinked.

"Tonks," he said slowly, "you do realise that I was just forced into making an Unbreakable Vow that protects the identity of my brother's murderer and now you're talking about a three-way with the one who made us make the Vow by threatening to kill us if we didn't?"

"If you hadn't made the Vow then your family would have to bury another child," Tonks pointed out (very sensibly). "You're actually saving them pain, this way."

Charlie gave her a look that said she had definitely failed in her attempt to comfort him. "A normal person would ask what the fuck was wrong with you," he informed her.

"I missed the hoops?" She grimaced and he laughed, the sound not at all humorous.

"You threw the fucking quaffle right off the pitch."

"Sorry."

Charlie rolled his eyes. "Don't bother, I'm used to it. Just like I don't need to ask what the fuck's wrong with you because I already know– you're a fucking psycho, but you're my fucking psycho."

"And you're my darling firebug." Tonks replied, the words almost reflexive. She paused for a moment, then– "so... was that a yes to the three-way?"
Harry's POV:

After the drama of the return to Hogwarts, it was a relief to settle back into a normal routine again. Classes weren't challenging but they were intense and while the practice for the First Task was over, obviously, Harry actually found himself actually missing it as Tom turned the focus of the training sessions to non-verbal magic– which was bloody difficult. Hermione was with him for every lesson, at least, which was a small but important consolation.

He was also meeting Madam Bones once a week and discussing events from his childhood with the witch. They weren't pleasant sessions, not even slightly, and they left him pale and shaky afterwards. Either Snape or McGonagall would join him, but both always remained blessedly silent for the duration, never interrupting or asking questions. McGonagall's eyes would look like fire afterwards while Snape's would be icy with hate, but neither of them ever confronted him about anything he'd said during the sessions, other then the initial offer from them both about always being there if he ever needed someone to talk to.

It took actual weeks for the fervor from the student body regarding the article Rita had printed to die down. After the shock of the initial few days, however, Harry had managed to don the thick skin he'd grown in the past, such as during the Chamber of Secrets mess and when his name had first been pulled out of the Goblet, and ignore the 'ignorant sheeple' of the student body, to quote his best friend, though he'd had to put up with a number of looks from the locals during the Hogsmeade weekend halfway through January.

Much to Harry's relief, however, Rita's newest article, published not long after the Hogsmeade weekend, had managed to help redirect people's attention. Harry wasn't exactly sure why Rita had chosen to investigate Sirius Black, but Hermione's equal parts calculating and satisfied expression told him that she'd been involved somehow in the reporter's decision. She hadn't said anything, though, and Harry figured she must have a reason for staying quiet and hadn't asked.

He'd actually enjoyed Rita's article too, for once– well, most of it. It had been filled with a number of pressing, thought-provoking questions and very unsubtle, pointed insinuations that had him feeling equal parts gleeful and nauseas– and it had left him wanting answers.

THE INFAMY AND INCARCERATION OF SIRIUS BLACK

Rita Skeeter

It was in my search for answers on another matter entirely that unearthed, for me, a number of questions regarding the infamy and incarceration of Sirius Black– questions I decided to share with my readers in my search for answers. Black's innocence is now an uncontested fact, but what we should be looking into is why his guilt was so unchallenged in the first place.

Why was Black considered to be one of the most infamous prisoners ever held in Azkaban, even prior to his escape? Supposedly, he had killed thirteen people with one curse– horrendous, yes, but considering twelve were muggles, not exactly an astounding feat of magic, and around the same time he was committing the crime Black's own cousin, Bellatrix Lestrange née Black, had been involved in torturing two Aurors into insanity before taking down nearly two dozen of the Aurors sent apprehend her– and that was just during the specific time period that Black had allegedly committed his first– and only– supposed war crime.

Before that Halloween when He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named died, Lestrange– like a number of other prisoners who were serving their sentences in Azkaban alongside Black– openly confessed to her involvement in a countless number of horrifying crimes. During the War thousands of muggles were slaughtered by Dark magic, including the three Unforgivables and the notoriously difficult
Fiendfyre curse, with hundreds more turned into inferi. Surely the witches and wizards responsible for these heinous crimes should have been considered far more infamous—so why weren't they? What was it about Black that gave him his infamous reputation? And for that matter, considering the wide press coverage of Black's crime, how was it that nobody noticed a trial was never held?

Possibly, it could have been Black's "shocking" allegiance to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named that was the root of his infamy. Black was, after all, widely known to be staunchly Light (which is just one more reason that his sudden motives for supposedly going Dark should have been questioned—which a trial would have been perfect for!) but considering the fact he did belong to one of the most prominent Dark-aligned families in Britain, it couldn't have been too surprising for those who didn't know him personally that a Black would be a Dark wizard. But why didn't those who did know him ask questions? Why was the innocent heir of an Ancient and Noble House locked away without a trial?

As previously stated, these questions about Black came up while I was investigating another matter entirely, a connection to a whole different issue that might just end up providing answers to the mystery surrounding Black's infamy and incarceration— the care and custody of one Harry Potter.

Harry Potter was placed by Albus Dumbledore (under whose authority, it must be questioned) in the care and custody of his muggle relatives, Vernon and Petunia Dursley. After Harry's interview revealing the shocking nature of his abusive upbringing, investigations have turned to why the boy was placed with them— and as part of my own personal investigation into the matter, I decided to request to view Lily and James Potter's Will.

I was promptly denied access to the legal document.

The Will, I was informed, had been sealed under orders from the Supreme Mugwump, supposedly to keep the location of Harry Potter safe. The Supreme Mugwump, of course, is none other then Albus Dumbledore. I found this immediately suspicious and requested to know the date of the order from Dumbledore to seal the Will and was told it had been sealed two full days before Black 'committed' the mass-murder he was jailed for. Suspicious of the timing, I dug deeper— and discovered that Sirius Black had been named by Lily and James as Harry's godfather. Legally, this would have given him full custody of Harry, unless the Potters' Will stated otherwise.

So to summarise, Harry Potter was removed from the Potters' house in Godric's Hollow by neither Aurors nor his legal guardian, the Potters' Will was almost immediately sealed thereafter to 'protect' the toddler from his location being known and then the only person with a publicly known legal claim was framed for mass-murder, thrown in prison without a trial and somehow managed to gain a hugely infamous reputation for what was a relatively benign crime in comparison to the other atrocities that had taken place those Dark few years.

I, for one, would like some answers— starting with the appeal I have filed for the unsealing of the Potters' Will.

"Do you think it's weird I've never seen my parents' Will?" Harry had asked his friends, after reading Rita's article.

"It's very, very weird," Daphne informed him, looking disturbed— quite a number of the students were, and not just the Slytherins. The idea that a Pureblood heir to an Ancient and Noble House could be thrown into Azkaban without a trial had given them all a nasty shock.

"How did you even get access your Gringotts vault?" Blaise questioned him with a frown.

"I– Hagrid had the key," Harry answered and something had twisted violently inside him at the
sudden realization. "And Hagrid had the key because Dumbledore had given it to him."

"Bloody hell," Theo actually shuddered, his eyes wide. "Mate, it's practically a conspiracy at this point!"

"You say that like you're joking," Daphne said, her face now concerned, "but I think you may be more right then you realise."

"I bet that's the first and last time she ever says that to him," Blaise said in a loud stage whisper, which broke up the tense atmosphere surrounding them somewhat as everyone laughed at Theo, who rolled his eyes good-naturedly.

The uneasy feeling didn't leave Harry though. It seemed that Dumbledore had been interfering with his life for far longer then he'd even realised and he had no idea why.

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Remus's POV:

It had been a horrible month. Well, it had been a horrible decade (plus a few years) but the past month had been horrible enough that it deserved recognition for the fact.

Remus wasn't a fan of Rita Skeeter; he didn't like reporters in general, actually, but Skeeter was the sort of petty, spiteful, uncaring person that he'd always held a particular loathing for. And now he owed her a debt. Reading that article about Harry– 'A Call For Justice'– had been one of the single most wretched moments of his life, an impressive feat considering the sheer number of wretched moments he'd experienced. He'd immediately flooed Severus and one look at his old classmate's face had told him that Skeeter hadn't lied or exaggerated; Severus informed him that Harry had officially confirmed that everything Skeeter had printed in her article was true and now there was an official investigation taking place.

He'd cried. If he hadn't been so distraught Remus would probably have been horrified about breaking down in front of Severus like that, but 'distraught' was very nearly an understatement when used to describe how he'd felt in that moment.

It hadn't just been the horrors that had been committed against Harry that had been so distressing, however, but the fact that Albus Dumbledore, the man he'd held in such high regard for so long, even in the face of the man's unreasonable grudge against Hermione Granger, had sent James and Lily's son back to his abusers!

Any question Remus might have had as to why Harry hadn't ever said anything to him had died a miserable, drawn-out death upon reading that damning line– "What gave Albus Dumbledore the right to force an abused child to return to his abusers?"

At some point Harry had managed to ask for help, and Dumbledore? Dumbledore had just sent him straight back to the people who'd hurt him.

Learning that had shaken to the core the very foundations of practically everything Remus had built his view of the world on. Severus, bless the man, had pulled his practically frozen self through the floo, dumped him on the couch in his private quarters and pushed a very full glass of liquor with a questionably high alcohol content into his hand before pouring one for himself. At some point, Minerva, Pomona and Poppy had joined them. Minerva had been enraged, Pomona kept bursting into tears and Poppy was furious with herself for never having realised the truth, even with the
impressive number of times Harry had ended up in her hospital wing.

Remus wasn't sure how Severus had felt as, even after an impressive number of drinks, his former classmate had stayed very, very quiet. Remus himself had just felt shattered.

He'd passed out at some point— he was fairly certain Severus had charmed his glass to automatically refill because he couldn't remember it ever been empty despite how much he'd drunk— and woke up still in Severus's quarters, laid out on the elongated sofa with a blanket, pillow, several hangover potions and a note saying that Severus had a class to teach. He'd left a note of his own behind to thank Severus then flooed back to his house where he'd curled up in his bed for the next five days not eating and barely sleeping, only getting up to visit the bathroom.

It had taken a sharply worded letter from Severus to get him up and moving again. And then the second blow came— The Infamy and Incarceration of Sirius Black article. While it hadn't been devastating in the same way as Skeeter's last article, it had still hurt— and it had mercilessly crushed the already severely shaken foundations of his universe to splinters.

The overwhelming guilt alone had been enough to leave him paralysed (Why?! Why hadn't he asked questions?! Why hadn't he demanded to know why Sirius had supposedly betrayed Lily and James?! Why had he never questioned the lack of a trial?! Why why why?!) but the growing suspicion that Dumbledore might have had something to do with Sirius's incarceration— and had definitely had something to do with Harry's placement at the Dursleys— had left him feeling like he should be questioning if up was really up and down was really down, because he just didn't know anymore.

(It made him question why he was the only werewolf who had ever attended Hogwarts, when there were so many out there. It made him ask himself just why Dumbledore might have wanted a werewolf of his age indebted to him— and made him think about all those missions he'd gone on as part of the Order of the Phoenix, the only one who'd been able to go undercover with the werewolf packs who'd supported Voldemort, the missions he'd offered to do despite their danger because he'd so desperately wanted to repay Dumbledore for everything, because he'd wanted to prove that he could be a werewolf and be good, be Light, too, because— because— because—)

This time Severus had come to him. Not with alcohol, though he would have thanked him for it, but with calming and dreamless sleep potions. Remus supposed that if anyone could identify with experiencing an internal crisis of... well, of everything he'd believed in for so long, it was Severus.

"The truth is never pleasant," his former classmate had told him, old grief flickering briefly in his eyes before being hidden away once more. "Lies are so much easier to live with." He'd then handed Remus a letter from Harry which Remus had clung to like the lifeline it was.

He hadn't been so lost and broken since Lily, James (and Peter, he'd thought) had been murdered and Sirius sent to Azkaban for betraying Lily and James and killing Peter. Back then he'd had no one to lean on and he was honestly surprised he'd survived it.

At least this time he wasn't alone— even if Severus was honestly the last person he'd ever expected to help him find his feet when it felt like there was nothing for him to stand on.

Chapter End Notes
Next chapter, poor Harry has to figure out Valentines Day and compete in the Second Task. No guesses for which one will be harder for the poor kid.

Hope you enjoyed!

~Cheshire Carroll
Chapter Notes

A/N: there's a scene (marked by *** that I feel I should warn is not something everyone might be okay with and some people could find disturbing. It's Sane and Consensual (though not exactly responsible) but not at all Safe. So if knife-play/blood-play/pain-play is not your thing, then I definitely suggest skipping it. If it is your thing (or you're curious or just don't care) then enjoy ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER LXII:

Severus's POV:

There was a tense atmosphere at Hogwarts, following Skeeter's latest article 'The Infamy and Incarceration of Sirius Black'. It wasn't hard to read the underlying accusations between the lines, the thinly veiled declarations that Dumbledore knew Black was innocent and had let an innocent (Pureblood Heir to an Ancient and Noble House) man rot in Azkaban in order to have control over the Boy Who Lived. Whispers were rife over the school amongst students and staff alike. As far as Severus knew, Harry was staying quiet– for once– but plenty of other people were talking, wanting answers– beginning with demanding for Lily and James Potter's Will to be made public.

Considering the upcoming custody dispute of Harry that was likely to end in blood, Severus wondered just who had been behind Skeeter's latest, suspiciously well-timed and well-informed article. Dumbledore's reputation taking such a hit was one of the best things that could happen for Harry right now– and so was the unsealing of his parents' Will.

He wasn't sure if Harry was aware of what the Headmaster was planning, or if he had guessed. The fact was, Dumbledore wanted control over Harry– and with Harry fighting him every step of the way, the best course for the old bastard to take would be to gain legal control. With the boy's custody up for grabs and Lily and James's Will tucked away, out of sight, it would come down to political power and influence to decide where the boy ended up– a painfully, Dumbledore-worshipping Light family being the Headmaster's first choice and one of the worst possible outcomes for Harry.

Skeeter's article, however, cast public doubt over Dumbledore's ability to make good choices, alienated him from his allies with the suspicions of his complicity in the imprisonment of one of their own and subsequently had begun to both minimise Dumbledore's influence in the Wizengamot chambers, the useless lot of them less likely to blindly follow his word like gospel with such dark suspicions hovering over him, and to remove the rose colored glasses of the Wizarding world as a whole.

Severus didn't like Black. Still loathed him, in fact– his ex-class mate had almost murdered him when they were teenagers, was he really supposed to just 'forgive and forget'? No, despite his bizarre not-friendship with Re– with Lupin (and no, he was not deluding himself, Minerva!) and recent grudging acknowledgment that holding onto his animosity towards a dead man wasn't worth
it in the case of James Potter, especially not after the man had spent the last moments of his life trying to save Lily and Harry's, he still couldn't let go of his bitterness and resentment towards Black. He didn't care that Black was dead, murdered by his own beloved godson, or that the man had suffered for years in the hellhole cesspit that was Azkaban. He hated him and would always hate him.

And that was why he had been the one chosen to go talk to Dumbledore, to see if he could find out the truth.

He gave his usual weekly report to the headmaster, complaining about the Gryffindors, deriding the Ravenclaws, belittling the Hufflepuffs and praising his Slytherins, all as per normal and like he didn't admire Poppy's sharp intelligence, Minerva's fierce courage and Pomona's even fiercer loyalty, like he wasn't aware of the acumen, tenacity and resolution of most of the students from all Houses (even though they had the most irritating tendency to leave their better qualities behind when they entered his classroom).

Dumbledore made his usual 'mmm's' and 'ahh's' and scolded him for his 'bias' (his bias!? The hypocrite!), and as Severus stormed 'moodily' towards the revolving staircase he paused, as if it was an afterthought and not like this whole encounter hadn't been meticulously planned out by a vengeful Minerva, a shockingly cunning Poppy and a tearfully enraged Pomona.

"So was it more of Skeeter's nonsense, or is it true?" He drawled, his tone casually careless and indifferent. "Did you choose to let Black rot in Azkaban, knowing he was innocent?"

"Severus," Dumbledore said, disapproving, and Severus snorted as he turned back around fully to face the Headmaster, a sneer on his face.

"Come now, Albus, you know that I of all people don't care that Black was supposedly innocent. He was an attempted murderer at age sixteen, it's doubtless he would have ended up in Azkaban at some point regardless. I was merely curious."

Dumbledore sighed heavily, his light blue eyes grave. "As our spy in Voldemort's camps, I know that you, Severus, are aware of the terrible choices we must sometimes make for the Greater Good," he said solemnly, his tone almost one of mourning. Severus wouldn't actually be surprised if the bastard did regret what he'd done to Black– Black had been one of his precious Gryffindors, after all.

"So it's true?" He asked, arching an eyebrow.

"It's not entirely incorrect." Dumbledore admitted and the bitterness inside Severus centred around Black made him want to smirk in dark amusement. It was only the knowledge Black hadn't been the only one affected, that Harry had also been hurt, that kept him from being as vindictively pleased as he would have felt otherwise. "From the beginning, even before he confronted young Peter, I knew that something didn't add up about Sirius betraying the Potters," Dumbledore sighed, missing Severus's internal dilemma entirely.

"I knew the moment I learned of his survival how important Harry would be, so I sent Hagrid to fetch him– I couldn't allow the boy to be raised by Sirius, I couldn't risk what his influence would do, so I had the Will sealed. Sirius being young Harry's godfather was too well-known, however, particularly amongst the Order, and I was struggling to conceive of a way to stop him from gaining custody of the boy. And then Sirius was accused by Peter in front of a street full of witnesses and despite my suspicions, the answer to my dilemma had just fallen into my lap. I could have spoken up, but I didn't. Instead, I had Alastor and other Aurors and government officials who were loyal to me urge Bartemius Crouch and Millicent Bagnold to send imprisoned Death Eaters immediately to
Azkaban, under the pretext that the world needed to heal and that holding trials, when it was so clear to everyone what their crimes were, would be unnecessary and cruel."

Dumbledore sighed heavily again as Severus made sure his face didn't reveal just how much he wanted to be sick in this moment. His face felt cold as ice and his stomach was twisted into knots as he wondered how he could have ever viewed Dumbledore as a benevolent, if somewhat manipulative, figure– from what he was hearing, the old bastard was the furthest thing from kindly or well-meaning. Sickened, he wondered if he hadn't have offered his services to Dumbledore as a spy, if he'd have been tossed into Azkaban never to see the light of day again at the bitter conclusion of the war, no trial to be had and the key to his cell thrown out into the icy North Sea.

"I never definitively knew if Sirius was guilty or not," Dumbledore reiterated, like that made any difference at all when he'd condemned the man to Azkaban regardless. He'd thought that Dumbledore had merely– for a given value of 'merely'– stayed quiet to his doubts on Black's guilt, perhaps while even having evidence to the contrary. Even with Skeeter's accusations, he'd never actually suspected that Dumbledore could have had a hand in encouraging the justice system to forgo Black's basic rights, along with a number of other Death Eaters– or alleged Death Eaters– who'd had the misfortune (that admittedly most of them probably deserved) to be thrown to the Dementors of Azkaban without a chance to defend themselves in a court of law.

"Well," Severus drawled, barely able to keep his voice from shaking, fear and hate churning sickeningly inside him, "it certainly couldn't have happened to a nicer person." Which he privately thought was true, but certainly wouldn't be passing on to Minerva, Poppy and Pomona.

"Severus," Dumbledore chided for the umpteenth time, peering sternly over his half-moon glasses at him. Severus twisted his mouth into a sneer. It came quite easily. "What happened to Sirius was a tragedy, and something that I regret." Dumbledore stated, "but it was for the Greater Good. You of all people, Severus, must understand why Harry could not be allowed to be raised by Sirius."

Why? Because he'd have been happy? Severus thought sourly, able to admit to himself that Sirius would have showered the boy with love and affection and made sure he wanted for nothing.

"Sirius would have raised him as the second coming of James Potter and, for all his virtues, you know better then anyone that James had his faults," Dumbledore said, shaking his head sadly. "The hero needed to defeat Voldemort could not be one who was arrogant, one who'd grown up without humility or restraint. The world needed a humble boy, one who was raised never knowing the fame associated with his name."

A boy who was beaten down and desperately wanted somewhere to belong; a boy who you could 'rescue', who would have been so vulnerable to kindness he would have been malleable as clay to a figure such as the wise, kind Headmaster of the school that had become his home, Severus thought furiously.

"A Harry Potter raised by Black would have been something loathsome," Severus sneered instead of saying any of what he was thinking out loud, his slight shudder not faked. He would have hated the Harry Potter who'd been raised by Black, Severus knew, but his student would have been raised loved, and that would have been worth it.

Dumbledore had taken that from Harry, like he had taken the boy's innocence and his chance to be a child, and had left him seeking the protection of the last... 'man' he should have ever sought for such a thing.

The women, Minerva in particular, were not going to be pleased, Severus thought, resigned. He should probably check his inventory of hangover potions before giving them the news. And gods
forbid he be the one stuck telling Re– Lupin of Dumbledore's culpability in the wretched matter of it all.

...And who was going to be the one to have to tell Harry?

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Harry's POV:

It took an embarrassingly long time after the resumption of classes for Harry to figure out that the Hogwarts professors were trying to help him with the Second Task. Well, Sprout and Flitwick were– Flitwick had winked right at him after he'd announced the class would be learning the bubblehead charm that day, and Sprout had decided, seemingly out of the blue, to do a water plants based unit; one that included gillyweed. Thanks to Barty's meddling, Harry already known about both methods for breathing underwater, but it was still oddly touching.

Tom's training was as tough as ever. The older boy seemed to believe less about him practicing a skill until he got it right and more about practicing it until Harry couldn't get it wrong. Considering the advanced spells he was being forced to learn, this meant many, many long hours casting spells in the Room of Requirement until he was so exhausted he was practically falling asleep standing up. It didn't help that every second day he was getting up at half past five in the morning to go running with Neville and Fleur, after which the three of them would meet Viktor for a 'delightful' swim in the Black Lake, originally at Neville's suggestion.

The sessions with Madam Bones were also continuing. The biggest issue right now was the custody one– Bones had confirmed he would never be returning to the Dursleys, an announcement that had left Harry in a state of numb shock that had lasted nearly three days, but the problem was figuring out where he'd be going now. His parents Last Will and Testament had finally been unsealed– Dumbledore would probably have fought it, Tom had told him, except that Rita's article meant there was too much public pressure on him for him to refuse.

Bones had actually shown him a copy– there hadn't been anything out of the ordinary for most of it, with only the custody arrangements in the case of his mum and dad's death being somewhat shocking. He'd already known that Sirius Black had immediate custody, but learning Alice Longbottom had been Lily's second choice for his legal guardian if his grandparents– her and James' parents– were deceased was a surprise, to say the least.

Harry had been simultaneously stunned and upset by the revelation. His brief memory of Alice had been very firmly burned into his brain and the realisation that Bellatrix, his sort-of mentor (sort-of friend), had been responsible for the state she was in had been hard enough before learning that his mum had wanted the woman to raise him, if anything happened to her.

He'd been able to look past Voldemort murdering his parents, though, so after taking a few days to mourn and be angry Harry had moved on towards not quite forgiveness but the same acceptance and decision to not ever think about that he used regarding Voldemort and his parents.

Due to obvious reasons, Alice clearly couldn't take custody of him and he was unsurprised to learn that his paternal grandparents, Fleamont and Euphemia Potter, were just as deceased as his maternal ones, Basil and Marigold Evans, which meant that the issue of his guardianship was still up in air. Bones seemed highly competent, though, so Harry was working on not stressing– not when he had enough to stress about.
The Black Lake, which he had always taken for granted as just another feature of the grounds, drew his eyes whenever he was near a classroom window, a great, iron-gray mass of chilly water, whose dark and icy depths were starting to seem as distant as the moon. And while the Second Task was racing up on him, so was another, almost equally as intimidating event– Valentines Day. And Harry was in a relationship.

The most experience Harry had with Valentines Day was Lockhart's disaster so he decided to broach the topic with Tom during a training session. In hindsight, it wasn't his best idea.

"So I was thinking–"

"Not a good start to any conversation, Harry," Tom interrupted him with a smirk, "but do go on, Harry dear." Harry rolled his eyes at the older boy but forged on regardless.

"Valentines Day." He said determinedly. Tom arched an eyebrow.

"What about it?"

"Well, it's coming up, isn't it?" He pointed out.

"And?" Tom asked, bored. Harry glared.

"Stop being purposefully obtuse." He told his... sort-of boyfriend, who sighed dramatically in response.

"Harry, I have no interest in such a grossly commercialized holiday, especially one with no Magical roots, merely a muggle religious background. The entire concept is ridiculous and I have little doubt that Hermione would agree with me on the frivolity of it all."

"What if I'm interested in it?" Harry asked, indignantly.

"You're not," Tom said, bluntly.

"I could be," he argued. Tom sighed before his lips twitched into a smirk, a wicked gleam in his eyes.

"Well if you absolutely insist, then we should celebrate the way the Romans did," he suggested, sly-eyed and wicked in a way that meant nothing good.

"I'm actually afraid to ask," Harry muttered.

"In Ancient Rome, there was a festival from February 13th to the 15th," Tom told him anyway. "They called it the Feast of Lupercalia. The men would sacrifice a goat and a dog then whip the women with the hides of the animals they'd slain."

"...You have got to be making that up!" Harry protested.

"Oh, the women would line up to be beaten– they believed it increased fertility– and after they would all go at it like rabbits," Tom continued, still smirking. "For our celebration, we could forgo the animal sacrifices, of course, but whips are generally made from animal hide– currently, leather whips with deerskin tails are quite popular. The Romans did have a few good ideas."

"How could that – that Lupercalia festival become Valentine's Day?" Harry asked incredulously, ignoring Tom's playful teasing. Or at least what he refused to even consider as anything but teasing. Tom answered his question.
"In the third century the Romans executed two men by the name of Valentine on the 14th," he lectured, "the Catholic Church made them martyrs, of course, so the day became known to those who followed Christianity as Saint Valentine's Day. In the fifth century, Christianisation across Europe had Saint Valentine's Day being combined with Lupercalia. The Christians removed the more... pagan aspects of the celebration, but the day remained about fertility and love."

"Huh," Harry murmured, more to himself then to Tom.

"You know, I think you're right, Harry," Tom mused, "perhaps we should celebrate Valentine's Day after all."

"Actually I think you're right," Harry said hurriedly, "it was a terrible idea, we should definitely skip it."

Tom just smirked.  

*Hindsight*, Harry thought with a sigh.

In terms of helpfulness, Draco, Blaise and Theo weren't much better then Tom. At the mention of the day in question, they all pulled various faces. "Urgh, do you remember Lockhart's bloody cupid-dwarves?" Theo asked with a grimace.

"They're hard to forget," Harry grinned, because the memory of Hermione setting one of the harps on fire was still one that made him laugh. "Maybe I should suggest it to Dumbledore– I'm sure the old bastard would leap at the opportunity to *ulp!*"

"Don't you dare!" A horrified Draco threatened, having slapped his hand over Harry's mouth. "Do you not realise what Pansy would do with an opportunity like that?"

Harry licked Draco's palm as the blond shuddered at the thought of Parkinson's romantic machinations and the other boy immediately yanked his hand away, pulling a face.

"Urgh! That's disgusting, Harry!" He complained, wiping his palm on his robes. "I don't know where that's been!"

"All sorts of fun places," Harry said cheekily and Blaise and Theo laughed while Draco looked horrified. "But nah, poetry isn't really Hermione's thing. Well, unless it's nineteenth century gothic poetry about murder, revenge, torture, the plague, being buried alive, and insanity." He amended, thinking of her well-worn copy of *The Complete Works of Poe*.

"I'm not even going to ask," Blaise decided. "But I agree that she'd be much more interested in something along the lines of a set of custom throwing knives then a *roses are red, violets are blue* poem."

"Where would I even buy something like that?" Harry wondered. Blaise smiled, blue-jewel eyes glittering.

"I'll write to my *madre.*" He promised and Harry, remembering the cold beauty of 'Black Widow' Marchioness Adrienne Zabini, tried not to shudder. Blaise looked far too amused for him to have succeeded but at least Theo and Draco both looked appropriately disturbed too.

"Just tell me how much I owe her." Harry said, resigned.
The morning of Valentine's Day, Harry woke up wondering if he'd made a terrible mistake. The feeling grew as he met Hermione in the Common Room and she didn't even mention the occasion, but as they reached the Great Hall he was relieved to see it was decorated—tastefully, thank Salazar—with vases of great sprays of red, pink and white roses and the usual golden cutlery, dinnerware, jugs and goblets had been replaced with a silver set that went far better with the flowers. Scattered around the Hall, giggling girls were opening gifts and chocolates delivered by owl while embarrassed boys hastily hid the same from their laughing mates.

"It's Valentine's Day?" Hermione asked, sounding surprised. Before Harry had to answer, Hedwig soared into the Hall, the snowy owl forever noticeable amongst the greys, tawnies and barn owls. Even Draco's sleek eagle owl had nothing on his beautiful girl.

She was carrying two wrapped parcels and Harry got a very bad feeling in his stomach when she landed in front of them, proudly preening her glossy feathers. Harry hastily grabbed several miniature sausages for her, placing them on a napkin for her to consume at her leisure (as was her right) while Hermione untied the parcels from her.

"There's a note," she told him, lifting a crisp white square of paper that had been folded neatly in half.

"From Tom?" He guessed. Hermione unfolded it, revealing red ink bleeding across the white in a familiar calligraphy.

"Tom," she confirmed, holding the note so they could both read it.

Tom's Valentine's message was simple and slightly horrifying, a twisted parody of romantic: *Harry and Hermione~ I'd kill to be with you.*

"I think it's supposed to be ironic?" Harry suggested, without much hope.

"I'm pretty sure it's just honest." Hermione said, wry and amused. Seemingly prompted by the sound of their voices, more letters inked their way across the bottom of the page, as if written by an invisible hand. "If you're confused, ask Harry for clarification," Hermione read aloud and Harry groaned, dropping his head into his hands.

"You better open it before the others get here— and don't let anyone else see what's inside." He mumbled.

He lifted his head as Hermione vanished the brown paper, revealing two sleek, black wooden boxes with silver hinges. She opened the first and sucked in a surprised breath.

Harry wished he could say he was surprised by the contents, but by this point he'd resigned himself to it.

The flogger was elegant looking, at least; the deerskin tails were a deep crimson color, soft and supple-looking with a braided black leather-hide handle. Nestled on snow-pale velvet with scattered white rose petals, the whip actually looked almost romantic. Snapping the lid closed before anyone else could see the contents, Hermione opened the second box. This time the velvet was a deep red colour and the set of cuffs resting on it had black leather straps with silver plating and were lined with pure-white fur.

"I believe Tom mentioned clarification," Hermione said dryly as she snapped the lid of the second box shut too. Harry groaned again, head falling back to his hands.

"I made the mistake of mentioning the upcoming Valentine's Day to Tom," he explained, voice
muffled. "The tosser started going on about the Ancient Romans and some feast they used to have before all the Christianisation happened, where animals were sacrificed and skinned and people were beaten with the hides."

"The Feast of Lupercalia?" Hermione asked in surprised realisation. "The old Roman festival of fertility and unbridled carnal copulation?"

"That would be the one." Harry confirmed. "And you know about it because...?"

"Because after 'Uncle Thaddeus' had his Bill passed in the Wizengamot about the traditional Wizarding versions of holidays being celebrated at Hogwarts, I investigated all the muggle holidays to find their magical equivalent," Hermione explained. "Valentines Day, unlike Easter or Christmas, doesn't actually have a traditional counterpart, though the Feast of Lupercalia can be considered its pagan roots. Hogwarts doesn't usually do anything special to celebrate it, barring of course Lockhart's spectacular disaster, but I'm not surprised that this year Dumbledickhead decided to passive-aggressively decorate the castle to celebrate the muggle holiday. I think I'll write to Vo-- 'Uncle Thaddeus' about this, see if he can't prevent it happening again next year."

"Well," Harry said, feeling nervous all over again, "I wasn't really sure if you were expecting me to do anything or not, so... er, well, I sort of got you something."

"You did?" Hermione asked, sounding surprised.

"Blaise helped," Harry mumbled, pulling the present wrapped in silver with a pale pink ribbon from his robes, where he'd pocketed it while dressing that morning.

Still looking surprised, Hermione accepted the present. She took the time to actually unwrap it instead of vanishing the paper and ribbon, uncovering the simple wooden box, a dark honey colour and not quite as fancy as the sleek ones Tom's gifts had come in but still pretty enough.

Opening it, she let out a quiet sound of surprise. "Oh! They're beautiful, Harry!"

The ornamental hairpins the Black Widow had bought were indeed beautiful-- beautiful and deadly.

The heads of the pins were pretty, green stones bracketed in floral silvery filigree nests and Elizabethan heart embossed silver beads, but those pretty green stones and heart-shaped beads also happened to be hollow-- as were the pins themselves, all of which ended in a razor-sharp, hollow tips. The beads were designed so they could be filled with a poison of choice and twisting them widdershins would release the poison into the body of the pin, and down to the exit point-- the hollow tip that was easily sharp enough to stab through any material and skin like a knife through butter.

Explaining that to Hermione had her eyes light up in actual delight. Adrienne Zabini was terrifying and deadly and apparently she had far too much in common with Hermione.

At least Hermione liked her present.

"Harry!" She exclaimed, visibly thrilled. "There are so many things these could be used for!" She sounded far too gleeful and Harry smiled weakly. His smile stopped when she dropped her voice to whisper, "I think Tom still has some dimethyl mercury-- I'll ask him to send some in, disguised as perfume or something. And Veritaserum! Veritaserum would be so useful... maybe Draught of Living Death? For if we need to stun someone but don't want them to be enervated by the first person with a wand who comes along..."
As Hermione continued planned quietly, Harry considered if he'd just made a huge mistake. Then he sighed, shrugged and decided to just go with it– he had more to worry about than how terrifying Hermione's brain was.

After all, the Second Task was just over a week away now.

The professors seemed determined to ignore the holiday of love that had once an ancient Roman ritual. Harry was horrified to receive several anonymous gifts throughout the day, mostly of chocolate (which Blaise, Theo, Draco, Vince and Greg had all happily appropriated once they'd checked they weren't laced with love potions) but there were no gnomes dressed as cupid trying to deliver him poetry, at least.

The decorations in the Great Hall were gone by dinner, but when Hermione joined him for training in the Room of Requirement, he got the feeling that the holiday wasn't over yet. Actually, he was actually more surprised that the room wasn't some sort of sex dungeon when they walked in to meet Tom, instead it was a mirror image of the living room from their wing in Riddle Manor.

Tom looked as striking as ever, his eyes red and his smile sly on his sharp, lovely face as he sauntered over to them, the prowling gait of a predator. Harry felt the hairs on the back of his neck prickle and wasn't sure if his speeding pulse was due to nerves or excitement. "Hermione thought that you deserved the night off training, you were so thoughtful with your gift," the older boy practically purred, his voice as heated as the look in his eyes. "And I quite agreed with her." Harry looked at Tom suspiciously.

"What's the catch, though?" He asked warily, because he was a Slytherin; he knew better then to not look a gift horse in the mouth. Tom made a mock-disapproving noise, shaking his head.

"And here I thought a night of fucking your significant others would be something to anticipate, not dread." He said dryly. Harry blushed and Hermione whacked Tom's shoulder half-heartedly.

"Tom!" She scolded. "Don't be so crass!" Tom rolled his eyes at the rather hypocritical statement coming from her, giving her a sharp push back in retaliation. The Room of Requirement materialised a bed behind them for her to fall on and Hermione hit the mattress with an amused sound, a murmured word from her own lips vanishing her robes. "Come on, Harry," she urged and Harry, almost like he was being pulled by strings (or pushed by Tom's hands on his shoulders, to be exact), stumbled forwards, onto the mattress.

Hermione reached up, grasping onto his robes and pulling him down, twisting them so she was straddling him; naked and beautiful and glorious, she grinned down at him and he gripped her hips as she leaned down so they could kiss.

In this moment, Hermione kissed with her everything; body and heart and soul, and Harry returned her sweet passion with his own, barely noticing his robes disappear. Hermione broke apart, moving off him and up to the top of the newly created bed, turning she was sitting on the pillows there, leaning back against the headboard. Harry knew without having to ask what she wanted. He moved up so he was on his knees between her spread legs, kissing her for a long, long moment before shuffling backwards as he kissed down her body, pausing briefly to nip at her breasts the way she liked, to press his teeth against the softness of her naval, before dragging them over her hip and burying his face between her legs.

Sex felt good, but Harry never really felt the need to be the one to seek it out– he left that for Hermione and Tom, who seemed to get something from it that he didn't. This, though– this he
loved doing. The rich scent and taste, the quiver and clench of thighs over his shoulders, pressed to his head, the feel of the give and pressure of it all against his lips and teeth and tongue, all as he figured out what felt good by listening to the way Hermione and Tom sounded, to feeling how their muscles clenched, how their bodies moved under his touch.

The mattress dipped and shifted as Tom joined them on the bed, his long fingers tracing along the curve of Harry's spine before the sounds of Hermione's whimpers abruptly muffled, he presumed as Tom pressed his lips to hers.

"I– I think you should fuck Harry," Hermione panted after a minute or two of muffled sounds and Harry felt a hot frisson of want shiver down his spine at her words. Hermione moaned again, her thighs clenching. "Ooh, yes, he likes that, Tom– yes, yes–" Harry groaned as Hermione's hands fastened in his hair, tangling and gripping hard enough to send sharp flicks of pain across his spine.

"Is that what you want, Harry?" Tom hissed against his ear, his tongue tracing the curve. Mouth busy, Harry lifted one of his hands from Hermione's thighs to give a shaky thumbs up. Tom actually laughed, leaning down to nip the digit before moving back behind him.

Tom murmured the spell that cleaned him inside, then as he pushed two slick, slender fingers inside Harry couldn't help but jerk, his teeth accidentally digging into Hermione far more violently then he'd ever do purposefully. That just made Hermione twist and cry out as she came, her body curving forwards, her hands in his hair holding his head firmly in place before she slumped back, hands releasing him, one falling to the mattress while the other idly ran through his hair.

Harry panted for a moment, his concentration on what Tom was doing with his fingers and rocking back into it. He glanced up at Hermione who was looking back at him, her eyes half closed with pleasure, her smile lazy and sated. He pressed his lips briefly to the point his teeth had dug in before resuming his previous task, taking more care this time, which wasn't quite as easy as it sounded with Tom's fingers practically making him see stars.

He was so on edge, hot need clouding his head and senses, that when Tom finally gripped his hips and pushed in, he was already coming undone. Tom fucked him through it, through Hermione coming again and pulling away only so she could pull him up onto his elbows and kiss him, reaching underneath to stroke him back to hardness through his choked off moans that bled into sobs and then to harsh pants, clinging desperately to her arms while she held him up.

Tom reached his own finish, gripping hard enough to bruise as he did so, and as soon as he pulled out Harry sprawled across Hermione's stomach, slumped and boneless. Tom stroked his back as Harry trembled, his strong hands turning Harry around. Harry tensed and tried to roll away when Tom reached down where he was sensitive and aching but Hermione held him in place as Tom gripped onto him, jerking roughly. Harry gave in to it, gave in to Hermione's teeth on the nape of his neck and Tom's hand hard and tight around him.

He turned his head, pressing his face against the mattress as he came again. It hurt, it did, but gods, it was good. Hermione's fingers stroked through his hair, her hands only trembling slightly as she sucked in deep breaths. Harry made a bleary sort of sound and Tom chuckled quietly.

"Perhaps we should rest here for the night," he suggested. "I'm not sure Harry can move."

"Arse," Harry muttered and Tom laughed again.

"Happy Valentines Day, Harry." He teased. "Though next year, we're celebrating like the Romans." He added. Harry wasn't sure whether it was a warning or a promise.
And it was probably just the mess of endorphins in his head, but at that moment he wasn't sure he cared either.

Fleur's POV:

La fête de Saint Valentin had never been an overly important day to celebrate in Fleur's family. She hadn't been expecting it to be any different in Britain, had barely even taken note of the date, in fact, other then as a way to measure just how many days left until the Second Task (only ten).

As such, it had been a surprise when her darling owl, Aurèle, had flown through the window of her room in the Carriage proudly carrying a bouquet of flowers. It was a small bouquet in shades of purple, white and green; violets and heather were interwoven with the delicate white lime blossoms, sprigs of coriander flowers and elegant lily of the valley, the blooms all arranged with a frothy asparagus foliage.

Fleur studied it carefully, identifying the plants used and translating their meanings; the asparagus foliage was for fascination, the purple heather symbolised beauty and admiration, the lily of the valley was trust and the purple violets for love between two women. Amusingly, the lime blossoms and the flowering coriander springs were for fornication and lust respectively– a lovely, if unusual, bouquet but certainly one she could never show her maman, grand-mère or Gabrielle, despite the surprising sweetness of her lover's gesture.

There was a card attached to the bouquet and Fleur smiled softly as she read the message Tonks had left—J'aimerais être une de tes larmes pour naître dans tes yeux, vivre sur tes joues et mourir sur tes lèvres.

(I'd like to be one of your tears to be born in your eyes, live on your cheeks and die on your lips).

On the back, Tonks had added 'Tu veux sortir avec moi? 7?' to which Fleur's enthusiastic reply, sent off with Aurèle, had been that yes, she would like to go out with Tonks at seven that evening.

She hadn't been expecting any romance from Tonks; they'd had a number of liaisons over the term, each which had been varying degrees of 'kinky', to say the least. Tonks was... an unusual woman of very particular tastes. Fleur's horizons had been broadened dramatically over the past weeks, much further then she'd have ever anticipated.

And she wasn't afraid to admit that Tonks made her nervous. There was something fundamentally wrong with the woman, something inside her head that worked differently from most people. But
while it did make her nervous, Fleur didn’t judge Tonks for it and had subsequently not attempted to hold the older witch’s behaviour to normal societal standards. Which meant she really hadn’t been expecting any sort of romance.

She and Tonks had come to an easy, comfortable understanding where neither of them felt the need to fake who they were to each other. Fleur was unashamedly and unapologetically not entirely human, freely allowing her nails sharpen to claws as they fucked and using her Allure to increase the intensity of the sex. And Tonks didn’t constantly pretend to smile and laugh and joke or act like she wasn’t far more into causing Fleur pain then making either of them come; sex always second to the sadism the older witch enjoyed (though that wasn’t to say Tonks didn’t enjoy sex, because she most certainly did– she just really, really enjoyed pain).

‘Romance’ didn't fit into the 'relationship' they’d created together. Even the flowers were a surprise, though Fleur knew that Tonks appreciated the uncommon ability they both had to understand Victorian flower language.

Fleur asked Hermione, during lunch, if she had any inkling as to why Tonks would change the routine they’d worked out together. Hermione had informed her that her psychopathic lover had sent her (and Harry) handcuffs and a whip as Valentines Day gifts in what he no doubt thought was a romantic gesture. "In other words, not even Merlin knows how their minds work," Hermione had concluded, sympathetically. "Don't try to figure it out, you'll just give yourself a headache."

It was, Fleur decided, probably the best advice she was going to get.

She’d existed in a state of nervousness the entire day, anxiously waiting for evening to arrive. Tonks hadn’t given any details about what she had planned for their date, but Fleur assumed sex would be involved and dressed accordingly.

By the time seven o’clock had arrived, the sun had dipped below the horizon and the sky had been reduced to a dazzling blanket of stars. The moon was barely a sliver, the crescent finer then the delicate pins holding Fleur's carefully styled hair in place.

She’d decided to wait outside the Beauxbatons Carriage, having convinced one of her classmates, Gervase Sinclair– the boys had always been easier to deal with then the girls– to inform Madam Maxime she was ill and resting in her room if the headmistress came looking for her. Fleur doubted she would– Maxime had been occupied enough in her conversation with the Hogwarts groundskeeper during dinner that Fleur suspected her headmistress would be quite engaged herself that evening.

She felt Tonks approach before she saw her; the older witch’s shallow, artificial emotions were distinctive enough that it made Tonks herself distinctive to Fleur's empathetic senses. She let Tonks approach her from behind, not fighting as the witch immediately pulled her into a rough kiss. Tonks bit her bottom lip sharply before coaxing her mouth open with her tongue and surprised Fleur by pushing something in it.

The unexpectedness of it had her bite down and the cherry split under her teeth, sweet juices filling her mouth. Tonks pulled away, stepping back slightly as Fleur rolled the split cherry on her tongue, confused, before finishing it and plucking the pip from between her teeth, vanishing it with a neat bit of magic.

Tonks was smiling at her, sharp and hungry-eyed. Cherry juice had left red smudges on the witch's lips and stained her teeth. "I've got snacks, wine and more of those cherries– feel like having a picnic?" She asked in lieu of any sort of greeting– or maybe the kiss had been the greeting?
Wine was probably not the best idea as Tonks was undeniably dangerous, and if she was smart, which Fleur knew she was, she would definitely stay sober while dealing with the older witch. But honestly, wine sounded really good– and so did the cherries, actually– so Fleur just smiled back. She could still taste the fruit in her mouth and wondered if her teeth were stained too. The idea was strangely arousing. Tonks's smile widened, almost as if she was reading Fleur's thoughts– or possibly her face was being a lot more expressive then she usually allowed it– and Fleur hastily nodded.

"Yes," she said, breathless.

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**Tonks's POV:**

Tonks liked to wear her hair in bright, bold colours because people remembered them. They remembered violent violet, bubblegum pink, sunny gold, lime green and crimson red. It meant when she went plain and brown, eyes slid right over her; it was the best disguise out there, the knowledge that to be invisible all she really needed to do was be unapologetically visible until she wasn't.

For her 'date' with Fleur, Tonks had decided to 'dress for the occasion'. She'd picked out a cobalt blue slip dress with a decorative pink flowered pattern that matched her lipstick, her hair was a deep, eye-catching crimson and her eyes were their natural pale grey, a shade that looked almost violet in the right light, the unusual colouring a result of her Black family genes and occasional use of Dark magic.

Fleur seemed to have had a similar idea about dressing up because she looked breathtaking; the frosty white of her robes draped over her willowy figure like a layer of snow on marble and the moonlight that hit her face turned her skin pale as the dead (*such a beautiful horror, and just for her*). Looking at her, so utterly fair and painfully perfect, Tonks wanted to see her lover soaked with red, could practically taste the hot iron of it on her tongue.

She'd been so fucking desperate for it lately; the cravings were stronger and darker then they'd been for over a year. They gnawed at the back of her mind like an itch she couldn't scratch, deep and irritating and persistent, the unsettling restlessness within her a constant reminder of what she craved, the need of it leaving her unfulfilled and afraid of being driven (closer) to the brink of insanity with her inability to find relief.

Blood-lust raged through her, filled every inch of her body with the compulsive need for turning her pretty blades wet and slick with life-liquid until she could think of nothing else but thick, hot blood covering her shaking hands and the euphoric feel of relief that rushed through her as she watched the sweet nectar of mortality spill. There was no other substance or symbol more potent than blood; nothing more intrinsically bound up in the sinewy cockles of humankind's collective unconscious and Tonks wanted; oh, she so desperately, desperately wanted.

She'd set up a picnic in the Forbidden Forest, because that's what the students had always dared each other to do back during her Hogwarts years and all the time she was spending at the castle over the past few weeks was making her surprisingly nostalgic.

The wine was good. The cheese and crackers were acceptable, as were the tartlets, and the little sandwiches surprisingly delicious (Hogwarts house elves did good work). Fleur had easily accepted Tonks feeding her cherries through kisses, not questioning it despite her clear confusion as to why.
The part-Veela was easy-going like that. It did terrible things to Tonks's self-control; it made her desperately want to push the younger witch to her limits, just to see how far the part-Veela would let her go. It was a hungry desire that grew with each sweet, breathless whimpered 'yes' and 'oui', with each gracious surrender and gift of submission, each glimpse of that beautiful trust that Tonks wasn't sure she deserved, nor did she know when exactly she'd earned it, but made her want to not break it.

Her mother had taught Tonks good manners, after all, and being careless with gifts was the very lowest of manners.

"Zese are délicieux," Fleur declared, licking her lips to catch a bit of juice that had escaped. Tonks smiled at her, hungry and wanting.

"They can get even better," she offered. Fleur looked startled then contemplative (always so good, her lovely little French doll, always saying yes).

"Oui," she said after a pause, a small, curious smile forming on her face. Tonks's own smile widened and she reached over to tug them both to their feet then reached for the laces that tied Fleur's robes.

As she slid the pale material off Fleur, she was delighted to see the part-Veela was wearing only stockings and a chemise underneath. Barely reaching the tops of her thighs, the skirt of the chemise was made of ruffled, transparent white silk with delicate lace trim adorning the hem. An equally white satin ribbon wrapped around the slender curve of her ribs, tied in a delicate bow. The sweetheart neckline barely covered her full breasts, the pale pink blush of her nipples noticeable under the nearly transparent lace. Visible under the skirt were a pair of glossy underwear, decorated with another delicate satin bow (like the most precious of gifts and Tonks wanted to devour her sweet, sweet present).

Tonks picked a cherry, brought it to her mouth and held it there, careful not to bite as she knelt down in front of Fleur, reaching to grab the French witch's hands and move them to her shoulders so Fleur could brace herself. Tugging those satin-silk knickers with that delightful bow down Fleur's mile-long legs was enough to make Tonks want to just push Fleur down and fuck her rough and dirty on the forest floor, but there was no need to rush things. She helped Fleur step out of the underwear, not wanting to ruin them, then coaxed Fleur's legs apart wide enough that it was easy to nuzzle into her, gripping onto a slender thigh with each hand, keeping them firmly open.

She grinned as she rolled the fruit in her mouth before moving her hands high enough on Fleur's thighs that she could use her thumbs to open the younger woman up enough that it was easy to use her tongue to push the cherry inside her. Fleur must have guessed where Tonks had been going with it all, but the loud gasp and the way her fingers tightened almost-painfully over Tonks's shoulders indicated she was still plenty shocked.

Tonks ignored that, though, concentrating instead on slowly but insistently pushing the cherry into her lover and listening to her moan, feeling her twitch and jerk. She repeated the process four more times as she leisurely ate Fleur out in between until the poor thing was panting and moaning against her, thighs trembling and hands clenching every time Tonks added a cherry or pushed her tongue in deep. She'd already come once, between the second and third cherry, and glancing up, Tonks was delighted to see the sparkling blue pools of Fleur's perfect eyes had transformed to dark oceans flooded with desire.

Getting the cherries out was just as much fun as putting them in. Casually pushing two fingers deep inside her lover, Tonks was able to tease Fleur to a second then a third orgasm as she located and tugged out the fruit, adding first a third and then a fourth finger inside Fleur as she did so, until she
had five warm cherries, three intact and two busted, the latter staining Tonks's fingers and the skirt of her dress with their dark juices. They were still delicious, as promised earlier, and she pulled her exhausted, weak-kneed lover down onto the picnic blanket to let her sit and rest while she bit each cherry in half and shared the spoils of her labour with the younger witch.

But Tonks hadn't come yet and she was aroused and restless and as soon as the last cherry and been split and devoured, she poured them both another glass of wine which she quickly drained, waiting for the flushed Fleur to do the same before asking, "Want to move this to a bedroom?"

Fleur seemed only too happy to agree. "Mine eez closest," she suggested and Tonks certainly had no problem with that.

Sneaking into the Beauxbatons' carriage was easy and although the bedrooms already had silencing charms applied, Tonks took a moment to cast several of her own as well as a tricky door-locking spell and a ward that would warn her of anyone approaching with the intention of either knocking or entering the room. She didn't have any specific plans for them but she knew herself, knew the restlessness that went deeper then her bones, and she could acknowledge that it wasn't going to be a gentle, calm sort of night.

Fleur had already come three times recently, but multiple orgasms were a blessing to their gender that should never be wasted (she'd certainly heard Charlie bitch about it enough) and Tonks gleefully pushed Fleur down on the bed and moved between her legs again, drawing teeth over the younger woman's hip and then burying her face between her legs once more. Fleur threw a leg over her shoulder and ground down onto her face. Tonks moaned in response and pressed two fingers up inside of Fleur, causing her to immediately twist and come with a shout.

"N-No more!" Fleur pleaded, her trembling hands weakly trying to push Tonks's head away. Tonks pouted playfully but backed off. Instead, she took in the sight of the lovely creature on her (well, on Fleur's) bed.

"I want to stain you red," she breathed, dragging her teeth over the creamy flesh stretched out before her, admiring the pink lines left but wanting more. "I want to soak you in it, want to make you cry–"

"Oui, oui," Fleur moaned, tears already sparkling in the corners of her pretty eyes, "yes, I want you, fais-le, je te fais confiance–" Tonks licked up all traces of the salt, adoring the way Fleur slipped back to her native tongue, before pressing their lips together, almost laughing as Fleur practically purred in response, tilting her head back to automatically deepen the kiss. She could taste the wine on the younger woman's tongue.

Trailing her lips from Fleur's delectable mouth back down her body, she kissed and sucked down her clavicle, her sternum, stopping to bite at the undersides of her breasts.

"Will you let me?" She breathed, digging her teeth into the creamy flesh just to hear the whimpers of pain. "Will you let me, pretty girl?"

"Oui– yes, yes," Fleur whimpered and Tonks grinned, claiming the French girl's mouth again in a savage kiss before pushing up to a crouch.

Fleur looked perfect, pink-faced and tear stained, sparkling eyes fogged with pleasure and wine. "Choose a safe word," she told her, because she was already dizzy with want and she didn't want to accidentally damage her lover more then what could be fixed.

"Camellias." Fleur said, after a brief moment. Tonks couldn't help her delighted laugh; in flower
language, camellias represented the message 'my life/destiny is in your hands'. It was oddly fitting and undeniably clever, evidence to the sharpness in Fleur's eyes under the fog of the wine and the coy slyness in her poison-sweet smile.

Tonks watched, hungrily, as the French witch shifted around on the bed, pushing herself to the middle of the mattress. She rested her arms at her sides, hands palm up, exposing the blue river lines of her veins. Her tender, pale stomach was exposed; her head was tilted back, showing her throat. It was a sacred trinity of vulnerability, all of which silently declared that Fleur trusted her, trusted the predator she called lover. Blood beat so hard and hot beneath those defenceless, delicate offerings, her skin thin and so, so fragile and Tonks's teeth sharp and so, so hungry, yet Fleur was blatantly giving the message that she wasn't afraid. She was merely waiting.

Tonks was only too happy to take her up on the offering of tender flesh laid out so temptingly before her.

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Fleur's POV:

***warning***

Fleur held herself still as death as Tonks conjured a dagger and pressed it just below her collarbone. The hilt glittered, the un tarnished gold and silvery iron almost luminous under the glow of the moon. There was something wild, feral and undeniably dangerous in the older witch's eyes. Tonks currently had deep red hair, the colour of 'romance' she'd playfully joked, but Fleur rather thought that the crimson falling over the opaque paleness of her skin and framing her icy violet eyes more resembled slashes of blood.

It was on the edge of her tongue to call for Tonks to stop; the older witch had traced stinging red lines into her flesh before with that same blade, but those had been light and shallow, barely deeper then the scratches left by her fingernails. It would be different this time, she could already tell by the distant, yet contradictorily hyper-focused look in her lover's eyes, carved deep as they were with shadows, equal parts sleepless nights and a darkness that Fleur would never be able to truly comprehend.

And perhaps the biggest warning of all? Tonks hadn't ever told her to pick a safe word before. Last time they'd used the dagger, the older witch had been in complete control; confident and precise, even in her lust. She'd never pushed further then Fleur could take, shockingly good at reading her moods by her expression alone. Tonks wasn't even looking at her now.

Fleur kept her mouth closed, though, clenching her teeth and ordering herself to remain still as the dagger bit in. The pain took a second to catch up to the cutting of her skin, but when it did, it hurt. It burned and throbbed sharply as her skin grew wet with blood. Tonks moaned as she pressed down with the dagger again, carving another gash into Fleur's skin. It was deeper this time and Fleur could barely keep from twitching, her hands frantically fisting the slippery silk sheets beneath her as the pain burned through her.

Tonks barely gave her time to gather herself before she was cutting her again, a third time, and through a sheen of tears Fleur pinned her eyes to the slight shine of the blade. She could smell her own blood now and Tonks's face as she started the fourth cut was just shy of blank, no fake mask in place; nothing in place, just a gleam in those violet-ice eyes.
The cuts were short but deep and blood was running down her side and up towards her neck, little trails of hot stickiness.

"Merde– merde–" she choked, wheezing, as Tonks sliced into her skin again. The side of her chest was on fire now, wet and burning, but there was an unexpected heat building up between her trembling, twitching thighs.

And then Tonks moved the blade to the opposite side of her chest, trailed the point along the blank canvas over her ribs, leaving a smudged trail of red behind, and Fleur started sobbing, unable to help it as Tonks began a second row of weeping cuts. Tonks lowered her head to press a hungry kiss to each of the dripping cuts and then licked into them, running her tongue through the deep gashes. Fleur's hands automatically moved to the back of her head, gripping her long red hair, unsure if it was to push her aware or hold her in close.

She then arched up against Tonks with her whole body, crying out sharply as the older witch bit over the cuts then sucked at them. The pain was white-hot, almost blinding, but she still ground her hips against her lover, chasing the build up of tangled pleasure-pain-hunger-want in her abdomen. She tangled her hands in deep crimson tresses that spilled like blood over her fingers and tried not to scream.

Tonks pulled back, moving her head up to press a wet, metallic kiss to her open, panting mouth and sliding her tongue inside. When she moved back again, Fleur didn't even try to muffle her wretched-sounding sobbing. The cuts were burning lines of pain-fire-pain on her torso and she could barely concentrate, having long since crossed the invisible line that existed during sex that dropped her into a haze, sinking into whatever was happening to her.

Even as Tonks dug her nails into the cuts on the left side, raking them down at an angle while still applying that heavy pressure, Fleur could only respond by screaming and bucking her hips, wildly thrashing in place. Her mouth tasted like blood and at some point she hadn't even noticed, Tonks had used magic to tie her down. With the amount of writhing and twisting she was doing, it was probably a good idea.

Fleur shook her head, trying to clear it, but she couldn't find the words, could barely even process anything aside from the way everything hurt and she was shaking and crying and she desperately wanted, but she wasn't sure what. The tremors ran up and down her body, shaking her apart and making her teeth rattle in her skull as Tonks made her fall to pieces.

The wash of heat, want and agony entwined together like lovers, made breathing difficult as Tonks cut away and Fleur just lost herself in it, in the rhythm of the older witch's movements. There was a ceaseless eternity in the way Tonks hurt her, each incision causing more blood to spill in rivulets over her skin. The wet ache between her thighs had been reduced to little more than an afterthought as her nerves light up and each thump of her heart was a beat of pleasure, a sick throb in her abdomen and inching along her spine with prickling white heat.

She whimpered and pressed her thighs tightly together, felt the way they trembled and she moaned. The pain was consuming her and she gladly, gratefully fell into it, darkness rising up from behind her eyelids to drown her alive.

When she came to again, it was to Tonks's mouth pressed between her thighs and she helplessly rode her swelling arousal to its completion. Tonks brought her off almost embarrassingly fast; Fleur's skin was fever-hot and clenching tight, the air was too close and too warm, and Tonks' hair seemed to run down her face and down her pale shoulders and the arch of her back like wet blood.

***(scene over)***
After, Fleur blinked blearily looked down at herself to see no open wounds, only pale silver lines running down her flanks that were almost unnoticeable against her creamy skin, starting just below her collarbone and ending halfway down her rib cage. She wasn't sure if she'd regained consciousness at some point or if Tonks had just continued cutting her up while she was passed out, but she didn't really care either way.

The bed sheets were beyond ruined, soaked with an almost alarming amount of red. "I gave you a blood-replenishing potion when I healed you up," Tonks informed her and Fleur nodded weakly, reaching up with a trembling hand to run fingers through Tonks's hair, now a bright bubblegum pink. "You're so perfect," Tonks whispered, catching her hand as she let it drop and pressing a soft kiss to each of her fingertips. "So, so perfect– I'm never going to let you go, my pretty doll."

Fleur let out a small hum, not seeing any problem with that. Tonks laughed softly and shifted so she could lay down behind her, pulling Fleur into the curve of her body and pressing her lips against the soft skin of her neck. "You're so gone right now, love. It's so pretty– you're so pretty. Sleep, lovely thing– sleep and dream sweet things."

When she woke, she was alone but draped across the pillow beside her where Tonks had been laying were several beautiful elongated ropes of deep purple-red flower blooms, all long and drooping, the pendulous flowers almost dripping from the stems. Scattered across them were a several hydrangeas the same reddish-purple colour.

Fleur couldn't help her smile as she looked down at them. The message of the hydrangeas were as obvious as they were touching– heartfelt gratitude for being understood. The other, more startling flowers were *amaranthus caudatus*. Their meaning in flower language was hopeless love or hopelessness, but Fleur had a feeling that Tonks hadn't chosen them for that– rather, for the name they were widely known by; Love-Lies-Bleeding.

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**Chapter End Notes**

A/N: Due to the length, I decided to split Valentines Day and the Second Task into two chapters but I've uploaded them both so enjoy!

~Cheshire Carroll
CHAPTER LXIII:

Hermione's POV:

Just as it had before she'd had to watch Harry face off against a fucking *dragon*, time before the Second Task was slipping away as though somebody had bewitched the clocks to go extra-fast. There was a week to go before February the twenty-fourth... then there were five days to go... three days to go...

Hermione started to go off food again, not unlike before the First Task, and she couldn't even remember the last time she'd slept properly– possibly Valentines Day. She felt helpless and she *hated* feeling helpless. It made her irritable and short-tempered and Gryffindors in particular quickly learned to stay the fuck out of her way. Hagrid's choice to continue Grubbly-Plank's lessons with unicorns wasn't helping either, with the pure gold foals flinching away from her.

With two days left before the Task, Barty arranged a quick meeting in the Room of Requirement where he shared the entirely unwelcome news that the Champions' "*sorely missed*" items had been selected– except they weren't so much 'items' as they were people; the Champions' Yule Ball dates, to be precise.

Hermione would admit that she did not take the revelation well.

"No." She said sharply, like a wolf snapping its teeth together in warning as Barty nervously explained the plan to tie her up in a bewitched sleep at the bottom of the Black Lake.

"Dumbledore assured the Ministry that it would all be perfectly safe," Barty offered weakly and she scoffed.

"And Dumbledore is a *bit* of an incompetent liar, the way that the Black Lake is a *bit* wet!" She spat. "No. I refuse." Tom, who had been spending every evening at Hogwarts from around 5pm onwards since the end of the holidays, spoke up sharply then.

"All of you, get out. Hermione and I need to talk." He ordered. Harry and Barty both hastily fled and Hermione crossed her arms as she glowered at Tom. She felt twitchy and agitated; she wanted to fight, or fuck, or curse something– anything to stop feeling like she was going to twitch out of her skin.

"You need some stress relief." Tom told her bluntly once Harry and Barty were gone. Hermione narrowed her eyes at him.

"No offense, Tom, but if you're suggesting some sort of scene right now, I can very confidently tell you that right now that is the absolute last thing I feel like," she warned.

"Of course not." Tom said, dismissive. "Right now you feel helpless and it's driven your control issues to even greater heights then usual. I happen to have a solution."
"A solution?" Hermione didn't bother to keep her skepticism from her voice.

"Yes, a solution." Tom said calmly. "I believe I made you a certain promise, after my egregious error of judgment before the beginning of the first term."

"You mean when you dumped us." Hermione corrected, her dark mood not willing to cut Tom any slack. Tom pulled a face.

"Yes, yes, that," he said sourly. "Let's not linger on it, though. The promise I made– I believe it went something alone the lines of owed cunnilingus, cross-dressing and the sexual practice known as 'pegging'."

"You... have my attention," Hermione said slowly and Tom smirked.

"I thought I might." He said, smug. "I have a one time only offer."

Hermione listened. And she liked.

Time and experimentation had showed them that the Room of Requirement really did provide whatever its occupants 'required'– including all the sex-toys Hermione could have ever dreamed up. Finding a strap-on appropriate for the situation was easy.

While she worked out how to fit the harness to herself, Tom stripped off and stretched out across the newly-appeared bed. He really did have a gorgeous body, Hermione mused as she took in the sight of him stretched out across the silk sheets. Broad shoulders, muscled stomach, narrow waist, firm hips and strong thighs, not to mention his striking face with its blatantly aristocratic features, unusually coloured eyes and his flawless, fair skin.

"Are you going to just stare, or are we going to do this?" Tom drawled, haughty and arrogant and fully aware of just how handsome he was. The superior smirk on his lean, sharp face was just shy of cruel, all wicked amusement and red eyes simmering with heat. Hermione refused to be embarrassed and instead smirked down at him.

"That eager to get started?" She teased, knowing just how much he wasn't. She already knew that Tom meant what he'd said before, that there would be no exceptions; this would be a one-off occurrence, something Tom had accepted to experience a single time in order to demonstrate his remorse– though honestly, by now she'd actually forgotten what she'd made him promise her, them, in repayment for dumping her and Harry... for about thirty-six hours.

He'd already prepped himself, and Hermione found herself more disappointed then she'd have expected to have missed what she assumed would have been quite the show. Annoyingly, Tom lost almost none of his composure as she pushed into him, his nostrils just flaring as he breathed hard. If there was ever someone who deserved to have that stupid smug look fucked off their too-pretty face, she thought rather uncharitably, it was definitely Tom. She certainly gave it her best effort, biting kisses over his back and shoulders as she thrust into him, awkward at first and then steadier as she found a rhythm. She knew she'd found the right angle when a gasp escaped his mouth, eyes shutting as he tipped his head back and arched into her.

Biting back a grin, she repeated the motion. Tom glared at her, teeth gritted and hands clenched, unable to prevent a deep, harsh breath just shy of a groan escaping with each thrust. As he fought to keep in control and keep his composure, each little slip sent a shiver running down her spine, made soft sounds escape her.

"Don't get too smug," Tom warned through clenched teeth. Hermione braced her hands on his
shoulders, pressing him down against the mattress beneath them and smirked down at him.

"Oh? What are you going to do about it?" She teased and Tom practically snarled at her, his hands snapping out to grab her wrists, squeezing hard enough she could feel the bones grinding together. She laughed, breathless, and accused in the manner of the pot and kettle– "such a control freak!" Tom smirked back at her.

"Yes. But you'll have to do better then that." He taunted. "Come on, darling– you have to make me feel it."

Hermione surrendered him that control, allowing him provoke her as she knew he'd never be able to actually reach his finish if he continued on as unsettled and tense as he had been. He started to move with her then, let his face slacken with pleasure and his breath come sharp as short groans escape his throat without censor.

She freed one of her hands and wrapped it around him, timing her strokes and her hand to work to bring him off. It didn't take too long and he'd barely shuddered into his orgasm before he was pushing her back and flipping them around.

"You are such--" she started to say, unable to help the laughter bubbling from her lips, before he was savagely pressing his mouth to hers, owning it. He tasted like heat and fury and she moaned at the back of her throat as he took control of her mouth, biting her tongue and lips.

Tom slid his lips down her body, raking his teeth against her flesh, until he was pulling the harness off and lifting her legs over his shoulders. She was so wet she was practically dripping and he was rough as he pushed two fingers inside her then sucked, but it was perfect in the way Tom usually was, hitting all the best spots to send her straight over the edge. He didn't stop but she was too sensitive and had to push her hand against his face until he pulled away, smirking all the while.

"Arse," she grumbled, slapping his shoulder half-heartedly.

"I do have a good one," he agreed, smug as anything.

"Normally I'd reply something along the lines of 'fuck you', except I just did." She replied sweetly and he lost the smug smile.

"For the first and last time." He muttered and Hermione smiled, relaxing back on the bed.

"Mm," she hummed, not committing to his statement but knowing it was likely true. Still, that had been fun. If she couldn't convince Tom to do it again, she was sure Harry would go for it.

"You're going to stop being so ridiculously difficult now," Tom told her and she snorted softly.

"Oh I am, am I?"

"Yes, you are, because it's getting on everybody's last nerve," Tom said, voice unyielding, and Hermione grimaced but sighed and gave in to being Harry's "sorely missed" hostage, albeit ungracefully, unrepentantly and as irritated by it as a stray cat who was cornered in a rain-soaked alley.

When she was summoned to Dumbledore's office the following evening of February 23rd, she glared so heatedly at the messenger that they squeaked and actually backed away from her. She then turned to Harry, seizing his robes and yanking him over to her so their lips met.

'Kiss' didn't quite describe the almost-desperate way they pressed up against each other, clinging
like they'd never let go as their mouths moved together in something hard and messy and desperate. "Be safe." She ordered when they broke apart and Harry nodded.

"I promise." He told her, and she gave him one last, long look before turning and leaving.

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Harry's POV:

After Hermione left, Harry retreated to the Room of Requirement for a last bit of training, only Tom refused to let him, saying he should preserve his strength.

He had to then remind Tom that he would be wearing only a pair of swimming trunks the following morning so the older boy couldn't keep biting, scratching, sucking marks and pressing bruises into his skin like he was. Tom had laughed at him then bent him over a couch, pushed fingers barely wet with saliva into him and coaxed a hot, dry burn to crawl up Harry's spine that hurt so perfectly, little fireworks of pleasure-pain setting off along every nerve.

"Don't get yourself injured," Tom ordered, after, and Harry nodded.

"I won't."

"Bring her back safely."

"Yes, I promise."

"And don't you dare come last."

"Definitely not."

"Do not forget that you cannot panic in the Lake. Keeping calm is the first step to your victory, assessing the strength of the opposition you face being the second and delivering a crippling blow to said opposition the third and final."

"Sometimes you terrify me." He told Tom, who pulled a face in response.

"Only sometimes? I really am losing my touch. Maybe we should go fetch that Valentines gift."

"Again, Tom—*swimming trunks*. Seriously."

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The morning of the Second Task, the sky was a pitiless cold, pale blue. Harry woke up alone in his bed, something that rarely happened since he and Hermione had first kissed. He considered staying under his blankets until it was time for the Task but at half past eight Draco, Blaise and Theo insisted on dragging him down to the Great Hall for breakfast.

Tracey (Daphne, as Viktor's hostage, was noticeably absent which hadn't done much for his housemate's mood) had then practically force-fed him a plate of toast, narrowing her eyes and tapping her silver painted nails threateningly against her crossed arms whenever he lagged. The nails caught the morning light like a set of tiny little blades, just waiting for a taste of anyone stupid enough to cross her; Harry was a Slytherin, he had the self-preservation to know better then to do something so idiotic— even if that meant forcing his dry, uncooperative mouth to chew and swallow when his stomach was so violently churning.
At nine exactly, Snape met him at the table to escort him down to the Lake. The lads all punched his shoulder lightly in farewell and the Slytherin Quidditch team cheered out his name while Tracey and Luna, the little blonde having joined them at the Slytherin table, pressed kisses to his cheeks. Even Pansy gave a grudging ‘good luck, Harry’ as he passed her.

Harry and Snape made their way down to the Lake in silence, Snape looking tight-faced and grim. As they exited the castle, Harry saw that the seats that had encircled the dragons' enclosure in November were now ranged along the opposite bank, rising in stands that were already filling with people and reflected in the lake below. The excited babble of the crowd echoed strangely across the water as Harry and Snape made their way around the other side of the lake toward the judges, who were sitting at another gold-draped table at the water's edge. Diggory, Fleur, and Viktor were already waiting.

Once he'd confirmed his presence, the Champions were told they had twenty minutes to do what they liked so long as they didn't leave the general area. Harry gravitated across to Fleur, who smiled encouragingly at him.

"Nervous?" She asked and Harry gave a strained laugh.

"A bit, yeah," he admitted. Fleur glanced around to make sure no one was close enough to overhear before leaning forwards and saying, in a hushed voice,

"I must zank zee youg meester Crouch– Madame Maxime told me zat Dumbledore wanted to use my seester as my 'ostage instead of Neville. Barty told 'im zat 'e refused to put a part-veela child at zee bottom of a lake, and zat eet was bad enough I must compete in an environment zat goes against my nature."

"Barty's weird but he's a lot smarter then he looks," Harry said. "He just rarely uses his intelligence for, well, good instead of evil." Fleur laughed at that, the pealing sound of it musical. Despite her apparent good humor, Harry felt guilt crawl uncomfortably in his gut. "Fleur," he said, hesitantly, "I... do you really not mind that I'm cheating, or are you just not saying anything about it because of, you know, Tom?"

"Non, non!" Fleur assured him, with a soft smile and warm eyes. "Zis Tournament, eet means very leettle to me when compared to zee aid zat 'as been offered to my people– zee aid zat you are very responsibility for 'elping me get. And besides, you are underage, non? You are at a disadvantage– eet seems fair to me zat you seek measures to even out zee odds."

"If you're sure?" Harry said, doubtfully, and Fleur nodded firmly.

"Yes, I am." She declared.

"Wotcher, you two!" A cheerful, marginally recognisable voice greeted them. Harry startled slightly, turning to see a sort-of familiar witch approach. Trainee Tonks was wearing Auror robes that automatically made him feel uneasy and her hair was a brilliant gold. Her eyelashes were also long and gold and her eyelids painted a pale blue. The Beauxbatons’ colours, Harry realised suddenly, and had to bite back a smile.

"Tonks!" Fleur visibly lit up and Harry really couldn't help his smile then.

"Thought I'd come to wish my two favourite Champions good luck," Tonks told them cheerily. “Though don't tell anyone I said that– I'm supposed to be rooting for Cedric, House pride and all that.” She winked playfully.
"You were a Hufflepuff?" Harry asked, incredulously. "I thought Hufflepuffs were supposed to be nice!"

Tonks gasped dramatically, pressing both her hands to her chest. "Are you saying I'm not nice?" She asked, mock-aghast.

"You're really, really not," Harry told her, honestly. "I mean, you're funny and a terrific actress, but you're not nice." Tonks laughed.

"Fair enough," she agreed. "And believe it or not, 'nice' isn't actually one of the qualities officially associated with Hufflepuff– the Sorting Hat looks for those who are loyal, dedicated, patient and value hard-work and fair-play. I'm at least three of those things. Patience is a bit meh and while I'd prefer to stab someone in the throat then in the back, that's about as close to valuing fair-play as I get."

"I've never really thought about it like that," Harry admitted. "Hufflepuffs would make terrifying Dark Lords– or Ladies."

"That we would." Tonks said, smugly. "And I actually came over here for a reason– I brought you a good luck present, Fleur. I'm afraid I don't have one for you, Harry– she's my favourite. Its nothing personal, she's just so much better-looking then you."

"No arguments here," Harry said dryly. "Though, um, should you really be seen being friendly with me in public? Seeing as how your boss thinks my girlfriend is a murderer?"

"Ah, but I'm supposed to befriend you, remember?" Tonks pointed out, before turning to Fleur and, after subtly positioning herself so her hands couldn't be seen by anyone on the judges' table, pulled a freaking dagger out of her sleeve.

Being best friends with Hermione had given Harry a certain appreciation for weaponry, blades in particular, and this was certainly a gorgeous one; slender and about the length of a grown man's hand, it had a glittering hilt of untarnished gold and the sharp, silver blade shimmered as it caught the light of the sun.

Fleur, Harry was surprised and a bit confused to see, immediately went pink at the sight of the dagger. That made Tonks grin even wider, a predatory sort of smile like a wolf with bloodied jaws.

"A girl with a knife is always to be feared more then a man with a sword," she told Fleur, pressing the dagger into the French Champion's hands then stepping in close so that she could roll Fleur's sleeve up. From her pocket, she pulled a wand holster which she easily attached to Fleur's forearm.

"I adjusted it– a bit of nifty transfiguration," Tonks explained, her voice hushed, "go on, try it."

Fleur, still startlingly pink-cheeked, slid the dagger into the sheath where a wand would usually be held. Not only did the dagger fit perfectly, but it immediately faded out of sight, making it look like Fleur was wearing an empty wand holster. "Disillusionment charm." Tonks explained, seeing the twin questioning looks Harry and Fleur were giving her.

"Wow," Harry breathed, impressed. "I really have to get one of those for Hermione."

"Champions!" Bagman suddenly called out and Harry grimaced, the nerves he'd almost managed to forget returning with full-strength.

"Go," Fleur told him, touching his arm gently and smiling. "I 'ave to tell Tonks somezing."

Harry nodded, leaving the two women and heading back over to the judges' table where Diggory and Viktor were already standing. Fleur joined them a moment later, her lips bitten red and slightly
As soon as she drew in with the rest of them, Bagman started moving among the four of them, spacing them along the bank at intervals of ten feet. Harry was on the very end of the line, next to Viktor, who was already stripped to his swimming trunks and holding his wand ready. "Good luck," Harry said to the Bulgarian Champion as Bagman moved him along. Viktor gave him one of his small, half-smiles and nodded.

"To you as vell."

"All right. Harry?" Bagman whispered, as he moved Harry along the last few feet. "Know what you're going to do?"

"Yeah," Harry nodded– the gillyweed Tom had bought was in his pocket, he was wearing his swimming trunks under his robes and his repertoire of non-verbal spells was well out of what could be expected of someone his age (Tom firmly believed that the more spells one knew, the more options they'd have in a crisis which meant it was more likely they'd come out in one piece).

Bagman gave Harry's shoulder a quick squeeze and returned to the judges' table; he pointed his wand at his throat as he had done at the World Cup, said, "Sonorus!" and his voice boomed out across the dark water toward the stands.

"Well, all our Champions are ready for the Second Task, which will start on my whistle. They have precisely an hour to recover what has been taken from them. On the count of three, then. One...two...three!"

The whistle echoed shrilly in the cold, still air; the stands erupted with cheers and applause; without looking to see what the other champions were doing, Harry pulled off his shoes and socks, pulled the handful of gillyweed out of his pocket, stuffed it into his mouth, and waded out into the lake.

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_Fleur's POV:_

The moment Harry turned to walk back over to the judges' table, Tonks dragged her in close, bringing their mouths together. The kiss was all teeth, sharp and jagged. The passion behind it was violet, possessive– only a parody of romance. Fleur kissed back, just as desperate, just as hungry.

"Good luck, pretty girl," Tonks breathed, pulling back far too soon. "Kill 'em dead."

"Zat sentence makes no sense," she complained, slightly breathless.

"It's a grammar thing, sweetheart," Tonks grinned. "Redundancies, or some shit. Now go." Fleur squeaked slightly as Tonks playfully slapped her butt but hurried over to the judges' table. She quickly slipped off her robes, ignoring the looks she got from practically everyone around her while clad in her sleek, silver swimsuit– it was the most conservative one she owned, but it was tight and exposed much more then she'd have liked to in front of all these people who were drooling over her like she was a piece of meat.

With practice, she ignored the way Bagman's hands lingered a touch too long while he was positioning her along the banks of the Lake, instead examining the icy, crystal waters before her.
Bagman announced the countdown—"One... two... three!"—and the moment she heard the shrill whistle, she tapped the crown of her head with her wand. The bubblehead charm easily bloomed into existence and a follow-up neat piece of transfiguration on her feet turned them to duck-feet—the opposite of attractive, with their scaly grey appearance, but the strong webbing between the toes would help propel her through the water.

Able to put it off no longer after applying several strong heating charms, Fleur took a deep breath and dived determinedly into the Lake.

It was so cold she felt her skin searing as though it were fire, not icy water, except worse because Fleur was a being of fire and air, not the wet and cold. It was abruptly overwhelming, more so than she'd expected and tried to prepare herself for, and even with the heating charms it hurt. It was wrong; it made her skin crawl as strength was sapped from her bones, the rapidly dwindling embers of the flames under her skin sputtering and snuffing out.

Gritting her teeth, Fleur kicked forward, using her transfigured feet to propel herself along in the water until she'd swum out far enough she couldn't see the bottom of the lake. Her long, silvery braid dragged out behind her as she swam and she really should have been expecting the sudden, violent tug against her scalp. Her head jerked back and she cried out, eyes automatically watering.

Turning to see what had grabbed her, she was met with the sight of a small, pale-green horned creature with sharp, needle-like teeth and long spindly fingers it was using to grip onto her hair. **Grindylow.**

Gritting her teeth, Fleur brandished her wand at the water-demon. Quick as a flash, it released her hair and grabbed her wrist, almost crushing the slender bones with its vicious grip. Her fingers spasmed and her wand fell from them, sinking like a stone through the water—much like Fleur herself, as the grindylow immediately began dragging her down. Fleur cried out, trying to yank away, but a second set of deceptively strong, spindly fingers seized onto one of her legs, and then a third to her foot.

Fleur fought, but the grindylows were strong swimmers—much stronger than she was—and she found herself quickly dragged to the bottom of the Lake, where long reeds swayed and tangled and she could see the gleaming eyes of many, many more of the water-demons waiting for their prey—for her. Panic flared through her, dizzying and overwhelming, and it was only the sudden flare of pain of sharp teeth sinking into the skin of her thigh that broke her out of her senseless freak out and with her remaining free limb, she went for Tonks's gift.

The handle of the dagger fit easily in her hand, almost as comfortable as her wand, and she slashed out wildly, desperately, at the grindylow holding her wrist. The blade easily ripped through the grindylow's neck, cutting through the mottled green flesh, slicing through sinew and scraping against bone. Fleur shoved the dagger in harder, cracking something beneath the sharpened blade, and black blood gushed out in torrents from the gaping wound, spreading through the water like ink as the grindylow gurgled horribly, its grip abruptly disappearing.

Fleur beat back her horror and nausea, instead focusing her resolve and lunging for the one that had sunk its sharp green teeth into her thigh. In a quick, decisive movement—and with another horrible gurgling sound and flood of dark blood—the teeth were gone from her thigh.

The remaining grindylows, still gripping her legs and hair, released her, shrieking amongst themselves. Fleur was sickened to watch as they lunged for their dead brethren, eagerly tearing great big chunks of flesh out of the floating corpses with their pointed teeth.

Swallowing back her nausea, Fleur ignored the feeding frenzy the best she could as she swam
down and desperately started searching the bottom of the lake for her wand. Thankfully, the pale, slender stick of carved wood was relatively easy to locate amidst the rippling, tangled black weed and wide plains of mud littered with dull, glimmering stones.

Returning the dagger to the holster once she had her wand in hand once more, Fleur non-verbally conjured a tie for her hair, twisting the long braid into a bun to avoid having it grabbed again. Taking a deep, soothing breath (and thanking the merciful gods that the grindylows hadn't managed to pop her bubblehead charm while she was wandless) she continued the Task.

Silence surrounded her as she propelled through the strange, dark, foggy underwater landscape. Weeds stretched ahead of her as far as she could see as she swam deeper and deeper, out toward the middle of the lake, and her eyes were wide as she stared through the eerily gray-lit water around her to the shadow beyond, where the water became opaque.

Small fish flickered past her like silver darts and once or twice she tensed up as she thought she saw something larger moving ahead of her, but when she got nearer, she discovered it to be nothing but a large, blackened log, or a dense clump of weed or once what almost looked like the pale, ghostly skeleton of a very small dragon. There was no sign of any of the other champions, merpeople, or hostages—nor, thankfully, the giant squid Harry had warned her about.

It took what felt like forever, though a non-verbal wandless charm told her it had only been around twenty minutes, before she heard a snatch of haunting mersong.

"An hour long you'll have to look,
And to recover what we took..."

Relief flooding her, Fleur swam faster and soon saw a large rock emerge out of the muddy water ahead. It had paintings of merpeople on it; they were carrying spears and chasing what looked like a giant squid-like creature. Fleur swam on past the rock, following the mersong.

"...your time's half gone, so tarry not
Lest what you seek stays here to rot...."

A cluster of crude stone dwellings stained with algae loomed suddenly out of the gloom on all sides. Here and there at the dark windows, Fleur saw faces—the sight of merpeople was familiar enough to her, as she'd spent many long summers at the Delacour's beach villa. Unlike sirens, the underwater cousins of veela, merpeople had little fondness for her kind, though they had never acted violently on the rare occasions she'd waded in the ocean water which gave her a small measure of reassurance that they wouldn't attack.

These merpeople leered at her as she swam past; one or two of them emerged from their caves to watch her better, their powerful, silver fish tails beating the water, spears clutched in their hands. Fleur sped on, staring around, and soon the dwellings became more numerous; there were gardens of weed around some of them, and she even saw what appeared to be a pet grindylow tied to a stake outside one door. Merpeople were emerging on all sides now, watching her eagerly, pointing at her duck-feet and talking behind their hands to one another. Fleur sped around a corner and a very strange but welcome sight met her eyes.

A whole crowd of merpeople was floating in front of the houses that lined what looked like a mer-version of a village square. A choir of merpeople was singing in the middle, calling the champions toward them, and behind them rose a crude sort of statue; a gigantic merperson hewn from a boulder. Four people were bound tightly to the tail of the stone merperson—and darling Harry, appearing very strange with gills and flipper-like feet, was floating in front of them.
The four hostages looked very odd; all four of them appeared to be in a very deep sleep with their heads lolling onto their shoulders and fine streams of bubbles kept issuing from their mouths. Neville was tied between Hermione and Daphne, while Diggory's Yule Ball date, a dark-haired Asian witch Fleur vaguely recalled Hermione complaining about once, was tied to Daphne's left.

Fleur swam hurriedly toward the hostages, half expecting the merpeople to lower their spears and charge at her, but they did nothing. Harry, finally noticing her, beamed and waved, a stream of bubbles exiting his mouth as he excitedly tried to speak. She laughed, reaching out to squeeze his arm gently, before turning her attention to the hostages. The ropes of weed tying them to the statue were thick, slimy, and very strong and Harry was using his wand to non-verbally cut through the ones tying Hermione.

Seeing the ease in which the seaweed was falling away, Fleur got the feeling that the younger boy had been waiting for her to arrive. Smiling, she pulled out Tonks' dagger and used it to slash through the weed tying Neville to the statue.

"Let's go!" Harry mouthed, Hermione in his arms. Fleur nodded, tapping Neville with her wand to cast a non-verbal featherweight charm before swimming after Harry as he led the way back through the mer-village—she noticed, a moment later, that he was following a small, dark-scaled sea-snake, which was easily slicing through the water. *Clever*, she thought approvingly.

It almost felt like cheating, following Harry, but Fleur didn't particularly care about that. They passed Diggory and Krum on their way, Diggory having used a bubblehead charm like she had but not having done anything to help himself swim faster, while Krum had transfigured his head into a shark.

The water was starting to lighten around them and Fleur was considering the end to be in sight when, almost inevitably, they were attacked.

The vaguely horse-shaped water monster was jet black with poisonous green eyes, a mane of thrashing serpents and a number of thick, strong, lashing tentacles in place of where an equine's rear-legs would be. The creature lashed out at them with its forelegs, vicious-looking backwards hooves that narrowly missed Hermione as Harry frantically yanked her out of the way, earning himself a painful looking bruise that bloomed up almost immediately on his pale skin as his forearm was clipped.

*Kelpie*, Fleur grimly identified, shoving Neville behind her and holding her wand out defensively in front of her. It was huge, muscular and honestly terrifying-looking— it bared its yellow, too-sharp fangs at them, poisonous eyes fixed malevolently on their movements, and Fleur desperately wracked her brains for its weaknesses. As kelpies were known to haunt rivers and lochs of Scotland, not France, she'd certainly never encountered one before and all she could really remember from class was the alarming fact that they were known to have a near-insatiable appetite for human flesh.

When it tried to lunge at Harry again, he made a jabbing movement with his wand that sent out jets of boiling water, causing it to wheel around, screaming its rage. Fleur's heart was beating so hard in her chest it felt like it was winding her. *Think, think, think*— how were you supposed to deal with kelpies?

It lunged a third time, successfully dodging Harry's spell, and they both had to dive out of its path, dragging their hostages with them. Apparently having decided, due to a lack of boiling water being shot at it from her direction, that Fleur was the easier target, it charged at her, its large bulk frustratingly deft and manoeuvrable in the water.
Fleur hit it with an *impedimenta*, slowing it enough that she was able to kick away, out of reach, followed by several stunners that fizzled out in the water before reaching it. In her peripheral, Harry made a sharp movement with his wand and she watched as a slim sea-snake, a pale-banded blue in colour, erupted from the tip of his wand. Harry’s mouth opened and a harsh hissing, spitting noise that carried in the water reached her ears.

The kelpie attacking again dragged her attention rather abruptly from the sight and Fleur forced her nails to sharpen to talons, the change not coming easily with water pressing at her from every angle, and aimed for the water-demon's gills– it was what her *père* had instructed her to do if she was ever attacked by a shark while at the beach, and it was the only thing she could think of despite her reluctance to get close to the beast.

One of its backward hooves caught her shoulder, the blow turning her entire arm numb for a second and then the pain hit and her vision turned white for a heartbeat as it felt like she'd just been struck by lightning, the fiery pain was so intense. Fleur gagged, momentarily convinced she might actually throw up, but she still had the presence of mind to go for the gills, raking her claws viciously along the sensitive slits along the side of its neck. The kelpie shrieked out in rage, its serpent mane lunging for her, a number of sharp fangs piercing her arm and sending sharp jolts of fire through her. Crying out, she fell back, her duck-feet propelling her back. Her left arm was an entirely uncooperative mess of white-hot pain while her wand arm burned viciously from the poison injected by the serpents’ fangs. A combination of pain tolerance and adrenaline was likely the only thing keeping her moving, but it wouldn't last.

Fleur was staring at the water-demon, genuinely terrified and out of ideas, when suddenly it let out an agonised scream that travelled piercingly through the water. The pale-banded sea-snake was latched onto its flank, starkly visible against its jet-black coat, and Fleur watched with stunned relief as the kelpie thrashed weakly in place, ignoring both her and Harry entirely, its struggles rapidly weakening. Whatever the sea-snake Harry had conjured up was, it was clearly highly poisonous.

"Let's go!" Harry mouthed urgently to her and she nodded hastily. Her arms were next to useless; the poison from the serpents was doing funny things to her grip, causing her fingers to feel numb and weak so she could barely even keep hold of her wand, while her left arm was limp and unusable. She had to use magic to fasten Neville, still under the influence of a featherweight charm, to her and rely on her duck-feet alone to propel her to the surface. She dreaded the thought of being confronted by any other creature, certain she wouldn't be able to fight it off.

The moment her head broke above the surface of the lake was one of the best of her entire life. Fleur hurriedly dissipated the bubblehead charm and eagerly inhaled great big gulps of wonderful, cold, clean air.

The crowd in the stands was making a great deal of noise; shouting and screaming, all of them seeming to be lunging to their feet. "I think we're first back," Harry panted beside her and Fleur, tears springing to her eyes, turned to kiss him dead on the cheek.

"Zank you," she gasped, trying not to start crying. The adrenaline was slowly starting to leave her and she was very aware of just how badly she was hurting— as well as the injuries to her arms, her right wrist was black with bruises from the grindylows, as was her left ankle and several places along her legs, and the bite mark on her thigh was sluggishly bleeding. She thought she might throw up.

Hermione and Neville suddenly both expelled a great spout of water, Neville blinking blearily in the bright sunlight while Hermione coughed and spluttered a few times.
"Fucking shit, Fleur!" She exclaimed when she could talk again, her eyes widening in a way that told Fleur she likely looked just as bad as she felt. "What in the seven fucking hells happened to you?"

"Grindylows. And a kelpie." Fleur grumbled and both Neville and Hermione made sympathetic sounds. Fleur was incredibly grateful to let Neville practically swim them both back to the shore, while Harry and Hermione followed. He was a strong swimmer and Fleur was reminded of how he sometimes swam in the mornings instead of jogging with her— it had clearly paid off.

"How are you feeling?" He asked her, concerned, as they approached the worried-looking professors. She smiled weakly at him.

"As eef I could sleep for a week."

Neville laughed and as they reached the shore he helped pull her out of the lake and onto the sweet, sweet land. "Here," he cast a drying and heating charm over her and she actually moaned aloud in relief, causing his cheeks to colour pink.

The Hogwarts Healer, who Fleur remembered from after the First Task, descended upon her, conjuring a floating stretcher that Neville helped lift her onto. Fleur would have argued that her legs were fine, except she was so exhausted and shaky that she just couldn't be bothered.

"Kelpie?" The Healer asked grimly as she waved her wand over Fleur, casting a number of diagnostic charms. Fleur braved a glance at her left arm and almost gagged at the sight—it was dark purple where the hoof had hit her and badly swollen, with a sickening, yellowish bulge in the centre of the bruising that she realised, horrified, was caused by bone pressing up against her skin. "Definitely broken," muttered the Healer, "episkey!"

"Putain de merde!" Fleur swore viciously as the bone healed with a sharp crunching sound and jagged bolt of white-hot pain almost as bad as the break itself, causing the hovering nearby Madam Maxime to let out a strained but amused chuckle.

"Here," the Healer said briskly, pushing a potion against her mouth. Fleur obediently parted her lips, letting the foul broth slide down her throat. The burning in her arm from the kelpie's poison faded a few moments later. Essence of dittany was applied to the fang-marks and the bite on her thigh, quickly healing over the broken skin, and bruise removal paste and an elixir for muscle bruising was liberally applied to the various bruises.

Finally, she was handed a pepper-up potion that she gladly downed, letting the warmth spread comfortably through her bones as energy seeped back through her.

"Visit me again after," the Healer instructed, handing her a thick blanket to wrap around her shoulders. Fleur nodded and thanked the woman, who bustled over to Harry who gave her a sheepish look that spoke of familiarity.

"Basilisks, Dementors, dragons and now kelpies— what will it be next?" she heard the woman snap at him before she took the time to quickly undo the transfiguration on her feet then turned her attention back to Neville.

"Zank you, Neville," she told him. "Eet would 'ave been very embarrassing to not be able to get out of zee lake."

Neville smiled at her, his eyes warm and kind. "I owed you for protecting me from the kelpie." He said and she laughed.
"Ah, but eet was because of me zat you were in danger from zee water-demon in zee first place," she told him and he laughed too, shaking his head.

"Let's not argue semantics," he said. "We should go see your score— you and Harry got back first, you know."

Fleur agreed, half because she did want to see how she'd scored— but also because she could see Tonks, over by the judges' table alongside the ex-Auror, Moody, and she very much wanted to intimately thank the older witch for the dagger, without which she wouldn't have even managed to reach the hostages.

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*Harry's POV:*

"Basilisks, Dementors, dragons and now kelpies— what will it be next?" Madam Pomfrey snapped, glaring at him as if it was *his* fault he kept finding himself in such dangerous situations while she wrapped him so tightly in a blanket that he felt as though he were in a straitjacket, then forced a measure of very hot potion down his throat that caused steam to gush out of his ears.

Next to him, Hermione snickered, accepting the blanket and potion that Madam Pomfrey knew better then to force on her like she had Harry before she bustled away to go help Diggory and Cho Chang, who had just reached the shoreline. "You've got a beetle in your hair," he told her, a touch sulky from her laughing at him.

"You've got about a lake's worth of mud in yours," Hermione retorted. "I'd banish it, but I still don't have my wand back." She added, mouth twisting down unhappily.

"Tracey's looking after your and Daphne's wands," Harry assured her, "Snape brought them down to the common room last night." Hermione nodded, looking relieved.

"Good." She murmured, before tilting her head slightly. "So, you and Fleur fought a kelpie— anything else?" She asked curiously.

"Grindylows, briefly— Professor Lupin's lessons came in handy there," he told her and she nodded.

"He was the most competent DADA professor we've had so far. Shame about the werewolf prejudice ruining that for us. How about any surprises?"

"Well, sort of— a good surprise, though; I came across a sea-snake who guided me to the mer-village while I was trying to find my way there," Harry explained, "turns out parseltongue works just as well underwater."

"Oh! I never considered that," Hermione said, surprised but pleased-sounding.

"It's also how I defeated the kelpie," Harry told her, "I used that *serpensortia* spell to conjure the most venomous sea-snake I knew of and set it on the kelpie."

"Excellent thinking," Hermione said approvingly. "I am genuinely so proud of you right now, Harry. And I don't mean that in a condescending way, I'm just really, really proud."

"Stop it," Harry grumbled, blushing slightly, and she laughed, looking much happier then she had in weeks. Harry couldn't help but pull her to him, kissing her. She kissed him back, just as
enthusiastically, and it took Dumbledore-for-brains pointedly coughing to get them to break apart.

Diggory and Viktor had each returned by this point, Diggory with Cho Chang and Viktor with Daphne.

"It's time for our champions to be awarded their scores," Dumbledouche said, the look in his eyes less then pleased as he looked at them. Harry tightened his hold on Hermione, stubbornly meeting the headmaster's eyes.

"Yes, sir," he said, his tone barely shy of challenging. Hermione pinched his hip lightly in warning then tugged him over to where the rest of the Champions were lining up with their hostages. Neville grinned and gave him a subtle thumbs up. Fleur, who was leaning on the younger boy, also gave him a brilliant smile, excitement bright in her sparkling blue eyes.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have reached our decision!" Bagman announced. "The Merchieftainess Murcus has told us exactly what happened at the bottom of the lake, and we have therefore decided to award marks out of fifty for each of the champions, as follows....

"Fleur Delacour and Harry Potter were both equal first to return with their hostages. Miss Delacour demonstrated excellent use of the Bubble-Head Charm and partial human-transfiguration while Mister Potter used gillyweed to great effect, however they each arrived three minutes after the time-limit and therefore we have decided to award them each forty-five points." Loud cheers erupted from the Slytherin and the Beauxbatons students.

"Cedric Diggory, who used the Bubble-Head Charm, was next to return with his hostage." Enormous cheers from the Hufflepuffs in the crowd; Harry saw Cho Chang give Diggory a glowing look. "We therefore award him forty points.

"Viktor Krum used an incomplete form of Transfiguration, which was nevertheless effective, and was forth to return with his hostage. We award him thirty-five points."

Further applause from the stands. Karkaroff had been absent since the start of the term, apparently he'd fallen ill with dragon pox, but the Deputy Headmaster who had arrived from Durmstrang to fill in his place clapped particularly hard, looking very superior. With his pale, pointed features, Deputy Headmaster Lyubomir Mitkov reminded Harry of a dark-haired Lucius. His icy expression and general disdain certainly added to his resemblance to the Malfoy patriarch, though Lucius softened a great deal when in private.

"When added up with the points from the First Task," Bagman beamed at the crowd, "we're left with Mister Krum in fourth place with seventy-five points, Mister Diggory in third place with seventy-eight points, Miss Delacour in second with eighty-one points and our youngest Champion, Mister Harry Potter, currently in first place with a grand total eighty-five points!"

Harry felt like he'd just won the Quidditch House Cup as everyone clapped and cheered. Fleur beamed across at him and even Viktor and Diggory smiled.

"The third and final task will take place at dusk on the twenty-fourth of June," continued Bagman, once the applause had died down. "The Champions will be notified of what is coming precisely one month beforehand. Thank you all for your support of the Champions."

It was over. Harry thought dazedly, as Madam Pomfrey began herding the Champions and hostages back to the castle... it was over, he had got through, he was in first place... and, best of all, he didn't have to worry about anything now until June the twenty-fourth!
Life, he decided, was good.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I hope everyone enjoyed the double update! I most definitely should have been spending my time revising for end of year exams but I was honestly so sick of studying. Sorry for taking so long to update, but real life (unfortunately) comes first :( You're all amazing <3 Thank you for your heartwarming comments and support!
~Cheshire Carroll
Part Four: The Goblet of Fire - Chapter LXIV

CHAPTER LXIV:

Harry's POV:

The only part of the Second Task being over that Harry wasn't relieved about was that Tom was no longer sneaking into the castle every evening to train with him. Instead, as they entered March, he and Hermione were lucky to see Tom once a week.

The weather had started to become drier, but cruel winds skinned their hands and faces every time they went out onto the grounds. Harry hadn't seen Madam Bones since before the Second Task but she had written to assure him that everything was being sorted out. That wasn't as comforting as Bones seemed to think but Harry trusted that Voldemort– or rather 'Thaddeus'– wouldn't let anyone he didn't approve of end up as Harry's legal guardian.

It wasn't until about a month after the Second Task that a grim-faced Snape fetched Harry from his Care of Magical Creatures class– Hagrid had finally finished the unicorn unit much to Harry's relief, as it had always put Hermione in a bad mood– and escorted him up to Dumbledore's office, where several official looking witches and wizards, Dumbledore, McGonagall and Madam Bones were all waiting.

Swallowing nervously, Harry inched as close to Snape as he could reasonably get away with. Snape, in a somewhat uncharacteristic public display of affection, reached up to squeeze his shoulder, a swift but undeniably comforting gesture.

"Harry," Bones said, with a kind smile on her face. "I'm sure you'll be relieved to know that earlier today your custody was officially decided."

"I'll be more relieved when I know who's my legal guardian now," Harry said honestly.

"Albus Dumbledore's application was considered the most appropriate, considering the circumstances." Bones told him, still smiling kindly. "He was officially made your legal guardian this morning."

Harry thought he'd misheard her for a moment. When he realised he hadn't, it abruptly felt like all the blood drained from his body as the comprehension hit, replaced by a searing chill which ripped its way through his bones.

He was dimly aware he might be having a panic attack. Whatever it was, it was bad. He couldn't even speak, couldn't control himself, couldn't stop shaking and gasping for breath. His blood was rushing in his ears, the floor was moving under his feet. Snape seized onto his arm, keeping him upright and steering him over to a chintz armchair. Harry barely even noticed, moving in a whited-out daze.

"I understand this is a shock," Bones was saying and Harry shook his head frantically.

"No! No, I won't– you can't– not him!" He pleaded desperately, ignoring the fact he was making a scene entirely.

"It's even worse then I thought," Dumbledore spoke up gravely, blue eyes twinkling like he hadn't
just cruelly swept Harry's entire world out from beneath him. "Clearly the influences of the Malfoys and their ilk run deeper then we realised."

"Harry," Bones said calmly, "I know there's a lot of talk in the newspapers right now about Professor Dumbledore, but Ms Skeeter is not known for her propensity to tell the truth. If I didn't trust Albus, I wouldn't have approved of the court's decision." Harry just shook his head, the cold nausea making him want to retch.

"Please," he whispered, hoarse and ragged with emotion, "not him– anyone but him, please!"

He felt the gaze of every person in the room boring down upon him, but he was afraid of what might happen if he attempted to look any one of them in the eye. He felt as if the walls were starting to close in around him. He didn't know the right thing to do, so he did the only thing that came to mind. Without so much as a backwards glance, he jumped back to his feet, turned on his heel and fled out the office door.

Harry didn't allow himself to stop running. His breathing was heavy, tearing almost violently from his lungs, but it was far more the result of the sheer horror and sickening anxiety then his impromptu dash across the castle.

When he eventually came out of his blind panic, he actually took a moment to figure out where he was. It turned out he'd ended up on one of the lower levels, near the dungeons, and was currently slumped next to one of the grey stone walls. Belatedly, he realised there was a purring cat on his lap, rubbing its little whiskered cheek against his stomach, and Snape was crouched next to him with his hand on Harry's shoulder and his dark robes pooled out around him as he spoke slowly and calmly, telling Harry that he was safe now, that everything was alright, that he was fine, just fine.

"How?" Harry choked, reaching out and grabbing onto Snape's hand, ignoring any possible weirdness in his need for physical comfort. His other hand went to the cat– going by the multi-coloured fur it was Sycorax, the one who'd briefly made Draco's life hell last term when the blond had made the mistake of referring to it as 'unholy spawn'– and he sunk his fingers into her thick, warm fur, finding reassurance in the softness. "How could this happen?"

What he didn't ask out loud was 'how could Voldemort have let this happen?' but he knew Snape would understand what it was he wasn't saying.

"I cannot speak for why this was allowed to happen," Snape said warily. "All I can say is that I will do everything in my power to help."

Harry nodded in silent, miserable thanks. The purring cat chose then to abruptly leap off his lap and start bounding off in the direction, he abruptly realised, of the Slytherin common room. Where Hermione undoubtedly was.

"Cory!" he called out desperately after the disappearing cat, "Cory! Sycorax! Don't go! Please, don't go get Hermione—" but the small, devilish she-beast had disappeared and he groaned, slumping back against the wall again. "Oh Merlin," he said despairingly. "Hermione's going to kill someone. Or she's going to yell at someone she most definitely shouldn't and then she'll get killed."

Snape immediately winced, alarm freely crossing his face. "This is going to have to be handled very carefully." He said grimly, which was as good as an agreement. Harry realised he was still clinging onto his Head of House's hand like a child and quickly let go, cheeks flaming red, somehow still capable of embarrassment even when he felt like he was about to throw up.

"Neither of you had any idea this was going to happen?" Snape asked, clearly ignoring Harry's
embarrassment. Harry nodded then paused.

"Wait, you did?" He asked, his tone a bit accusatory. His professor sighed, looking very aged as he leaned against the stone wall next to Harry.

"I knew it was a possibility," he said heavily, "but it wasn't until I was sent to retrieve you that I learned the application had been accepted. I had honestly hoped that the smear campaign run by Ms Skeeter would cause the Ministry too much backlash if they accepted Alb– Dumbledore's request for guardianship. Or that the unsealing of your parents' Will would provide an alternative option."

"Both my maternal and paternal grandparents are dead," Harry said bitterly, "my godmother was tortured into insanity and my godfather was murdered.

"There were no other relatives?" Snape pressed and Harry shook his head.

"No. I mean, most of the older pureblood families are interrelated in some way, but there are no immediate blood relatives. Only one of my grandparents had a sibling– Fleamont, my dad's dad– but Charlus Potter is also dead, and so is his wife, Dorea, and their son, Henry Potter the second."

"So Dumbledore appeared the best choice for straightening out the Boy Who Lived who ended up in Slytherin," Snape said, sounding both furiously unhappy and tiredly resigned. "And the... Ministry just went along with it."

What he didn't say was 'and Voldemort just went along with it', but Harry heard it, heard the confusion and the barely hidden anger in his professor's voice that echoed in his own.

He growled quietly, letting his hands ball up into fists at his sides. "I swear to Merlin that if Tom knew about this I am never sucking his dick again," he vowed angrily to himself and Snape made a choking noise, his expression clearly saying he'd rather have not woken up that morning. Honestly, Harry felt the same– and then his stupid brain caught up with his even stupider mouth and his face felt like it had caught fire. "I'm so sorry sir." He mumbled into his knees, horrified. Snape just sighed and patted his shoulder a touch harder then what was strictly necessary.

"Harry? Harry!"

Hermione's alarmed voice had him groaning softly under his breath before he lifted his head off his knees to face the very worried witch being led to him by Sycorax. He had some fast thinking and even faster talking to do.

- Voldemort's POV:

One moment he'd been perusing a dull missive in Fudge's pretentious office, standing alongside the equally dull and pretentious man who had the nerve to believe he could actually be worthy of being Minister of Magic (Voldemort already longed for the day that he could disabuse the worthless bit of slime of the ridiculous thought), and the next, a sheer and overwhelming fear that wasn't his own seared mercilessly through his mind.

Hm. It had been a while since this had happened. Voldemort easily turned his attention inward, towards the mental link between himself and Harry Potter. As the boy's Occlumency had improved, less and less had the link between them been accessible. Currently, however, it was as wide-open as it had been when the boy had attempted to wandlessly Avada his disgusting uncle in
a fit of mindless rage.

It seemed that Dumbledore had finally made his move. And the boy was terrified and furious and utterly choking on it.

The rush of emotion, so intense and all-consuming, the rich burst of colour... it made him pause, made him think, just as all the little bits of the boy's emotions that had slipped through their link had. Voldemort did not regret making Horcruxes– how could he? Without them, he would be dead. Yet with each new Horcrux made, he had lost part of himself. Food tasted like ashes in his mouth, he felt even further dissociated from a world already so grey and washed out, he lacked any and all physical desire– a sense of removed numbness was the closest he felt to emotion most days, with the exception of fast-burning rage, dispassionate intrigue and moments of shallow amusement.

It was only when interacting with Tom, Harry or Nagini that he really felt anything much at all, though occasionally dear Bella and Hermione were able to stir a flicker of something also– Severus and Lucius too, on a particularly good day.

He did not regret making his Horcruxes, but he found himself often wondering now that if he had more soul left inside him, would he regret having created as many as he had?

It made him consider, perhaps, if he should do something to change that.

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Severus's POV:

Hermione didn't take the news well. He wasn't expecting her to, so it wasn't a surprise, but it was still concerning.

After hearing Harry stumble through a pale-faced and stuttering explanation that had his own fury building up inside him, Hermione rounded towards him with the snarl of a wounded lion. Her eyes were dark and dangerous with fury.

"I am going to carve him into a thousand screaming, bloody, twitching pieces." She stated, her voice flat and far too calm sounding.

It was not a good sign. And honestly, it was times like these that made him wonder if her claimed blood relation to Voldemort was as much of a falsehood as he'd assumed.

His own rage was a subtler thing; when Severus got angry enough, it was as if his very emotions were burnt away leaving nothing but a bitter iciness and an eerie calmness like a mirror's surface, reflecting only what those gazing at him expected to see there. Even as a child his blood had always turned cold when he got sufficiently angry; sharp, cruel and biting, like frost, with a terrible dark clarity descending over his mind instead of a haze of red. It had served him well as a spy and it would serve him well now as he sought to direct Hermione's wild rage to safer targets then those who likely deserved it.

Hermione's rage reminded him of the Dark Lord's– it was powerful and unpredictable as Fiendfyre and twice as vicious; a murderous, bloody inferno burning under her skin, ready to burst out and consume all that had enraged her. Severus had seen Voldemort raze through dozens of fully-trained witches and wizards in fits of rage, reducing them to bloodied shreds, scorched bones and empty-eyed husks in the face of his fast-burning fury. He had a feeling that Hermione would be entirely capable of doing the same, if given the chance and the power.
Fortunately, it meant his skills in redirecting his Lord's rage could be applied to the murderously enraged young witch. Between Harry and himself, they were able to tone down the burst of rage to a simmering fury, the impulsivity smothered under cold, ruthless calculation. She was far from letting it go– they all were– but she was no longer about to go off on an ill-advised fit of temper.

He understood where she was coming from, he truly did; this was possibly the worst outcome he could have ever considered. He knew there had to be a reason but it bewildered him that Voldemort had allowed Dumbledore to get his hooks into Harry at all. There was nothing he could do, though– nothing but hope desperately that this wouldn't blow up in everyone's faces.

Somehow, he had very little hope that this would not be the case.

Harry's POV:

They skipped classes for the remainder of the day, though Harry wasn't sure if it could be called 'skipping' if Snape had given them permission. Not wanting to talk to anyone, unsure if the news had been leaked and definitely not in the mood to discuss his new 'custodian' with anyone if it had, he and Hermione retreated to the Room of Requirement where they both curled up in front of a merrily flickering log fireplace.

The Room had thoughtfully provided several stacks of books for them to read– muggle ones, Harry realised with some surprise; he vaguely recognised a number of the titles, such as 'King Lear', 'Slaughterhouse-Five' and 'The Odyssey'. Hermione, curled up by his side, had been provided with a copy of 'Commentāriī dē Bellō Gallicō', which he managed to roughly translate to 'Commentaries on the Gallic War'. As it was written in Classical Latin, he could only make out about one in ten, fifteen words– if that– though he managed to figure out despite Hermione's rapid page-turning that it was a firsthand account of some war or rather fought by Julius Caeser, who'd actually written the book, with a focus on battles, intrigues and tactics.

The challenge of translating seemed to have a calming effect on Hermione, even more so than Snape's impressive work earlier, and Harry managed to relax himself as he snagged a copy of 'Lord of the Rings' from the stack to flip through. He very pointedly did not think about the sick feeling in his stomach and the anxiety crawling under his skin, uncomfortable prickles that made his skin crawl and his throat feel funny and thick and like he couldn't breathe properly.

The sort-of peace lasted until what Harry was pretty sure was either late afternoon or early evening, going by the way his stomach was starting to send out pangs of hunger, and Tom slipped into the Room.

The moment Hermione saw Tom, her eyes turned colder then the Black Lake in winter. She stood before Harry could stop her, stalking across the Room and viciously lashing out. A dull crunch and a spurt of red was followed by sharp cursing as Tom doubled over, hands going to his nose. Harry jumped to his feet, cursing, and rushing over so he could grab Hermione in case she planned on going for a second blow.

Hermione watched Tom with eyes cold and jagged like shattered ice, both sharp and cutting yet oddly fragile too. She felt betrayed, Harry realised suddenly, and he wanted to reach out and comfort her but he knew better then to touch her when she was holding herself so predator-still.

"So Voldemort wants a spy," she stated harshly, the sharp bite in her voice like a knife to the throat
as she addressed Tom, "and he's decided to pick Harry."

Tom was still leaned over, teeth bared and blood dripping freely from his nose. It had already trailed down over his chin and throat like war paint and the bitter smile that crossed Hermione's face was so awful that Harry never wanted to see it again.

"Episkey!" Tom grunted, wandlessly healing his nose before straightening up and fixing Hermione with an almost eerily blank look. Harry resisted the urge to shift in place uneasily, glancing between the two of them with a sinking stomach, wondering if he was about to get stuck in the middle of a physical—or magical—fight. "Dumbledore believes that Harry is the key to defeating Voldemort," Tom told them, voice blank as his expression, "and Voldemort wants to know why."

"And Snape isn't enough?" Harry asked sourly before he could stop himself. He might want to deescalate the situation but he wouldn't deny that the betrayal he felt still sat heavy and bitter.

"Dumbledore trusts Snape but he'd be an idiot to tell him everything when the man could be 'discovered' as a spy at any point and tortured for everything he knew. Harry," Tom fixed his gaze on him, the crushed-violets–hued gaze intense. "Harry, there are serious changes about to happen in the Ministry and you need to be integrated properly within Dumbledore's precious Order before those changes are made, because afterwards Dumbledore will be far more wary about affording you the same trust he will presently—as of now, he still believes he is in control but that illusion will not be maintained indefinitely. It has an expiration date, and that date is fast approaching."

Harry took a deep breath and forced himself to think rationally. "It's... you two really think it's important. That I do this."

"Voldemort has mentioned the prophecy to you," Tom answered him, just as quietly. "It's the reason why he came after you, when you were just an infant. However, the version he knows is not complete."

"I thought the prophecy didn't apply anymore," Hermione argued, sharp and icy.

"It shouldn't, from what we know of it," Tom agreed. "But we still need to know the rest and if there's a memory of it is stored in a location other then Dumbledore's head, we are currently unaware of it. Hermione, this is ultimately for Harry's safety. I promise you this. But—" Tom hesitated for the first time, his face losing its detached coolness and something else flickering momentarily in the twist of his mouth and flash of his eyes, something startlingly honest and vulnerable. "This... this is not what I would have chosen."

"But you chose to go along with it anyway, you chose Voldemort over us," Hermione hissed, furious, and Harry winced as he saw the exact moment that all of Tom's forced calm cracked.

"Do you actually think I like this fucked up situation any more then you do?" Tom snarled back at her, his eyes burning a searing, bloody crimson and his mouth twisted furiously. "Do you really think it was Voldemort's idea that you go to Skeeter, Hermione? Do you think he wanted Dumbledore's reputation ruined? Or for Harry's parents' Will to be unsealed, out of hopes that an alternative guardian had been named? I cannot directly go against Voldemort's decisions, I never thought I'd ever want to, but I tried!"

Harry sucked in a surprised breath and Hermione made a small, shocked sound beside him. "Really?" He asked. "You... did that?"
"Yes!" Tom hissed, wildly unhappy as he glared furiously at them both. "Yes, I did, and Voldemort can never know! Do you understand?" Harry nodded shakily because yeah, he did understand; Voldemort trusted Tom, trusted him like he didn't trust anyone else, ever, and Tom... well, Tom had apparently put him, put **Harry**, first. And maybe it hadn't actually made any difference in the end, but that didn't change the fact that he had done it.

It was a bit staggering, really.

Beside him, Hermione appeared about as stunned as Harry imagined he looked. Tom looked a bit shocked himself, like he hadn't really planned on telling them. Harry could imagine why— there was a certain power to be had, knowing that Tom would go against Voldemort for him, for them. It was a power that Harry wanted to promise right then and there that he would never, ever abuse, but...

Well, he couldn't guarantee that, could he? Not really. When it came to the three of them, to protecting them and keeping them safe, Harry couldn't think of anything that he wasn't willing to do. A terrifying thought, but one that was true nonetheless.

"I'm sorry for accusing you." Hermione said, finally.

"But not for hitting me?" Tom asked, finally vanishing the blood with a tap of his finger.

"No, you deserved that." Hermione narrowed her eyes slightly. "A bit of warning would have been appreciated."

"I wanted Harry to have a genuine reaction to the news," Tom admitted shamelessly, even as Harry glared at him. He shrugged slightly. "I'm sure you had an appropriately traumatic response and right now everyone in that room bar Dumbledore and Snape is going to be wondering just why the Boy-Who-Lived had such an extreme reaction to the news the glorious beacon of the Light himself was gaining custody of him."

Harry swallowed at Tom's words, the sick feeling in his stomach churning again. The pleas to get him out of this nightmare were just barely contained— he was sure that if he begged, Tom would acquiesce to his pleading and manoeuvre him out of the situation in some way, even if it was to kidnap him from the castle. And yet, he hesitated.

Because Voldemort had chosen to allow this to happen for a reason. He wanted Harry in Dumbledore's 'care and custody' for a reason, he'd decided to entrust the task to him. And as outraged and upset as Harry was, he found that he also didn't want to let Voldemort down. It was stupid, it was so, so stupid, but...

But, **fuck it**; he was going to do this. He was going to do this so he could make Dumbledore pay and that old bastard was going to regret everything he'd ever done to Harry.

Hermione and Tom both seemed to read his decision, his determination, on his face; Tom's mouth twisted into a viciously pleased smile while Hermione looked equal parts terrified, furious and (very) reluctantly accepting.

"Fine." She said, tightly. "Fine. But I swear to Morgana that if you ever spring something like this on us again Tom, I will never forgive you."

Her words, cold and stiff and terrifyingly honest, but Harry shudder a bit. Tom, however, just nodded with an understanding in his eyes. Tom wasn't the sort to suffer betrayal lightly, Harry knew, and the three of them were aware that Hermione saw this as a betrayal. Harry did too, if he
was being truthful, but... well, he was more forgiving then either of his partners (he'd had to be, what with siding with Voldemort and befriending Bellatrix).

Hermione was also afraid and Harry was aware of just how much she hated to be afraid. Her fear, he knew, came from the fact that while he was with Dumbledore, he'd be out of her protection—something they were still working on, as she was still in the habit of trying to shield him from all of life's dangers she could.

Harry didn't resent her for it; before coming to Hogwarts, she'd lost practically every single person who'd ever meant anything to her. He wouldn't— couldn't— begrudge her for it, not when her past justified it so. All he could do was be understanding when she was being smothering, to not feel belittled or like she considered him incapable when she moved to fight his battles in his place. Hermione had seen him duel with Tom, she'd taught him how to fight with his fists and her blades; she knew he was capable, knew the sharpness of his instincts (and blades) and the strength of his raw magic, a power that Tom was finely honing into a deadly weapon through his intense training— Hermione knew he was capable and he knew that she knew he was capable.

And he knew that she still hated the thought of him being out of the reach of her protection regardless.

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Tom didn't linger. Harry wasn't sure if he was relieved by that or disappointed. He claimed he was busy ("places to be, people to kill– you know how it is") and that he'd just wanted to 'clear everything up' when he learned from Voldemort that the final hearing regarding the custody issue was that day.

After he left, Harry moved back to the couch, flopping down on its perfectly comfortable cushioning, and Hermione followed after him.

"Honestly," she muttered sourly, "I really don't know how Tom always manages talk himself out of trouble."

Harry snorted, amused despite himself. "He's clever with his tongue, the sly bastard."

"Yes, he is a cunning linguist." Hermione agreed, tone wicked and sly, and it took a moment for Harry to realise what she'd just said and then he groaned, cheeks reddening in response. Yet despite his slight embarrassment, he felt a wave of relief– if Hermione was back to making dirty jokes then she must be in better spirits.

"This is going to be like after that article came out, isn't it?" He asked suddenly and she gave him a pitying look.

"Most definitely." She agreed, before pulling a face, looking abruptly both shocked and horrified. "Salazar's bollocks, I just realised that I'm actually annoyed I didn't let Dumbledick-face go through with adopting me at the start of the year! How utterly, wretchedly horrifying is that?"

Harry looked back at her, eyes just as wide. "That is bad." He agreed, a bit stunned. Hermione let her head fall back against the couch, muttering viciously under her breath. Harry caught a few words– 'fucking nightmare', 'fucked up' and 'fuck everything' seemed to be coming up multiple times– and he agreed completely.

It was going to be a long couple of weeks while this all settled down– and the fast approaching Easter– no, Eostre– holidays were suddenly even more terrifying to him then the upcoming Third
Task. In the past he'd either signed up to stay at the castle or spent the Eostre holidays with the Malfoys. Under the 'care and custody' of Dumbledore, he had the sinking suspicion that it wouldn't be so this year.

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Hermione's POV:

It was in the late hours of the evening, long past Tom's leaving and Harry falling asleep on the couch in the Room of Requirement that had thoughtfully stretched itself out into a queen-sized four-poster, that Hermione snuck back to the Slytherin dormitories to borrow Harry's Invisibility Cloak and make her way to the Owlery.

Rita Skeeter met her by the Quidditch Pitch, despite the lateness of the hour– Hermione had promised her significant information of interest and Skeeter was the very definition of 'opportunist'. Loose blonde curls in disarray, emerald robes creased like they'd hastily been thrown on and a lack of bright lipstick all gave Hermione the impression the woman had actually left the comforts of her bed to meet her.

Well, she certainly didn't plan on disappointing.

"Miss Skeeter," she greeted the older witch. "I have information and a proposition for you– a proposition that will see you very well compensated and given much acclaim."

"I'm listening." Skeeter said, giving Hermione a calculating look.

"I'm not sure if you're aware, but Albus Dumbledore has just taken custody of Harry." Hermione said, her tone cold as ice, eyes narrowing dangerously as fury lashed around inside her, just very barely contained.

Skeeter's eyes gleamed hungrily. "No I didn't know." She said, and Hermione could practically read the following morning's headlines in the witch's smile. She gave Skeeter a moment to process the information before continuing on to her proposition.

"I want to hire you to write a biography on Dumbledore," she said, her expression twisting to something that felt fierce and hateful. "An expose on his entire life. I want you to dig up every single filthy, little secret he's hiding and splash it across every newspaper, to write a book that floods every bookstore from Britain to France, Bulgaria, America– every bookstore everywhere. I want you to destroy him. And you can start with this." She pulled a copy of Fleur's timeline, fetched from the dorms along with the Cloak, out of her magically expanded pocket and handed it across to Skeeter, flicking her wand to give the older witch enough light to read by.

Skeeter flicked through it, taking less than a minute to figure out just what it meant. Her eyes widened with dawning comprehension, genuine shock visible on her face. "This is... this is unbelievable!" She breathed, her tone one of disbelief.

"Double check it." Hermione said fiercely. "Look at the records yourself. Every single thing written down there is one hundred per cent fact. Albus Dumbledore, so-called Champion of Muggleborns, is a vile lie and I want you to find out the truth." She smiled at Skeeter then, sharp and fierce and bloodthirsty. "So, are you in?"

"Oh I'm in," Skeeter replied, her answering smile nasty and her eyes gleaming in a way that reminded Hermione of a Great White shark circling its prey; hunting, assessing, anticipatory and
hungry. "He won't know what hit him."

"You'll be paid for your time." Hermione promised. "I want you to be thorough. I need everything to be a fact, information that will be backed up when the public double-check."

"You're that confident that there's something to find?" Skeeter asked and Hermione reached across to tap the timeline.

"Ex nihilo nihilo fit!," she quoted. "Nothing comes from nothing– this subtle subjugation of Muggleborns didn't just happen. Something happened in his past that started it, something significant. I want to know what it was, and then I want everyone to know. I want to destroy him."

Skeeter laughed sharply, appreciation and approval clear on her face. "I like you, Hermione Granger." She said. "I do believe this will be a very productive partnership."

"Excellent." Hermione replied, anticipation licking down her spine. "Let's take him down."

"The bigger they are, the harder they fall." Skeeter smiled, all teeth and entirely predatory; scenting the blood in the water she was about to spill.

"And I'm going to enjoy watching Dumbledore fall," Hermione said, not bothering to hide the sheer hatred in her voice and smiling like her smile was a knife to Dumbledore's throat. "Because I will ensure he hits every rock on the way down."

And when he'd hit the ground, she planned to be waiting there to deliver the finishing blow.
PART FOUR: THE GOBLET OF FIRE - CHAPTER LXV

Chapter Notes

Warning: recollection of past underage sexual assault in semi-vivid detail. Will be in italics and marked with *** if people want to skip it. Also, there's some violence and gore. You have been warned :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER LXV:

Hermione's POV:

"He can't do this!" Draco's face was horrified as he looked up from the Prophet, where Rita Skeeter's article had been rushed through overnight printing to make the front page. The title hadn't even needed any embellishments, no clever puns or alliteration– it was enough of a shock factor on its own:

ALBUS DUMBLEDORE ADOPTS BOY-WHO-LIVED!

"Unfortunately," Hermione said bitterly, "he can."

She was not coping well with it. In fact, Harry was coping better then she was– she'd woken up twice during the night in a cold sweat before taking Harry's Invisibility Cloak and sneaking off to Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, like back in their Third Year with the fucking dementors. She'd spent over an hour sitting on the floor of the shower, trying to let the steaming hot water boil away the ice creeping inside her veins as she stared at the tiled floor and watched how the colour seemed to be draining out of her surroundings, seeping away to leave everything dark and grey and trying to push in on her, settling right on her chest so she couldn't breathe–

Yes, she really wasn't coping well with it.

Harry was facing the situation with a strong-minded resolution that was almost heartening to witness. Having taken Tom's words to heart he seemed determined to infiltrate the Order of the Phoenix and Hermione didn't have the heart to point out that technically, doing so would not be considered 'remaining neutral' insofar as not taking a side. If– when– he did this, Harry would officially be actively acting in the interests of the Dark. He'd be spying for Voldemort against Dumbledore.

Daphne, tossing down her own copy of the Prophet and scowling fiercely, looked up to meet hers and then Harry's eyes. "Don't forget, we are your friends and we are here for you. I expect you to tell us how we can help you. If you do not, we will find ways to do so ourselves." She declared and, despite herself, Hermione had to smile slightly. Just leave it to Daphne to make offering help sound like a threat, she thought fondly.

Draco, Blaise, Theo and Tracey were all making sounds of agreement, Luna was nodding along determinedly and even Fleur's face was set in resolve. "Just tell us what to do," Blaise spoke for
them all, grim but his face set.

"Thanks guys," Harry said, a small but genuine smile lightning up his face. "But right now, this is what needs to happen."

"So there's a plan?" Draco asked, looking relieved.

"There's a plan." Harry confirmed with enough confidence in his voice she was almost reassured.

But, as it turned out, when it rained it fucking poured– Harry was called up to Dumbledore's office just two days after the news broke to be told by the old bastard that over the upcoming holidays he'd be staying with the Weasleys.

The goddamn fucking Weasleys.

The Weasley twins were not dealing particularly well with losing Ronald– or their sister, she supposed. And despite McGonagall and Snape's best efforts, the Slytherins were coping the brunt of their... unhappiness. Some of the older Slytherins had taken to escorting the younger years around, and their fifth, sixth and seventh year prefects had started a rotating self-defence 'club' where they taught the younger Slytherins counter-curses to common 'prank' spells, curses and jinxes, as well as duelling and dodging practice.

Hermione and Harry had been two of the twins' main targets, of course, but neither of them were easy marks— the extra training this year for the Tournament, along with all their previous training and general experience from the streets, meant that they were hard to take by surprise, and harder yet to corner, pin down or actually hit. And they hit back, twice as hard.

(There had been quite a few hospital wing visits in the first few weeks of the term– Hermione didn't believe in going for the throat, she believed in going for the balls)

Still, although things had somewhat settled, an important element of the... not peace, rather the temporary ceasefire they'd found themselves in was due to the fact they all kept their distance. Harry staying with the Weasleys meant that not only would he not be able to keep his distance, but he wouldn't have anyone to watch his back.

It was a deeply unsettling thought, one that had her chest feeling like it was constricting tighter and tighter as the Eostre holidays approached– and Moody's new unit on hex-deflection wasn't helping. Unsurprisingly, he kept singling out her and the other Slytherin students with links to Death Eaters for the class 'demonstrations', and more often then not she'd leave DADA nursing small injuries. Instead of going to Snape, though, Hermione had decided to take advantage of the training– training she viciously hoped that one day she'd be able to turn back on Moody. The others seemed to be following her lead (and she chose not to think too closely on that, not right now).

As the holidays approached even the ever-increasing workload being heaped on them all didn't do anything to dull most of the Slytherins' spirits. For all those who weren't heading off into the mouth of the dragon, or dreading their best friend being forced to do so, the idea of getting away from the castle was a relief. Hermione had received invitations from Fleur, Draco, Blaise, Daphne and Tracey to stay with them over the break, as well as the option to stay at her home with Tom, but, remembering her previous promise to herself, she'd decided to at least start the holidays by returning to muggle London one last time. She wanted to give Sting money, to set him up so he'd be comfortable, even buy him a cheap flat and use magic to help confund someone into giving him a job. And, of course, at the very least, she owed a proper goodbye to the one she owed so much.

Harry and Tom were both, understandably, not at all enthusiastic with her plan. Even her promise
not to sleep on the streets and to instead pay for a hotel room somewhere did little to improve their moods, so they were all as tense as each other the day classes ended. Harry didn't even get to ride on the Express with the rest of the students the following morning, Dumbledore taking no chance of him disappearing—instead, he was practically escorted off from his last class by a thin-lipped McGonagall, who at least looked as displeased about this as Hermione felt.

Snape summoned her, soon after Harry had been fucking taken, to his office. "You remember our deal?" he asked her and, after pausing a moment to think, Hermione nodded.

"You want to be able to get into touch with Harry and I, when we disappear." She muttered, not particularly invested in the conversation, not while her stomach was churning so violently. "So that you can contact us if there's an emergency."

"I'm aware that Harry will... not be disappearing with you, but Lucius and Narcissa passed on to me that you've told young Mr. Malfoy you already have plans for the holidays and so won't be staying with them." Snape said and Hermione nodded again, staying silent. Her Head of House sighed quietly, apparently giving up on conversation as he instead pulled a notebook out from his desk drawer. It was small, hardly bigger then her hand, and a dark brown colour with gold-leaf trimmings. "This," he told her, as she looked at it, a touch confused, "is charmed with a protean charm— are you aware of what that does?"

"It's a spell that links several objects together through a common purpose," Hermione answered. Snape smirked slightly.

"Exactly—five points to Slytherin. This notebook has been linked with a second one, one which will remain in my possession. Whatever you write in the pages of your notebook, or I write in the pages of mine, will be reflected in the other so we can keep in contact. The notebooks heat up when they receive a message. I expect you to keep your notebook with you and check it at least twice a day. Understood?"

"I don't break my promises," Hermione told him, picking up the notebook. The leather cover was startlingly soft to touch. Snape nodded sharply.

"Nor do I." He said, leaning forwards slightly to look her in the eye. "Harry will be safe, Hermione. And if I ever believe that he isn't, I will take steps to ensure it is so."

"I know. I'm just being ridiculous," Hermione said tightly, angry at herself, at her weakness. Snape snorted.

"No, you're being entirely human." He told her. And it was...strangely comforting to hear.

She slept uneasily alone in the bed that night. The following day, even with the compartment packed tight with her friends and housemates—Draco, Blaise, Daphne, Tracey, Theo, Luna, Flora, Hestia, Neville, Greg and Vince all cramming in together—the Express felt emptier then usual. The others were careful not to bother her, seeming to realise she'd prefer to keep her distance, and as Hermione stared out the window at the countryside rushing by, she wondered just when she'd gotten so dependant on others for her happiness...and she wondered just what she'd do if that happiness was ever torn away from her.

(That was a lie, she didn't have to wonder, not really; she knew exactly what she would do. She would make the world burn, would make everyone feel her grief and let none even tangentially responsible survive her rage)
Rita's POV:

Despite popular belief, Rita didn't write her sensationalist articles based on false information and misreported interviews because she didn't have the skills necessary to find the truth—she had been a Ravenclaw, after all; research was her bread and butter. She just genuinely found it more entertaining to do otherwise.

Besides, readers didn't want to hear about how squeaky clean the people she wrote about admittedly often were; they wanted to read about drama and heartbreak and mischief. They wanted to knock down their idols, celebrities and heroes, just as much as they wanted to build them up. And Rita was more then glad to oblige; anything for a story, and anyone would do—she honestly just did not care. More then once she'd been compared to a shark, which she actually found more flattering then anything; a cold-blooded, apex predator, always on the hunt, able to sniff out any blood in the water—what wasn't to love? In her opinion, all good reporters were like sharks, because when they sensed blood they were ruthless about attacking to draw even more.

Harry Potter, everybody's little darling—even with his surprise Sorting—had been a mark, an opportunity for a number of juicy articles. When his name had been pulled from the Goblet, she'd leapt at the chance. The publicity surrounding the international sensation that was the Tournament meant that Dumbledore couldn't keep the press away from Hogwarts—and, more importantly, away from Harry Potter—any longer. Oh, she knew she'd need to be careful; with public opinion the way it was, she'd have to (at least initially) preserve the precious Boy Who Lived's golden image, not rip it to shreds despite her immediate inclination to try, purely just to see if she could.

The first interview during the Weighing of Wands ceremony hadn't told her much about the boy hero; he'd seemed simple, slightly flustered and as attached to his little girlfriend as any pubescent teenage romantic. Very little about him had seemed Slytherin, and she did wonder just how he'd come to be in the House.

And then everything had changed. Rita would be the first to admit she wasn't a nice person, but she wasn't some sadistic monster (though just plain sadistic, yes, undoubtedly so). Children were precious; any witch or wizard would agree. Abuse was exceedingly rare in the Magical World—fertility wasn't exactly booming, so children were at the very least seen as a precious resource to their families. In most circumstances, particularly in Pureblood families, they were doted upon, adored despite the high expectations often heaped on their too-young shoulders (the Skeeter family may not be one of the Sacred Twenty-Eight, but Rita's mother was a Fawley and her father was a Pureblood whose grandfather had immigrated to Britain from the United States—she knew how Purebloods and their politics worked, knew what they valued).

Abuse. It was an ugly word, used to describe something even uglier. It was one scandal she rarely splashed over the front page of any newspaper she could, and certainly never when it involved a child. Harry Potter, an abused child—while she'd certainly considered it the story of the century, she wouldn't have actually published it if the boy hadn't given her permission.

But he had. And oh, it hadn't just stopped there—because Harry Potter had brought her a far juicier scandal, led her to a trail of blood in the water ready for her to follow to bigger prey.

Albus Dumbledore.

She'd never liked him; he was far too ineffectual in his various posts, far too invested in the image he projected and entirely useless whenever it actually mattered. Bringing him to his knees would be a delight. And, Rita thought smugly as she apparated back to her house, she'd just signed the
contract that meant she'd be paid for doing so.

Could it get any better?

Her good mood, however, soured in the blink of an eye as she walked through her front-door. She knew the moment she entered her brownstone that she wasn't alone— it was a prickling sensation on the back of her neck that had her tensing up and reaching for her wand, just moments before a voice called out a greeting;

"Good evening, tesoro."

Rita immediately relaxed. That voice, rich and sensual, edged with command and accentuated with something undeniably foreign... it was unforgettable, and certainly unmistakable.

She made her way straight for her bedroom, pausing only to take off her favourite emerald green travelling cloak lined with maroon fur before pushing open the door to a breathtakingly familiar, utterly captivating sight. Illuminated in the soft light of her bedroom was a woman who could give the French Champion, Fleur Delacour, and all her veela kith and kin some serious competition.

Kings and paupers alike loved describing a woman's beauty; in odes and spiels, in song and art, all painstakingly attempting to describe the sight before them. Wars and blood feuds both often started over a woman whose visage made man lose all sense and reason, from the curve of her breasts, to the arch of her neck and the sway of her hips.

Adrienne Erzsébet Zabini, née Cianciulli, the woman currently entirely naked and stretched out languidly on Rita's featherbed, every inch of her glowing like cold moonbeams in the soft candlelight, possessed just such a hauntingly lovely visage, the very sort that Rita could write a thousand odes for without ever coming close to truly capturing it.

Rita had first met Adrienne Cianciulli– or Addie, as she'd fondly nick-named the girl– when the Italian girl transferred to Hogwarts at the start of their third year. Even then, Addie was a sight to behold; ebony lacquered hair that flowed like silk to her slender hips, eyes that sparkled with jewel-tones of deep blues, greens and onyx, and porcelain skin an enchanting and startlingly pale shade, like fresh-fallen snow– utterly flawless. At just twelve years old, she had been the envied and coveted of all at Hogwarts.

Rita hadn't wanted to like her– at the tender age of thirteen, she'd been awfully self-conscious about the heavy-jawed shape of her face and her need for glasses, always wearing her blonde curls long and a pair of frameless spectacles to try and hide her childishly perceived imperfections– but they'd been paired together in Transfiguration, both of them top of the class, and she hadn't been able to resist the Slytherin's sharp tongue, sharper mind and sharper-yet smile. Behind Addie's fair, exquisite face, Rita had quickly learned, was ice and steel and the sort of dark, hungry shadows that were always restless.

Each as ambitious as the other, their... 'friendship' had slowly grown and evolved as they'd studied together out of class, usually in secret. Rita had learned that while Addie had been born in Italy, she and her mother had travelled extensively over Europe and she'd spent a good portion of her childhood in Slovakia, where her mother's family originated and her great-grandmother still lived. Addie always preferred staying with her great-grandmother, she'd admitted– her mother, Matilde-Elisabetta Cianciulli, was a social climber, constantly chasing after richer, wealthier men with bigger and better titles. Her great-grandmother– her dédanya– had high expectations of her, but her expectations leant more towards Addie learning the old family magicks and one day having an heiress to pass them along to. Matilde-Elisabetta was determined to groom Addie in such a way to marry her up as high as possible.
(It would be years and years later that Addie would finally admit that her mother's desperation and obsession with class and marriage and wealth despite their already prestigious lineage– as well as her own subsequent insecurities regarding such things– came from the fact that Addie was actually born out of wedlock, to an already married man who'd never had any intention of leaving his Contessa wife for Matilde-Elisabetta)

Rita, in return, had shared pieces of her own childhood, growing up in a very proper British household with a father that splashed about his gold in blatant overcompensation due to his insecurity over not being Sacred Twenty-Eight and a mother who loved to be spoiled with expensive jewels, tailored robes and glamorous parties. Julian and Clementine Skeeter loved her very much, but they both expected her to marry a Pureblood of high-standing from one of the Sacred Twenty-Eight families as soon as she graduated, her mother seeing it as the proper thing for a young witch to do while her father saw his daughter's marriage as a way to fully integrate himself into the upper-crust Pureblood circles that his wealth and marriage alone could not.

Unsurprisingly, she and Addie had bonded over their shared, similar frustrations. Rita had no interest in boys, marriage, boys, children or boys (or men, for that matter). She'd much rather have a successful, lucrative career then a wedding, husband and offspring. Adrienne didn't mind the idea of getting married to a wealthy lord or count or duke with lots of gold, properties and titles, but the thought of simply settling was repugnant to her– she dreamed of traveling the world without her mother's presence or her dédanya's influence, of meeting new and interesting people around the globe and thoroughly enjoying herself (with those new and interesting people), not of being tied to one man for the entirety of her life.

Pureblood society in most European countries was... not exactly supportive of such dreams and ambitions. Oh, it wasn't misogynistic, not really– as witches, they were fully capable of acquiring a Mastery in the field of their choice, assuming leadership positions in government or even becoming the materfamilias of their family over a younger brother, so long as when it came to marriage the husband was the one to take on the family name. For Circe's sake, a (Pureblood) witch could even become Minister for Magic, or that country's equivalent, if she so desired– but whatever pathway a witch chose, she'd still be expected to have married and produced at least one heir before reaching her mid-twenties. Such a prospect was the opposite of thrilling.

During their sixth year, Rita and Addie's private Transfiguration study sessions finally bore the long-awaited (forbidden) fruit– they had both achieved successful (illegal) animagus transformations. Rita was very fond of her little stout, oval Cotinis Nitida form, with its curled antenna, shiny shell an identical shade of green to her eyes and elytra with margins the same blonde-yellow colour as her hair. Addie's form was a Latrodectus Hasseltii– a glossy black arachnid from the genus of widow spiders, highly venomous and with a very distinctive red hourglass on its lower-back.

After they'd changed back, Addie had smiled, slow and hungry and extraordinarily beautiful.

Later, while reading about their new forms, Rita would learn that male redback spiders willingly sacrificed themselves to the female during sex by somersaulting into her mouth so she'd eat him. The way Addie's sharp smiles always seemed to show her teeth, startlingly white against her red lips, took on a new, disturbing, predatory significance. Later, Rita would start to dream about that smile, terrifying and terrible; she would dream of hungry, wailing, ravenous things she saw in it, of knife-sharp teeth, the sharp wet sounds of bone being broken and death.

In that shared moment, however, Rita looked Addie straight in the eye and smiled right back at her, mouth curving as sharp as that of any shark that had learned to walk on land.
During their seventh and final year at Hogwarts, Rita learned that Addie kissed like she moved, with that same devastating grace. She learned that while men weren't at all interesting, women very much were. And she learned that her parents had died, victims of the dragonpox outbreak that had claimed a number of lives, leaving her free to turn down various offered betrothal contracts and instead apply for an internship at *Witch Weekly* when she graduated.

(Addie had married a wealthy lord within months of graduating, following a 'whirlwind romance'. When he died, barely a year later, Rita's greatest surprise had likely been her lack-of such a thing)

"You are thinking hard, *tesoro,*" Addie noted, bringing Rita's thoughts back to the present, to the woman on her bed.

Addie's hair pooled like cold silk over Rita's pillows, dark as midnight on the white velvet, her eyes glimmering in fine, bright jewel-tones. Her lips were painted red and curved in a slow, sly, satisfied smile that even a cat would be hard-pressed to match the sheer hedonistic laziness of. Stunningly, breathtakingly beautiful could not come close to describing her. It never did. It was little surprise that men lined up for her hand in marriage, even knowing the fate of those that had come before them.

"It's been far too long," Addie murmured, wrapping her mouth around the words in a very distracting way.

"Well your poor husband was quite unwell," Rita replied, "I understood you needed to stay and care for him." Addie's teeth flashed as she laughed, white like perfection. Rita smiled back, shrugging off her robes and draping them over her dresser.

"I'm afraid my poor, poor *amore* passed away several days ago," Addie said, sudden, sorrowful tears glistening in her bright, downcast eyes, an expression of abject grief crossing her lovely face.

"How tragic," Rita deadpanned, slipping out of her underthings before sliding onto the bed. "You know, I had plans for this evening. I've got a big contract, lots of work to do." She playfully complained. Addie smiled, tears disappearing as suddenly as they'd appeared, and reached up, winding a slender hand in Rita's blonde curls to draw her head down so their lips were only a breath apart.

"It looks like you're done from here, *tesoro,*" she breathed, teeth flashing sharp as they dragged over Rita's lip. There was a curl of power in the air that made Rita's blood sing beneath her skin.

"What I think is that I want you to do all the wicked, dirty, filthy things to me that my poor, poor, darling deceased husband was too much of a useless, artless *idiota* to figure out." Her words were a soft caress, her eyes glittering jewel-bright behind their dark veil of fluttering, feathery lashes. Fire poured through Rita's veins, her eyes dilating under the weight of the sex-thick voice and the rolling shiver in the air. She drew a shuddering breath; her pulse drumming an erratic tattoo against the slow glide of Addie's lips now at her pulse.

"Well, I can never deny you anything," she gasped and Addie's smile widened.

"Of course not." She purred. "Nobody can."

And wasn't that the truth?
Rita sometimes thought that her use of a comparison to veela was more accurate then she intended it; Addie wasn't a veela herself, no, but there was just something more about her.

"So, a big contract?" Addie asked lazily, after, when they were both sprawled out over Rita's silken sheets.

"Yes, I got my first payment for it today." Rita replied, feeling a thrill of satisfaction at the memory of the handsome, dark-haired youth with oddly-coloured eyes exchanging with her a heavy pouch of gold for a signed contract. "It's very promising, too-- should be entertaining, challenging and certainly headline-making-- career-making, even, if my career and reputation weren't already exactly where and how they should be-- and I'm being compensated every step of the way."

"Don't leave me in suspense!" Addie poked her sharply in the ribs, pouting her lips and turning dewy doe-eyes on Rita.

"You know, I'm not actually sure if I'm supposed to be telling anyone," Rita noted, frowning slightly as she recalled it hadn't been mentioned in the contract. Losing the pout, Addie instead arched an elegant, perfectly-sculptured dark brow in a wordless command and Rita laughed, amused at the haughty demand. "Alright, alright, you wicked creature-- I've been commissioned to write an expose on Dumbledore. I'm going to tear him to shreds."

Because if Addie really did have some sort of creature blood, then all the better that the old warlock was removed from power. Rita would not deny how much she despised that she still hadn't been able to mar the image Dumbledore projected to the Magical World, not without turning Britain-- and possibly the wider, international Magical communities-- against her. Except that was all about to change, wasn't it?

There was blood in the water, she thought with a smile that was sharkish and cruel, and Rita was ready to hunt.

"Blaise has so very many things to say about that man," Addie stated, her mouth twisting in distaste, "and not one of them good." Rita made a humming sound of consideration.

Blaise Stefano Gábor Zabini had certainly been a surprise to first hear about, nearly fifteen years ago now. With his dark skin, darker hair and fierce, steely blue-grey eyes, Addie's second husband, Conte Gennaro Cesare Eriprando Zabini, had been perhaps the only husband Addie had ever been genuinely attached to. Gennaro was certainly the only one she'd had a child with, and 'Zabini' was the surname she used when between husbands.

Rita had initially worried that the Conte intended to leave his fortune to his heirs and Blaise had been conceived as a way for Addie to get the money, but Addie clearly loved her son-- and from the photographs in the Prophet from the Yule Ball, Blaise had certainly inherited her looks; they both had the same quality to them, like a sheathed blade; beautiful and gleaming and more than capable of slitting her throat at a single moment of inattention-- and sweet Morgana if that wasn't bizarrely enticing.

"I think Harry mentioned your Blaise in one of our interviews," she remembered idly.

"Harry Potter... delightful boy, that one. His friend even more so." Addie smiled, a hint of something sharp-- something predatory-- evident in the curve of it, the flash of white between the red.

"Hermione Granger. Or should I say, Hermione Dagworth-Granger." That certainly had been an intriguing piece of information to uncover. "Interesting girl, that one."
"Very interesting girl." Addie agreed. "I've told her to write to me, if she wants. My dear dédanya has always wanted a great-great-granddaughter for me to pass along our old magicks but my Blaise is enough for me. Pregnancy was... not something I'd care to repeat."

"You must really see something in her," Rita noted, surprised.

"Yes," Addie smiled. "I see a younger version of myself."

And wasn't that just terrifying?

"Harry Potter is safe, I hope," Rita wanted to clarify and Addie laughed.

"I said a younger version of myself, not a younger me. There are many similarities, but we are not exact copies. Just close enough that there are things I can teach her that will be valuable. She and that boy of hers will do great things one day, tesoro, if given the chance. And considering that Blaise fully intends to support her, to be at her side as she works to ensure such a chance will come about, I intend to do everything in my power to see that they succeed."

"A British husband next, then? It'll be nice having you closer." Rita said, a touch shaken by the pure conviction in Addie's voice, by the unnatural brightness in her eyes, the sheer enticement that sucked her in like pools of bottomless quicksand (which was certainly not a comforting metaphor).

"Yes," Addie agreed, eyes still too-bright, too-beautiful, too-ensnaring; enough to drown in. Enough to make the one to whom their draw was released on want to drown in them and to never come back up for air. "Ah, my apologies," Addie said, blinking suddenly and breaking Rita from her half-trance. Rita shook her head slightly.

"Warn a girl," she complained half-heartedly, not truly bothered by it. It was just something that happened occasionally with Addie.

Addie just smirked. "So what do you have on Dumbledore so far?" She asked, instead. "Because while travelling Europe, I came across some interesting rumours from dédanya's acquaintances, the ones old enough to remember the wars. Rumours I think you'll be very interested in."

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**Hermione's POV:**

It was late afternoon by the time she exited King's Cross Station and verging on evening when she approached the estates.

Everything was achingly familiar; the bite of the wind on her face, the crunch of dirt, gravel and broken glass under her boots and the brilliant mess of the violent sunset above her, the wide expense of sky streaked with pinks, oranges and reds like paint spilled across a canvas by a careless child, or perhaps it was closer to the splatter of blood caused by the repetitive swing of a weapon, splashing and smearing the bleak world with sharp, unforgettable colour.

Once away from the station she'd changed her clothes, switching from the tailored emerald silk blouse, dark wool-blend trousers and slim-cut cashmere coat into a pair of stained jeans and a ragged knitted sweater over which she wore a dark, threadbare jacket. Her long, loose curls had been bound back in a tight braid and she'd vanished the nail-polish from her fingers. She'd kept on her dragon-hide boots, simply spelling them with a notice-me not charm to keep attention off the expensive 'leather'— it would do her no good to turn up looking like money.
She was careful to look poor without looking like she was homeless, a familiar exercise— it had always been a balancing act; if she looked like she lived on the streets, people could call the police and it was only the kind officers who'd try to stick her in a group home, the dirty ones would try to do much worse and she'd really prefer to avoid the sort of incident that could lead to breaking the law against casting magic on muggles.

She had no idea where to find Sting— it felt like forever since she'd returned here, and the 'bases' she remembered were no doubt abandoned by now. She walked along familiar streets, the sort where the working girls and boys could be found, hoping to see a familiar face. And she did.

Glitter looked unchanged from how Hermione remembered her. She'd likely have been very beautiful once, with her liquid eyes, long lashes and soft mouth, but as it was, she was about twenty pounds underweight, the bones of her face perfectly symmetrical but far too pronounced. She was also far too pale and covered in faint scars and bruises at varying stages of healing.

She smiled gently at Hermione, but the smile didn't reach her eyes and she still had that awful, drowning expression on her face that she looked at everyone with. "It's been some time, sweetness," the long-time prostitute greeted her. "I was hopin' you'd moved on ta better things."

"I have," Hermione admitted. "I came back to repay a debt."

"'S honourable of you, love. Ain't much honour here, though, Jane."

"Hermione," she corrected the woman on impulse. "My name— it's Hermione." Glitter looked surprised.

"You really aren't comin' back, huh?" She said, a much more genuine smile curling her sparkly pink-painted lips. "I'm real glad, hun. Real glad. Sure you don' wanna make a clean break? No good can come from lookin' back on this sort o' past, love."

"I have to," Hermione said firmly and Glitter sighed.

"You'll be lookin' for that crowd ya ran with, then— Pike's lot." Hermione nodded and she sighed again.

"Rosie'll be two streets down. She's still with them, most'a the time. She'll know where they're all kippin'."

"Rosie... oh, you mean Cat," Hermione realised, and Glitter shrugged lightly.

"I always do hope you girls get ta make somethin' of yourselves," she said, lifting a hand to tap her earring, a gaudy fake gemstone. "I'm real glad ta see ya have, hun." Hermione was confused for a moment then almost groaned aloud at the realisation, lifting her hands to the earrings she'd forgotten she was wearing and quickly removing them. The twin tear-drop diamonds glittered on her too-soft palm and she stared down at them, trying to remember where she'd gotten them. She couldn't remember.

Her stomach twisted and she was assaulted by a barrage of memories of struggling to survive; of running, hiding, freezing, seeking shelter from torrential downpours and flashes of lightning or mounds of snow, facing off criminals, addicts, homeless, the drunk and police alike, all those who took issue with her general existence— or worse, the ones who took interest in her general appearance— of getting into fights, taking beatings, of stealing just to get the gnawing hunger and bone-deep cold to go away, just for a bit. Through sweat, and blood, and tears, she had managed to build herself as much of a life as she could; she found herself bolt holes, she stole money, clothes,
food, jewellery, whatever it took.

She wondered when she'd stopped looking at all the finery around her, all the finery that had just been fucking *given* to her, and thinking of how long it could keep her warm and fed. When had it just become another part of her day-to-day life?

*She didn't remember.*

Her first, second and third year, even, at Hogwarts, everything had still been... not raw, but still so overwhelmingly present inside her. There had been days where she'd wake up with a frantic feeling underneath her skin, memories of freezing, starving nights, of never knowing when she was going to eat again, of fear that someone would come after her, fear that they would catch her. Those days, she'd obsessively check her belongings, making note of her valuables, while planning escape routes and contingencies. Those nights, she'd rarely sleep at all for the frantic feeling in her brain. She mostly didn't even try. Since her summer at Riddle Manor, however, and the practically permanent arrangement of sleeping next to Harry, those days had been... well, she *couldn't remember* the last time she'd had a day like that.

Glitter hadn't said anything while Hermione stared at the earrings her hand. It was a sort of unspoken rule– 'you shut up when they shut up'.

"Here," she said abruptly, holding her hand out towards Glitter. "Take them. They're real– you should get a good price for them."

"Ta," Glitter said, her eyes widening a bit but otherwise concealing her surprise as she accepted the earrings, slipping them into her bra and out of sight.

"Thank you, Glitter." Hermione said and Glitter gave her another soft smile.

"Deirdre," she corrected and her smile widened a bit at Hermione's surprise. "Gotta figure it's fair. Goodbye, Hermione. Don't take this th' wrong way, sweetness, but I hope I don' see ya again."

Hermione found Cat– or Rose, while she was working– where Glitter had said she'd be. Cat hadn't changed; long red hair, sticky red lips and dead eyes. Sharpie had always said that Cat was one of those dead things that kept breathing. The sheer levels of apathy the girl was capable of had always been eerie; apparently, that hadn't changed in the two years since Hermione had last seen her.

Hermione very much did not want to have to hang around and wait for Cat to finish 'working' for the evening and fortunately Cat was the sort of person that wouldn't go telling everyone if Hermione paid her the equivalent of a night's work in trade for a guide back to where "Pike's lot" were currently calling their base.

"How are things?" Hermione ventured, a touch hesitantly, as they walked together. Cat shrugged, smacking her ever-present gum before answering.

"Same as ever. Had some territory trouble, 'bout a year back, bu' things're mostly settled. Got a few new younger ones hangin' round. Some'a us are keepin' an eye on 'em."

Hermione nodded. There was an odd comradery that existed between the street kids. Even if they did compete over food, shelter and all that, with the older kids often picking on the younger ones, they did have an unspoken agreement to help each other avoid adults and outright starvation as well as passing on bits of information picked up through experience, like rubbing wax onto clothes in winter to repel water and snow and to avoid using duct tape on shoes, because it meant less traction which made it harder to run.
And that sort of information could be more valuable than gold. It could mean the difference between succumbing to hypothermia overnight or surviving to another day, between going hungry or finding a shelter or soup kitchen that was safe—kids weren't really supposed to be homeless and a lot of organizations felt pressured to alert the police when homeless children came to them so that they could get the kids off the street. And that? That usually meant sending them straight back into whatever abusive, hellish situation they fled from in the first place, which was why homeless kids hardly ever took advantage of the help that was out there. The free food wasn't worth the risk of being shunted right back into whatever they'd escaped so they physically wouldn't go and get free food, even if they were starving.

The warehouse Cat led them to was old, falling apart. The inside wasn't any better then the outside. Shabby mattresses were scattered about, a burnt-out fire had scorched a large black stain on the uneven concrete ground and there were enough gaps in the roof and walls that Hermione could see the stars in the night sky above them.

Hornet was the first one Hermione saw, as she walked in. She... had grown. Taller but not at all wider, Hornet was still all sharp angles and skinny limbs. Some people might think she looked delicate, all small and baby-faced with big eyes like a doll, but the spattering of ropey scars on her bony knuckles, hollow cheeks and gaze sharp and cutting as broken glass called that out as the lie it was. She looked, Hermione thought, like any street rat, any homeless kid; unmoored, untamed, unfed—a feral child in a feral world.

She was, Hermione realised with a small amount of shock, now about the same age that Hermione had been when she'd received her Hogwarts letter. Looking at her, Hermione wondered if this was what Snape had seen when he'd met her at Hyde Park—someone cold and disillusioned and half-savage; too thin, too rough and too wild. Too dangerous.

Hornet didn't look hostile, but she didn't look particularly welcoming. "What're yeh doin' 'ere?" she asked, tired and wary. "Thought you was long gone. 'Specially when ya didn' even come 'round when Sting got 'is 'ead bashed in."

Hermione choked; her chest violently constricted, her lungs unable to properly inhale oxygen. "What?" She whispered, swaying in place. It felt like her blood had frozen to ice, like it would only take a nudge (or a word, a confirmation) for her to shatter.

"Janey? Tha' you, babe?" Pike's surprised voice washed over her. Hermione turned numbly towards him and he grimaced. "Shit, ya don' look good. What th' fuck happened?"

"Is it true?" She demanded, her voice rasping like she had a mouthful of ash and gravel, like she'd swallowed broken glass. "Is he— is Sting...?" She couldn't even say it.

"Aw fuck," Pike winced and that was answer enough, even without his nod. "Yeah, Jane. He's gone, babe."

Hermione made a sound like she'd just been stabbed. Her mouth tasted like blood but she barely noticed as her brain violently rejected what she'd just been told. In that moment, her limbs felt like lead, refusing to obey her commands. She just stared blankly at Pike, unable to properly process what he'd just spat at her.

Sting was dead.

Sting was dead.

Sting was dead and it was like a fucking knife to her heart. Her grief pressed down so heavily that
she couldn't breathe, couldn't even think.

She just... fuck, she just wanted to get so drunk that she was still intoxicated the next day and she couldn't remember the night before. She wanted to get so high her body felt like an abstract four dimensional concept. She wanted to run until her limbs went numb, chain smoke until her lungs burned with every breath and fight until the roar of adrenaline blocked everything else out.

She wanted to fucking forget.

"Aw fuck, Janey," Pike sighed again, his mouth twisting unhappily. There was a silent sympathy in his eyes, he knew how close the two of them had been before she disappeared off, but Hermione was too numb to it. She felt numb to everything.

Pike slung an arm over her shoulder and, in her state of shock, she let him. He steered her over to one of the corners, where a gaggle of teenagers had gathered— she recognised Jackie, Jill, Hornet, Cat, Sledge and Pike. These were the more 'original' crew, the ones she'd known best. There had been others— Josie, Sharpie, Lacey, El, Flea, Rottweiler, Doc and, of course, Nymph— but they were gone.

And now Sting was too.

Hermione took a shaky, trembling breath and tried not to think about how wrong it was that he was gone. She felt wrong, restless. Her nerves were a trail of fire and her knuckles throbbed with a phantom sensation that set her mind clawing for that memory, eager to drown her thundering pulse. And god, did she feel raw all over, bare to be dissected.

And then, because apparently the whole fucking trip was fucking cursed, two more people entered the warehouse, one of them horribly, hatefully familiar. He was around twenty now, lean and hard looking; uncomfortably handsome, but in a cruel, sharp way. Seeing him made her stomach curdle, made icy rage trickle through her veins.

With instincts as honed as hers to sense when eyes were locked on him, it was little surprise that his head jerked over in her direction, to see her looking straight at him. It took a moment for recognition to spark in his eyes, but then Jed's mouth curved into a sly-fox smile she knew far too well.

Intimately so.

***sensitive material ahead***

**When Hermione is Jane and Jane is nine, it's Jed who introduces her to the wide, wild world of sex.**

_He teaches her to kiss first and she likes it, likes learning her how to use her tongue to kiss less like someone with exactly no experience, likes to wind her fingers in his hair and leave little teeth marks on his skin._

_The first time they fuck, Jed gives her alcohol before, coaxes her into drinking it and then lays her down on a mattress while her head spins, her vision is blurry and she can't think straight. "D'ya want this?" She vaguely remembers him asking, over and over. Later on she'll figure out that him 'asking' for 'permission' was just another way to manipulate her. That if she'd said no, instead of giving a confused, half-conscious agreement, he'd likely have just poured more cheap, burning whiskey down her throat and used her after she'd passed out._
After, she convinces herself he surely never meant to go that far. And she did say yes before he kissed her harder than he ever had and pulled off her clothing.

The pain is dulled by the alcohol but it's still agonising, still makes her feel like she's been torn in half, makes her cry and struggle and beg. He doesn't move off her, out of her, doesn't lift his hands from the bruises he's making on her thin wrists as he holds her down. He does not stop and it feels as if the more he pushes into her the more she is, in turn, being driven out of herself. She has nowhere to hide as the tormented flesh he is violating belongs solely to him and she no longer has any claim to it or any other part of her person. In that moment, she completely loses all sense of self, entirely defeated lying beneath him and thinking that now there is truly nothing left within her that she can call her own.

When he's done, when he's rolled away from her, she's barely conscious anymore. There's tear tracks dried on her cheeks, purpling marks all over her body and a frankly worrying amount of blood beneath her. She passes out in a dizzying, alcohol-induced haze of pain and confusion.

The next morning Jed smiles and kisses her, nurses her through her first hangover, holding her hair away from her face as she vomits. Everyone treats it as a milestone and she doesn't realise yet, not until too late, that the others are talking about her first hangover, not the sex. If they'd known what Jed done, while the others were too drunk or high or absent to notice, they would not have been nearly so amused.

Instead, nobody seems to notice her become more quiet and withdrawn then usual, dark marks on her wrists, mouth swollen and gait unsteady. Her girl parts are swollen, stinging and bleeding into her underpants. It feels like the flesh has been split and torn and she wants to claw off her own skin, wants to stand under scalding water until she feels clean. Jed, though, Jed touches her and praises her and smiles at her like she's precious and beautiful and not dirty and half-broken like she feels.

Her perception of normal sexual behaviour is skewered; two of her only friends are underage prostitutes, most of the homeless girls and a good few of the boys she knows work the street corners, selling their bodies for a handful of quid. In this world that she's raised herself in, sex is a commodity, a business transaction.

Jed gives her nice things, after– books, candy, even a necklace. And she remembers, from the fog of that night, giving Jed permission even though she didn't really realise just what she was giving permission for, or just how far he'd been intending to go.

Jane doesn't want to do it again. Her memories of the night are foggy; blurred and only half realised, a sickly remembrance of wretched, stabbing pain and been torn in half. But Jed takes her somewhere where they are alone, another old warehouse, this one smaller and crumbling but with a ratty mattress laid against a wall. He undresses her and pushes firmly so she's laying down and she wants to say something but every time she opens her mouth he kisses her. She cries again, but it doesn't hurt as much this time. The lancing, splitting pain is a duller, aching and throbbing sort of agony, not sharp and tearing.

Jed cleans up the blood after, helps her redress, kisses her and gives her a notebook she'd pointed out to him a few days ago with two somewhat childish sparkly pens to go with it and some pretty hair clips.

Quiet and hollowed out, feeling as if someone has reached inside her and scooped out all her emotions, Jane looks at the notebook she'd wanted but didn't have the money to buy or the right moment to steal and thinks of Sharpie reeling johns in with red lips and coy smiles while Lacey bats her eyelashes and pouts at them, both trading their hands, mouth and body for payment, and
she remembers the ‘favours’ Josie used to do Rottie in return for her precious heroin when she didn’t have enough cash to cover the costs. Her numb brain finally feels like it’s started to kick into motion again and at the same time that a part of her is irreparably shattered, something else quietly clicks into place, a calculated understanding of how this thing between her and Jed is going to work.

She waits until the next time, for Jed is nothing if not predictable, and smiles sweetly at him, for the first time undressing herself. She’s nothing special to look at— a skinny slip of a girl with pale skin, jutting ribs, twig-like arms and hair that looks like a bird tried nesting in it. But her observations have already shown her that men, boys, don’t care about how women and girls look; it’s their mouths, it’s between their legs, it’s their hands, their fingers and how they use them, that’s what matters.

She lays down on the mattress and this time ignores the pain, blinks back the tears and focuses instead on kissing Jed, on trying to reciprocate his actions, moving her hips in a way that made him go even deeper inside her, causing fresh lances of agonising, stabbing pain that she stubbornly ignores. He gives her a book this time and a cupcake and a handful of chocolates in cellophane wrappers.

"Oh I wanted to read this!" She exclaims, which is actually true, and smiles 'shyly' at Jed. She gives it a day, disappearing off to read her hard-earned prize and then finding Jed afterward. She dresses soft and sweet in her only dress, wearing an innocent expression on her face and the sparkly clips he gave her in her hair. "I read my new book," she tells him, all 'shy' again, biting her lip and peeking up at him from under her lashes. “There are more in the series, you know."

"Yeah?" Jed says and she steels herself, summoning her courage before reaching out with a hand that she’s fiercely proud doesn’t tremble at all to touch Jed over his pants, to gently stroke him into hardness before pulling him out of his old, worn jeans and kneeling down.

She has very mixed feelings about what happens next. It doesn’t hurt, at least, not like sex anyway. Her throat burns from the bile that kept rising up, her nose is stuffy and her jaw aches something fierce. He’d been too fast, too rough, too impatient, but he’d finished quickly— quicker then he had when they shagged. So not all bad— and she couldn’t deny that despite the position she’d originally thought was demeaning, having to kneel in front of the older boy, unlike when Jed had just been pounding into her here she’d had far better control of the situation, far more power. She might have been the one on her knees but it had been Jed grabbing her hair and babbling her name, over and over.

She tucks him away, gives him another sweet smile and then leaves him. That evening he gives her the next three books in the series and she pulls him out of the warehouse, over to the nearby park where she lets him fuck her.

It’s that easy. She tells him what she wants, then either sucks him off or gives him a handjob and once he’s given her what she’s asked for they’ll shag on the closest appropriate surface. The sex barely hurts anymore, but she still prefers using her mouth, likes the power and control of it.

The friendship she’d once felt for Jed is gone. Long, long gone. Instead, a block of ice encases her heart when she thinks of him and that empty, hollowed-out feeling drains her memories of spending time with him of anything good. She still smiles and laughs and kisses him like nothing has changed, but there is something very cold that burns with an icy rage inside her, something that grows sharp and bitter and numbing.

Sometimes the rage is so overwhelming and suffocating that she can’t breathe and her throat feels blocked, like she’s choking on the hate. Other times she feels like she’s choking on something that
feels less like hate and more like grief over the loss of something she doesn't understand, a grief that is so thick and heavy she might just suffocate on it.

She's thought about killing people before– the nuns, the other children at the orphanage, the bastard who stabbed Rooster; just the bleak fantasies of a beaten down child offered only cruelty by those who surround her. Jed is the first person she's actually looked at though and thought 'I will make you scream before I let you die'. It's when she's struck with the sudden realisation that she means it, that she wants to cut him open from ear to ear and watch him bleed out, that she knows this thing between them has to end. She's got everything she wanted from him anyway- she doesn't even have to get on her knees now for him to get a hint. An offhand comment is enough to send him running for whatever it is she wants.

The 'breakup' isn't memorable. She tells him their arrangement is finished. He calls her some unflattering things, but she couldn't care less– not about him. He's worthless to her, but more then that he's less then her.

It's a few months later, in a library, that Jane picks up a book called 'Lolita'. She cries in the bathroom of the library after reading it, because she understands now but that doesn't make it hurt any less. These days it feels like she's constantly raw with emotion, filled with rage, hate and the heavy grief that's so intensely suffocating sometimes it's hard to even force herself to get up in the mornings, even with the knowledge that laying there all day will mean she'll starve.

Eventually she'll stop hurting so much. She's sharper and angrier and more closed off but the fresh wounds stop bleeding. The wounds leave behind scars, though, scars that don't fade, won't ever fade. There are shadows in her eyes and a coldness in her heart and Jane swears she'll never let herself be hurt like that again.

(And then she finds a tiny green-eyed girl with long red hair and cigarette burns who smiles shyly at her and trusts her and her new sharp edges start to soften for the child who goes by 'Nymph').

***end of recollection***

- Hate and rage, grief and loss; the violent emotions twisted and churned inside her, dangerous and volatile as an unlit molotov cocktail, just a spark away from an explosion, and Hermione unflinchingly stared straight back at Jed, smiling with all her teeth at the boy who tricked and manipulated a vulnerable child into being his willing victim. Meeting his eyes with her own, she showed him her teeth in a silent dare for him to stretch his hand within reach while her teeth were already bared.

He didn't get the message. Of course not; for all his street-smarts and sly-cunning, he was never one of the smarter runaways. Instead, he practically sauntered over to her, the teenager he'd entered the warehouse with trailing after him. Thin, plain, dirty and threadbare, his companion had the sort of appearance that was easy to overlook— Hermione could see a bump in his jeans, however, that told anyone who knew what to look for that he was armed.

"Well, well, well," Jed grinned, at least intelligent enough to stop before he got too close— she'd probably knife him if he tried. "Ya have grown up, haven't ya? Lookin' real pretty, Janey."

"Go fuck yourself, Jed," she replied bluntly. Pike, whose arm was still wrapped around her, gave Jed a warning look.

"Hit on 'er later, Jed— she's jus' found out 'bout Sting, give 'er some peace." He ordered. Hermione
felt her entire body flinch at Sting's name been spoken out loud and Pike squeezed her gently. "D'ya want somethin' ta help ya take th' edge off?" he asked, his face sympathetic. Hermione knew she should say no, fuck no, but she was drowning in her own emotions, her Occlumency shields were being mercilessly battered, floodgates against a tsunami, and right now she just wanted to forget. And so, she decided fuck it and nodded.

Pike tugged her down so she was sitting on the uneven stone ground, Hornet shifting over so she was on her other side, with Cat then curled up beside her and Jackie, Jill and Sledge across from them. Jed and the boy with him, the one she didn't know— Bones, Cat called him— also made themselves comfortable, so the group of them formed a sort of circle. Pike fished a joint out of his pocket, lighting it up with an easy flick of a lighter. Hermione stared at the eddying wisps of smoke as he pressed it to her lips and she breathed the drug in, held it in her lungs and then tilted her head back and blew the smoke up, up, up, watching it drift towards one of the gaps in the warehouse roof.

The joint was passed around and Hermione could feel herself calming down as her mind started to turn foggy. At some point a plastic cup was pushed into her hands as a bottle of cheap, shitty whiskey was shared around the circle. The drink inside was bitter and strong and she winced as she forced herself to swallow it before accepting the joint again and sucking in another lungful of smoke. And then another. And another.

The room started spinning around her, and Hermione swayed in place.

"Jane, ya doin' okay?"

Even though he was right beside her, it sounded more like Pike was across the room. She blinked a few times but couldn't get her eyes to focus. Pike was just a blur of himself, wavering just like his voice was in her ears.

"Everything's spinning," She admitted. She tried to brush a few stray curls out of her face but it only made them plaster against the clamminess of her forehead, and she realized she wasn't just dizzy but sweating and shaking too.

"Well, she's righ' done for th' night," someone commented.

"C'mon, babe," two hands grabbed her and half carried, half dragged her across the warehouse floor, dumping her on one of the battered mattresses that had likely been grabbed from the side of the road or a dump. It smelled faintly of a mix of mildew, ammonia and bile, and its broken springs jabbed uncomfortably into her spine. She tried to move, to roll over, but her body was sluggish, reluctant to obey.

"She don' look so good," Sledge remarked.

"She'll be fine," snorted Jed. "She's jus' gone all soft 'n civilised on us." This prompted a round of laughter and Hermione turned her head, squinting towards the sound. Everything was a blur and she could make out Pike– the one who had carried her over to the mattress— standing up and walking away. She searched for the others but she couldn't see them in the shadows.

"I'm headin' out; night's still young. Any'a you lot comin'?" Pike asked.

"Nah," Jed said. "I wanna stay 'n hit up some more."

"Me too." Bones agreed.

"Suit yerself," Jackie said with a giggle.
'Richie still got 'is hands on tha' good shit, huh?' Jill asked Pike, and Hermione vaguely heard the sound of voices fading.

Hermione blinked tiredly, her head lolling slightly as she tried to stare after them. Her body still felt strangely disconnected, unresponsive, and she noticed, very abruptly, very unnervingly, that Jed was watching her.

In the back of her head alarm bells had started going off. Something was wrong with her, something was very wrong, but she was too out of it to pay any real attention; the world felt strange and unreal, like it was blurring around the edges. She closed her aching heavy eyelids and felt like she was fucking lost, like she was just drifting away.

"She shouldn' be this outta it." Someone– Bones, she thought– commented.

"Nah, I added somethin' a li'l extra to her drink," a second, much closer, voice commented– Jed. She could hear footsteps, but she couldn't bring herself to open her eyes to see by who was coming closer. She was drifting, floating, flying–

"Janey?" The voice came a time later. It was quiet and distant, like if she tried she could convince herself that she never really heard it at all. The ratty surface of the mattress scratched against the skin of her arms, making her shiver, and something finally pierced through the dreamy blur– where was her jacket and sweater? She didn't remember taking them off. She wasn't sure why she would.

A hand touched her bare shoulder and she tried to jerk away from it, but it was useless. The hand was too strong, too rough and cold, and she couldn't seem to make herself move the way she wanted to. She didn't think she could make herself breathe if she needed to, rather then relying on her subconscious to do it for her.

Fingers stroked roughly along her neck, up her jaw to her lips, and she tried to jerk away from them, not wanting to be touched. She managed to turn her head to the side and the sudden movement made her head spin.

"Jus' go back ta sleep," Bones urged soothingly. "Gotta sleep it off, babe."

Despite the heavy eyelids, she finally managed to force her eyes open. The world was blurry, but she could make out the two figures kneeling near her, both far, far too close. She tried to sit up but couldn't find the energy and when she made her mouth form words they came out jumbled and unfamiliar. Her throat was so dry she sounded sick.

She tried to pull on her magic but like the time Greyback had concussed her, slamming her head into stone, she was struggling to focus enough to pull it forth to protect herself.

"Donnnn't." The slurred word barely made it out of her desert-dry lips, hoarse and dragging.

"Aw, Janey. Still not feelin' good?" The thin mattress barely moved as Jed sat down beside her.

"Whsss gnnn unn?" she managed to slur out. *What's going on?* (She had a sick, sick feeling she knew exactly what was going on, but she couldn't focus, couldn't get her stupid fucking brain to *just fucking work*)

She struggled to get up but arms pushed her back down. Whatever drug was going through her body seemed to be waning in its strength and effectiveness, fought against by her magic, but it wasn't leaving her system fast enough. Her lips parted to speak, to object, but the words barely came out. Her mouth was still bone-dry and stuffed with cotton and the only word she could rasp was 'no'.
"Don' be like tha', sweetie," Jed laughed. "Don't'cha remember all them good times we had, huh?" He tried to kiss her again and she clenched her jaw, gritting her teeth together, only for him to force her mouth apart.

When he leaned over her and grabbed the hem of the thin t-shirt she'd been wearing under the sweater, Hermione tried to claw at his face. He cursed and pulled at her t-shirt roughly. It ripped and she cried out when it yanked abrasively against her skin as he pulled it away but he didn't slow. When he pulled out a switchblade to cut away her bra, however, she immediately stopped struggling and instead started to shut down. Her body started to go numb (numb and blank and desensitized; it was her security, her failsafe, so she could hold onto the fraying edges of that denial until the end–)

She pressed her hand to Jed's chest in one last useless effort and pushed as hard as she could. "Nnno," she rasped. He didn't listen.

Hermione closed her eyes.

(She closed her eyes and felt like she was fucking floating, up, up, up, up–)

Except–

No. No. She'd sworn to herself she'd never be hurt like that again and she meant it. She could still feel the pressure of her flick-knife in her notice-me not charmed boot, she knew where Jed liked to keep his weapons, had spotted earlier where Bones kept his, and they were both fucking dead-meat.

Getting her body to cooperate would be the challenge but even though Hermione was drugged half out of her mind and terrified, she was also fucking furious. And anger? Anger made her focused, made her calculating and vicious; it was a weapon in her arsenal, not a liability, one that had always made her infinitely more dangerous– and not just because of how closely linked it was to accidental magic. Hermione embraced her rage, welcomed it like the old friend it was, and let it surge through her, let it aid her already raging, tumultuous magic burn through the drugs fogging her brain, disconnecting it from her body.

It might not be enough. She was drunk and high as well as roofied, it might be enough– but it gave her a chance, a chance that she took. She peeled open her eyes and her head was spinning and she felt like she was about to vomit, but– but she could see Bones right there. He was right fucking there, the stink of raw spirits foul and heavy on his breath as he leaned over her.

Her stomach twisted violently and for a moment she was convinced she was going to vomit then she pushed the nausea to the side, promising later, and it didn't matter that she couldn't focus, didn't matter that she had no control, her magic (her magic?) just surged through her body; uncontrolled, Dark and chaotic as it burned through her blood, her muscles, her bones. It burned and it hurt, but it gave her the strength to lift her arm up and viciously rake her nails down Bones's face, one finger managing to catch the corner of his eye. One of his fists slammed wildly into her jaw as he went stumbling back, swearing loudly and yanking the knife she'd spotted earlier from his belt as she managed, with gargantuan effort, to shove herself up off the ratty mattress.

It was like she was standing in a cyclone, the world was spiralling so frenziedly around her, but it didn't matter. It didn't matter that Bones was bigger and stronger and had a knife, didn't matter that the world was spinning, didn't matter that she was seeing stars from his punch, because she was better then him— she was better and she was lunging at him, knocking him back, his knife in her hand and then buried in his torso, sliding through skin, slicing flesh and scraping down cartilage until it jammed between two ribs.
Liver, stomach, diaphragm, the bottom of his left lung—Bones died under her, choking on his own blood and suffocating from a collapsing lung that was bubbling red froth from the wound. Knives caused slow, cruel deaths; she wasn't sure who had told her that, but all she could think, viciously so, was good.

"The fuck? You crazy bitch! You fuckin' insane whore!" Jed howled, apparently breaking out of his shock enough to grab her by the wrists and slam her back against the ground. Her hands were slippery enough that the impact knocked the knife from her grip, sending it skittering across the warehouse floor, and Hermione twisted and thrashed in Jed's hold, fighting like a captured wildcat, clawing and yowling in distress, more and more control returning to her with every second that passed.

"Stop fuckin' squirming!" Jed snarled, jamming his switchblade against her throat hard enough to draw blood, but Sting had taught her what to do—when some'un puts a knife to yeh throat ya break their fuckin' fingers!—and she grabbed the wrist holding the blade, keeping it steady with one hand while with the other she wedged her fingers roughly under Jed's, violently pushing down on his joint while yanking back. The sharp crack was only slightly muffled by tissue, skin and sounds of their struggling, and Jed let out a loud howl of pain, dropping the switchblade.

Hermione didn't waste a moment in snatching it up and then she smiled, mouth wet and red, baring her bloodstained teeth up at Jed, who was still straddling her, like a wolf with bloodied jaws, grinning and panting smugly. 'You let me in too close, didn't you?' She taunted him wordlessly, and he didn't have time to react, not fast enough to save himself.

She remembered Sting taking her hand, guiding it through his points of vulnerability, and how to use them in a fight. The last was his throat. "Here," he'd instructed, guiding her hand and tipping back his head slightly, baring his throat. "Feel with your fingertips. On my right side is the right common carotid artery and over here the internal jugular vein. Move over to the left and you've got the left common carotid artery. The carotid arteries are deeper and better protected than the jugular, but you go at them with a blade and enough force and you've got it."

Hermione was still smiling as she slashed a matching red smile through Jed's throat. His blood fucking poured down on her, almost-boiling and closer to black then red in the dim light.

Jed gargled above her, coughing and spluttering up a disgusting amount of blood and bile over her face before slumping down onto her, a heavy and repulsive mass as he lost all muscle control. Hermione managed to squirm out from under him before he lost control of his bodily functions, thank fuck, which meant she avoided getting covered in piss and shit as she alternated between gagging and gasping for breath as she stood half-naked over the two would-be rapists.

She did end up vomiting, the disgustingly ripe potency of the stench of the voided bowels mixing up with the alcohol, drugs, dizziness and left-over terror into a sickly, churning mass of panic and substance-induced nausea. Even after she'd finished retching, the taste of bile remained thick and nauseating in her throat. Looking around her, Hermione found her ragged sweater, carelessly tossed away by greedy hands after being stripped from her body, and she used it to wipe her face clean the best she could, smearing a mixture of blood, bile, tears and mucus on the unravelling synthetic fake wool.

She wanted to use wand to vanish the mess but she wasn't sure she'd be able to channel her magic in any kind of controlled manner, not at that moment, so instead she pulled her jeans back up over her hips, located her discarded jacket and shrugged it on so it covered the worst of the mess and then found her satchel, which she'd spelled with muggle repelling charms to keep it from being stolen,
Hermione waited just long enough to be sure neither Jed or Bones were still breathing before getting the *fuck* out of there. Scenes of what had just happened mixed together with past, present and 'what-if' futures in one giant, haunting mess and she was a mess all the way stumbling out of the warehouse, holding in the hysteria so she didn't lose control of herself.

When she was out, she followed the dark streets, blood-soaked switchblade clenched tight in her hand as she avoided any passerby's, staying in the shadows away from the street lamps until she recognised a familiar street name. Relieved, she managed to make her way over to an old park she just barely remembered that consisted of stunted trees, several straggly bushes, rusted playground equipment covered with graffiti and– most importantly– a public restroom.

She locked herself into one of the bathroom stalls and doubled over once more, fully emptying her stomach into the toilet bowl and ignoring the acidic burn in her throat as she heaved, desperate to ground herself. When her stomach was empty, she stood back up, abdomen aching and head spinning. Her face was wet, her skin covered in a sheen of sweat mixed with more tears and mucus. Some girls could cry and look all pretty and delicate while doing so, dainty tears of sorrow or pain tracing down their cheeks, but Hermione had never been one of them, not when she was genuinely upset. She just got all messy and sticky, with tears and snot dripping everywhere, and she covered her mouth, slumping against the wall of the stall while trying not to make a sound as she shook and cried silent tears.

She let herself break for only minutes before putting herself back together. She wiped the tears from her eyes and stumbled out of the stall to wash her face with the trickle of reddish-stained water that dripped from the rusted tap. It tasted like metal when she licked her dry, cracked lips. Her hands shook as they brushed her tangled mess of hair away from her face. She was teetering on the edge, ready to fall apart at any second.

*(Nothing had *fucking* happened, so why was she reacting like this?)*

She didn't know what to do or who to get if she should get anyone at all, and in the end she contacted one of the only people who had never let her down, one who she knew didn't have to be strong for. She then sank down against the side of the rest rooms until she was slumped on the concrete. She was still too dazed to force herself to move again and her eyes closed of their own accord as she drifted softly into the substance-induced numbness of unconsciousness.

"*Hermione!*"

A hand on her shoulder forced her to open her tired, bloodshot eyes.

It took a moment for her to remember what had happened. It all seemed like a blur, like a disrupted, half-remembered dream. But then she remembered Sting, remembered the canabis, the alcohol, the drug that Jed had slipped her... she remembered being helpless, being stripped down and then finally managing to fight back... and she remembered staggering along the streets, finding somewhere to be sick, to curl up and succumb to the dizziness– but managing to contact someone to help her first.

Professor Snape could never possibly look more comforting to her as he did in that moment, in the dim, artificial light. He stared into her eyes, bent on one knee in front of her in the dirty muggle public loos, his face a mix of concern and horror and muted fury. In his free hand, he held her protean-charmed notebook, the one she'd dropped onto the bathroom floor after writing her vague location into its pages and pleading for him to come get her.

She opened her mouth to say his name but it got caught in her throat. Instead the near-silent tears
started again and he swore violently then picked her up in his arms, holding her tightly to his chest while whispering her name between her choked-down sobs. She was sure he wanted her to say something– anything, even. But she couldn't get her words out.

He apparated them somewhere and, through the mask of her tears, Hermione could make out the front gates of Hogwarts.

Snape didn't let go until she realized he was taking her in the direction of the hospital wing and she started to struggle fiercely. He stopped moving, instantly loosening his arms so she could get to her own feet. It took nearly every ounce of concentration and willpower to stay upright and she had to hold tightly onto him for balance. She let her eyes close and her head loll forwards, gasping heavily.

Snape didn't say anything for several moments, before gently tipping her head up, forcing her to meet his gaze. "Are you hurt?" he asked, and his expression was so sincere and worried that she did her best to stop crying. When she couldn't, she just shook her head in response, because for all it felt like she was dying a little bit inside, violent tremors shaking through her, locking up her muscles and rattling her bones, she wasn't physically injured anywhere badly enough to require medical attention. The dried blood coating her like a second skin wasn't hers. Snape nodded, and gently turned them both away from the hospital wing, towards the dungeons instead.

Her legs were trembling and she didn't complain when Snape, after a slight hesitation to make sure she wasn't going to start panicking again, lifted her back into his arms.

Time started to swim confusingly and it felt like she blinked and they were outside the snake portrait guarding his quarters. Another blink and he was gently laying her across one of the leather couches in his private rooms.

Laying there, she let her eyes close and the blurred, disjointed memories of the night pull her down until the surface had faded from sight and let herself drown in it, dying inside (StingStingSting) but somehow still breathing.

The next time she woke up, the last of the alcohol and the drugs, both the ones she'd voluntarily and involuntarily taken, had worked their way from her system. Her head was clear even though it ached fiercely and she felt like throwing up again, which she blamed on what seemed to be a rather impressive hangover.

She slowly opened her eyes and took in the room around her– she was stretched across a familiar leather couch, covered in one of the quilts that came standard with all the beds in the Slytherin dorm rooms. The dried blood had all been vanished and on the coffee table were two glass phials, each containing a different colored liquid.

"For the hangover," a familiar deep voice said, and Hermione flinched at the sudden sound then cursed herself for it. Snape hesitated in the doorway she presumed led to his sleeping quarters, his expression carefully blank.

"No, it's– it's fine." She said, awkwardly, moving so she was sitting. The quilt fell away and Hermione realized too late her jacket was unzipped, sweater missing and the t-shirt she'd been wearing had been torn off while the straps of her bra had been cut away, leaving her breasts bare to the room. Yanking the blankets back up to her neck, Hermione very determinedly did not meet Snape's eyes.

"One for the headache, one for the nausea?" she asked stiffly, pretending she hadn't just, albeit accidentally, flashed him.
Snape hesitated again, before moving forwards slowly and sitting down on one of the other two couches, the one furthest from her she noted. She appreciated the thoughtfulness of his action, though it wasn't necessary (it really, really wasn't, she told herself firmly). "The one on the left is specifically tailored for hangovers and deals with both the headache and nausea," he said, pausing for a moment before adding. "The one on the right is a contraceptive potion."

Hermione closed her eyes and took a few deep breaths, trying to slow down her racing heart. "I don't– I wasn't assaulted." She said, stiffly. "It's not necessary."

"You should still take it." Snape said, his voice more gentle then she'd had thought possible. "It doesn't just prevent a pregnancy, it also prevents the spread of... certain infections and diseases, a majority which are most commonly transmitted by sexual contact, but some that can be spread and passed along through blood contact. From what I saw, there was... a lot of blood involved."

Barely stopping herself from blanching, Hermione took another short, sharp breath, reaching out blindly with the hand not holding up the quilt to pick up the nearest potion, swallow it down with a grimace and then repeat the process. Shuddering at the taste, she opened her eyes again and Snape was a second too slow to hide his anger– not at her, of course, she wasn't so far gone as to not recognize that it was the situation that enraged him. It still made her duck her head.

"Can I have a shower?" she asked, not quite able to meet his eyes.

"Yes. Of course." Snape said. She was a touch surprised when he led her to his private bathroom, though relieved that she wouldn't have to cross paths with any other students, not yet.

Water would never be hot enough to clean away the memories. She'd long since learned that lovely life lesson. That didn't mean she couldn't try, of course, and she ignored the ugly, purple bruises on her wrists as she scrubbed herself until her skin was red, raw and stinging.

She still felt cold and sick, but that feeling wouldn't fade for a while. Another lovely life lesson, that.

She didn't particularly want to go out and talk to Snape– he'd probably want to discuss what had happened. Hermione was quite happy to never even think about any of it again, already in the process burying the drugged, disjointed memories deep under thick Occlumency walls.

She saw her face in the bathroom mirror and winced– it looked hollowed out and ghastly, bruised and swollen where Bones had hit her, the swell of her lower lip interrupted by an angry red line. She looked... small, in ways that had little to do with her actual size. She looked like someone had sucked the colour out of her– like she was fragile and oh-so breakable in all the ways she'd always been afraid to be.

In the end, she sat silently in the bathroom until there was a knock at the door. Her alone time was up; she pulled on the last whispers of her self-control by the skin of her teeth and prepared to put on a tough face.

She shivered as she left Snape's bathroom, her hair still wet and cold. Snape was standing in his living room looking so tired and defeated that it honestly frightened her to disturb him. "Are you hungry?" He asked, when he noticed her hesitant approach. She flinched at the sudden question before she could stop herself and a flicker of pain crossed Snape's face before he hid it again. Hermione swore viciously in her mind, her mood abruptly tipping to furious. This was hardly the worst thing that had ever happened to her– she was barely even injured, for fuck's sake, there was no point in acting all traumatised and shit.
Hogwarts had softened her. Sting would mock her endlessly for her twitchiness—after he'd poked a few holes in Jed and Bones with a very sharp knife, that was.

But Sting was dead.

Sting was dead; dead and probably not buried—his body would have been found, called in and left unclaimed until it was cremated, the ashes put into storage somewhere and just forgotten. Sting was worth more then that. He was more then that.

He hadn't been good, not really, but he had been kind. To her, at least.

Hermione had never been afraid of him, of the boy who moulded her into the form he knew was necessary to keep her alive. Sting had tended to punctuate his words with... actions, would be the kindest choice of word for explanation, but it had just been what Sting did; expressing his anger, fear, warnings and lessons through skin and bone.

He hadn't been abusive and she'd violently argue that fact to her own death; Sting had cared for her and teaching her how to survive had been more important than a couple of cuts and bruises. He'd kept her alive when she'd been too stupid to know how, like back when she'd been six, still new to the streets and unable to stomach the half rotten food they'd found, or the chemical taste of the cheapest instant meals available. Sting had force fed her back then until she'd learned to eat what was in front of her, even when she was sure she couldn't manage another bite if her life depended on it, because it was better then starving.

Closing her eyes, Hermione could so easily pull to mind the image of the boy who'd stitched her back together when she'd been injured. She could remember sharing a blanket when the winters were harsh enough to threaten their lives, both of them little more then a brittle house of skin barely held up by bones. She could remember the 'birthdays' in which Sting would press new blades of sharpened steel into her hands and painstakingly teach her how to use each of them until she was as good as he was.

And she could remember, in horrifying detail, the one time Sting had whispered his story to her, both of them curled up together behind a dumpster, wrapped up in ratty blankets and sharing her "special talent" as she'd known magic as then to keep warm. He'd told her about how, when he was still too young to even understand it, his da used to lead him down to the basement for 'poker night' with his friends, undressing him and leading him over to an old cot kept in the corner. What followed would be a nightmare.

Unless his poker friends were over, his da would never pay him any attention. He drank a lot and was loud and would beat on his mama and sometimes on him, but Sting would take his fists and kicks any day over the cot. It made him scared and sick and he'd beg and plead but the nightmare would never stop.

He used to fight, at first, he'd whispered as he shuddered at the memory, and Hermione remembered holding his hand tight in her own, hot tears pricking at her eyes. He'd struggle the best he could, given his size— he might have been young, but growing up in London's estates meant that even then he'd known he had to fight. That if someone was hitting him, he shouldn't stop hitting until they stopped— it was one of the very first things he'd taught her.

He'd run away when he was eight, right after his mama had hung herself, because without her to hold him back his da had stopped waiting for poker nights.

Even back then, "Jane" hadn't cared for many people, but she had cared for Sting and as he cried, great big silent tears with his face buried in her shoulder, she'd held him tight in her skinny arms
and vowed she would figure out a way to make his father pay.

Grimly, Hermione knew what she planned to do to repay Sting— or, to use the name he'd been born with, to repay Lachlan Farrier, son of Gladys "Gladdy" and Walter "Wal" Farrier, for all he'd done for her (it hadn't been difficult to find Sting's real name after he'd taken her to Gladdy's grave on two separate occasions. He'd known her real name— well, he'd known her real first name, which was fairly distinctive— so she'd always felt it was fair. And now it saved her the trouble of trying to figure out his real identity).

Hermione took a deep breath, remembering Sting, remembering his words; 'This shitty fuckin' world can try whatever the fuck it wants ta break us, but WE WON'T BE BROKEN,' he'd tell her, when everything was too much. 'Fuck no. We're gonna survive, Janey. We're gonna be stronger, we're gonna fight harder, we're gonna win an' we'll beat the fuckin' shit outta whatever fuckin' dares try ta bring us down. D'ya hear me?'

I hear you, she thought, and I will not be broken. I'll kill anyone who tries.

A/N: Hope you enjoyed the chapter! Bit of a dark one (and yes, that is a 'bit' of an understatement) but the next one should be a bit more cheerful! Happy almost New Years, everyone <3

~Cheshire Carroll

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed the chapter! Bit of a dark one (and yes, that is a 'bit' of an understatement) but the next one should be a bit more cheerful! Happy almost New Years, everyone <3

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Part Four: The Goblet of Fire - Chapter LXVI

CHAPTER LXVI:

Hermione’s POV:

Hermione took a deep breath, remembering Sting, remembering his words; ‘This shitty fuckin' world can try whatever the fuck it wants ta break us, but WE WON'T BE BROKEN,’ he'd tell her, when everything was too much. 'Fuck no. We're gonna survive, Janey. We're gonna be stronger, we're gonna fight harder, we're gonna win an' we'll beat the fuckin' shit outta whatever fuckin' dares try ta bring us down. D'ya hear me?’

I hear you, she thought, and I will not be broken. I'll kill anyone who tries.

Her newly reaffirmed conviction lent iron to her spine, so when Snape looked at her and, very quietly and very solemnly, said, “Talk to me, Hermione. Please. Just this once, talk to me,” she didn’t immediately spin a handful of evasive lies into a convincing enough fiction.

Instead, and perhaps against the ‘better judgement’ she would have employed if her world hadn’t been so violently, wretchedly shaken and shattered, she did something she hadn’t done before: she told Professor Snape, an adult, the raw, painful, ugly truth.

Slowly, staggeringly, she let her story drag from her lips in jagged bits and pieces, stopping and circling back and getting lost and starting over, but forcing it out word by painful word, until it felt less like throwing up razor blades and more like Sting helping her pull broken glass out of a bleeding wound.

Snape listened quietly, not interrupting once, his hand a steady weight on her shoulder, grounding her. He didn't flinch, or gasp, or make a sound as she spoke about the car crash that ripped her parents from her, or the nuns, or Sting and Rottie beating her half senseless because teaching her to survive was more important then cuts and bruises and even a broken bone that one time. She tripped over her words as she spoke about the first death she’d witnessed, watching a boy called Rooster bleed out after trying to help stitch him back together, then later Sharpie’s murder and Lacey's abortion gone wrong and Josie's overdose. Rottie’s death escaped from her in choked gasps and her breathing was ragged and broken as she told him bleakly about Jed, about using her body the way Sharpie and Lacey had taught her, about how she’d learned to grit her teeth and smile through the pain of being split open until it was just a dull ache and she felt numb inside.

Nymph's death was a barely audible whisper, the ever-present guilt strangling her words, and she spat out the confession of torturing the man responsible for the atrocity with a vicious satisfaction she wasn’t ashamed of. She spoke briefly of the times people had tried to touch her, the times she’d had to use her knives or her fists to defend herself, the nights she’d been cold and starving and had to keep moving about to distract herself from all the pain until the exhaustion was too much.

And Snape just sat there with her and listened as all the ugly secrets and lies came spilling out of her like bile and when she was done, when she was a shaking, sweat-soaked, clammy mess, he very gently and very slowly wrapped his arms around her. She pressed her face into his shoulder, into the thick material of his robes, and finally let herself cry, let the sobs tear themselves violently
from her as she fell to pieces in his arms and let herself trust that he'd hold her together.

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**Severus's POV:**

It was in a state of something like shock that, for the first time Severus could ever remember, Hermione opened her mouth and started talking pure, honest truth about a past more horrifying then he had dreaded. He soaked it all in, holding tight to the handle of his wand digging into his palm as Hermione's words spun out a horrific recount of death, abuse, rape and suffering, of half-spilled secrets and full-blown lies, of survival stripped down to its rawest form, drenching the world with red as it was flayed to the bone.

Her story, her past, wound itself into his brain and little bits of information slotted themselves around what he’d already been told, erasing lies and completing truths half-told until the bigger picture was finally, finally, illuminated; grim and horrifying and spattered with nearly a decade of suffering.

It was a clawing, sickening feeling to know that Hermione had been hurt so horrendously and nobody had been there to rescue her. Children should not have to rescue themselves.

While she’d been asleep in his private quarters (and under the influence of a discrete spell to keep her so) after he’d basically carried her through the castle, Severus had returned to the muggle city to clean up the… mess. While Hermione hadn’t explained anything in her inebriated state, the sheer volume of another person’s blood coating her, as well as the bruises on her face and wrists and the disarrayed state of her clothing, the shirt and underthings torn and even cut through in places, all painted a very telling, very chilling story— and when he’d told her that if anyone ever attempted to force her into having sex with them that he not only gave her permission to permanently deal with them, as she had done Cortland but that he would give her an alibi, he had meant it.

A tracking charm applied to the blood had led him through the back streets of London’s estates, a grim journey with an even grimmer destination to anticipate. While Severus's own childhood should be treated with all the solemnity it deserved— poverty was never anything to romanticise, and the effects it had were devastating and long-lasting— he couldn’t help but compare the roof over his head and running water to the wild, half-feral children and grown men and women alike skittering away from him, wary eyes set in gaunt faces tracking his movements as he passed by, and almost feel lucky.

It was never a competition to determine who had it worse; being Head of Slytherin House had taught him that children who lived in gilded manors could suffer just as badly as the halfblooded children from broken, impoverished homes like his, but looking around and seeing the trash on the side of the road, the darkness and the hollow-eyed, suspicious looks of the locals who lived— or at least survived— on such streets made the worst parts of Cokesworth come to the front of his mind in vivid colour.

He found the ‘crime scene’ in a warehouse; two dead bodies and a ratty mattress that served as a canvas to a macabre, abstract painting depicting the final, fatal results of the attempted assault; blood, dark and clotted, mixed with splatters of pink, red and all those many shades between the two, marring the already-stained bedding in globs, pools and streaks that made Severus’s stomach turn.
The bodies were both adolescent males, and they clearly hadn’t been moved since they’d died. One of the bodies was half-splayed facedown over the mattress, his death clearly responsible for most of the bloody mess there, while the other was located several feet away, the throat slit so deep Severus could see white bone. He might have felt some pity for them if both boys didn’t have unfastened trousers and Hermione hadn’t had bruises on her wrists from someone trying to hold her down (and if they had succeeded in raping his student, then they’d died far too quickly!). And, irrelevant to their failure or success—and it had better have been a fucking failure—just for their intention to do one of his Slytherins harm, in his mind they’d gotten exactly what they’d deserved.

Severus had swiftly cleaned the warehouse of evidence, transfiguring the bodies into sticks which he’d set on fire and then banished the ashes. The mattress was similarly burned, with all charred remains vanished, along with the excess of blood. He’d considered burning the warehouse down too, but decided he didn’t want to attract any unnecessary attention.

After apparating back to Hogwarts and returning to his private quarters, purposefully avoiding any staff and students that had remained in the castle over the holidays as he hurried through the castle, Severus had looked down at his unconscious student and felt an almost physical pain. The sight before him of Hermione all bruised up, her clothes torn and dried, flaking blood everywhere, had hurt more then the Crucius setting alight every pain receptor in his body.

Things hadn’t improved when she woke up; no, it only got worse. Hermione had looked so small and fragile when she walked out of the bathroom after scrubbing herself clean, all brittle and wounded and hollowed out in a way he struggled to associate with either the clever, proud girl who sat amongst friends in his classes or the savage survivor who broke bones and slit throats with a fierce, broken strength.

And then it got worse, because of-fucking-course it bloody did, and his only consolation as he sat there listening in horror was that the assault had been unsuccessful. And after Hermione had finished revealing to him the horror show that was her childhood, he’d just wanted to be sick. But he couldn’t, not yet. Instead, he’d soothed the distraught child—because Hermione was still a child, and he realised that people, himself included, too often forgot that—and after she’d cried herself out, he’d performed a swift medical examination with as much professionalism as possible.

He’d chosen to look at the livid, angry splotches of ugly colour on her wrists and face as a testament to his Slytherin’s strength, so as to cope. Because she was strong; she’d lived through hell and back and clawed her way through every day in defiance of those who had hurt her, making both poor choices and worse ones but still living through them and surviving.

After fetching his freshest stock of swelling solution and bruise paste—and two calming draughts; one for her and one for himself—Severus made the somewhat impulsive decision of offering to let her stay with him for the remainder of the holidays at his house on Spinner’s End.

While he knew that having a female student stay with him was beyond just wildly inappropriate for a male professor and that he should probably be sending Hermione off to Narcissa to care for her, Severus hesitated for three main reasons. The first was that while Hermione was in such an emotionally vulnerable state, he wanted her as far away from the Dark Lord and his people as possible—something he couldn’t be sure of happening if she stayed at Malfoy Manor. The second was that he currently felt (and quite understandably so, in his opinion) both reluctant to and extraordinarily paranoid of letting Hermione out of his sight.

And the third reason was that he didn’t believe that Narcissa would be able to offer Hermione the help she needed. Rem-Lupin’s insistence earlier that year that Hermione needed to talk to someone about what she’d undergone was playing in his head over and over, the chilling prediction he’d
made proving far too accurate so far for Severus’s comfort; ‘get that child the help she needs,’ Lupin had told him, ‘…or the pain from bottling all that up inside… it will destroy her’.

Narcissa couldn’t provide Hermione with that help, she just wasn’t qualified, and while neither was he, Severus at least knew someone who was— someone who he doubted he’d have any difficulty at all in convincing to help Hermione. First, he just needed to convince Hermione to accept the help.

(It was probably a good thing he had the remainder of the holidays and the privacy of his house to argue about it with her— he was probably going to need it)

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Tom’s POV:

Concern was a deeply irritating emotion. It suggested vulnerability, suggested weakness, and Tom despised both. Yet, he couldn’t deny he was most certainly concerned.

He could count on one hand the number of occasions either he or Hermione had used the security measure Voldemort had built into the spell tying Hermione’s magic to the Diary, and for good reason— it wasn’t intended for frivolous use, it was a failsafe, of sorts, for very real danger. It wasn't like Voldemort would have entrusted one of his horcruxes to a child, not even the Diary horcrux (it—he— was different to the other horcruxes in that he was able to protect and defend himself in ways they could not due to the extra enchantments involved in order to facilitate its secondary purpose of opening the Chamber of Secrets) without some insurance of its safety.

Admittedly, Voldemort's decision to task a child with safekeeping one of his horcruxes— especially a child Tom wasn’t supposed to drain of its life-force to strengthen his own existence and use to open the Chamber to cleanse Hogwarts of mudbloods— had certainly confused him, back a year and a half ago. He understood his counterpart's motives now; Tom had been similar enough in age to be relatable to Hermione (and, more importantly in Voldemort’s eyes, through her, Harry), he'd been powerful enough to intrigue both the young teenagers and, most importantly, he was charming enough to befriend them.

Because people like Harry? Their weaknesses were their attachments, and what better way then to ensure the boy would never become the threat the prophecy had foretold he'd be, then to make him attached to a piece of Voldemort’s very soul? Harry loved Tom, and because Harry loved him, the boy would stand back and let him and Voldemort do whatever they wished. Tom sometimes itched to push, to find the boundary where Harry would put his foot down— murder, muggle-hunting, torture, assassination; so far, the boy had been remarkably adaptable.

He wouldn't, though. Well, not intentionally. Because Voldemort's plan had... not backfired, precisely, but something dangerously close— his success was a double-edged sword, because Harry might be hopelessly attached to Tom but Tom was also uncomfortably attached to him. Not to mention the third member of their triad, who he was just as (hopelessly, not that he'd ever admit it out loud) attached to, despite her initially being just a means to an end, a way to get influence over Harry.

It was downright inconvenient, really, and it was making Tom experience all sorts of uncomfortable emotions he could really do without— concern, being a good example. Because seeing as every one of those occasions that the Diary’s failsafe had kicked in had been accompanied by a serious risk to either Harry or Hermione’s immediate wellbeing, the fact
Hermione had pulled on the Diary’s magic only hours after disembarking from the Hogwarts Express was troubling.

The fact he hadn’t been able to find or contact her was even more so.

She was most certainly alive, the magic that bound her to the Diary told him that much, but finding her was proving to be an issue. As was contacting her, considering she’d put up the wards he’d bloody taught her and Harry to prevent owls from locating them.

He might have been able to return his essence back into the Diary, which was something that was becoming harder and harder to do as his power grew, and then manifest himself in the new location, but they’d decided that the risk of carrying a Dark Artefact around with Moody’s eye able to locate Dark magic through obstructions like fabrics or walls, it would be safer to leave the Diary secured at the countryside manor they called their hou–home instead of on Hermione’s person (and despite his reluctance to take the Ring off, which Tom fully blamed on the magic of the horcrux at work and certainly not any attachment Harry might have had towards the soul piece bound to it, Harry had had to hide the Ring in a secret compartment of his school trunk due to the risk. Which Tom certainly wasn’t smugly pleased about. Not at all).

Previously, Hermione and Harry's ability to disappear off into the muggle world had been convenient— and amusing. Right now it was a significant problem as Tom didn't have a fucking clue where she was, other then likely somewhere in the city of London and possibly injured, having likely having been attacked. Thinking about what could have happened to her— maybe she’d been attacked by Dumbledore, Moody, or a member of the Order of the Phoenix looking to remove her influence from Harry, or perhaps one of Greyback’s pack looking for revenge, or possibly even just a random muggle who’d taken her by surprise; the possibilities seemed endless— made Tom’s chest feel strangely tight and his stomach all tense in a way that set his teeth on edge.

He was going to have to track her down in person to ascertain her wellbeing, the inconvenient, persistent concern wouldn’t leave until he could confirm for himself that she was uninjured and in full health. He knew that she’d been planning to return to her old stomping grounds to visit some past ‘friends' and while tracking her down wouldn't be easy, but he wasn’t a genius for nothing.

And if she'd been hurt in anyway, Tom thought darkly, then nobody involved would be spared. He'd destroy the entire muggle city and every last one of the lowly filth within it if he had too— or rend every last member of the Order of the Phoenix to bloody shreds.

Remus’s POV:

When Severus had flooed him looking horrible; exhausted and shaken and like the world had been cut out from underneath him, face drawn, skin ashen and stress lines cutting deep into the corners of his mouth, to say that Remus had been alarmed would be an understatement.

“What happened?” He’d demanded, shocked.

And the answer had been… unpleasant. Severus hadn’t revealed much— just that Hermione had been the victim of an attempted assault, but she’d managed to get away. One of the attackers, however, had been an old acquaintance of hers— one who’d previously coerced her into a sexual relationship, back when she was just a child.
“She told me about her life before Hogwarts,” Severus had said, voice quiet but not even close to soft. His controlled expression had flickered, a brief crack in his composure that had given Remus a glimpse of what lay underneath; a glimpse of something dark with hatred and rage, a glimpse of something undeniably dangerous that had sent instinctual shivers down his spine. Remus hadn’t needed to ask for any more details—that had been telling enough.

What he had asked was how he could help, knowing that Severus wouldn’t be telling him all this if he didn’t have a reason. He wasn’t expecting Severus’s response, as his old classmate enquired as to whom Remus had spoken to as a child in order to recover from his… encounter with Greyback.

He’d had to explain that his mother had taken him to a muggle therapist who had since passed away. When Severus failed to react with disappointment, Remus got the sudden, prickling feeling he’d just stepped into some sort of trap—and that was when, of course, Severus asked if Remus would then be interested in talking to Hermione and sharing the advice and techniques from therapy with her that he’d found useful.

After taking a moment to clarify that Severus wasn’t making a very out-of-character joke, Remus had just sort of stared at him for a bit. He was in no way at all qualified to help a (slightly disturbed) teenage girl deal with her childhood full of trauma—or the aftermath of a recent one. Unfortunately, however, he could see where Severus was coming from—the Magical world didn’t actually have the equivalent to muggle therapists, and muggle therapists were legally obligated to report any crimes committed by their patients that they knew of so Hermione would have to guard what she said in any therapy sessions.

If Hermione was to actually get anything out of speaking to someone, she had to be able to speak openly and honestly with someone non-judgmental and who at least had basic knowledge in how to help her learn to manage the trauma and start healing from the emotional wounds it had left deep in her psyche. And Severus was right—Remus really couldn’t think of anyone other than himself who fit that criteria.

So, against what was likely his better judgment, he’d agreed so long as Hermione herself agreed with Severus’s choice. He hadn’t actually expecting her to say yes, though, so when Severus had flooed him to say that she had—and that she was willing to arrange to meet him the following day— he was understandably shocked.

It was with a great deal of trepidation that he stepped through the floo into Severus’s house (his old childhood home, if Remus wasn’t mistaken). He could instantly see why Severus was so worried about Hermione—there were shadows under her eyes and a wild, jittery sort of air about her. She had a faded bruise on her jaw, nearly imperceptible but still present enough for his keen eyes to pick out, and held herself like a wounded animal cornered by a predator; tense and coiled, ready to attack at the slightest provocation.

“Why don’t we go sit out in the garden?” he suggested, hoping she’d feel less trapped when outside. She nodded shortly, her eyes darting over to Severus for a split-second before she turned and led him through the house to the backdoor. Remus tried to be respectful of Severus’s privacy and not stare but he couldn’t help noticing just how… empty the house seemed.

The sun was shining outside and Hermione led the way through a slightly overgrown-looking garden full of what Remus assumed were potion ingredients, over to an old wooden bench.

“I admit,” he said, to break the silence once they were both seated, “Severus’s house isn’t a place I ever thought I’d be visiting, back when I was young.”

“Me either,” Hermione said, quietly. She wasn’t looking at him directly, though he could see that
she was carefully observing him in her peripheral vision. “I’m… not used to trusting adults enough to put myself in such a vulnerable position.”

Remus wondered if there had ever been an adult in her life before Severus who hadn’t hurt her, let her down or died and left her alone. He was honestly surprised she was talking to him at all, even if it did feel like he was balancing on a thin wire with a pit beneath him filled with something very sharp.

“Well I’m very glad you feel you can trust Professor Snape with your safety,” he said and Hermione nodded stiffly.

“Professor Snape is one of the three people in this world I almost fully trust,” she admitted. “It’s why I agreed to talk to you, because he doesn’t think you’re just going to go off to Dumbledore with everything I say. He said you figured out about Nym— about Iris, and that you’ve never told anyone. He told me he believes you won’t ever tell anyone, and he seemed convinced. He told me he believes that you’ll be able to help me. He trusts you. And I trust him. So… here we are.”

“Did Professor Snape tell you why he thought I might be able to help you?” Remus asked, trying not to show her how blown away he felt by her declaration of Severus’s trust in him.

“No,” Hermione said bluntly, “but I know you were bitten by Greyback when you were young, and I can make an educated guess from there.”

“It’s common enough knowledge that Greyback likes to Bite children,” Remus agreed, ignoring how That Name automatically raised his hackles and prompted the visceral urge to curl his lips back from his teeth and snarl. “It’s not quite so commonly known, however, that Turning them isn’t all he likes to do with them. I was… very hurt, afterwards; the sort of hurt that couldn’t just be magicked away. I’m sure it won’t shock you to learn there aren’t any therapists in the magical world,” he said, and Hermione made a soft noise of derision that he took as agreement. "There are Mind Healers, but they focus on magical damage to the brain, not on mental damage from a trauma.

“Luckily for me, my mother was a muggleborn and she found a muggle therapist to take me too. Psychology had quite taken off by the seventies, though there were several debatable methods used by various therapists at the time that had yet to be discounted due to lack of research providing proper scientific data to support the effectiveness of such practices, or simply due to the lack of ethics involved.”

“That fills me with confidence,” Hermione muttered, not quite looking at him still.

“I’m really not explaining this right,” Remus said with a wince. “I’m not a therapist, and that’s not really what I’m here for. If I tried, I’d likely do more harm then good. I’m just here to talk to you. And if you don’t want to speak with me, you don’t have to; I’m not here to force you or make you uncomfortable. I’m simply here to offer my advice and a non-judgmental listener.”

"...Advice?” Hermione asked after a long pause. Her face was still wary, closed off, but her body language was less tense.

"As I said, my mother found me a therapist when I was a child. That therapist helped me deal with what had happened to me— not the werewolf parts, of course, but working through the trauma of the brutal assault." He explained.

“...and did it help?” Hermione's voice was so quiet he could barely make out her words.
"It did." He replied simply. Hermione was silent again for another long moment.

"It was a while ago." She said eventually. "When I was… hurt like that. It wasn’t particularly violent. I was manipulated into it, by someone older. I didn't realise for a while, and when I did I turned the tables on him and became the manipulator before eventually ending it completely. But I ran into that person on the first day of the holidays. And he drugged me then he and his friend tried to fucking use me, like they were in some way fucking entitled to my body and what I wanted just didn’t fucking matter, but I stopped them!"

There was a definite finality in her use of the word ‘stopped’, Remus thought as he looked over at her, her face twisted in raw anger, grief and hurt. He had a feeling that the person who'd drugged her and his ‘friend’ wouldn't be drugging any other unwilling, underage girls again– they'd be too busy rotting in the ground.

“And I don't understand why I’m so bloody affected!” Hermione then spat out, her eyes fierce and wild and filled with hate. "Nothing fucking happened!” She snarled. “Nothing! So why the fuck am I so messed up about this?"

“Because you’re assuming that trauma is rational,” Remus told her gently, making sure to keep his body language calm and steady. “It isn’t. It’s unpredictable and irrational and, I’m sure you’ll agree, quite inconvenient.” He took it as a victory when the corners of Hermione’s mouth twitched slightly upward. “Situations we wouldn’t expect to can trigger flashbacks or our flight or fight response—and it’s important to understand that a sexual assault doesn’t have to be successful to be traumatic, especially considering your past abusive history with your assaulter.”

“But how do I fix it, then?” Hermione demanded. “It’s— inconvenient, to say the least!”

“There’s no easy fix, as I’m sure you’re aware. That’s the unfortunate truth of it all.” He answered her. “But there are measures you can take towards healing yourself. Physically, eating well, being physically active and ensuring you get the sleep you need to be able to function can make an enormous difference, as when your body ‘feels good’ then your mind is far likelier to ‘feel good’ also.

“Emotionally, things are much less straightforward and different things help different people. The most common steps to take are making sure you have someone to talk about your experience and its repercussions with, practicing meditative and relaxation exercises and journalling.”

Remus paused, observing how Hermione’s eyes were as sharp and attentive as they’d been in his class the previous year; he could practically see how she was absorbing his words. There were signs of stress on her face and in her posture, but she didn’t seem as if she was agitated to the point they should take a break, or end their ‘session’ for the day.

More confident, he started to talk her through the relaxation and meditative exercises he’d found most useful, as well as the coping strategies he’d used for dealing with daily triggers, anxiety and panic attacks. And when Hermione did clearly reach her limit, he stopped and retrieved the small journal he'd prepared after learning she had agreed to talk to him.

“This is for you,” he told her, placing it down on the garden bench between them. As Hermione eyed the journal somewhat dubiously, he explained its purpose. “During my Hogwarts years, when I was unable to attend regular sessions with my therapist, I found that writing down my thoughts and feelings really helped me get through the harder days.”

“You weren’t worried that someone might steal it and read it?” Hermione asked and Remus smiled.
“I certainly was, as I assumed you would be, which is why I got you this journal specifically. It’s protected by a blood ward, of sorts, so that once it’s locked to your blood, to you, then you are the only one who will ever be able to read anything written in its pages. It’s a very handy piece of magic, but it’s not… entirely legal, strictly speaking, so best keep that between us.” He admitted. In response, Hermione arched an eyebrow at him in a way that suddenly reminded him of Lily so much it actually hurt— Lily had had that same unimpressed look perfected too.

"Is this your way of attempting to foster a mutual trust between us?" she asked, her voice sharp as her stare— and her mind.

"Possibly," Remus admitted ruefully. "It really is a useful piece of magic, but… I suppose attempting to manipulate a situation in order to 'foster a mutual trust' isn't ideal when trying to earn that trust."

“Oh, I don't know," Hermione said, her face relaxing slightly into a more considering look. “I’m actually impressed by how very Slytherin of you it was. And I certainly trust Slytherins more than Gryffindors.”

The sneer on her face when she spat out ‘Gryffindors’ was all Severus this time, Remus thought fondly. And her appreciation for the journal, and perhaps even for his attempt to forge a trust between them, might have remained unspoken, but he could still hear it. Could see it, too, in the more relaxed lines of her face. Her expression wasn't unguarded, he doubted it ever entirely would be around him, but it wasn’t quite so hard.

"Would you like me to come visit again?" He asked, deciding it was a good time to ask her.

She hesitated, like Remus had guessed she would, but then slowly nodded. "Maybe give it a day or two." She muttered, looking down at the journal. "But... yes. I... would like that."

He gave her a small smile as he stood up, ready to return to the house to give her time to contemplate. Before he could leave, however, she spoke up again.

“Professor,” Hermione said quietly, once again not meeting his eyes as she looked out over the garden. “I am… not good at saying thank you. But I think you should know that Greyback is dead.”

Remus froze, the sudden wave of emotion crashing into him akin to a tsunami that consumed him entirely. He could barely think; he could barely breathe. There was a crushing weight pressing down on him, pushing the air out of his lungs, suffocating him.

He didn’t even recognise the sound of his own voice over the roaring in his ears as he gasped out— "What?"

Hermione turned her head to meet his eyes. Hers were cold and so uncomfortably sharp, her gaze cutting like a knife through the thin veil of his rapidly unraveling composure.

“He attacked a young girl in a dark alley,” she told him, “and made the mistake of forgetting that small animals still have teeth— and a tendency to bite back when cornered.” She smiled then; a little dark, a little wild, flashing her teeth like she was baring bloody fangs. “And sometimes those small animals have bigger friends who hold a grudge.”

Remus took a moment to take several deep, meditative breaths, focusing on the way his lungs and ribcage expanded and contracted with each inhale, exhale.

“How did he— how did he die?” He asked once he could talk again, his voice uncomfortably
hoarse.

“In pain.” Was the answer Hermione gave. It was short, but it was enough.

“Good.” He growled without thinking. It took him a moment to realise his blunder, his mind still reeling, and he almost winced. “Er, you didn’t hear that.” He said guiltily. Hermione just laughed, the sound startlingly genuine as her smile softened into something far more playful then predatory.

“Don’t worry, professor,” she told him, ”I understand completely.”

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Harry’s POV:

Harry hadn’t been expecting to enjoy the Eostre holiday, so it wasn’t at all surprising how much he was hating it.

He was, to put it bluntly, under an unspoken but obvious house arrest at the Weasley family home. It was not the most auspicious start to his spying on Dumbledore and his Order (the James Bond films made being a spy seem much more thrilling), but... well, it was still a start at least. Obviously he couldn't expect them to trust him right from the get-go, he wasn’t an idiot, but he really did wish Dumbledore could at least have sent him off to some other fine, upstanding Light family for the holidays.

The Weasleys called their home ‘The Burrow’. It was... cozy, he supposed? Well, it was better then staying with the Dursleys, though that really wasn’t saying much. Mr. Weasley was kind of a clueless idiot, but he was pretty harmless and thankfully not home much. Outside of his negativity towards the Malfoys, particularly Lucius, Mr. Weasley was far more focused on asking Harry about muggles (and bloody hell, wasn’t the moron actually supposed to be the wizarding authority on them? That was just tragic) then he was on converting Harry to the church of ‘All Slytherins Are Evil And Dumbledore Is God’.

Percy Weasley didn’t live at home and didn’t seem inclined visit, nor had Bill Weasley so far, and much to Harry’s relief the twins had kept their distance— he was pretty sure Mrs. Weasley had threatened them to be on their best behaviour.

And Mrs. Weasley… now she was an utter pain in the arse. Harry disliked her immensely, and despite his sympathy for the woman losing both her daughter and a son (and the no small amount of guilt he felt about his role in both murders), the way she kept forcefully pushing her— and Dumbledore’s— opinions and agendas on him, along with her constant prejudice and sanctimonious holier-than-thou attitude, left him unable to stay neutral about her.

Not to mention that as well as constantly singing about Dumbledore’s praises and the evils of Slytherins (particularly Malfoys), the interfering busybody was constantly sighing and tutting around him, nattering on and on about how horrified dear Lily and James would have been to learn their son was in Slytherin, and “poor, dear Sirius” too, Harry’s “brave and loving” godfather.

Harry was both fed up and entirely unimpressed with her entire spiel— if his father or Black wanted him to give a damn about their opinions, they should have lived long enough to express them in person; he refused to let his life be dictated by the opinions of the dead. And considering the fact his mother had been close friends, best friends even, with a Slytherin (and Harry still didn’t know how he felt about the whole Professor Snape and his mother situation Voldemort had
revealed) he rather thought she wouldn’t give a damn about him being Sorted into Slytherin— and from what Remus had told him about her, he was pretty sure Lily would have rained hell down on anyone who gave Harry trouble over it.

In order to escape the pushy, overbearing Weasley matriarch and continue to keep his distance from the twins, Harry mostly stayed in the room he’d been given and concentrated on his Eostre holiday homework, only appearing for lunch and dinner, sneaking down to the kitchen early in the mornings for food to avoid having to sit down for breakfast with all the Weasleys.

It was on the fourth morning that his newly-made routine (and the tedious drain on his patience that the entire holiday was turning out to be) was interrupted. It was early morning, the sun having just barely risen, and Harry was quietly sneaking into the kitchen to get something to eat away from the Weasleys when he almost literally ran into a very familiar face.

"Morning Harry!" Greeted the all-too familiar redhead, so unlike the rest of his family with his firmly muscled build, shiny burn scars running up and down his arms and that friendly, cheerful smile so at odds with the sharpness evident in his blue eyes.

"Oh it's you," Harry said unenthusiastically. Charlie Weasley's annoying smile widened.

"I think I’m insulted." He said, far too amused. Harry immediately scowled.

“Don’t think too much,” he retorted, channeling his inner-Malfoy, "it doesn’t suit you."

Apparently surprised, both Charlie's eyebrows rose. “Well you're in quite the snarky mood on this lovely bright and early morning.” He observed and Harry's scowl deepened.

"Can you blame me?"

Charlie tapped a finger to his lips mock-thoughtfully. “We-ll," he said, stretching out the one syllable word, “you did have the sheer audacity to be Sorted into Slytherin.”

Harry snorted. "Yeah, but if the Hat didn't try to put you there too I'll eat my day old jocks."

"Was that actually a backhanded compliment?" Charlie teased. "Because I'm pretty sure that was a compliment."

"Don't let it go to your head." Harry said grumpily. “But for coming from a subspecies of uncultured swine, you’re almost bearable.” He then winced a bit internally, thinking he might have taken the banter a bit too far calling the Weasley family a subspecies of pigs. Thankfully, Charlie didn’t seem too bothered.

“Ouch.” He said instead, in perfect deadpan as he placed a hand over his heart. “You hurt me deeply with your words.”

Harry just rolled his eyes and continued towards his original goal of the kitchen. Charlie, of course, just followed him. “Ooh, are you making breakfast? Because I could really do with a cuppa.”

“I’m not going anywhere near that bloody teakettle,” Harry said, a bit grumpily. “It’s a menace— I tried to make some tea yesterday and it bit me.”

“It what?”

“I either managed to screw up putting on a kettle or the twins are pranking me, because the bloody thing bit me. And I swear to Salazar, it has fangs!”
"Ugh, dad sometimes brings them home from work— it's from muggle baiting, you know; biting teakettles, shrinking keys and all that. One of the twins probably nicked it from his shed and replaced ours," Charlie explained with a groan. “And now I really need that tea. Mixed with a bit of whiskey. Lots of whiskey.”

“Why are you here anyway?” Harry asked. “I thought you left your family for Romania— a decision for which I don’t blame you in the least. Romania is definitely looking pretty good right now.”

Charlie snorted. “You’ve done your research,” he observed, looking more amused by the fact someone had been digging around in his life then anything. “And I love my family, there were just certain ideological differences between us that I didn’t feel like making an issue, so I left.”

“And what’s that a fancy way of saying?” Harry pressed, curious.

“That I’m gay.” Charlie said bluntly. “And that’s just not acceptable here.”

“Here?” Harry asked, confused now. “As in, the British Magical society? Because nobody’s ever said anything to Hermione about her and Fleur, or anything to me about T— about my boyfriend.” He only just managed to not pull a face as he said ‘boyfriend’. It just sounded wrong on so many levels to use such a childish word to describe the younger Dark Lord.

“Well they wouldn’t, considering who it is you’re always around,” Charlie said. Harry scowled a bit.


“Relax,” Charlie told him, “I meant traditionalists. The more traditional families, as well those aligned to the Dark or more inclined towards practicing Darker magic, don't tend to be against same-sex relationships. The issue is that for witches and wizards, same-sex relationships have long been associated closely with the old rites, rituals and festivals that involve highly ritualised coupling, often with multiple partners— the sort that the Lighter families, muggleborns in general and the witches and wizards who see themselves as modernists don’t approve of at all.”

“And why don’t they approve?” Harry asked, before pulling a face. “Let me guess— it’s because the Darker families either support, advocate for or practice the rites and rituals and stuff, so they immediately have to condemn them and everything involved.”

Charlie’s laughter in response to his snide jab at Dumbledore’s blind flock was as surprising as it was genuine. "You're not exactly wrong," the redhead freely admitted, surprising Harry further. "The Lighter families and a lot of witches and wizards who fancy themselves as 'modern' see the rites, rituals and all that as uncivilised, and with the influence of muggle religions such as Christianity gaining strength through the introduction of muggleborns, well," he shrugged a bit, "it’s viewed as too close to paganism or what the muggle Church condemned as witchcraft. A lot of the older practices and traditions are now condemned as wrong and immoral. I mean, even just two hundred years ago and it would have been fine that I liked men, so long as I found a wife that I came to an arrangement with to produce an heir or two, but now..."

But now Charlie felt he had to hide it from his firmly Light-oriented family. Harry frowned. This wasn't the first time he'd heard of how ideas and concepts introduced by muggles and muggleborns were interfering with long held traditions and practices of the magical world but he had learned to take most of what Tom said regarding muggles with a grain of salt. Charlie, however, had been raised in an entirely Light oriented household that was very pro-Dumbledore and he was saying nearly the exact same things, just with different levels of hostility.
"It's not like that everywhere," Charlie spoke up with an almost sympathetic expression that made Harry wonder what his face must look like— some mix of confused, uncertain and apprehensive. "The more segregated the magical community of a country is from muggles, the less criticised and denounced the older practices tend to be."

“What do you mean by ‘segregated’?” He asked, interested. None of his classes had talked about such things, though it was possible Binns had mentioned it and he'd slept through it.

"All countries have a degree of separation between magicals and muggles, of course,” Charlie told him, “but there are some countries where most of the witches and wizards wouldn't have seen a muggle their entire lives. Muggleborns are located and taken early– it's a practice that went out of fashion centuries ago here, but it’s where a lot of the old changeling myths came about– and are raised from a young age as part of the magical community with no contact with their muggle parents. Depending on the country, actually interacting with a muggle can be considered illegal and result in large fines or even jail sentences."

"Is Romania like that?" Harry asked, intrigued, and Charlie laughed, shaking his head.

"No, which is a good thing for my Gringotts account. Muggle nightlife is wicked fun."

"Why don't we learn about any of this stuff at Hogwarts?" Harry asked. Charlie arched an expectant eyebrow at him and he sighed, answering his own question. “Dumbledore, then?”

"Well, you didn't hear it from me."

“What a git,” he muttered, which was certainly one of the milder things he’d said about Dumbledore but he was feeling too annoyed to be particularly imaginative. “And of course any witches or wizards who really try to change how much of an influence muggles are having on Wizarding culture end up getting labelled as Dark Lords… or Dark Sorceresses.”

“To be fair,” Charlie pointed out, “most Dark Lords and Sorceresses, no matter their original goals, do end up as responsible for mass killings and torture as well as widespread terror and destruction.”

“So do the sides fighting them, probably,” Harry countered. “History is always written by the victors— the Light gets to look like they’re the heroes, valiantly battling to defend the masses against the evil Dark, while conveniently maligning, imprisoning and killing off anyone who disagrees with them!”

“You can’t be suggesting that all the Dark Lords and Sorceresses are actually innocent,” Charlie said, tone almost dismissive in his amusement at the idea, and Harry shook his head, frustrated.

“No, of course not— but it’s not like they’re actually given the chance to give their side of the story to an audience without any bias.” He explained. “I mean, as an example Voldemort had to have offered his followers more then just power to get them to side with him, but it’s not like we’re actually taught what any of his or his followers’ goals were, other then ‘overthrowing the Light thereby plunging the Wizarding World into a terrible era of darkness’— something which is practically spoon-fed to us from the time we enter the Wizarding world, whether as muggleborn eleven-year-olds or as children being raised in any family other then Dark families.”

As Harry spoke (er, ranted), Charlie’s eyebrows rose higher and higher until they were almost at risk of disappearing into his hairline. “You cannot possibly be arguing right now that You-Know-Who was actually some political activist who was given a bad rep,” he said in disbelief. “The evil toser was a mad despot responsible for the most gruesome of the torture and killings throughout the war that he started!”
“Technically it would have been a revolution,” Harry argued, “and the despot thing’s not all that unusual, really— there’s a disturbingly high number of rulers throughout history who can and often are considered ‘despotic’, except despite being so feared they keep ending up greatly revered and even beloved by their people! And if we actually consider the fact that most of those ‘despotic rulers’ end up achieving the blind admiration of their people through a perceived destruction of a major threat that distracts or blinds the people from the threat that the despot themselves actually present, then we should all definitely be taking a good, close look at Dumbledore.”

Charlie’s look of disbelief had turned to one that was genuinely stunned. “I know Dumbledore’s done some questionable stuff, but are you seriously calling him a despot?” He asked, his voice hushed like he was actually afraid to be overheard.

“Well I’m certainly not calling him a benevolent overlord!” Harry scoffed. “Dumbledore might be widely admired as a strong leader and some ridiculously idealised image of restraint, wisdom and compassion, but it’s not like he actually used any of that in the duel against Grindelwald that made him so well-known throughout the International Wizarding community! No, it was winning a duel to the death with the at-the-time ‘Darkest wizard in known history’ that gave him the foundation that he’s used to build his pedestal.

“And really, the fact that he’s actually been so successful up on that pedestal of his should be giving more of us reasons to be suspicious and second guess him— while people who are genuinely compassionate and empathetic and all that certainly make really great human beings, they make awful leaders and rulers; they’re not mean enough to actually get stuff done.” And okay, he was probably been a bit too influenced by Tom and Voldemort there, but his points still stood. Nice people were nice but most of the time they were sort of useless at making stuff happen, like getting changes made when people didn’t want to change— and people never really wanted to change.

“So you think the fact that Dumbledore’s actually successful is a sign he’s not a nice person?” Charlie asked slowly, clearly still not convinced. Harry, having heard Tom and Hermione bickering and ranting about this often enough, just shrugged.

“I think Dumbledore hides a lot of things behind his act of a caring, wise old man who only wants to see the good in people. I think he very deliberately shows everyone a calculated image that disarms them and makes them vulnerable to being used as pawns in his giant game of chess.

“History shows that there’s a very specific personality-type that always crops up in positions of power and actually has any measure of success in it— the charismatic and charming yet calculating and cruel tyrannical type. And history also shows us that more often then not, the general masses end up worshipping and enabling such leaders. People are drawn to them, like they’re drawn to Dumbledore—and used to be drawn to Grindelwald and Voldemort, who both still have people loyal to them and their beliefs even now, decades after their defeats.

“I think that Dumbledore seems ‘too-good-to-be-true’ for a good reason— he is too good to be true. And they might have been Dark Lords, but at least Grindelwald and Voldemort didn’t hide who they really were and what they were really capable of.”

“You have really put a lot of thought into this,” Charlie said slowly. His face was guarded, his sharp, blue eyes wary almost. Harry shrugged again.

“Dumbledore’s been dicking with my life long enough for me to come up with some strong opinions.” In fact, he’d really like to learn just how long Dumbledore had been interfering with him and his family, because all Rita Skeeter’s articles in the Daily Prophet were hinting at some pretty nasty revelations regarding Dumbledore’s involvement in the 1981 Halloween mess and its
“Well I’ve got some bad news for you then,” Charlie interrupted the darkening turn Harry’s thoughts had taken, “because Tonks mentioned last night that Moody was planning on visiting you and my parents today,” which, Harry thought, probably explained Charlie’s presence. And if that wasn’t horrifying enough news, Charlie continued with, “and that he’s not the only one— apparently Dumbledore fancies a chat with you, mate.”

“What?!” Harry said, horrified. “Tell me you’re joking!”


“You’re lying.”

“You’re right.” Charlie agreed. “Also, if you’re planning to eat before my mum comes down to start making breakfast, you’ve only got about sixty seconds left.”

"Gods, you're an arse!” Charlie’s laughter followed Harry as he stormed over to the fruit bowl, grabbing three apples before hurrying back up the stairs to the relative safety of the bedroom (because he absolutely refused to think of it as his bedroom).

Charlie hadn’t been joking, like Harry had hoped anyway. It was just before lunch when Mrs. Weasley knocked on the door to the bedroom and told him he had visitors. She sort of bustled around, looking flushed and excited by the ‘important guests’, while Harry steeled himself for a thinly-veiled interrogation— one without Hermione nearby to rescue him.

But it was what he’d signed up for; it was the whole purpose of this torturous experience. And he’d already acknowledged that he needed to stop leaning on Hermione, and Tom— he needed to stand on his own two feet.

Dumbledore and Moody were in the living room, sitting on an overstuffed couch. Dumbledore was sipping congenially from a cup of tea (apparently the kettle hadn’t bitten his fingers) while Moody looked as ill-tempered and scowl-y as usual.

Harry cautiously sat down as far away from them as was politely possible then found great interest in the hovering knitting needles visible over Dumbledore’s shoulder.

“Harry, my boy, I hope you’re enjoying your stay here,” Dumbledore said, with a kind smile. Harry nodded stiffly.

“The Weasleys have been very welcoming.” As Dumbledore had no doubt instructed them to be.

“I’m pleased to hear you’re getting along so well with them!” Dumbledore beamed.

Which hadn’t been even close to what Harry had said, but fine. “They’re a nice family.” He said, a bit awkwardly, and Dumbledore nodded jovially. “I, uh, I actually had some questions about my own family,” he added, doing his best wary-but-curious teenage boy impression. It wasn’t entirely fake.

“Ah,” Dumbledore said quietly and then Moody spoke up, almost making Harry jump at the unexpected sound.

“Good folk, the both of ‘em.” His DADA professor barked. “James was a damn fine Auror, one of
my trainees before he graduated with top marks. Lily was chosen to apprentice under the Head
Unspeakable, old Croaker himself, before she and your dad had to go into hiding. It hurt a lot of
people, what happened to those two, and it was a damn shame to lose ‘em.”

Harry pounced on the perfect segue into what he really wanted to talk about. “But why did they
have to go into hiding? Why did Voldemort target us?” he asked.

“That is a very complicated story, my boy,” Dumbledore said, looking gravely at him over his half-
moon spectacles. “And it’s one I don’t yet wish to burden you with.”

“Wish to— it’s my right to know!” Harry said indignantly.

It wasn’t that he didn’t already know— Voldemort had told him about the prophecy when he was
eleven, on the very first time they’d met— but it was the sheer principle of the thing! What
fucking right did Dumbledore have to keep the reason Harry’s parents had been fucking murdered
from him? What right did he have to decide to keep a prophecy about Harry that would have— had
circumstances been different— resulted in Voldemort hunting him down to fucking murder him
too, away from him?

“You are young yet, Harry,” Dumbledore said, voice soft but firm, “too young to bear the weight
of such things. And I will not lie and say that I am not concerned with the company you choose to
keep. I understand how you must desire to see the best in your friends amongst Slytherin house,
and how, perhaps, you feel you owe them your loyalty, but we cannot willingly blind ourselves to
the truth, for the consequences of doing such are too horrendous to imagine. As much as I wish it
were otherwise, and as much as the Ministry of Magic willingly denies it, the truth is that Lord
Voldemort is not dead. And when he inevitably chooses to reveal himself, how many of your
House mates do you think will flock to his side and pledge themselves to him and his terrible
cause? For all that we extend our hand in friendship towards Slytherin house, only a very rare few
individuals accept it.”

Dumbledore paused and Harry wondered what his face was doing. He didn’t think the sheer look
of shock was exactly unsuitable for the speech he was having trouble processing, but it certainly
wasn’t for the reasons Dumbledore (hopefully) thought.

It was just… the sheer gall of Dumbledore’s words was just— there were honestly no words. No
words to describe it.

(And had the old bastard forgotten that he was a Slytherin? Or was he just purposefully ignoring
it?)

“Well,” Harry broke the silence, his words only slightly strangled-sounding to his ears, “you can
trust that I won’t pledge myself to Voldemort and whatever his cause is— he murdered my mum
and dad, sir. Why would I ever side with that monster?”

Charlie knocked on the door to the bedroom Harry had retreated to after Dumbledore and Moody,
then poked his head in without actually waiting for Harry to tell him to come in (or piss off). Harry
gave him a fierce glare and the redhead actually winced slightly as he stepped fully into the room,
closing the door behind him. “That bad, then?” he asked.

“Dumbledore wants me to have private lessons with that sick maniac Moody!” Harry spat out.
Charlie whistled.
“You realise there are people who would kill for a chance to train with the Mad-Eye Moody?”

“There are people who I would kill to get him and Dumbledore to just leave me alone!” Harry retorted, angrily.

“Let me distract you,” Charlie said, stepping right into his space and pulling him off the bed and slinging an arm casually around his shoulders.

“I don’t want you to distract me,” Harry muttered sourly, trying to shrug out from Charlie’s grip. Charlie refused to let go and just grinned at him.

“Are you sure? Not even with a Quidditch challenge, seeker to seeker? Because I’ve heard you’re the best seeker Hogwarts has seen since I graduated and I have to say, I’m feeling pretty competitive of my title.”

Harry felt excitement leap in his chest— he hadn’t been able to fly his broom since the last holidays, and it had been even longer since he’d played any sort of Quidditch. And he had his pride, yeah, but this was Quidditch.

“You win,” he admitted to Charlie, before grinning. “Just try to keep up, old man!”

“Oh, you little shit, it’s on!” Charlie laughed.

It was an excellent afternoon and Harry found he was actually having fun. Charlie was definitely the best seeker he’d ever competed against, and he half wished that the redhead was still at Hogwarts just so they could compete against each other in a proper match.

Still, Harry had a big grin on his face as he followed Charlie back into the Burrow as the sun started to set. If he got to play Quidditch like this every day, then maybe it wouldn’t be that bad staying at the Burrow. And Charlie, he’d admit, was growing on him.

When they walked in through the backdoor into the kitchen, Harry was surprised to see a second unexpected but familiar (and much more welcome) visitor waiting for them.

“Wotcher, Harry!” Tonks— Fleur’s sort-of girlfriend, or possibly just friend-with-benefits—greeted him brightly. Tonks was looking very groovy in her torn muggle jeans, combat-style boots and leather jacket. Her hair was styled in blue, red, green and purple twists and her eyes were a familiar grey colour that Harry couldn’t quite place.

“Hi,” he smiled at her. He’d seen her around Hogwarts a few times since the Second Task, mostly when she was with Fleur, and he thought she was pretty fun. Weird, yeah, but he was dating Tom so he didn’t plan on throwing any stones from his glass house.

“Tonks? What are you doing here?” Charlie asked, looking surprised. Tonks smiled brightly at her friend, stepping forwards to slip her arm through Charlie’s and pull him away from Harry, off towards the living room.

“Wait here a moment, Harry, I just need to borrow Charlie for a minute!” She called out over her shoulder.

“Uh, sure, go right ahead,” Harry said to their retreating backs.

“Harry, dear?”

Harry cursed under his breath as he turned around to try and smile at Mrs. Weasley, who’d just
bustled into the room. He was stuck making conversation with her for a few minutes as he waited for Charlie while she started to chop up the ingredients for dinner. He let out a quiet sigh of relief when Charlie and Tonks came back into the kitchen.

“So, mum, Tonks and I are going out for dinner tonight and I thought Harry might like to join us,” Charlie said cheerfully.

“That sounds great!” Harry said immediately, probably a bit too eagerly. Mrs. Weasley frowned and Charlie shot her an imploring look.

"Come on, mum," he coaxed. "Tonks and I'll both be there-- Tonks is Moody's old trainee, you know that means she’s good at what she does. He wouldn't accept anything less! And the kid's been cooped up here for days-- we do want him to want to come back, don't we?"

"I don't know," dithered Mrs. Weasley, twisting her hands in her apron. "Professor Dumbledore was very precise in his instructions--"

"Don't you trust me, mum?" Charlie asked, his face tragically hesitant. It was some very impressive bullshit, Harry thought, impressed.

"I swear, Mrs. Weasley, I won't do anything stupid," he said 'earnestly'. “It would be nice to go explore a bit, and to catch up properly with Miss Tonks.”

"I, well... I suppose it should be alright. But I want Harry back by nine at the very latest! And if there's any mischief at all, I will be informing Professor Dumbledore!” Mrs. Weasley warned. Harry refrained from rolling his eyes with great effort.

“Thanks mum! See you in a few hours!” Charlie grinned, grabbing Harry’s arm. “Ready, mate?”

“Wha— urgh!”

The sudden apparition was not appreciated and Harry staggered about like a baby deer when they reappeared on a cobbled path. “A bit of warning would have been nice,” he grumbled as Charlie balanced him. Charlie grinned.

"Not as funny, though."

Harry rolled his eyes but didn’t bother replying, instead looking around the oddly familiar surroundings. “Are we in Hogsmeade?” He asked.

“Yep.” Charlie confirmed, as he set off at a brisk pace, pulling Harry along with him, “and we’re heading to the Hog’s Head.”

“I didn’t realise they did meals there,” Harry said. “… actually I didn’t realise they did anything edible there at all.” He did try not to judge, but a childhood of cleaning the Dursleys’ home under Aunt Petunia’s sharp-eyed glare had definitely instilled an appreciation for at least a basic level of cleanliness in him— something that the Hog’s Head conspicuously lacked.

“You sound just like him, you know,” Tonks said, amused, as she led them through the doorway of the dusty pub.

“Just like who?” Harry asked, confused.

“Just like the guy who tracked me down earlier today, to organise to meet with you.” Tonks replied, steering them through the pub, towards one of the back corner tables, out of sight of the
“Who are you talking about?” Harry repeated, a little alarmed now.

“Me.” A new voice answered, as Tonks pushed him down onto a seat in the furthermost table from the entrance. Harry blinked, startled, at the new addition— and his third surprising face today.

“What are you doing here?” he blurted out. Tom, his eyes a brilliant crimson, arched an eyebrow.

“Not quite the convivial greeting I was expecting,” he drawled.

“Well obviously I’m thrilled to see you,” Harry grumbled, feeling his cheeks heat slightly. “It’s just… unexpected.”

And also slightly worrying, considering the colour of Tom’s eyes right now. Plus sitting up close like they were now, Harry was very aware of the familiar sharp, coppery tang of spilled blood clinging to the older boy.

“Well I’m not used to having Hermione and your skill at vanishing being turned against me,” Tom said. Harry frowned, examining Tom and not liking how tense and strained the older boy appeared.

“What’s wrong?” He asked, a growing sense of dread starting to build up inside him.

"Something happened with Hermione," Tom told him and Harry... Harry didn't know how to react at all. The words rattled in his skull like marbles in a cracked ceramic bowl and he sucked in a breath, mind spinning in every unpleasant direction imaginable— he knew Tom wasn’t the sort of person who was quick to panic. If the older boy was worried then there had to be a bloody good reason for it.

A chill came over Harry and, with no small amount of difficulty, he forced down the bile rising in his throat. “What do you know?” He asked, keeping himself from spiralling into a useless panic through sheer determination spurred by the knowledge that it would do Hermione no good if he wasted time freaking out.

::I know that several hours after she left King’s Cross Station, she used the bond to the Diary to pull on an excess magic:: Tom hissed, switching from English to Parseltongue. Harry had completely forgotten about their company in the wake of Tom’s revelation. ::She hasn’t contacted me since before leaving Hogwarts— has she spoken to you?::

::No:: Harry hissed back, ignoring how both Charlie and Tonks startled at the sound of Parseltongue coming from him. ::Why the fuck did you wait so long to talk to me!? She could be in trouble!::

::Do you think I’ve been sitting idle all this time, Harry?:: Tom asked, his expressionless face dangerously cold in a way that made Harry go quiet. ::I knew she was alive so I’ve been searching the areas of London she told us she used to frequent, and have been... questioning a number of homeless teenagers. I found one of the little gang she used to run around with, a girl who went by the ridiculous sobriquet ‘Cat’, and used Legilimency to learn that she took Hermione to the warehouse where her old acquaintances were squatting. The girl left before Hermione did, but when she returned the following day it was to discover that Hermione had killed two boys who went by the even more appalling noms de guerre of ‘Jed’ and ‘Bones’. From what few memories the girl had of her, Hermione appeared to get fairly very inebriated::

::What?:: Harry asked, stunned. ::Why would she do that?::
(It was probably a bit telling that he was far more surprised to hear Hermione had been drinking or using drugs, whatever Tom meant by ‘inebriated’, then he was that she’d killed two people)

::That muggle boy, Sting, is apparently dead:: Tom said dismissively. ::This seemed to cause her some distress::

“Oh,” Harry said, slipping back into English in his shock. “Yeah, that would do it.”

Bloody hell, Hermione must have been devastated.

::Going by the girl’s memories, Hermione was quite clearly drugged with something stronger then anything she was taking:: Tom continued, clearly not caring a bit about the death of Hermione’s childhood friend. ::I may have experienced a slight… loss of control, after discovering that::

::Is that why you smell like blood?:: Harry asked carefully. Tom’s mouth twitched slightly, the first real sign of humour in the older boy he’d seen that night.

::Let’s just hope Hermione doesn’t hold any strong feelings towards those muggles:: Tom hissed. ::Or there’s going to be quite a bit of angry sex in the immediate future::

“Oh shit!” Harry groaned (Parseltongue was not at all satisfying to swear in). ::Do you remember the name of who you killed::?

::I wasn’t paying any particular attention to what I was killing:: Tom said dismissively, which suggested more then one of homeless crowd had been murdered (and oh shit, hadn’t Tom used past tense when he said that the girl had gone by ‘Cat’? Shit, he had).

::I had bigger concerns:: the older boy continued, ::as considering everything I found, I’m fairly certain that the two boys she killed attempted something very foolish to do to any witch, inebriated or not, and Hermione pulled on the magic of the Diary to help her own magic burn the alcohol and drugs from her system so she could fight back. I just don’t know where she went after she killed them::

Harry (who was desperately not thinking about what Tom meant by ‘something very foolish’) chewed his lip nervously, thinking hard. ::Have you talked to Snape::?

::Snape:: Tom repeated, confused. ::Why Snape::?

::He and Hermione made some sort of deal, after last holidays, that he’d always be able to contact her in case there was an emergency:: Harry explained.

::That:: Tom hissed through gritted teeth, ::would have been very convenient to have known four days ago::

Harry decided not to mention that if Tom had come to him four days ago, then he could have known four days ago— the older boy’s temper was clearly hanging on by a thread.

“Please tell me what’s happening once you find out,” he quietly asked instead, as Tom stood abruptly.

“Of course,” Tom told him, some of the coldness leaving his face as he glanced back down. Before Harry really knew what was happening, Tom had reached forwards to tilt his head up, leaning down to kiss him. Harry inhaled sharply in surprise, his hands lifting and curling around Tom’s hips as he anticipated the shove of teeth and tongue that was sure to follow. It didn't come. The kiss stayed bewilderingly gentle, right up to the moment Tom pulled away— it left Harry feeling
off-balance, almost.

Tom must really be worried.

“I’ll contact you soon.” The older boy promised him before swiftly leaving the pub, disappearing outside into the darkness.

“Harry? You alright, mate?” Charlie asked gently as Harry stared out after Tom feeling lost and alone.

“No,” he answered honestly, his voice bleak. “I just… I’d like to go back.” Actually, he wanted to go home; to their countryside manor, to the Malfoys, even to Hogwarts— the location didn’t matter so much, it was the people that mattered. His home was where Hermione and Tom and his friends were, not the Burrow.

The end of the holidays couldn’t come soon enough— and if someone didn’t contact him with news of how Hermione was, then fuck Dumbledore, fuck Voldemort and fuck his mission— he was going to break out of the Burrow and go find her himself.

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Hermione’s POV:

When Hermione really thought about it, she was actually surprised Tom hadn’t turned up sooner. He looked pissed too, and Hermione had a sinking feeling that she knew why.

Her memories of that night weren’t very clear but looking back now, she was fairly certain that she’d used the Diary’s magic to help get rid of the drugs Jed had slipped her, right before she’d basically gutted Bones. Of course Tom would have noticed that, but considering the emotional wreck she’d been afterwards, Hermione wasn’t surprised she hadn’t realised that he’d have been alerted that something was wrong— and apparently he had been worrying about her.

“Shit,” she said. Tom looked quietly furious.

“Hermione. I’d like a word— in private.” He said stiffly, ruby eyes flicking over to Snape, who was standing like he was ready to put himself between her and Tom the moment Tom reached for his wand.

“It’s okay,” she told Snape, “I’m safe with him,” (she hoped) “we’re just going out to the garden to talk.”

Snape didn’t look reassured. Considering Tom had most likely gotten Voldemort to summon Snape in order to question if he knew where she was, she could understand why he was concerned for her safety.

“I’m safe with him,” she repeated, looking him straight in the eye. “I promise, professor.” Snape still looked hesitant but Tom was clearly out of patience and Hermione wasn’t about to wait for him to start cursing her favourite professor. Hastily grabbing Tom’s arm, she led him quickly through the house, then out to the backyard, the somewhat overgrown garden dimly lit by the light through the house windows.

The door had barely closed behind them before Tom grabbed her by the chin, his fingertips pressing sharp points of pain into her jaw as he forcibly tipped her head back so she was looking
him straight in the eye. His burning red eyes were like glowing coals of rage in his icy face. “Show me what happened.” He ordered in a voice that left no room for argument.

“No,” Hermione snapped anyway, because her memories were hers and her mind was nowhere near stable enough at present for her to be able to safely approve legilimency. She then hissed in pain, reaching up to grab onto Tom’s wrist as his grip tightened further, to the point it felt like he was going to dislocate her jaw. Unable to talk, she resisted the urge to punch him in the face and instead let go of his wrist with her right hand, instead moving it up beside his ear and clicking her fingers loudly twice— their non-verbal safe-word.

She hadn’t been sure that it would work, but much to her relief Tom released her immediately. Her jaw hurt, but Tom looked angrier at himself now then he’d been at her, stepping back and swearing under his breath, running both his hands agitatedly through his dark hair.

Hermione took a deep, calming breath and stepped forwards, closing the gap between them. She reached for Tom’s left hand, lifted it so his palm was resting against her neck, his fingers over her too-fast pulse so he could feel the rapid (reassuring) beat of it. “I’m okay,” she told him gently. “I promise. My head is a little scrambled right now, and it would do both of us no good if you went digging around in it, but I swear to you, Tom, I am okay.”

“I’ve been tracking you down for four days,” Tom told her, his voice flat and empty in a way that did not mean good things. Hermione winced.

“I didn’t realise you’d be aware— my memories are… not clear. I’m guessing I used the Diary link?” He nodded stiffly and she groaned softly. “Fuck. I’m sorry, Tom. I’m so sorry. I was stupid, and careless; I let myself be vulnerable around people I should have known better to, and I was drugged. I stopped them before anything happened, but they tried… well, I don’t think I have to spell it out.”

“Those pieces of filth should have died screaming!” Tom snarled, his rage so intense that she could practically feel the crackle of his magic lashing out around them in response, but his hand staying gentle as it rested on her vulnerable throat.

“They died too quickly,” she agreed, bitterly. If given half the chance, she would have torn Jed and Bones apart, carving them into a thousand screaming pieces.

“They dared to touch you, dared to put their filthy, unworthy hands on you,! Tom seethed and her breathing hitched, cracks splintering in her careful composure and exposing something desperate and still-bleeding beneath, drawn up far too close to the surface. Hermione could tell the moment Tom spotted the vulnerability, could see the outward shift from violent rage to tightly-controlled fury, icy and possessive.

“They hurt you,” he said, very softly. “I should have burnt the entirety of London to the ground.”

Hermione let out a shaky, shuddering breath. “Tom,” she whispered, and he leaned in and kissed her, slanting his mouth firmly against hers. For a moment she tensed (what if-what if-what if-) but the kiss was so familiar— Tom’s touch, Tom’s scent, Tom’s taste— that it was impossible to mistaken him for anyone else. In an instant, she shifted from frozen to frantic, desperately kissing back.

As his hand shifted from her throat to the back of her neck, his grip pulling her in close, Hermione was startled by the sudden wave of want and need that flooded her. Her pulse sped up as her heart started beating harder and her blood purred through her veins.
“I want you to take me like they never got to,” she gasped out roughly—demanded—between the hard, urgent kisses. “I want you to have me like they could never have me. You and Harry; you are the only ones who ever get to own me, nobody else!”

They ended up on the grass. Hermione wasn’t entirely clear on how. She was wearing a dress, thank Salazar, which made it easy to hitch the skirt up around her hips. She didn’t have a clue where her knickers had ended up, though. Or Tom’s robes.

Skilled fingers and hasty conjuring made quick work of preparation, before she was lifting her hips up and wrapping her legs around Tom’s waist. Her back arched up off the ground as he pushed in, the angle deep and almost painful, setting off bright sparks of pleasure-pain in her brain.

It wasn’t gentle; her nails tore his back to shreds and she could smell the blood in the air as his teeth pressed against the column of her trachea, a silent, wordless warning that kept her still, kept her from digging her own teeth into him as she felt his thrusts almost like punches inside her, knocking the breath from her lungs. Sounds were being wrenched out of her, needy and trembling, and Tom responded with a low, rough groan that she could feel reverberate against her throat.

Neither of them lasted long; it was too fast-paced, too hard and desperate and needy. When Tom dragged the wet heat of his mouth with its accompanying blunt scrape of teeth over from the column of her throat to the side of her neck then bit down, hard, she was all but thrown over the edge, every part of her drawing tight then releasing as the pleasure tore what was suspiciously close to barely shy of a scream from her.

Tom didn’t last much longer as she lay there, limp and trembling with after-shocks and the continued bursts of pleasure-pain with each rock of his hips. He pulled off her after, moving so he was lying beside her on the flattened grass. She turned her head so she could press her face into the curve of his shoulder and Tom moved them so that his arms were wrapped securely around her.

Hermione felt like an egg that had fallen to the ground; shattered, her raw insides everywhere but where they belonged, with only Tom’s arms keeping what little fragile bits of shell remained of her held together. She wasn’t sure how long she clung to him, pressed against him, just that he never stopped holding her tight.

When she felt settled, her emotions less like they were about to start malfunctioning on her, she loosened her steel-grip on Tom. Moving back slightly, she tilted her head up to look at his face. The angle verged on awkward, stretched out together on the ground as they were, but the sight of Tom, of the blood still smeared on his lips as he smirked at her, sent a hot jolt of arousal curling deep inside her.

“I liked hearing you say that,” he murmured, leaning to press his hot, damp (bloody) lips to her forehead.

“Saying what?” Hermione asked, wondering what embarrassing things she might have blurted out during the spectacular impromptu sex.

“That I get to own you.”

“Being an unstable, emotional wreck makes me melodramatic.” She muttered.

“Hm, sorry but no; you can’t ruin it for me, so don’t even try,” Tom replied, far too smug by half, but there was something deeper in his voice, burning in his eyes; something vicious and pleased, dark and satisfied.
“You, me and Harry, we belong together, to each other.” She said softly. “You are the only ones who will ever get to own me.”

She was half expecting some sort of witty reply, or possibly more kissing, but instead Tom shifted his arm so he could tangle his fingers with hers, then tugged her hand so she was touching the pendant that hung around his neck, the one that she and Harry had given him for Yule; the ‘symbolic yet suggestive jewellery signifying chains of ownership’ as she’d nicknamed it. “Oh,” she whispered, understanding what he wasn’t saying (because he was wearing it, he didn’t have to, but he was).

They laid there in the grass together for a stretch of time Hermione didn’t bother keeping track of. It was Tom who stirred first, sighing softly as he shifted up into a sitting position.

“I need to pass on to Harry that you’re alright,” he murmured. “I don’t want to make him wait longer then he has too—I’ve recently become quite aware of how uncomfortable having the uncertainty of someone’s wellbeing hanging over you is.”

Hermione took a moment to translate that in her brain then jerked up so she was sitting upright too, looking over at Tom appalled. “You told Harry?” she demanded, before groaning. “Oh fuck, I can’t believe you did that— he’s going to be panicking so badly, you inconsiderate arse!”

Tom, very tellingly, did not try to argue that. “I was… not particularly patient or reassuring when I discussed with him your possibly injured or endangered state,” Tom admitted and Hermione groaned again.

“Go!” She ordered, giving him a push. “Go tell him I’m fine, you berk, and that I’ll explain everything when we meet on the train.”

Tom nodded, getting to his feet and redressing quickly before offering her a hand so he could pull her up too. As they turned towards the backdoor, Tom paused. “You didn’t happen to cast any silencing charms, did you?” He asked.

“…this is becoming the running gag of my life,” Hermione sighed. She really hoped Snape had applied his own silencing charms when it became clear what she and Tom were doing (each other).

Tom snorted, amused, and Hermione wasn’t entirely sure that he hadn’t ‘forgotten’ to put up a silencing charm on purpose, in order to torment Snape for her professor’s earlier reluctance to let her talk privately with him. “You go ahead,” she told Tom, disgruntled. “I have to fix up…” she gestured to herself, “all this.”

“He’s undoubtedly already aware of what we were up to,” Tom said, amused. “There’s no need to try and hide it.”

“And yet, I still am.” She replied, flatly.

Several glamours later, Hermione walked back into the house. Tom was gone, and Snape was waiting for her in the living room.

His long-suffering expression, she would admit only to herself, was actually quite funny. Honestly, at this point she was really just waiting for her poor professor to walk in on her fucking—they just seemed to have that kind of luck.

“Dare I ask just how that boy is connected to the Dark Lord?” Snape asked, apparently determined to once again pretend nothing had happened.
“Very close blood relative,” she answered him, mostly honest. “Though officially, Tom is Dagworth’s nephew — the other side of the family then my squib mother, for obvious reasons.” She couldn’t quite resist adding.

“Yes, abundantly obvious reasons,” Snape said, with a dark glare. “And how does ‘Basilius Sfor’ fit into this equation exactly? The one that just so happens to share a wand with ‘Tom’?”

“…well that’s where it gets complicated,” Hermione admitted.

“Of course it is. Because things are never simple with you.” Snape sighed and she couldn’t help but smirk at him, feeling lighter then she had since that horrible night.

“What can I say, professor? It’s all part of my charm.”

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Rita Skeeter’s POV:

“So your book is about to reach fifty years,” Rita said, perfectly feigned admiration in her voice as she smiled at the tiny old woman who she’d asked to interview about her best-selling publication ‘A History of Magic’.

Bathilda Bagshot smiled kindly back at her; old, earnest, gentle, utterly and entirely senile and one of the easiest marks Rita could remember. Slipping the babbling concoction into her tea was only too easy — the concoction was so much easier to get her hands on then Veritaserum, and with the right vict-er, target it worked just as well as the truth serum, if one could put up with the inevitable devolution of the into hysterics. It would certainly have no issue loosening a batty old woman’s tongue, stripping her of all inhibitions and filters.

“What can you tell me about the Dumbledores?” She asked eagerly, as soon as the Bathilda’s eyes became unfocused. “They were your neighbours for a time, weren’t they?”

“They were a puzzling sort of family,” Bathilda mumbled, looking somewhat vaguely at the window. “I remember Kendra slammed the door in my face when I went around to welcome her to Godric’s Hollow with a batch of homemade Cauldron Cakes. The first year they were here I only ever saw the two boys. Wouldn’t have known there was a daughter if I hadn’t been out picking Plangentines by moonlight the winter after they moved in—”

“Wait, did you just say daughter?” Rita interrupted sharply, her eyes gleaming as she leaned forwards. She’d come here following the trail ancient whispers passed on by Adrienne, whispers that hadn’t surfaced for decades about a rumoured connection between Dumbledore and the Dark Lord Grindelwald other then their famous duel.

But this? This was just as intriguing — she’d never even found a hint anywhere of a sister to the famous Albus Dumbledore! He must have had the information buried deep, because she’d managed to even dig up records of his father’s imprisonment in Azkaban for attacking three muggles, but nothing on a sister.

“Tell me about her!” She eagerly ordered the confused elderly woman with the forcibly loosened tongue.

“I… I saw Kendra leading Ariana out into the back garden… she walked her round the lawn once, keeping a firm grip on her, then took her back inside. I didn’t know what to make of it at all.”
Bathilda stammered, words only slurring slightly. “The Dumbledore family weren’t on speaking terms to anybody, not until I wrote to Albus… he was just a student at Hogwarts, that bright boy, but he’d written such an impressive paper on trans-species transfiguration that had been published in ‘Transfiguration Today’ that I just had to congratulate him… We struck up a delightful correspondence after that, and eventually I was introduced to the rest of the family, including dear, darling Ariana and serious, devoted little Aberforth… how he adored his dear sister… Such sweet children, all of them,” she sighed mournfully.

“But what was the problem with the sister— ‘Ariana’, was it?” Rita pressed. The clear despondence in the elderly witch’s voice hinted at a tragedy, and she wanted to know what.

Readers loved a good tragedy, especially one with scandal involved.

“I thought she might be a squib,” Bathilda murmured, with a little confused frown creasing her liver-spotted forehead. “I just didn’t understand why they kept her hidden… some of the rare few who knew Ariana existed even thought Kendra kept her imprisoned, as a number of the older families used to keep their squibs locked away… a practice that most thought was quite unnecessary in the new time and age Britain was moving into, and dear Kendra was a muggleborn so I never did quite believe the rumours… she wasn’t well-liked, poor Kendra, and nobody ever did seem sure what caused the explosion that killed her… but those boys of hers did dote on sweet Ariana, even my grand-nephew was awfully fond of her… I could never understand why he- why he would—” Bathilda’s eyes filled with tears, emotion choking her up.

“Do you mean Grindelwald?” Rita demanded, savage excitement filling her, the sly, smug triumph of successfully digging up a delicious, dirty little secret. “What did he do?”

Bathilda started weeping, tears running down her wrinkled cheeks as she pulled a white handkerchief from the sleeve of her robes and pressed it to her heart, apparently too overcome with emotion to dab at her eyes. “He killed her, he killed her, he killed that sweet little girl!” the elderly witch wept. “Oh, I’d been ever so worried about Gellert after his expulsion, but he and Albus had formed such a close friendship, oh they shared everything, they were closer then brothers— I thought that Albus was straightening Gellert out, helping him to use his prodigal gift with magic to create something wondrous for the world, but then he fled the country without even telling me, and I learned from the Aurors that he’d killed poor, sweet Ariana! I never saw him again, I only ever heard about the awful, awful things he was doing, all his and Albus’s plans to reshape the government into something new and better turned to a hateful, horrid revolution of death and violence and Dark magic!” The old woman was weeping so hard she was practically hysterical at this point, her words barely discernible amongst the sobs.

Rita ignored her hysterics, focusing instead on what was important, that gold prize-worthy piece of information she’d just learnt— and all the connotations that went along with it.

“Albus Dumbledore’s childhood best friend, Gellert Grindelwald, killed his squib sister, a mysterious explosion killed his muggleborn mother and then Grindelwald went on to become one of the most dangerous Dark Lords of all time— this is perfect!” She breathed, practically able to see the galleons piling up, headlines all across the world printing out her story. She almost couldn’t believe she’d managed to stumble across something so deliciously scandalous! It was unbelievable… which was actually a problem.

“This is going to need evidence,” she muttered to herself. Nobody would possibly believe her otherwise. “Do you have pictures? Letters? Mementos? Anything?” She demanded of the weeping, befuddled Bathilda.

“I… I…” Bathilda dabbed at her eyes with the handkerchief, her hand trembling. “I don’t show
them to people… it would be so easy for them to get the wrong idea, and… oh, I don’t think I should—“

“Oh for Circe’s sake!” Rita sighed, rolling her eyes. “Just… sit tight, I’ll go find them myself— but let me say, Batty, you’ve been a wonderful help! Truly, with what you’ve told me today, that pathetic serene, silver-bearded image of wisdom of one of the greatest wizards in magical history worldwide is going to be crushed— and I’m going to be the one responsible! It’s almost a shame you won’t remember this, but I’ll make sure to send you a copy of the best-seller; ‘The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore’ has a nice ring to it, don’t you think? Actually, it doesn’t matter what you think— obliviate!”
Staying at Snape’s house on Spinner’s End was quite different from anything else Hermione has experienced. The town itself wasn’t anything special; it spoke to her of a familiar poverty, a town of streets filled with identical old brick, terraced houses halfway to falling apart, broken street-lamps and a dirty river that wound between overgrown, rubbish-strewn banks, all overlooked a disused, abandoned mill, its immense chimney towering high over the dilapidated town.

Despite its rough surroundings, however, Snape’s house wasn’t uncomfortable. It was clean, almost too clean, with the slight air of neglect that came with homes not usually inhabited. Half the rooms had walls completely covered in books, most of them bound in old black or brown leather, and the furniture was old but serviceable. Snape had clearly invested enough money in the place to keep it functional, liveable even, but not a knut more.

Only the garden showed any signs of tending to, beyond any required upkeep. Slightly overgrown, it was not immediately obvious that it was a garden but memorising ‘1001 Magical Herbs and Fungi’ gave Hermione the knowledge to recognise the different plants, berries and herbs planted there, to spot the hidden patterns in the way the shrubbery, trees and patches of flowers were arranged in the seemingly neglected, uncultivated wildness.

The room she stayed in was small but functional, the general theme of the house; it contained a simple dresser, a single bed made up with crisp white sheets and an adjoining match-box bathroom, containing a shower that was barely three foot by three foot, a mirror and a loo.

Living with Snape was… startlingly easy. Comfortable, almost. Peaceful. She spent most of her days either doing her homework or reading, rarely seeing her professor outside of the mealtimes, which Snape would always cook. She found, as the days passed, that she most enjoyed borrowing one of the books and reading it out in the garden. Snape’s book collection had a variety of magical and muggle texts, everything from ‘The Odyssey’, ‘One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest’ and ‘Slaughterhouse-Five’ to ‘Tales of Beedle the Bard’, ‘Sonnets of a Sorcerer’ and ‘E. Nesbit's Fairy Tales’, to ‘The Dark Arts: A Legal Companion’, ‘Nature's Nobility: A Wizarding Genealogy’, ‘The Decline of Pagan Magic’ and just about every issue of the scholarly journals ‘The Practical Potterioneer’ ever printed.

But while her days were calm, her nights… weren’t.

She wasn’t sleeping well which wasn’t unexpected, everything considered. She was waking up at least every second night in cold sweat, a nightmare hammering at her chest and head, all sharp...
edges like her favourite knives and lingering like a shadow. Writing about them in the journal Lupin had given her had… helped.

Over the almost two weeks she spent at Spinner’s End, Lupin had come to visit her four times. It was… strange, talking to him. While they didn’t discuss her past itself, a life-time of conditioning holding Hermione back from verbalising the memories that haunted her, even locked away behind her towering walls of Occlumency, they did talk about the emotions associated with traumatising events.

Trauma, which Hermione had the self-awareness to acknowledge she had suffered more then her fair share of, was a very tricky thing. She knew quite a few tricks to adapting to and getting around hers; she’d practically mastered the art of appearing normal even if everything inside her was all upside down and turned around and fucking burning her whole fucking world to ashes. Lupin, however, was teaching her how to actually process what had happened, acknowledging instead of avoiding.

She could already tell it was going to be a slow process. At least only once so far had she descended into a full panic attack; gasping, hyperventilating and careening out of control before Lupin had fetched Snape, who’d gently pushed her head down in an approximation of putting her head between her knees until she could breathe again.

She didn’t spend all her time reading, doing her homework and talking through her myriad of emotional issues with Lupin, however; she hadn’t forgotten what she’d promised herself she’d do to repay Sting.

Finding Walter “Wal” Farrier hadn’t even been that hard; while Snape had been brewing a potion down in the cellar, Hermione had broken into one of his neighbour’s houses and used her illegally purchased acacia wand to summon a phonebook. There were a surprising number of W. Farriers listed, but only one whose address listed him as living in Tolstone, the suburb near London where Sting had taken her to visit his mother’s grave.

After finding the address, from there she’d had to convince Snape to take her to London for a day. She knew she could always go without asking; Snape wasn’t trying to watch her every movement so it would be easy to slip away, but the show of trust he was giving her had the irritating side-effect of making her want to show him she was worthy of that trust.

She brought it up during dinner, a few days before the end of the Eostre holidays. ‘Shockingly’, Snape had been reluctant. Hermione had been stubborn, however, promising him that she wasn’t putting herself in any danger (mostly true) but that this was something she desperately needed to do (completely true).

She didn’t tell him it was completely legal, because that would have been a dirty, dirty lie.

It took nearly an hour of arguments and reassurances to wear him down. At one point, Hermione had found herself wondering if this was what having a parent was like. She’d quickly shied away from that thought, not at all comfortable with what it implied— her parents might have been dead for most of her life, but she had no plans of ever replacing them and what they’d meant to her.

Two days before she was due to return to Hogwarts— and, more importantly, to Harry— Snape apparated them both to London with a promise to return in the evening to collect her. Hermione had caught several buses then a cab to her destination, the journey taking around three and a half hours.

Tolstone was not a ‘good’ area in general and Patching, the suburb that Farrier’s address had been
listed as, was far worse than Spinner’s End could dream to be. While Spinner’s End had an abandoned, poverty-stricken look, Patching had a dark, dangerous atmosphere, the unmistakable air of a criminal element about it; it was the sort of place where children and adults alike knew better than to loiter on the streets, where no one cared to look, no one bothered to investigate, and all who lived there were already rotting inside.

The house located at the address she’d found, if it could even be called a house, was awful. Paint hung in strips off the sides, the bare wood weathered to a grey sheen, the sagging eaves were propped up by long planks and the front steps rotted through, and the only way in was through a yard knee-high in weeds, any grass long dead, around to the back door. It was the exact sort of place where Hermione had expected to find Wal Farrier.

As she walked around the side of the ‘house’, she shifted slightly, her pace subtly slipping into the quiet step of a ready predator; not exactly nervous, but certainly preparing herself for trouble without thinking it. She knocked sharply on and the door to the house swung open, revealing a scowling man with stringy grey hair and a bulbous nose like a mushroom cap. Wal Farrier had evidently been drinking and Hermione felt disgust well up inside her as his watery blue eyes took her in with an obvious hunger.

“An’ ‘oo might you be, huh?” He asked, in a voice like he had a mouthful of ash and gravel. His breath stunk of harsh spirits and his teeth were cigar-stained as he leered down at her.

“I’d think up something clever to say here, but you’re honestly not worth the effort,” Hermione drawled disdainfully, twisting her mouth into a sneer as she let her acacia wand slip from her sleeve, down into her hand. Farrier reacted about as well to her taunts and purposefully affected clipped, upper-class accent as she’d expected him to.

“Wot didja just say, yeh stupid li’l whore?” He bellowed, face going purple with rage as spittle flecked his lips.

“I didn’t say anything, precisely, but I did explicitly imply that you’re a pathetic waste of space, Walter Farrier.” She said, her voice sweet enough to choke on. “You see, I was a friend of your son’s— you know, Lachlan Farrier, the boy you used to sexually abuse until he ran away after your wife, his mother, hung herself to get away from you? Remember him?” She grinned then with a feral pain verging on mania, all sharp teeth and bitterness, the need for revenge cold and painful in her eyes. “I’m here to make you pay for what you did to him.”

“I dunno wot yeh’re talkin’ ‘bout, yeh crazy bitch!” Farrier snarled at her, the dumb animal panic of prey flaring up in his eyes, and she laughed at him, high and wild and savagely dangerous.

She was going to rip apart this man and then bury what she’d done so deep that it would never come to light.

Hermione saw Farrier’s decision to move, to grab her, as soon as he’d made it, and reacted faster then he could dream of. She side-stepped neatly and he stumbled forwards, out into his yard, giving her the perfect opportunity to hit him in the back with a quick silencing spell then step back through the now-empty doorway, into his house.

When she was this angry, Hermione tended to either go hot with animalistic rage or ice-cold and cuttily cruel. Right now, her blood was boiling in her veins, a haze of red sliding over her vision as she waited for Farrier to turn around again, waited for him to charge back into his house after her (and away from any possible witnesses; just because this area was filled with criminals, addicts, prostitutes and illegal immigrants who’d never bring bring attention to themselves, it didn’t mean she was about to go reveal magic to the lot of them) before snarling out, “Crucio!”
It wasn’t quite as satisfying as tearing her knives through his flesh, to make him cry and bleed with her own two hands, but she didn’t know enough about torture to make Farrier hurt the way she wanted him to suffer. She kept the curse active, the silencing spell keeping Farrier mute in his torment, mouth locked in an unending, soundless howl of unthinkable agony as he convulsed wildly on the ground, his limbs jerking and body contorting so violently she was surprised his bones weren’t snapping. Idly, without removing her eyes from the sight, she stepped around his convulsing body and closed the door.

She held him under the Cruciatius without any pause, watched as his sweat mixed with urine then the contents of his bowels on the already filthy carpet as he lost control of his body’s sphincters. Vomit sprayed from his mouth and, still silent in his torment, he coughed and choked and screamed, his tears running mingling with more blood, dribsbles of puke and mucus as his nose started bleeding and he bit his tongue nearly clean in half.

She crucio’d him until the blood vessels in his body began to unravel and rupture one by one, until his eyes rolled back into his skull as his back arched up so high she thought he might have snapped his own spine clean in two, then he collapsed on the ground, unmoving, lying limp in a pool of his own bodily fluids with his mouth frozen open in a permanent howl of agony.

Hermione ended the curse, quietly examining the results of her handiwork. Her stomach rolled at the grisly picture; the stench was overpowering and she thought she might be sick, before she fought it back.

She almost left him there like he was, but in the interest of not attracting any attention from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement— she wasn’t sure just how it was that Aurors identified crimes against muggles by witches and wizards, but she was pretty sure leaving a muggle who’d clearly died in agonising pain without any clear cause was likely to raise some flags in the DMLE.

Fortunately, many muggle criminals attempted to cover up their crimes by setting evidence on fire — and there was enough alcohol in the house to pour over the body before she hit it with several overpowered incendio’s then retreated out the backdoor, casting a disillusionment charm over herself before exiting the house, going through the yard and back out to the street.

She walked through Tolstone until the surrounding area began to look neater and more up-kept, then located a phone booth and called a cab. She had to confound the driver when he initially refused to take her all the way to London, but taking a cab took just short of an hour off the journey back to the city— besides, she wasn’t heartless enough not to pay the confounded cabbie the full fare for the ride, using up nearly all of her remaining converted muggle money to do so before slipping off to make her way quickly to the point where Snape had dropped her off.

Her professor was already waiting there, the relief on his face unmistakable when he saw she looked to be in the exact same state as when he’d dropped her off that morning. “Are you ready to go?” He asked briskly, holding out his arm so he could apparate them both away. Hermione paused for a moment, looking around her at the streets still filled with people even as the sun sank below the horizon, muggle London nearly as lively at night as it was during the daylight hours, before she turned back to face Snape and accepted the offered arm.

“Yes,” she murmured, so quietly she could barely even hear her own voice. “I am.” Because she knew, deep in the jagged wound that was her heart, that this time as she left the muggle world, she would never return to it—and she was ready. This chapter of her life was over; both Hermione Granger the daughter of dentists and Jane the runaway street rat were gone and they wouldn’t ever be coming back.

Snape looked at her for a moment, his piercing dark eyes seeming to see straight through her,
Harry was in a room. He nodded. “Alright. Three- two- one—“ and with a muted crack, he apparated them both away.

Harry’s POV:

The return to Hogwarts couldn’t come soon enough in Harry’s opinion. It didn’t matter that, through Tonks, Tom had passed on a message confirming Hermione was safe and uninjured and currently staying with Snape— until he saw her with his own eyes, his persistent uneasiness would remain.

And if he’d felt uncomfortable and trapped at the Weasley’s house before, it was nothing compared to after his brief meeting with Tom. His temper was shorter and it took a great deal more of his stretched thin self-control to keep from snapping at Mrs. Weasley’s interfering, pushy attitude or swearing at Mr. Weasley’s stupid, ignorant questions, or pulling out his illegal blackthorne wand and cursing the Weasley twins stupid when they kept “pranking” him, too subtly for Mrs. Weasley to notice but Harry knew he didn’t keep misplacing his glasses, spilling ink on his homework or mistake the sugar for the salt, and he definitely wasn’t clumsy enough to keep tripping everywhere— especially while walking up the bloody stairs!

Charlie only came to play Quidditch with him twice more, on the weekend; considering the fact the stocky redhead had a job, Harry understood why but he still wished Charlie had been able to visit more— something he never thought would happen.

He counted down each day until boarding the Hogwarts Express so desperately that he almost couldn’t believe it when it finally arrived. There was no end-of-holidays gloom to be found; Harry’s trunk was already packed and he dressed in his school-robes the moment he woke up, the Slytherin crest and green-and-silver tie proudly on display (living with the Dursleys had made him very accomplished in the fine art of passive-aggression).

For some unfathomable reason, instead of shrinking the trunks so they could apparate to King’s Cross, Mrs. Weasley had used the telephone in the village post office to order an ordinary Muggle taxi to take them into London. The journey was very uncomfortable, mostly owing to the fact that Harry was jammed in the back of the cab with the twins and the three trunks and it was a relief for all three of them when they finally arrived at King’s Cross.

Once passing through the barrier to Platform Nine and Three Quarters, Harry said a hasty thanks and goodbye to Mrs. Weasley— something about appreciating her opening up her home to him and how she and her family had been so kind and welcoming, he didn’t really remember— before rushing off.

Blaise, Tracey and Draco were all already in their usual compartment, as were Greg and Vince, and Blaise was complaining to them about the funeral of his latest step-father that his mother had made him attend. Harry wasn’t sure he’d ever been so happy to see them before.

“That’s why you’re alive!” Draco exclaimed, interrupting Blaise’s story when he noticed Harry grinning at them like a loon from the doorway to the compartment.

“You lot are a sight for sore eyes,” he told them and Tracey flicked her long, strawberry blonde curls with a sniff.
“I imagine so, after being stuck for so long with Weasleys!” She shuddered delicately at the sheer horror of the thought. Harry shuddered at the memory of the sheer horror that was the reality of it.

“Have any of you seen Hermione yet?” he asked as he pulled out his wand to tap his trunk, applying a quick feather-light charm so he could lift it up into the storage space above their heads.

“Aaaaand that only took thirty seconds,” Blaise said, amused.

“Shut up,” Harry said, rolling his eyes. “Have you seen her?”

“Ooh, something happened, didn’t it?” Blaise noted, shrewdly.

“What makes you think that?” Harry grumbled and Blaise snorted.

“Maybe it has something to do with the way peace and quiet go running, screaming bloody murder at the sight of you both?”

“I resent that,” an achingly familiar voice said and Harry almost tripped he spun back around so quickly to the beautiful sight of Hermione smiling at him. Ever since he’d heard what happened, it felt like he’d been carrying a hurricane of anger and fear inside him— now, there was a tentative peace and relief settling into his bones.

“Hey,” he told her, for want of something better. Hermione’s eyes softened.

“Hey to you too,” she murmured, leaning forwards to kiss him. Harry hooked his arms around her, drawing her in close to enjoy the warmth of the kiss, soft and loving with the promise of more behind the dip of her tongue.

“Go get a room,” Draco grumbled from behind him and Hermione broke the kiss, pulling back from Harry slightly in order to smile sweetly over his shoulder at the blond.

“That’s a wonderful idea— come on, Harry.” Harry laughed and went along with it as she grabbed his hand, letting her pull him out into the corridor, still full of laughing, shouting students all finding their friends. She lead them to one of the bathrooms, locking it behind them so they had privacy and throwing up a quick silencing charm.

Harry waited until she turned back to him before immediately asking, “so what the hell happened?”

Hermione’s face lost all warmth and brightness, dimming drastically, and she sighed, flipping the lid of the toilet down so she could sit. “I learned that Sting is dead,” she said, not hiding her sheer grief at the revelation. Harry sucked in a shocked breath, the loss of the cheerful muggle he remembered a sharp, sudden ache in his chest he hadn’t been prepared for. "And then I was drugged, attacked and I killed two people.” Hermione continued, as if the news of Sting’s demise hadn’t been bad enough. “All on the first day, too."

"Attacked?!" His voice was shrill enough that he’d be embarrassed if he wasn't so alarmed.

"Nothing happened– I dealt with it all. But... it was a lot of shit to all happen at once." Hermione admitted, which honestly just worried him more.

“Oh, wow. That’s... that’s fucking awful,” he breathed, which was the understatement of the century, before pushing back his rage and fear in order to concentrate on Hermione. “Um, Tom mentioned you were staying with Snape?”

“He came and got me, after the attack and, er, self-defence.” She explained, wincing slightly at the
memory. “I was… not quite in my right mind, but he took me back to his quarters at Hogwarts and cleaned up the scene so there wouldn’t be any evidence. When he offered to let me stay at his house, after, I agreed. It was pretty nice there.” She said, in a clear attempt to change the subject, looking at him pleadingly to go along with it.

“Uh, what did you do there?” he asked, accepting the change of subject and wordless plea to let it go, understanding that the best thing he could probably do for her was to let her bring it up when she was ready.

“Mostly read from his enormous book collection,” Hermione said, before pulling a face. “Also, apparently people are supposed to deal with their past traumas. Something about emotional health. So I got to work on that, too— Snape asked Lupin to help me.”

“Remus?” Harry was confused. “Why Remus?”

“Well, keep it between us, but Greyback— the werewolf who bit him— apparently likes little boys just as much as he likes little girls,” Hermione said, her mouth twisting in distaste.

“That’s just sick,” Harry shook his head, stomach churning as he wondered why the world was so horrible. “Remus was only, what, six or seven when he was Bitten?”

“Don’t think about it,” Hermione advised. “It’ll just make you mad and sad and there’s nothing we can do about it that we haven’t already done.”

“Killed the sick, sadistic son of a bitch?”

Hermione’s smile was sharp and mean. “Exactly.”

That night in his four-poster bed, with Hermione curled up against his side and following a thoroughly enjoyable welcome back feast and reunion with his friends, Harry slept well for the first night since leaving Hogwarts.

He woke up before Hermione, feeling particularly well-rested, and put a hand on one of her shoulders, nudging her her gently. “Wake up, H’mione,” he mumbled through a yawn, and what followed next happened so fast he didn't even have time to react.

Hermione’s hand slid under the pillow in a movement almost too swift to follow, and then Harry was being pinned to the bed, all of her weight on top of him— and, far more worryingly, one of her knives pressed right to his throat. It had all happened in about three seconds and Hermione was staring down at him, all feral and afraid and only half-awake, and Harry would be a lot more impressed by her killer reflexes (literally) if he wasn’t scared to death.

“Hermione,” he said quietly, very definitely fully awake now, “it’s okay. It’s me, Harry. You’re in our bed at Hogwarts, in the Slytherin dormitories. You’re safe.”

The knife dug in deeper and his pulse jumped as he abruptly shut his mouth. Hermione's eyes fell shut for a moment and when she opened them again she looked horrified, tossing the knife away and shoving off of him. Heart still pounding, Harry put pressure to his throat with his hand. The skin, to his relief, was unbroken.

Hermione was looking at him, however, like he was bleeding to death in front of her.

“Are you okay?” He asked hesitantly.

"Am I okay?” Her voice was uncharacteristically shrill. “I just held a knife to your fucking throat,
“Yeah, but I’m fine and you’re clearly freaking out,” he pointed out. “Seriously, I’m fine—and now I know not to wake you up like that.” Never, ever again. Ever.

Hermione took a shaky breath, one of her hands covering her face. For a really horrible moment, Harry thought she was about to cry. Then she lowered her hand again, her mouth set in a determined line. “Lupin said I have to be kind to myself, that mistakes are part of recovery,” she told him abruptly. Harry blinked.

“That’s… good advice?” And she was following it?

“It’s easier to say then do, of course,” she admitted, “and this… talking thing with Lupin feels a lot like ‘two steps forwards, one step back’, but… I can acknowledge that I’ve got enough to deal with right now that I shouldn’t go around adding more, especially when I’m clearly bothered by what happened more then you are.” She paused for a moment before adding, wryly, “though I should probably stop sleeping with knives under my pillow, when I’m sharing a bed with someone.”

“That’s probably a good idea,” Harry wholeheartedly agreed, before adding, “you know, I was pretty sceptical about the whole talking with Lupin thing, but it’s obviously doing something right.” And if Hermione’s laughter was a bit shaky, well, only the two of them could hear it.

The start of the summer term would normally have meant that Harry was training hard for the last Quidditch match of the season. This year, however, it was the third and final task in the Triwizard Tournament which he needed to prepare for and he still didn't know what he would have to do.

On the third day back at Hogwarts, a nondescript brown owl delivered him a short note at breakfast that stated ‘10pm tonight, RoR’— it was only signed ‘T’, but the handwriting was unmistakable and Harry felt excitement stir at the thought of reuniting with Tom, the three of them together again. Going by the faint smile on her face, Hermione was just as eager.

Harry was still in his school robes when he entered the Room of Requirement that evening at nearly ten exactly, having spent the time since classes ended doing homework in the common room to try and distract himself from the buzzing excitement that nearly had him vibrating out of his skin. He knew Tom was there before he even set eyes on the older boy— the Room had already styled itself in the way Tom preferred; all vast and magnificent, like a room in a grande castle or manor, filled with hand-carved furniture, elegant drapes, various antique-looking adornments, exquisite paintings, a beautiful crystal chandelier and the grand fire-place around which several velvet-padded armchairs and a long, leather sofa were arranged tastefully.

Tom was lounging back on one of the armchairs, all lazy and careless and still so devastatingly handsome. Barty Crouch Junior was kneeling on the ground at Tom’s feet, looking up at him with worshipful, reverent eyes, like the young Dark Lord wasn’t seated on an armchair but a grand throne that propriety dictated he was required to prostrate himself before.

Honestly, Barty was great but he definitely had a few screws loose. Azkaban seemed to have had that effect on all of the Death Eaters who’d been imprisoned there. Or possibly they’d been just as crazy before all the dementor exposure— he honestly wouldn’t be that surprised.

“You’re such a hedonist,” Hermione observed as she crossed over to Tom, skimming her palm over the velvet on the chair’s arm as she leaned down to greet him with a long, deep kiss.
“Of course,” Tom said, after the two of them broke apart, entirely unashamed, his slightly reddened lips curling into a sly, cat-like smile. “This world is made up of sharp edges, darling, and nobody else is going to soften them for me.”

Harry, more conscious then either of his partners of the other person in the room, didn’t kiss Tom in greeting, but he did smile at the older boy, who smiled back at him with glittering eyes, clearly amused by Harry’s show of self-consciousness.

“How was your holidays?” He asked teasingly and Harry groaned, flopping down onto one of the chairs.

“Let’s not talk about that. Let’s not ever talk about that.”

“I suppose we could talk about the Third Task instead, then,” Tom said, amused, and Harry held back his wince.

“Yeah, about that,” he said as he straightened up in the chair and took a breath, already steeling himself for the upcoming argument, “I don’t want to cheat.”

“Excuse me?” Tom asked flatly.

“What?” Hermione demanded at the same time.

“It’s just…” he hesitated slightly as he tried to find the words to explain himself, “all the Champions have worked so hard for this, and for the Final Task it just… doesn’t feel right. Cheating, I mean. I want to do this one on my own merit.”

“Harry, there are times when you are disgustingly noble,” Tom told him, his lips pressed into a thin, unimpressed line.

“Thanks,” he replied brightly, purposefully misunderstanding. Tom’s lips thinned further.

“That was not a compliment.”

“This may surprise you, Tom, but I’m not actually a complete idiot,” Harry said dryly. “I’m well aware you meant that as an insult, but, shockingly, not everybody views human decency as a flaw.”

“Just the intelligent people, then,” Tom said smoothly.

“And the arseholes.”

“Enough of the foreplay, boys,” Hermione interjected, though there was no amusement present in her voice. “Harry, are you going to dig your heels in about this pointless gesture and be needlessly stubborn?” She asked sharply.

“Yes,” he told her with a sigh. “And is it so wrong for me to want to test myself? Tom’s been training us all year, plus now bloody Moody is going to be giving me lessons—”

“What?” Tom and Hermione both interrupted sharply. And whoops, he hadn’t told them about that yet.

“Ah, that’s a long story—“

“Then give us the short version.” Hermione snapped.

“Dumbledore came to visit The Burrow and basically told me that he’d asked Moody to teach me,
“You’re not wrong,” Tom said, looking immensely displeased by that fact.

“I don’t like it,” Hermione muttered.

“I don’t either. Believe me, I don’t like it at all.” Harry said with a shudder. “But it’s not like I can just refuse, not when I’m trying to get on Dumbledore’s good side.”

“What good side?” Tom sneered.

“The side slightly less likely to lock me up and throw away the key for being a slimy, no-good, traitorous Slytherin?”

“I hate that old fool,” Tom snarled, looking murderously furious.

“I daydream of all the terrible things we will one day do to him,” Hermione said wistfully and Barty, who had been silent up until this point, made an amused sound.

As if reminded of the wizard’s presence, Tom glanced down at Barty and gestured carelessly towards the exit. “If Harry’s going to be ridiculous about this then your presence is no longer required,” he said dismissively. “You’ve got your orders.”

“Yes, my Lord,” the still-kneeling Barty said, bowing so low that his head practically touched the ground before carefully standing and exiting the Room, the large, carved door shutting behind him with a gentle thud.

“Well do I get a kiss, Harry, now that Junior is gone?” Tom asked, slightly mocking. Harry considered rolling his eyes as he stood up to do as the older boy had prompted— just because he wasn’t into exhibitionism didn’t mean he hadn’t wanted to kiss Tom hello— but instead decided to surprise both Tom and Hermione.

Not giving himself time to second guess his actions, instead of bending over to kiss the older boy still lounging in his chair like Hermione had, Harry climbed onto the armchair so he was straddling Tom’s thighs, winding his hands in hair as dark as his own and yanking Tom forward into a hot, dirty kiss that was all teeth and tongue and bold confidence.

When he eventually pulled back, he felt smug to see how surprised Tom looked before the older boy’s mouth curled into a slow, almost dangerous-looking smirk. “Why don’t we try something new tonight, beautiful boy?” He practically purred, one arm curling possessively around Harry’s waist, holding him in place, while the other lifted up between them, long fingers curling around the silver-and-green striped tail of Harry’s school tie.

Harry looked at him warily, breathless and aroused from the kiss. “New?”

“Mm,” Tom hummed in affirmation, sliding the tie through his fingers, right up until they reach the Windsor knot, “how about while I fuck you, I tighten this,” he tugged playfully on the silky material, teasing almost, “enough to make things deliciously breathtaking?”

A hot wash of half-terrified arousal hit Harry square in the chest with the force of a bludger, despite the horrible pun. “Oh my god,” he said weakly, his voice sounding wrecked even to his own ears.
“That wasn’t a no,” Tom purred, the curve of his mouth downright sinful and the gleam in his eyes a little too knowing, too wicked, for his comfort, and Harry shuddered slightly in... in something—something that didn’t feel bad, not like he’d have thought it would. “I’ll go slow,” the older boy promised, “I’ll check up on you as we go... and the second you want me to stop, I’ll stop. I promise. Do you want try this, Harry?”

Sweet Merlin, no. Absolutely not. It was insane. It was stupidly dangerous. It was— it was ridiculously enticing, damn it. Tom was much too convincing, especially when his voice went all low and silky and seductive like that, with just a hint of danger.

“Okay,” he breathed, before he could think the better of it, “okay. Um, I— how do I— how do I ask you to stop?”

“Here,” Tom ran his hands down Harry’s arms, wrapping his long fingers around his wrists and tugging them so that his hands were pressed against either side of the older boy’s waist. “Keep your hands there unless you want me to stop,” Tom instructed. “The second you let go, even just one hand, even if it’s by accident and just for a moment or two, I will stop and I will check in with you. I’ll ask for a colour— green for go, yellow for wait and red for stop, it’s enough.” Harry nodded and Tom, his hands still circling Harry’s wrists, squeezed sharply. “Repeat it for me,” he instructed, “show me you can use your words, Harry. It’s important that you can communicate this.”

Harry flushed, his cheeks heating up. “Uh, green for go, yellow for wait and r-red for stop,” he mumbled, ducking his head slightly so he didn’t have to meet either Tom or Hermione’s eyes. Tom released his wrists, moving to tilt Harry’s head up, coaxing him into making eye-contact.

“Don’t be embarrassed,” he said, calm and patient despite the anticipation and sharp hunger clear on his face, “you don’t have anything to be embarrassed about.” Harry nodded, immediately feeling better though he wasn’t entirely sure why.

“I think I’ll watch,” Hermione said thoughtfully, certainly not appearing to be upset by the prospect if the heat in her voice and the way her pupils were blooming was any indication. She leaned back in her chair, hooking one of her legs up over the arm of the chair, gravity sliding her skirt back to her hips in a way that made it very clear what she intended to do while watching.

Harry’s breath caught for a moment, the thought of the weight of Hermione’s gaze on him, on Tom, as they did this new, terrifying, intimidating (exhilarating) thing shockingly good in a way that had him swallowing back what would probably be a very embarrassing sound as his body reacted to his arousal. And Tom noticed, purposefully rolling his hips to bring Harry’s attention to his own very prominent interest, grinding them both together with delicious friction. Half-hard became a distant memory. A very distant memory.

With his characteristic lack of patience, Tom used magic to vanish their trousers and underpants then used that odd little spell that made Harry blush to even think about, the one that tingled all up inside him, cleaning and slicking him for the preparation.

Tom’s long, clever fingers felt as odd inside him as they had every time they’d done this, and the new, different position they were in, him straddling Tom’s lap, made Harry feel more awkward and exposed then the times they’d done this on a bed—the position felt more... vulnerable, almost, and Harry hid his red, burning cheeks from the other two by burying his face in the crook of Tom’s neck, trying not to be too loud when the older boy’s fingertips reached that spot inside
him that made his toes curl and sent sparks up his spine.

By the time he was stretched and ready, Harry felt overheated and aroused enough that when Tom lifted him up slightly by his hips so that he could slide into him, his body provided no real resistance. The angle was almost painful in how deep, almost too deep, it felt, Tom grinding up inside Harry against what felt like previously untouched parts of him, but the discomfort of it was softened by the distraction of heated, aching need caused just moments ago when it had been Tom’s fingers buried deep inside him.

After giving him time to adjust and then nod that he was ready, Tom helped guide him into a rhythm, helping him move so that he was rocking back in time to meet the upwards shove of the older boy’s hips. Initially Harry’s inexperience made him feel clumsy and awkward until they managed to time their movements so that Tom was hitting that spot inside him again and again and again until Harry couldn’t care less about how he looked, only about chasing that building sensation, his thighs trembling and his nails digging into Tom’s hips from where they were still obediently gripping just above his hips.

And then, what felt like just moments before he reached the climax he was chasing, Tom fucking stopped and an honest-to-Merlin whine escaped him before he could stop it. Tom, the bastard, just grinned, moving one of his hands from Harry’s hip to his tie. Harry swallowed roughly, abruptly remembering what they’d planned. “What do you say for stop?” Tom asked, at least sounding out of breath though still far-too in control.

“Red,” Harry blurted out, impatient to move again.

“And if you can’t speak?”

“I— I let go.”

“Good boy,” Tom praised and Harry ignored the way Tom’s words made blood flood to his cheeks — something which was easy to do when Tom pushed the knot of his tie up, tightening it at the base of his neck until he gasped, his throat automatically bracing against the push of the knot trying to constrict his airway.

“Relax for me,” Tom whispered in his ear. “Just give in, and I promise it will feel so good for you.”

Harry swallowed again, hard, but obediently willed the tension in his muscles to lessen. He felt taut as a bow-string as Tom began to push harder. A small thread of panic rose up within him, but then Tom began to move again, and the snap of his hips succeeded in distracting Harry from the anxiety that came with the idea of being willingly choked.

The tie tightened. As it became harder to breath, Harry felt his focus slip— stars flashed behind his eyes as his vision darkened, the oxygen deprivation bringing with it a blind, dizzying sensation of hazy disconnect.

He almost didn’t notice Tom loosening the tie, not until the air moving into his lungs cleared his vision, though his head still throbbed and spun. A whimper escaped him as the world came to a jarring focus, a bit like the awareness that came with pulling out of a steep dive on his broom.

“Are you still with me, Harry?” Tom asked and Harry nodded, dazed. “Do you want me to do it again?” He asked, making a scolding sort of sound when Harry nodded again. “Words, Harry, or our fun will have to end.”
“Yes,” Harry whispered, his voice hoarse, his fingers digging compulsively into Tom’s waist.
“Green.” Tom smiled, smug and satisfied and hungry, before moving again, first his hips and then the tie, pulling it tighter and tighter, faster then the first time.

Tom’s face was quickly replaced by a floating sea of stars. With the lack of vision and the buzzing in his skull from the oxygen deprivation came a bizarre sort of euphoria that first tingled then rushed through him. Tom loosened then tightened the tie twice more, with the rushing euphoria returning faster each time, along with the spinning and the lights that exploded like fireworks the longer he was forced to hold his breathe.

When the knot slipped loose the fourth time, Harry’s head lolled back as he shallowly inhaled. His whole world felt like it was shifting, tilting side to side. It almost felt like he was free-falling again, except there was nothing beneath him this time to land on, and only his grip on Tom kept him from drifting away.

“Do you still want to keep going? Harry, do you want to keep going?”

“I, yes,” Harry’s words were barely audible through the blood rushing to his ears, his grip on Tom tightening compulsively, as if he was afraid that his hands might slip away and then Tom would stop and that would be bad, because he wanted it, he did— “yes, I want— green, green— I want __”

“Shh, shh, relax,” Tom cooed, “I know, beautiful boy, I know— just relax.”

Harry nodded as best as he could, not quite able to stop the boneless way his head lolled back and forth. Tom pressed their mouths together as he tightened the tie again, swallowing Harry’s last, choked breath. He wasn’t as gentle; he was putting more pressure behind the knot, was moving his hips faster, was nipping at Harry’s mouth with his teeth, was overwhelming him and it was like Harry’s mind was unravelling, his thoughts turning to white noise as the world went all dark and soft-edged, like it would swallow him whole.

His orgasm felt like it hit him out of nowhere; in that moment, he was convinced it was the most intense sensation he’d felt, like he was on fire, ecstasy burning through him as his senses went haywire. His body felt boneless, his hands falling away from Tom as he lost his grip, yet he didn’t even notice as he faded out, losing time.

Tom’s words washing over him brought the world half back into focus. “Breathe in slowly,” he was coaxing, and Harry vaguely realised he was automatically gasping for breath as Tom slowly loosened the tie. He didn’t pay much attention, his body seemed to know what it was doing, setting a rhythm, and he closed his eyes, letting things float away again.

He came aware once more as Tom slipped out of him, the older boy muttering a quick spell under his breath to vanish the sticky mess between them. Strong arms pulled him against a firm chest, and he rested his head against warm, sweat-damp skin.

They stayed like that for a bit, arms wrapped securely around him and hands running through his hair and up and down his back in soothing, repetitive motions until Harry felt solid again and he opened his eyes, lifting his head slightly to orientate himself. He was in Tom’s lap and Hermione was perched on the arm of the chair, running her fingers through his hair. “How are you feeling?” She asked softly.

“That was…” Harry had to pause, to cough to clear his aching throat and to collect the right words from the jumble of thoughts. “That was good. Really good.”
“It was fun,” Tom agreed and a snort of laughter escaped Harry. Hermione made an amused, undeniably fond sound.

“Feeling a bit high, there?” She teased gently.

“Maybe,” Harry admitted, with another snicker. ‘High’ was a pretty good description for how floaty his head felt right then. And tired. Strangely tired. Or was it not so strange?

“Not strange at all,” promised Hermione, and he was confused for a moment before realising he must have said that out loud. “You did,” she confirmed, gently amused, before stroking her hand through his hair and down his back again, while Tom pressed his lips gently against Harry’s temple.

“Sleep,” the older boy murmured. “We’ll talk again later.”

“Okay.” Harry sighed, letting his eyes drift close and his mind drift away.

When he next woke up, he felt much more clear-headed and aware. He was still in the Room of Requirement but he’d been moved onto a bed (Merlin bless the magic of the Room) while he was asleep and wrapped up in a thick, warm blanket. Yawning, he sat up, letting the blanket pool around him. His throat felt rough and sore and his head was throbbing a bit. Hermione and Tom, both sitting over on the long leather sofa by the fire, looked over at him, Hermione smiling while Tom looked infinitely satisfied.

“How are you?” She asked him and Harry yawned again, standing up and stretching before he answered.

“Bit sore,” he said. “That was… intense. Good,” he admitted, a bit pink-cheeked, “but intense.”

“Would you be interested in a repeat performance some time?” Tom asked as Harry made his way over to them, pausing only to grab the blanket and bring it with him.

“Probably,” he answered honestly, pulling the blanket around himself like a fluffy, protective cocoon as he sat with them on the sofa, curling up in the space next to Hermione. “Just… not all the time, I don’t think.”

“Fair enough,” Tom agreed, pausing for a moment before adding, a touch stiffly, “thank you. For trusting me enough to try that.” Harry was about to just shrug in response before deciding not to be quite so blasé.

“Of course I do,” he said quietly, instead. “Trust you, I mean.”

Tom’s unusually-coloured eyes softened, looking fond and unguarded in the way they rarely were, even when it was just the three of them. “Thank you, Harry,” he said again, which was probably some sort of record, before pausing again. “Perhaps… there is something I’d like to ask you both. Something that does require a great deal of trust.” He said, appearing to be choosing his words carefully— his pale violet eyes were suddenly guarded again and Harry didn’t like it, didn’t like the way the older boy was hesitating.

“We do trust you,” Hermione reaffirmed, in a firm voice that left no room for argument as she looked Tom straight in the eyes. “We’ve literally put our lives in your hands, Tom. I’ve let you tie me up, hurt me and choke me, do you think I’d have let you do that if I didn’t have complete faith in you? We trust you.”

"What she said," Harry agreed, before blushing a little. "Just without, you know, the tying up part.
And the hurting. Just the choking bit.”

"So really, nothing like 'what she said',' Tom said, losing the stiffness as amusement replaced the guarded look on his face.

"Semantics," Harry mumbled, embarrassed, before quickly asking, "so what exactly is the 'something' you're being so purposefully vague about?"

Tom was immediately distracted. “It’s not something to agree to lightly," he told them, uncharacteristically hesitant. "It is... very permanent."

Harry glanced over at Hermione, who was looking at Tom with a thoughtful look on her face. "We won't run screaming, you know," he said suddenly, causing Tom to glance back over at him. He shrugged, a bit awkwardly. "You're kind of stuck with us, at this point. So if you just tell us what it is you want, even if we don't like it we're not going to run."

Tom looked at him for what felt like a long time, eyes sharp and face very carefully clear of any emotion. "I presume you've seen the Dark Mark," he said finally. "Voldemort's brand on his followers' flesh, tying them to him. Marking them as his."

"We have," Harry confirmed slowly.

"Tom," Hermione sounded hesitant, clearly catching on to where the older boy was going (Harry had a sneaking suspicion that he knew where Tom was going to). "Do you...?"

"I want to give you both a Mark," Tom admitted. “Not his, though—mine. Because you're not his, you're mine, and it would mean I'd always be able to find you, no matter where you were, and you'd always be able to call me to your side, or find your way to mine," he explained, and Harry rather abruptly understood why Tom suddenly wanted this of them.

Tom didn't want a situation like the Eostre holidays disaster to happen again. He'd been genuinely scared for Hermione, something not helped by his inability to locate her afterward, so it was really no surprise he wanted to take measures to not only ensure such a situation couldn't occur twice, but to also bind them closer to him.

He’d never, ever say it, not out loud, but Harry thought that deep inside him, Tom was afraid of losing them both and that this was his way of keeping them safe, and keeping them his (and Harry understood, because, in his own way, he was just as afraid of losing the other two).

Harry glanced at Hermione, saw the agreement in her eyes, then turned back to Tom. “You know," he said, “you didn’t really need to ask. If it can be hidden from Dumbledore and Moody, then of course.”

“IT can be concealed,” Tom promised. “Like Parseltongue glamour, only a Parselmouth could undo the magic keeping it concealed when you wish to hide it from detection.”

“Okay. Um… will it hurt?” He asked nervously.

“Yes,” Tom admitted honestly. “It will. Likely more than anything you’ve ever felt before, but it will be brief and then it will be over.”

“Do you plan to do it now, then?” Hermione asked quietly and Tom nodded.

“If you both agree, there’s no point in putting it off.” He told them and Harry pulled his arms free of his blanket cocoon, fiddling with the buttons of his right shirt cuff so he could pull it open.
“Right arm?” Tom asked, eyebrow arched, and Harry shrugged, pushing his sleeve back up to his elbow.

“Well, the Dark Mark’s on the left arm, right? So we should have ours on our right arm.”

Tom’s lips quirked, amused, as he lifted his wand, reaching over a very-still Hermione to press the bone-white tip to Harry’s forearm, his free hand encircling Harry’s wrist and holding it in place with a steely grip. “Are you ready?” He asked.

“No,” Harry said, automatic fear in response to the threat of pain swelling up inside him. “But do it.”

Tom murmured something, a hissed string of syllables that Harry didn’t notice, not really, because Tom had not fucking exaggerated when he warned it would be painful. It fucking hurt. The magic burned like acid had been spilled over his skin then soaked down into it, searing through his flesh, muscle, bone, then deeper, in a way that he couldn’t describe, not even in his own head, and turned his whole world blinding white as everything inside him screamed.

Then, just as suddenly as it had begun, it was over, the whited-out agony gone as swiftly as it had burned its way through his entire being. Harry gasped for breath, his face wet with tears he didn’t even remember crying. After taking a minute to slow his heart-rate, he looked down at his forearm.

It wasn’t a skull and snake, not like the Dark Mark. It was still a serpent, though, of course—an ouroboros, ink-black and bold against his pale skin; elegant, sleek and intricately detailed to the point Harry could make out the patterns on individual scales. He sucked in a sudden, startled breath as it moved suddenly, the serpent gracefully unwinding and gliding sinuously along his skin, briefly coiling its way around his arm like a manacle before disappearing up under his shirt sleeve. He could sort of feel it, though, making its way along his skin and to his chest, where it coiled itself back into what he guessed was its original, ouroboros form right over his heart.

“Bloody hell,” he said weakly.

“How does it feel?” Tom asked, releasing his iron-grip on Harry’s wrist. Harry moved his hand to rub over his heart, where the ouroboros sat.

“ Weird. But not in a bad way?” He said hesitantly, not quite sure how to explain it. “It’s kind of hard to put in words.”

“I imagine so,” Tom agreed. “It’s a piece of magic that marks your very soul, and the soul is a very… ephemeral concept to describe. A fourth dimension in our three dimensional world.”

Harry nodded silently, still pressing his hand against his heart.

“My turn now,” Hermione said, wincing slightly as she lifted up her right arm, her sleeve already rolled back.

Hermione’s expression looked about as tortured as Harry guessed his had and he hastily shifted his gaze from her face down to her forearm. It was strange to watch, liquid-like blackness pooling out from under the tip of Tom’s wand like spilled ink, winding itself into the same ouroboros that his own skin had been marked with.

Hermione’s sudden gasp for breath alerted him to the spell’s completion and his best friend swore quietly under her breath, panting for a bit before she looked down at her arm, examining the Mark on her skin. The ouroboros unwound itself, winding its way almost playfully around her wrist and ‘snapping’ at her fingertips before slithering up her arm and out of sight. By the way she pressed
her hand over her heart the way he had, a few moments later, Harry guessed it had ended up in the same place as his.

“Well that was certainly an… experience,” she muttered.

Tom looked infinitely satisfied, like the cat with both the canary and the cream, and Harry had to bite back a smile. Then he had to bite back a yawn.

“What time is it?” He asked and Tom cast a silent tempus before answering;

“Approaching three in the morning.”

“Shit,” Harry groaned, “we have to get up in about four hours for classes.”

“You should return to your dormitory,” Tom agreed reluctantly. Harry stood, letting the blanket fall away, Tom and Hermione standing too, Hermione stretching out while Tom glanced around them. “There’s something I have to do quickly before I leave,” he said.

“Oh?” Hermione asked, curious.

“Mm,” Tom agreed wordlessly. “I’m looking for the room where things are hidden.”

“What—?” Harry started to ask, before falling silent when his question was answered before he even finished asking it as the Room of Requirement shifted and changed around them.

It was like they’d gone from standing the middle of the lounge of a grand manor or castle to a huge cathedral with large, high windows and piles and piles of junk everywhere, looking like it had all been collecting for centuries. It was impressive.

“This,” Tom said, gesturing around them, “is the Room of Hidden Things. Desperate, clueless Hogwarts students needing someplace to hide something miraculously come across this room then, in most cases, never manage to find it again. If you’ll wait a moment, Voldemort hid something here, decades ago, that he asked me to collect.”

“How the hell are you going to find it in this mess?” Harry asked, gesturing to all the objects around them, ranging from books to joke items to weapons to jewellery and more.

“Believe me,” Tom said, sounding almost darkly amused, “it won’t be an issue.”

Harry traded confused looks with Hermione as Tom disappeared amongst the stacks, reemerging barely five minutes later holding something in his hands. As he got closer, Harry was able to identify it as being a discoloured old tiara with a large, oval-shaped blue gemstone set in the centre. He didn’t recognise it but by the way Hermione had inhaled sharply, she did.

“Tom,” she said slowly, her eyes very wide as she leaned in to examine the tiara closely, “is that the lost fucking Diadem of Ravenclaw?”

Tom smirked, looking very, very smug. “Why yes it is.”

“What the fuck,” she breathed, looking awed.

“What’s so special about it?” Harry asked, frowning slightly.

“It’s been lost for nearly a thousand years,” Hermione told him, wide-eyed with wonder, “it’s the only known relic known to once belong to Rowena Ravenclaw but it went missing shortly before her death and no one’s seen it since.”
“Really?” Harry asked, curiously. He reached out to touch the blue jewel then let out a sudden, strangled gasp as something rippled through his body and images flashed through his head. A dark forest appeared before him in his mind, a Muggle peasant in work-worn clothes walking along a path with a basket of mushrooms, the glittering diadem in a tree, a cold malicious smile, red-burning eyes, a cruel voice he knew well, and a green flash as the Muggle fell, lifeless.

Then Harry blinked again and the images were gone, it was just Tom and Hermione and the Room of Requirement.

“What the bloody hell was that?” he asked, shivering slightly. Hermione looked concerned and confused but Harry couldn’t quite explain the emotions lingering behind the steel-sharp glint in Tom’s eyes.

“A bit of residual magic,” the older boy said smoothly, in a manner that Harry didn’t believe for a moment. “It’s time to go, or you’ll sleep through all your classes.”

“You really think I’m an idiot, don’t you?” Harry sighed and Tom smirked.

“Ask me no questions and I’ll tell you no lies, Harry dear.”

“You’re an arse.” He informed Tom, but he didn’t bother pushing for an answer he clearly wasn’t going to get. He was tired and Tom was right that if he didn’t get to bed soon, he’d end up sleeping through his classes—honestly, at this point he probably would anyway.

The diadem would just have to be a mystery for another day.

Chapter End Notes

Happy International Fanworks Day!!!

~Cheshire Carroll xoxo
"The Weasley twins are a problem," Severus snapped as he walked into Minerva's quarters at the end of the first week back, having been quietly notified over breakfast that she was planning a small get-together that evening.

Minerva, Poppy and Pomona were all already seated, both Poppy and Pomona sipping from lightly steaming cups of tea, and Minerva winced at his blunt words, but very tellingly did not try to refute them.

"I take it your holidays weren't very relaxing," Pomona observed, sympathetically.

"You did take off quite suddenly," Poppy added.

"I had to re-write the staff patrols," Minerva said, clearly annoyed, and it was his turn to wince.

"My apologies. There was a...situation."

"I guessed," Minerva sighed, "you've never left us in the lurch before, so I'll let it go this time." Severus nodded his thanks, before lowering himself onto one of the tartan sofas. "So, the twins," Minerva slumped back in her seat slightly, running a hand tiredly down her face. "It's... difficult." She sighed. "They've lost two siblings in a short space of time, which makes it hard to punish them too severely."

"It's the first week of term and already eight of my Slytherins have had to visit the Hospital Wing due to their 'pranks'," Severus said flatly.

"It's true," Poppy admitted, her mouth tilted down unhappily. "I have as much sympathy for their loss as you do, Minerva, but their behaviour really is unacceptable. It can't continue."

"I'll have a stern talk with them," Minerva promised. "They'll be alerted that the period of leniency for their unacceptable behaviour is over and that the consequences should they continue breaking the rules will be severe."

"Thank you," Severus said, pleased that his concerns hadn't just been brushed aside. He despised those who tended to get leniency for their appalling bullying because they claimed to just be 'pranking' people—there was no prize for guessing just why it was such a sore spot for him. The damage done to him by the Marauders during his school years had left its mark— and in a very literal sense, considering the actual Mark it had eventually led to, though he wouldn't give them full credit for that; Lucius had certainly played a large role there, as well as the general discrimination against Slytherins and his own propensity for Grey and Dark magic.

"So, shall we discuss the true purpose for this meeting?" Pomona asked, clapping her hands together.
"The Final Task," he stated and both Poppy and Minerva groaned.

"Thank Merlin it's all almost over," Poppy muttered, glaring at her tea. "Honestly, have you heard they're importing a bloody sphinx?"

"It could be worse," sighed Minerva. "I heard they were considering a cockatrice—at least with a sphinx, if the Champions can't answer the riddle they can back away before they get attacked."

"So long as the little idiots don't try to actually attack the sphinx right back," Severus said sourly. All three witches winced at the thought.

"Surely Hagrid has taught them better then that," Minerva said hopefully.

"Really." Severus said flatly. She practically deflated.

"I can't wait for this to be over. If it's ever announced that another Tournament is being planned, I'm retiring on the spot." She muttered.

"Speaking of retirement, did you hear about Karkaroff?" Poppy asked. Severus very carefully did not react to the name of the man he'd watched (and even participated, however reluctantly) be tortured to death. The Dark Lord had faked the now-ex Headmaster of Durmstrang contracting the untreatable in most cases and nearly always fatal dragonpox, followed by a swift 'retirement' and retreat to an undisclosed location to 'live out his days'.

"No, is there news?" Pomona asked, a concerned look on her face. That woman had far too much compassion in her heart— Igor Karkaroff had been a cowardly, traitorous, turn-coat weasel and Severus honestly couldn't care less about his murder, though he did wish he hadn't had to watch the grisly spectacle.

"There was an announcement, he's officially passed away," Poppy said with a sigh. "Honestly, someone really needs to improve the dragonpox cure. It's ineffective in far too many cases."

"At least it's been some time since there's been an outbreak," Minerva tried to be optimistic.

Dragonpox, much like muggle chickenpox, was far more dangerous when adults contracted the affliction then when children did, though its symptoms far more closely mimicked smallpox—even those who survived it were usually left with extensive, full-bodied scarring, as well as a greenish hue to their skin. There was a treatment, but it only worked in about thirty to thirty-five percent of cases.

"Perhaps you could put your considerable skills towards brewing a cure, Severus," Poppy suggested.

"I'm investigating improving the wolfsbane potion presently, I'm afraid," Severus told her, realising a moment too late just what he'd revealed. Predictably, a knowing look crossed Minerva's face, her mouth twitching into a smile.

"Oh? Did you catch up with Remus over the holidays, then?" She asked 'innocently' and Severus scowled.

"Once or twice. Purely for professional purposes, of course."

"Oh, of course, of course," she said airily, looking far too much like a cat who got the cream—and both Poppy and Pomona were doing a terrible job of concealing their own amusement. His scowl darkened.
"Perhaps we should invite him along to the Third Task, to join the staff patrolling the outside of the Maze," Poppy suggested, her eyes twinkling with mirth. "He was the only competent DADA professor hired this last decade—he could be quite helpful in keeping the Champions from being too badly injured."

"Splendid idea, Poppy!" Minerva exclaimed, "I think I'll bring it up with Albus tomorrow."

"It will be good to work with him again," Pomona agreed cheerfully. "Don't you think, Severus?"

"You're all wicked, wicked women." Severus told them.

Bloody, interfering witches—if Hermione and Harry didn't turn out to be the death of him, then it would be Minerva, Pomona and Poppy's good intentions.

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**Tom's POV:**

"Are you quite sure about this?" Tom questioned. Voldemort made a neutral sound, his eyes fixed on Rowena Ravenclaw's Diadem, running the tip of a long, pale finger along the delicate curve of shining silver. "It's going to hurt," he added, unnecessarily as it was.

"Pain has never been a stranger to us," Voldemort said, almost idly. "We do not fear it."

"Nor do we enjoy it," Tom pointed out. "And repairing a tear to our soul is not something we have prior experience of!"

Voldemort finally looked up from the horcrux, meeting his gaze. "Why, Tom, you seem more anxious about this then I do," he said, softly. Tom resisted the urge to shift uneasily as Voldemort's mouth curved into a smile that was just shy of cruel. "Could it be that you are... afraid that, should this work, I may consider re-integrating you back into our main soul too?"

Tom's sharp smile cut wide, vicious enough to be a weapon in its own right. "Don't forget that we are one and the same, Tom," he said to Voldemort, his voice just as soft, just as dangerous. "Death, non-existence, is our greatest fear. We'd gladly massacre the world, if that's what it took to stay alive, and we'd do it without hesitation or regret and a smile on our face."

Voldemort's face had lost any trace of amusement, a cold, dark look taking its place. "Are you threatening me?" He asked in a low hiss. Tom let his sharp smile widen.

"Of course not, my otherself. I'm just reminding you of the instinct that runs deepest within us—and the lengths that we are willing to go, that we have always been willing to go."

"I see," Voldemort said coldly.

"Do you really?" Tom mused, rising to his feet. "Then I'm sure I won't have to remind you again."

"Careful, Tom," Voldemort warned, as he too stood. "We may be one and the same, but you are still a child, not even twenty years of age. I have decades of magical knowledge that you... lack. You should keep that in mind."

"Oh I will," Tom murmured to himself as Voldemort swept out of the room, Diadem in hand. "I will."
Harry’s POV:

It was in the very early in the pre-dawn hours of Sunday, when Harry had been fast asleep, that it happened— it started with a deep, terrible feeling trickling at the back of his mind that pulled him into a lighter, uneasy rest, followed by a sudden, undeniable jolt of fear that yanked him to the edge of consciousness.

And then— pain.

It was the worst agony he'd ever experienced, shocking him awake with a strangled scream as it felt like he was been torn to pieces, deep, deep inside his very being, the excruciating pain overwhelming every single part of him until he was nothing but suffering.

It was, he noted in the very, very distant part of his mind that wasn't overwhelmed by the agony, probably what the Cruciatus curse felt like.

Harry curled into himself, unable to even cry out for help as his jaw was locked tight and the smallest of movements only (impossibly) increased the agony, and he mentally begged for the pain to end, for it to stop— stop— please— he'd do anything, just make it stop—

He could hardly think, could hardly concentrate at all, but— but he was just aware enough to realise that the worst point of the pain originated from his scar; it was on fire, so hot it surely had to be boiling his brain in his skull, melting it until it was soup and leaking out through his ears, his eyes, his nose—

And then— then it stopped, bar for the sensation of a white-hot poker being pressed to his forehead, but even that was nothing, not compared to mere moments ago. Harry heaved a broken, terrified breath, panic-stricken and near hysterical at the thought that the torturous pain could return—

"Harry! HARRY!"

People were shouting his name. Harry slowly opened his eyes. His face was soaked with tears and a thick, sticky hot liquid that oozed down his temple. Every inch of his body was covered in icy sweat and his bed covers were twisted all around him like a straitjacket.

"Harry, oh fucking christ, Harry!"

Hermione was standing over him looking both horrified and terrified. There were more figures at the foot of Harry's bed. He clutched his head in his hands then rolled right over and vomited over the edge of the mattress. When he half collapsed back onto his pillow, he first became aware of the dark red liquid that was smeared over his hands and the white cotton.

"We need to get Snape," someone— Draco?— said, sounding terrified.


"Harry— Harry, can you speak? Can you hear us?" Hermione was pleading. Harry blearily noted that her face looked wet in the dim light of the dorm-room before the pain in his scar flared up, briefly turning his vision white followed by a rush of colour behind his eyelids, images dancing too fast to make sense— fluttering yellowed pages bound in black, a cracked black stone set in gold,
an ornate silver circlet with a sparkling blue gem, finely wrought handles framing a shining gold cup, a locket of heavy gold with a serpentine S in glittering green emeralds, a long, winding, sinuous form, jagged red lightning — and then everything went blessedly black.

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Hermione’s POV:

"What the fuck's happening to him?" Draco sounded hysterical. She didn't blame him — she felt hysterical herself.

Harry's skin looked grey and waxy, his pyjamas and dark hair soaked through, like he'd been standing under the shower, and his face absolutely drenched in dark, wet blood except for where tears had carved pale lines down his cheeks and towards his throat. She couldn't even see his scar under it all.

She had no idea what was happening. One moment she'd been dozing, then Harry had just— screamed. A single piercing, tortured sound followed by the terrible keening of a wounded, dying animal that just went on and on and on as Harry curled up, non-responsive, bleeding, his whole body burning hot and shaking almost enough to rattle their entire bed.

Everyone in the dorm room had been woken — and probably others outside it. Even when Harry had finally uncurled, he'd remained unresponsive, just briefly clutching at his forehead before vomiting over the edge of the bed and collapsing back down onto the mattress, his eyes rolling up into his head.

Desperately, she'd pressed her fingers to his neck, a thin sound escaping her when she felt his pulse, shallow and racing like a hummingbird's.

She stayed there, frozen; kneeling beside Harry with her fingers on his pulse and a white-knuckled grip on her wand. A low curse alerted her to Snape's presence. He didn't try to push her aside, instead crouching beside her, reaching for Harry's wrist to check his pulse before cursing again.

"Expecto Patronum!" He snapped, sharply swishing his wand. The dazzling, silver-white doe that flowed into existence was almost blinding in its brightness in the dim dorm room. "Alert Poppy, Albus, Minevra and Moody to an emergency regarding Harry Potter and tell them all to make their way to the Slytherin boy's dormitories immediately," Snape ordered and the doe leapt into movement, bounding through the wall and out of sight. "Draco, Zabini, Nott, Crabbe, Goyle — out," he added, his dark eyes briefly flicking over to the observers, all of them pale and afraid, before turning to her.

"If want to stay then you will do everything I say, stay out of the way and don't argue if you're told to leave." He told her, with no room for argument in his voice. Hermione didn't think she could talk even if she wanted and nodded wordlessly. "Can you tell me what happened?" Snape asked, his voice gentling.

"I don't know," she said, in a voice she barely even recognised. "He just... he just started screaming. And then— then he stopped, and that was even worse. It was like he was in too much pain to even breathe, let alone scream, then his eyes just rolled back and he went limp and there was nothing I could do to help!"

Snape said a very bad word under his breath, his face strained and a very real fear in his dark eyes.
Dumbledore and Madam Pomfrey both apparated suddenly into the room with sharp cracks that sounded far louder than usual in the near-silent dorm room. Absently, she noted that she hadn't realised the school medi-witch could apparate inside Hogwarts; it did make sense, though.

Snape squeezed her shoulder, tugging her back slightly, and Hermione went with the movement, giving the adults the space they needed to help Harry. Dumbledore immediately started murmuring under his breath, an unending stream of spells that lit up Harry's forehead in an ominous, glowing red light. Madam Pomfrey similarly started casting, her wand sweeping up and down Harry's body. One of them vanished the blood, exposing the livid red jagged lines of his scar which seemed to have split open, but it didn't take long for the vanished blood to be replaced by fresh blood.

McGonagall came rushing into the dormitory a few minutes later in her tartan dressing gown, her glasses perched lopsidedly on the bridge of her bony nose. "What happened?" She demanded, looking horrified at what she was seeing.

"Dark Magic," Snape said grimly, gesturing at Harry's still glowing forehead. "Unknown cause, but it originated in his scar. We can't get him to wake up— his entire body seems to have shut down and the bleeding won't stop."

"Hecate help us," McGonagall looked like she was about to be sick. "Is Moody—?"

"I alerted him," Snape confirmed.

"He's got years of experience identifying Dark Magic, he should be able to tell us what this is," McGonagall said shakily, before appearing to notice her presence for the first time since she'd rushed into the room. "Miss Granger!" she gasped, her expression shifting to one of surprise, quickly followed by a sudden, deep concern. Hermione didn't respond— she felt ice-cold.

"I think she's going into shock," Snape muttered. "You should probably—"

"Yes, yes," McGonagall agreed. "If you need me, or if something happens—"

"I'll send a patronus," Snape promised. "Take her to my quarters, I've got calming draughts there— both of you need one."

Hermione distantly thought Snape might be right about the shock, as she didn't protest as McGonagall wrapped a careful arm around her shoulders and gently began to steer her out of the dorm-room. "Let's go wait on Professor Snape's couch, dear," she said gently. They passed Moody as they crossed through the common room. McGonagall murmured for him to go straight through, before continuing to steer Hermione out of the Slytherin dungeons, pausing only to tell the pale fourth-year boys waiting in the common room something she didn't even hear.

Her next truly coherent thought was after McGonagall had handed her a calming draught she'd swallowed automatically, the older witch having sat her down and conjured her a heavy blanket to wrap around her shoulders.

The artificial calm lent her lucidity and she took a deep, calming breath, focusing on the expansion of her lungs the way Lupin had taught her, followed by a slow exhalation. "I couldn't do anything," she told McGonagall, her voice cracking slightly. "There was nothing to fight, nothing to defeat, nothing I could do to make it stop— I couldn't help him. I couldn't help him!"

"I know you don't like Professor Moody or Professor Dumbledore, but Moody was an exceptional Auror and the Headmaster is one of the most extraordinarily powerful and knowledgable wizards in our known history." McGonagall said, her voice gentle. "Likewise, Madam Pomfrey is a highly
distinguished medi-witch and Professor Snape has an... impressive, er, mostly theoretical knowledge of the Dark Arts. The four of them are more then qualified to identify whatever it was that happened to Harry and reverse it. We just have to wait."

"I'm sure this won't come as a surprise to you, professor, but waiting is not one of my strengths." Hermione muttered and McGonagall gave a small smile.

"Perhaps not, but I know you care deeply for Harry and that you know the best thing you can do for him is to let those who are qualified to help him do their job," she said gently and Hermione sighed, drawing her knees up to her chest so she could wrap her arms around them, letting her head fall forwards so her face was pressed against her knees.

She eventually dozed off, a restless and uneasy sleep only made possible due to the forced calm flowing through her veins. When she next woke, it wasn't McGonagall sitting with her on Snape's couch but Lupin, who was slumped in one of the armchairs across from the couch someone had stretched her out on, covering her with the conjured blanket.

"Lupin?" She asked, her voice gritty from sleep. Lupin jerked upright, turning to face her. She couldn't read his expression, which immediately had her heart sinking. "Is there— do you know anything that's happening?"

"Harry still isn't awake, I'm afraid," Lupin told her, the words like plunging into a lake of ice. "But," he continued, "his condition is— mostly stabilised."

Hermione slowly pushed herself up into a sitting position, keeping quiet as she sorted through her thoughts. "Do they know what the problem is?" She asked, finally.

"Not... not exactly," Lupin said, hesitantly. "All they were really able to confirm was that it had something to do with his scar," he paused and Hermione glared at him.

"Don't bother hiding anything." She said sharply. "There's no point— the moment Harry learns something, he'll tell me."

"I'm not trying to hide anything, Hermione," Lupin told her, firmly. "There's just no easy way to tell you this. Dumbledore believes... he believes that Harry's scar connects him to You-Know-Who. He suspects that Voldemort is gaining strength and power— I've been told you and Harry have already been made aware of the suspicions that You-Know-Who has returned— and that last night something... significant happened to him. A Dark ritual, most likely, or perhaps if we're lucky he was hit by some sort of horribly debilitating curse— that, unfortunately, also somehow affected Harry through the link." Lupin's whole face twisted at the last word.

Hermione— didn't know what to think. She already knew about Harry's scar linking him and Voldemort, but nothing like this had ever happened before. The worst that Harry had told her about was a few aches, or some tingling.

A new fear clawed at her suddenly as she thought about what Lupin had said— that Voldemort might have been hit with some sort of curse. What if the Dark Lord had been injured? What if something terrible had happened to him?

Harry had (accidentally) proved, thirteen years ago, that Voldemort wasn't invincible, or invulnerable to harm.

And if something happened to Voldemort, what did that mean for Tom?
Harry’s POV:

The night was wet and windy, two children dressed as pumpkins waddling across the square and the shop windows covered in paper spiders, all the tawdry Muggle trappings of a world in which they did not believe... And he was gliding along, that sense of purpose and power and rightness in him that he always knew on these occasions... Not anger... that was for weaker souls than he... but triumph, yes... He had waited for this, he had hoped for it...

"Nice costume, mister!"

He saw the small boy's smile falter as he ran near enough to see beneath the hood of the cloak, saw the fear cloud his pained face: Then the child turned and ran away... Beneath the robe he fingered the handle of his wand... One simple movement and the child would never reach his mother... but unnecessary, quite unnecessary...

And along a new and darker street he moved, and now his destination was in sight at last, the Fidelius Charm broken, though they did not know it yet... And he made less noise than the dead leaves slithering along the pavement as he drew level with the dark hedge, and steered over it...

They had not drawn the curtains; he saw them quite clearly in their little sitting room, the tall black-haired man in his glasses, making puffs of coloured smoke erupt from his wand for the amusement of the small black-haired boy in his blue pyjamas. The child was laughing and trying to catch the smoke, to grab it in his small fist...

A door opened and the mother entered, saying words he could not hear, her long dark-red hair falling over her face. Now the father scooped up the son and handed him to the mother. He threw his wand down upon the sofa and stretched, yawning...

The gate creaked a little as he pushed it open, but James Potter did not hear. His white hand pulled out the wand beneath his cloak and pointed it at the door, which burst open...

He was over the threshold as James came sprinting into the hall. It was easy, too easy, he had not even picked up his wand...

"Lily, take Harry and go! It's him! Go! Run! I'll hold him off!"

Hold him off, without a wand in his hand! He laughed before casting the curse—

"Avada Kedavra!"

The green light filled the cramped hallway, it lit the pram pushed against the wall, it made the banisters glow like lighting rods, and James Potter fell like a marionette whose strings were cut...

He could hear her screaming from the upper floor, trapped, but as long as she was sensible, she, at least, had nothing to fear... He climbed the steps, listening with faint amusement to her attempts to barricade herself in... She had no wand upon her either... How stupid they were, and how trusting, thinking that their safety lay in friends, that weapons could be discarded even for moments...

He forced the door open, cast aside the chair and boxes hastily piled against it with one lazy wave of his wand... and there she stood, the child in her arms. At the sight of him, she dropped her son into the crib behind her and threw her arms wide, as if this would help, as if in shielding him from sight she hoped to be chosen instead...
"Not Harry, not Harry, please not Harry!"

"Stand aside, you silly girl... stand aside, now."

"Not Harry, please no, take me, kill me instead!"

"This is my last warning."

"Not Harry! Please... have mercy... have mercy...Not Harry! Not Harry! Please! I'll do anything—"

"Stand aside. Stand aside, girl!"

He could have forced her away from the crib, but it seemed more prudent to finish them all...

The green light flashed around the room and she dropped like her husband. The child had not cried all this time. He could stand, clutching the bars of his crib, and he looked up into the intruder's face with a kind of bright interest, perhaps thinking that it was his father who hid beneath the cloak, making more pretty lights, and his mother would pop up any moment, laughing—

He pointed the wand very carefully into the boy's face: He wanted to see it happen, the destruction of this one, inexplicable danger. The child began to cry: it had seen that he was not James. He did not like it crying, he had never been able to stomach the small ones whining in the orphanage—

"Avada Kedavra!"

Then he broke. He was nothing, nothing but pain and terror, and he must hide himself, not here in the rubble of the ruined house, where the child was trapped screaming, but far away... far away...

...and Harry's eyes flew open.

For a moment he just lay there, panting loudly as he tried to orient himself. The world was blurry, out of focus, and anxiety speed his heart.

"You are in the hospital wing, Harry," a familiar, deep baritone voice told him, before he could start to descend into true panic. Harry twisted in place but before he had to say anything, gentle hands slid his glasses onto his face and his surroundings swam into focus.

Snape was sitting on the chair beside the cot he was currently laid out in, looking tired, like he'd been there for a while.

Depending on how long Harry had been unconscious, he just might have been.

"How do you feel?" Snape asked, gently.

"...my head really hurts," he said, wincing slightly at how raw his throat felt when he spoke. Snape immediately poured a glass of water from the jug on his bedside and Harry gratefully gulped down the cool liquid.

It also gave him time to think about what had happened. Which, admittedly, he had very little idea of— it was just clear that it was connected to his scar, which meant it was connected to the link between him and Voldemort.

He closed his eyes, hesitantly giving the link a mental nudge.

No response on Voldemort's end.
Resisting the urge to glare, the next mental nudge was more like a sharp mental poke.

Still nothing.

Not outwardly reacting, despite the strong urge to grit his teeth, this time Harry gave the link a rough mental shove— and finally got a response.

'I cannot talk at this moment'

Harry opened his eyes, swallowing back his frustration. Because, was Voldemort fucking serious? Did he not realise the torture he’d put him through last night? And without giving any sort of warning— or even a fucking explanation, after the fact?

"Harry, I can promise you that no one will hear your answer besides myself, but it's very important that you tell me if you know anything about what happened to you last night." Snape said, still with rare gentleness.

Harry just shrugged helplessly in response. "I really don't," he admitted (and Voldemort wasn't saying anything through the link either), "and it's never happened before."

He thought about mentioning how it had been connected to his scar, which was a link between him and Voldemort— except that would likely require admitting that he and Voldemort could talk through the link, and Voldemort had put up Occlumency shields in his head and he'd even possessed his body once, and... and Harry found himself hesitating.

It wasn't that he didn't trust Snape, because he did, he truly did. It just... it felt wrong to tell people about this. And admittedly, confessing that Voldemort could get into his head and vice versa, even just to Snape, didn't sound like a safe thing to do at all— partly because he didn't have an explanation for why, and that? That was starting to feel hopelessly naive of him.

He was very aware of how dangerous Voldemort was, how very Dark and, at times, questionably sane, but... but he'd never really given the connection between them a second thought. Back in their second year, after the Legilimency debacle with Dumbledore, Hermione had briefly mentioned they should look into cursed scars... but they'd never got around to it, not with all the Chamber of Secrets drama— and maybe that was just making excuses, but Voldemort had saved their butts with his Occlumency shields and... and they'd been complacent. He'd been complacent. He should have started to look into his scar years ago— the very moment he'd realised it wasn't normal.

Snape gave him a long look, one that had Harry feeling like he was being dissected under those dark eyes, before the man finally dipped his chin.

"Dumbledore will want to talk to you about this," he warned and Harry winced.

"Great." He muttered. "When can Hermione come see me?"

"I imagine that she and your other friends will be breaking into the Hospital Wing tonight if it's decided that you aren't allowed visitors," Snape said dryly, "so I'll talk to Madam Pomfrey about a time, to spare us all the excitement." The sound of the door to the hospital wing swinging open had him grimacing slightly. "And that would be the Headmaster now." He said, impressively keeping his tone even. Harry's face was already twitching into a scowl as the smiling face of Albus Dumbledore rounded the corner of the curtain blocking off his cot from the rest of the hospital wing.

"Ah, Harry!" He exclaimed, McGonagall just behind him, a look of utmost relief on her face as she saw Harry was awake and sitting up. "It's quite a relief to see you with your eyes open, my boy!"
The Headmaster beamed and Harry had to bite back the dozen responses he could give, settling instead for a jerky nod.

Dumbledore, seeming to realise that there was no friendly conversation to be had, lost his bright smile, his face settling into something serious, his usually twinkling eyes grave. "You gave us all quite a scar, Harry," he said. "You've been unconscious for seven days—"

"Seven days!?!" Harry interrupted, aghast. Tellingly, nobody scolded him for the interruption— he must really look terrible.

"Seven days exactly," Dumbledore confirmed grimly. "And I'm afraid we're no closer to discovering what happened to you now then we were while it was happening."

"I... seven days?" Harry repeated again, feeling lost. It didn't feel like seven days— it barely felt like one day.

"What do you remember about that night?" Dumbledore asked, and Harry couldn't help his flinch, one hand reaching up to his scar. It felt... inflamed, the scar tissue hot to touch and more prominent than usual.

"Ah," Dumbledore said, like Harry had just confirmed something for him.

"It only stopped bleeding about fifteen minutes before you woke up," Snape said quietly. "We've had to give you blood replenishing potions twice a day."

Dumbledore spoke up again, when it became clear that Harry wasn't going to. Harry just... couldn't think of anything to say— he was confused, his head still hurt, his scar hurt even more then his head and he just wanted answers that no one seemed to be giving him.

"I'm not sure how much you know about that scar of yours, Harry," the Headmaster said gently and Harry shrugged slightly.

"Um, not much," (that he was willing to reveal to Dumbledore, anyway), "though before Hogwarts, Hagrid told me it wasn't an ordinary cut, that a mark like it only comes from being touched by a Dark curse, a really evil one."

"Hagrid is quite correct," Dumbledore said gravely. "I guessed, thirteen years ago when I first saw the scar on your forehead, what it might mean. I guessed that it might be the sign of a connection forged between you and Voldemort— and now I am convinced I was correct to think so. I believe that Voldemort, quite by accident, transferred something of himself to you the night he gave you that scar— which is the reason you can talk to snakes, and an answer as to why there is a link between you both."

Harry stayed silent for a long moment, digesting that, before speaking up. "What did the St Mungo's healers say about my scar?" He asked.

Dumbledore frowned. "I beg your pardon?"

"I asked what the professional healers said about the cursed scar on my head after you identified it as such thirteen years ago," Harry said slowly. There was a short pause and his eyes widened. "Are you telling me that I have a cursed scar from one of the Darkest wizards who ever lived and you never bothered to get it checked by actual fucking healers who specialise in that shit!?" He was shouting by the end and wasn't even at all sorry for it.

It wasn't that he wasn't already aware of the scar being some sort of link between him and
Voldemort, one that had been created when the wizard had tried— and failed— to kill him as a toddler, but it honestly chilled his blood that Dumbledore, who had only ever foreseen a future where Harry and Voldemort were enemies, hadn't ever seen fit to get a cursed scar from fucking Voldemort on a fifteen month old baby checked out by professional healers.

It was... honestly, it was the worst sort of negligence Harry could think of— other then leaving him at the Dursleys, of course. And maybe he wouldn't normally be so blunt about it, but he'd basically been tortured (and he was going to get a good fucking explanation for that, or heads would fucking roll— and he'd just sit back and watch Hermione's rampage and laugh) and, understandably, he wasn't at his most balanced.

"That does seem negligent of you, Albus," McGonagall said to the headmaster, her voice hushed like she hadn't meant for him to hear.

Harry ignored them both, focusing instead on what he remembered from just before he'd passed out, seven fucking days ago.

Tom's Diary. Fake-Tom's Ring. The Diadem, from the Room of Requirement. A golden cup, with an engraving of a badger. A golden locket, with emeralds forming an 'S'. The bloody huge snake that lurked around Riddle Manor.

His scar.

He wanted answers— and one way or the other, he planned on getting them.

He had a good idea where to start, too.

Chapter End Notes

So it's been a Harry-centric few chapters, but the others (particularly Hermione, seeing as this story is named for her) will get their time to shine!

Thank you everybody for their support! It means the world to me xoxo

~CC
I'm not making excuses, but I'm going through a lot of shit in my life right now. I'm sorry it's taken forever to update, but I hope you enjoy and thank you to everyone whose been so supportive– your beautiful comments mean the world to me <3

CHAPTER LXIX:

Hermione's POV:

If she was in a mood to be glib about it, Hermione would have called the past several days something along the lines of her 'not good very bad week'. Harry was unconscious in the hospital wing with no visitors allowed, Tom was MIA and not even responding to the ouroboros Mark he'd given her, and neither he or Voldemort had replied to a single one of her several dozen owls.

Fear constantly pulled at her like an ever-tightening noose around her neck while panic sunk its vicious fangs into her heart, dripping a poison that pumped through her bloodstream. After the first two days of taking it out on just about everyone she managed to rip her teeth into, the population of Hogwarts had made the wise decision to leave her alone. Only Snape acted any differently and he was in just as foul a mood as she was, stalking around the castle to take out his anger on rule-breaking students.

Harry had been unconscious for seven days and she was near her breaking point when she finally received a letter at breakfast, delivered by a swift-winged, nondescript brown owl that she recognised:

Harry & Hermione,
I will visit you as soon as I am able. I cannot predict when, but it is my sincere promise that to see you both and explain is my priority.
~T

Then (and she doubted it was a coincidence) an hour later Snape approached her with the news that Harry had finally woken up.

And suddenly she could breathe again.

Rushing into the hospital wing to see Harry sitting upright in the cot had her feeling like Atlas being removed of his burden. Her eyes were suspiciously wet as she carefully wrapped her arms around him, hugging him and burying her face in the crook of his neck just to feel the steady beat of his pulse against her lips.

When she pulled back, she quickly wiped her eyes dry and drank in the sight of Harry like she was dying of thirst. He looked wan and a bit thin, but his cheeks still had colour and his hands were steady.
"I don’t know if I should be more relieved that you're awake and upright or terrified of the look on your face right now," she told him. Which was a lie— *relieved, definitely*— but Harry had a particularly impressive air of grim decisiveness about him that was surprising to see.

"I," he told her, with the air of someone giving a grand announcement, "am so fucking sick of Tom and *Thaddeus* always avoiding or deflecting questions about what the fuck Tom is and the Ring and the Diadem— and this fucking link between us!"

Hermione got the distinct impression that Harry would have been shouting if they weren't in a public space.

"I am sick of it," he repeated, voice slightly calmer but no less absolute, "and one way or another, I'm going to get my answers."

"We," she corrected him, reaching out to tangle their fingers together then lift their entwined hands to lightly press her lips against his knuckles. "I'm right beside you, remember."

"I've got a pretty stupid idea," Harry admitted to her, his pale cheeks dusted a light pink and his green eyes warm in response to her reminder. "But *Thaddeus* is staying quiet and if Tom refuses to say shit, then I'm going to the only other 'person' I know who might be willing to answer."

It took her a moment to understand who— what— he was referring to. "Oh," she said, surprised. "That's— that's a dangerous game, Harry."

"You're not warning me against it?" He asked, blinking in surprise.

"Would it make a difference if I did?" She countered.

"Of course!" Harry eyed her like she'd just said the moon was made of cheese, or something equally as ridiculous. "If you thought it was a terrible idea, of course I wouldn't do it."

"It is a terrible idea," she admitted. "Utterly mad, really. But sometimes that can pay off— after all, remember how we met *Thaddeus'?"

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Harry was quiet and twitchy during the next few days as they waited for Tom's promised visit and Hermione didn't blame him. What he'd gone through had been traumatic, despite the fact he'd never left his bed. Pain, intense pain, was terrifying and shattering and had the ability to reduce people to faded shreds of themselves. All things considered, she thought Harry was coping extraordinarily well— especially with Dumbledore calling him to his office to suggest Harry might not be safe in the Slytherin dormitories anymore!

Harry had firmly refused all suggestions that he move, of course, but it had shaken both of them, which was the last thing they needed right now.

"Do you think Tom will tell us?" Harry asked her the fifth day after he'd woken when he'd finally been allowed to leave the hospital wing as he appeared restored to full health, nothing at all wrong with him or indicative of what had happened (he was, however, required to check in with Madam Pomfrey once a day until she said otherwise and check in with Snape at the start of the day, during lunch break, after his classes had finished and before bed— it amused her that Snape liked to pretend he wasn't secretly a mother-hen at heart).
"I hope he does, but no, no I don't think he will," Hermione admitted to Harry with a sigh. "I believe Tom would have said something before now, if he was able."

"If he's able?" Harry's brows furrowed and she shrugged slightly, unsure how to quite verbalise her suspicions so they'd make sense.

"Voldemort's told him not to tell us things before— like Dumbledore becoming your legal guardian, even though that's had a massive and lasting impact on your life. That Tom's kept quiet about the scar... it makes me think it's a secret he's not supposed to share."

"Great," Harry muttered and Hermione grimaced at him in agreement.

Six days after Harry woke up, Hermione jolted awake in the middle of the night in response to the mattress she was sleeping on dipping under a new weight. She reacted on instinct, fists lashing out only for her wrists to be caught in a tight, unforgiving grip. The sheets and duvet were trapping her legs, preventing her from kicking out, but before her panic ramped up and she blasted the intruder with a burst of reactive magic, a familiar voice hissed, "stop struggling, it's me!"

"You son of a bitch!" She hissed back angrily and Tom made an amused sound, leaning down to kiss her. Still angry, she bit his tongue sharply and he pulled back with a quiet laugh.

"You are pissed."

"Oh? What gave it away?" She snarled, yanking at his hold on her until he'd released her wrists.

"Mmmioneee?" Harry stirred beside her, his voice slurred by sleep. She sat up in the bed, her hair spilling down over her shoulders and down her back in a riot of sleep-tangled curls as she did so, and reached over to gently shake Harry's shoulder.

"Wake up, Harry, we've got a visitor," she told him as he blinked his way to wakefulness., Tom helpfully conjuring a ball of light so they weren't all in the dark, surrounded by the heavy green and silver hangings of Harry's four-poster bed. Tom then leaned over to swipe Harry's glasses off the bedside table, handing them to the younger boy as he sat up yawning.

Once he'd woken up enough to be aware of his surroundings, Harry gave Tom a concerned look. "Are you alright?" he asked and Hermione took a moment to properly examine Tom now sitting in the light, feeling a flicker of unease slide down her spine as she saw how... faded, almost, he looked. It reminded her of their earlier days, when Tom was still gaining his strength and wasn't always fully tangible, often returning to the Diary to 're-charge'.

Tom grimaced in response to Harry's question. "I'm... drained, more then anything. Very drained. And I've been very— occupied."

"Taking care of an injured, weakened Voldemort?" She asked shrewdly and the edge of Tom's mouth quirked up slightly in what was almost a smile.

"You said it, not me," he murmured, which certainly wasn't a 'no'. The sense of unease within her grew.

"What was it?" Harry asked, leaning forwards with wide green eyes that were bright with alarm, an undeniable edge of fear audible in his voice. "What happened? It was... it was terrifyingly awful, beyond anything I've ever felt before." Hermione's heart hurt as Harry shuddered at the memory, his face pale and stricken.

"I imagine it was. It's described as a suffering so terrible that it could lead to death," Tom said, very
quietly. "We did not predict that it would hurt you the way that it did."

"Wait," Harry said, eyes narrowing as Hermione went very, very still, "what do you mean by 'predict'? Did you... did you know it was going to happen before it did, whatever the fuck it was?"

"Yes," Tom admitted, at least speaking honestly. "But as I said, we did not realise the effect it would have on you."

"But you still knew it would hurt me," Harry accused, his jaw going taut with rage. Hermione's hands curled into fists, her nails digging sharply into her palms. The temptation to break Tom's nose was strong and she was barely holding herself back.

"We knew you'd very likely feel something," Tom corrected, mouth twisting down at the corners. "A headache, perhaps. A burning pain in your head, at worse. We did not factor in how you being a living being, not an object incapable of feeling pain, would change things."

"I... I saw a snake," Harry recalled, frowning. "Before I passed out. I saw a bunch of objects too, but there was definitely a snake— I'm pretty sure it was Voldemort's pet, the one from Riddle Manor."

Tom winced. "Yes, Nagini... she had what I assume was a very similar reaction to your own. She has yet to awaken."

"Seriously, what the fuck happened?" Harry demanded.

"I'd like to know that too," Hermione added coldly. She was trying very hard not to draw conclusions and lash out, but if Tom's explanation wasn't a good one then she couldn't make any promises.

Tom abruptly looked very tired; tired and resigned. "I trust you both, I trust you with my very existence." He said quietly. "But Voldemort... Voldemort does not. And for all my power... he is, for lack of a better word, my creator. He is stronger then I and he is capable of unmaking me, of eradicating the sentience I have gained."

Hermione felt like she'd plunged into a frozen lake then tried kicking to the surface, only to find it had already iced over— it was as if all her anger had been drained from her, leaving only fear behind. Beside her, Harry's face had turned white— she imagined hers was a similar shade.

"But... but he won't, right?" Harry whispered and Hermione felt her breath catch in her throat as she waited for Tom's answer. Tom's eyes flashed a brilliant, bloody crimson as he met both their gazes, all traces of tiredness gone and replaced by a fierce, steely conviction.

"I will do whatever it takes to ensure he can never take me away from you both," he promised. "And should he ever try, I would do everything in my power to stop him."

"Good," Hermione said fiercely, leaning forwards to grab the collar of Tom's robes, using her grip to yank him forwards so their faces were barely an inches apart, "because vow or no vow, if anyone ever took you from us, we'd burn down the world to get you back— and kill anyone who got in our way."

And beside them Harry, a promise burning like fire in his eyes, nodded his fervent agreement.
Harry's POV:

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Hermione asked. There was a worried slant to her mouth and her fingers were twitching in that way they did when she was uneasy and her instincts had her wanting to reach for a knife.

Classes had finished for the day and he and Hermione had returned to the Slytherin boy's dormitory after he'd checked in with Snape, both of them sitting cross-legged on his four-poster bed with the silencing charms up and the hangings drawn shut. Talking with Tom the previous night had provided no answers to all the questions they had and while they didn't blame Tom, that didn't mean they didn't still want an explanation. That he didn't want an explanation.

So they were going with plan B—or plan R, as Hermione had called it, for 'plan reckless'.

Reckless or not, however, they were still doing it and Harry looked Hermione dead in the eye, answering her with a confidence he didn't entirely feel. "I'm sure."

"Alright." Hermione nodded, and that was that. He certainly appreciated her faith in him, considering his own shaky confidence in what they were doing, and he took a deep breath before sliding the Ring onto his finger where it felt like it belonged, the sensation of rightness flowing through him.

"Ready?" Hermione asked and he swallowed hard then nodded. She lifted her wand, gently pressing the tip to his chest and murmured, "Obdormius."

Harry immediately slumped back against his pillow, his eyes drifting shut as a wave of tiredness turned his limbs weak and heavy and his world faded to nothing.

Awareness returned to him slowly, his surroundings blurring into the almost-familiar scene of the strange, off version of Riddle Manor with Not-A-Dream-Tom sprawled casually over a winged armchair.

"Back again?" He asked lazily and Harry nodded, causing 'Tom' to arch an eyebrow. "Oh my, you're looking much more wary this time, darling... I believe you've finally discovered I'm not a figment of your subconscious." He sounded pleased by that.

"No, you're not... you're something else entirely," Harry agreed.

"I am," 'Tom' agreed, something playfully teasing about his easy expression and lazy, relaxed posture.

"What are you?" Harry asked, not bothering to dance around what he wanted. To his surprise, instead of getting defensive or closing up 'Tom's' mouth curved into a smile.

"I wondered when you would ask."

"Well wonder no more," Harry said shortly.

"So impatient," sighed 'Tom', shaking his head mockingly. When Harry didn't rise to the bait with a snarky retort he tilted his head slightly, his expression suddenly one of unnerving focus. "My, my," he spoke softly, "you're not in the mood for games today, are you darling?"

"Not even close." Harry replied grimly and 'Tom' made a considering sound, straightening up on his chair.
"Tell me," he said, "what is this answer worth to you, Harry Potter?"

Harry, remembering the horrific pain and both Tom and Voldemort's less than helpful answers, set his jaw in determination. "Quite a lot, actually." He answered honestly. "But I've got another question for you first— what would a corporal body out in the living world be worth to you, Tom Riddle?"

Immediately, 'Tom' went very, very still. "Not all of us were... created with such desires," he said quietly, his eyes dark and piercing.

"I didn't ask about anyone else, I asked about you," Harry said, meeting those red eyes without fear. "Tell me what this—" he pointed at his scar, "is, how it connects me and Voldemort and how you and Tom are involved, then I'll help you get a body."

"Going for honey, not vinegar." 'Tom' murmured, "clever boy."

"Thanks," Harry said.

"And also very stupid." 'Tom' added and Harry let the insult roll off him, well used to his Tom reacting similarly whenever he felt he'd been too 'nice'. "But I wasn't lying," 'Tom' continued. "Not all of us are created with such desires and I have no need for a body. What I desire is something... quite different."

"What is it?" Harry asked warily, but 'Tom' shook his head.

"Not yet," he said, "the time isn't quite right. But you will owe me—and I will call you on your debt."

"What is with you lot and your extractions of promises of vague future favours?" Harry asked, almost more exasperated then he was nervous. Almost.

"It isn't anything beyond your capabilities, that I can promise you," 'Tom' said, amusement colouring his voice as he finally rose to his feet, graceful as ever in his movements as he crossed the off-coloured room so he was standing right up in Harry's personal space. Harry locked his muscles in place to stop himself from automatically stepping backwards and 'Tom' smiled in a distinctly predatory manner. "Do we have an accord, Harry Potter?"

_hermione is going to be so pissed_, Harry thought, already resigning himself to her (justified, he'd admit) fury. "Yes, we've got a deal." He said aloud and 'Tom' immediately leaned forwards and kissed him.

Harry froze in shock, not moving until he felt sharp teeth bite his lip hard enough to draw blood. He tried to jerk his head back, but 'Tom' had moved a hand up to the back of his neck at some point and easily held his head in place until Harry managed to get his hands up between them to shove the older boy away.

"What the _fuck_ was that?" He demanded angrily and 'Tom' grinned at him, licking the blood off his lips.

"That was an oath bound by blood," he said, smug as anything.

"But did you really have to _kiss_ me?" Harry glared, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. It came away smeared with red. 'Tom's' grin widened as he licked his lip again, making Harry realise that it wasn't just his own lip that 'Tom' had cut with his teeth.
"Of course not," he answered teasingly, "I just wanted a taste."

"God, you're as creepy as Tom and Voldemort!" Harry groaned in a sort of horrified and resigned exasperation. 'Tom' laughed before tilting his head in consideration.

"You know," he said thoughtfully, "I think you should call me Marvolo— I don't like sharing my identity with someone else, even if that someone is myself."

"That's fair enough," Harry admitted.

Marvolo smiled. "Excellent. Now I believe I owe you some answers."

Harry nodded, preparing himself for whatever probably disturbing thing it was that he was about to learn.

"What Tom and I are, and what you contain within yourself, are tethers," Marvolo said, his voice shifting into the sort of voice Harry's professors used when giving lectures, "very, very special tethers whose sole purpose is allowing their creator to escape death."

That... sounding foreboding. Except—

"Voldemort has the Philosopher's Stone, though," he interjected, frowning.

"That's... very interesting to hear, but nevertheless— the Stone could be stolen, it could be destroyed, it could even fail to continue working one day," Marvolo told him, shaking his head. "What we do is keep Voldemort from dying, even if his body is destroyed entirely. While we exist, death cannot claim him."

And that... that certainly explained a lot about how Voldemort had survived that Halloween night, thirteen years ago. It also explained why Voldemort had been so keen on getting his loyalty— also? Harry was really glad right about now that he wasn't mortal enemies with Voldemort; he didn't even want to imagine what it would be like having an immortal nemesis who couldn't be killed even if his body was obliterated, and who wanted him very, very dead. What a fucking nightmare.

"We are of immeasurable value," Marvolo interrupted his horrified train of thought, causing Harry to glance back up at him and meet his intense stare. "We are likely Voldemort's most precious... possessions. Which is why it continues to bewilder me what in Salazar's name he was thinking when he chose a human, a near child, to be a receptacle to something as valuable as what you carry within you."

"I think," Harry said slowly, remembering Dumbledore's explanation about his scar, about how Voldemort had accidentally left a part of himself in Harry the night he tried to kill him, "that he didn't do it on purpose."

"He didn't do it on purpose." Marvolo stated flatly, the disbelief clear on his handsome features.

"The night he tried to kill me," Harry said, ignoring the way Marvolo's eyebrows rose up in surprise, "when the spell backfired and, well, destroyed his body for a while, Dumbledore said he accidentally transferred something of himself to me, that it's why I can talk to snakes."

"That," Marvolo said, speaking very quietly and very slowly, his crimson eyes burning into Harry's, "is both extraordinarily fascinating and alarming beyond what you could possibly comprehend. Those were Dumbledore's exact words? That Voldemort 'transferred something of himself' to you?"
"Um, yeah, why?" Harry said, frowning.

Marvolo, shockingly, looked almost as if he'd paled slightly and there was a glint in his eyes that took Harry a moment to place, because he just wasn't expecting to ever see fear on the... tether's face.

"Because, Harry," Marvolo said, voice tight, "it's quite conceivable that Dumbledore is aware of our creation. Which means, he'll be trying to destroy us— and the containers that we're kept in."

Harry felt cold. He'd been aware since his first year that Dumbledore planned for him to be his sacrificial lamb, but could the Headmaster actually want him dead?

"I guess that's why he keeps putting me in dangerous situations, like submitting my name into the Goblet of Fire," he said through numb lips. "He's trying to kill me off without actually having to do it himself... or he's trying to have Voldemort murder me— and destroy his own tether when he does."

"I hate that man!" Marvolo hissed, his expression twisting into something Harry hadn't seen on his face before— a tangle of hatred, violence and loathing, with an undeniable underlying of fear.

"Yeah," Harry said, wrapping his arms around himself feeling cold and sick, "join the club."

Marvolo glanced back down at him and his enraged expression smoothed slightly. "Come here," he said, tone shifting to something soft and coaxing. Harry hesitated for a second before stepping forwards, letting Marvolo's oh-so familiar arms wrap around him, the older boy easily able to slot his chin over Harry's head. "You're ours, Harry Potter," Marvolo told him quietly, "and we take care of what belongs to us. We won't allow that man to hurt you."

And oddly enough, that... that was exactly what Harry needed to hear.

"Time to wake up," murmured Marvolo, his lips brushing against the top of Harry's head, and the Manor began to blur around them, dimming to darkness until Harry opened his eyes and found himself looking up at the roof of his four-poster bed.

Hermione was leaning over him, an anxious expression on her face. "Did he answer your questions?" She asked and Harry sat up slowly, giving her time to move back so they didn't knock heads.

"He did," he told her, opening his arms so she could shift herself over into his lap, wrapping her arms around his waist as he wrapped his around her.

"That bad?" She murmured, leaning her head against his chest, her ear over his heart, and Harry gave a strained laugh.

"Yeah, I learned that Dumbledore isn't just trying to serve me up as a sacrificial lamb to Voldemort — he actually wants me dead."

Hermione tensed, her arms tightening around him in a suddenly crushing grip. "What?" She snarled.

"The link between Voldemort and me— it's because of something that happened the night he tried to kill me, he accidentally created something Marvolo called a 'tether'," Harry explained.

"Marvolo?" Hermione asked, her grip not having relaxed even slightly.
"He's just as egotistical as Tom and Voldemort," Harry snorted, "he didn't want to share a name with them."

Hermione made an exasperated sound. "Why aren't I surprised?"

"Apparently he and Tom are 'tethers' too— the Ring and Diary, I think, are what he called 'receptacles'."

"And you're a receptacle too," Hermione surmised. Harry nodded.

"He was... confused why Voldemort made me one, he said the tethers and the objects that contain them are Voldemort's most precious possessions— 'immeasurable value', he said. I told him I was an accident."

"What are the tethers actually for? What's their purpose?" Hermione asked.

"They keep Voldemort alive," Harry told her. "Even if his body is destroyed, like that Halloween night, while his tethers exist he can't die."

"Well... that's really something." Hermione said before giving a short laugh.

"What is it?" He asked and Hermione pulled back slightly so she could grin at him.

"You realise what this means, right? It means that Dumbledore, paragon of the Light, wants you dead and Voldemort, the Darkest wizard to ever live, wants you alive— seems a bit backwards, don't you think?"

Harry snorted, his mouth stretching into reluctant grin to match hers. "Merlin, what a mess this is."

"At least it's never boring." She offered and Harry groaned.

"What I wouldn't give for boring!"

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Harry's wish for boring, unsurprisingly, wasn't about to come anytime soon. Just two weeks after he started attending classes again, Snape held him back in Potions to give him a nerve-wracking announcement.

"Unfortunately," his Head of House said sourly, "I've been instructed to pass on the message that at nine o'clock tonight you're required to go down to the Quidditch field where someone will tell you and the other champions about the Third Task."

"Wonderful." Harry muttered, just as sourly. "Thanks Professor." He added. Snape nodded shortly, mouth pinched with what Harry could recognise now as concern.

At half past eight that night, Harry left Hermione in the Common Room Tower and made his way to the Quidditch Pitch. As he crossed the Entrance Hall, Diggory came out of the corridor Harry guessed lead to the Hufflepuff common room.

"What d'you reckon it's going to be?" the Hufflepuff asked, all friendly smiles as he joined Harry and they walked together down the stone steps, out into the cloudy night. "All my housemates keep coming up with different ideas; Cho reckons we'll have to find our way through an old Egyptian pyramid while fighting off mummys which sounds fun, don't you think?"

"Yeah," Harry mumbled, "fun." Diggory laughed, clapping one of his hands on Harry's shoulder.
"Cheer up mate, it's almost over now!"

They crossed paths with Fleur as they passed the Beauxbatons' Carriage and the beautiful part-Veela gave Harry a radiant smile, pressing her lips against each of his cheeks in greeting. Harry relaxed slightly and smiled at her, happy to see the French witch—he'd only briefly seen her in passing since the term had started; even though she, Diggory and Viktor were exempt from the seventh year NEWT exams, they still had to do all the homework that the professors were heaping on the rest of the frantically studying seventh years.

"'Arry, eet eez wonderful to see you looking so well!" Fleur exclaimed, happily beaming at him with her bright blue eyes sparkling like jewels.

"I don't know, right now I kind of feel like I'm about to be sick," he confessed and she tilted her head back and laughed, the sound tinkling and musical.

"Oui, oui, I confess zat I am nervous too." She admitted.

"Any idea what the Task is?" Diggory asked her.

"I 'ave been zinking zat per'aps we will be underground, 'unting for somezing," Fleur replied thoughtfully. "We 'ave covered zee air and zee water, so eet makes sense zat zee earth will be next, non?"

"Well, we may as well go find out," Diggory said cheerfully. He was far too happy about all this, Harry thought sourly.

Together they walked down the dark lawn to the Quidditch stadium, turned through a gap in the stands, and walked out onto the field, only to stop short.

"What've they done to it?" Diggory asked indignantly. Harry felt just as horrified as the Hufflepuff, both of them exchanging scandalised looks as they bonded momentarily over their mutual love and worship of Quidditch. Because the Quidditch field was no longer smooth and flat like it should be, instead it looked as though somebody had been building long, low walls all over it that twisted and crisscrossed in every direction.

"Zey are 'edges!" Fleur announced, bending over to examine the nearest one. Harry very carefully did not stare. Beside him, Diggory gulped and did the same.

"Hello there!" called a cheery voice.

Ludo Bagman was standing in the middle of the field with Viktor, who nodded politely at them, the corners of his mouth even tipping up slightly into what could almost be called a smile. Harry, Fleur and Diggory headed towards them, making their way carefully over the hedges.

"Well, what d'you think?" said Bagman happily as the three of them climbed over the last hedge. "Growing nicely, aren't they? Give them a month and Hagrid'll have them twenty feet high. Don't worry," he added, grinning, spotting the less-than-happy expressions on Harry and Diggory's faces, "you'll have your Quidditch field back to normal once the Task is over! Now, I imagine you can guess what we're making here?"

No one spoke for a moment. Then—

"Maze," grunted Viktor.

"That's right!" exclaimed Bagman. "A maze! The Third Task's really very straightforward. The
Triwizard Cup will be placed in the center of the maze. The first Champion to touch it will receive full marks!

"We seemingly 'ave to get through the maze?" Fleur asked doubtfully. Harry agreed with her— it sounded much too good to be true.

"There will be obstacles," said Bagman happily, bouncing on the balls of his feet— honestly, was the man on drugs? "Hagrid is providing a number of creatures, others have been imported specially... then there will be spells that must be broken... all that sort of thing, you know. Now, the champions who are leading on points will get a head start into the maze. " Bagman grinned at Harry, who shifted in place a bit awkwardly. "Then Miss Delacour will enter, then Mister Diggory and then Mister Krum. But you'll all be in with a fighting chance, depending how well you get past the obstacles. Should be fun, eh?"

Harry, who knew only too well the kind of creatures that Hagrid was likely to provide for an event like this, thought it was unlikely to be any fun at all. However, he nodded politely like the other champions.

"Very well— if you haven't got any questions, we'll go back up to the castle, shall we, it's a bit chilly..."

Bagman hurried alongside Harry as they began to wend their way out of the growing maze. Harry had the feeling that Bagman was going to start offering to help him again, but Fleur saved him, sliding her arm through his and turning her head slightly so her long, silvery hair hid her wink. He smiled back at her, gratefully hurrying along beside her before Bagman could try anything.

They left the stadium together, splitting apart from the others to head towards the illuminated Beauxbatons Carriage. To Harry's surprise, however, Fleur continued on past the Carriage, in the direction of the forest. "Is something wrong?" He asked, confused, but Fleur just shook her head, stopping in the shade of the trees when they had reached a quiet stretch of ground a short way from the Beauxbatons horses' paddock. Then, to his surprise, she suddenly wrapped her arms around him in a tight hug.

Fleur smelled like flowers— lilies, roses, honeysuckle, jasmine and more; a ridiculously enticing combination that had Harry thinking he could die happy surrounded by her scent. Those veela genes were strong.

"I am so very glad zat you are alright," Fleur said when she eventually let go of him, her richly accented voice thick with emotion, deep blue eyes shiny with unshed tears. "I care very much about you, 'Arry... and 'Ermione... oh, she was so lost and afraid; eet was terrible to see 'er like zat. I wished to be zere, to support 'er, but she was... she did not welcome company."

"Yeah, she doesn't tend to deal well with me being hurt," Harry admitted. "I mean, she doesn't even blink about getting hurt herself, but the moment I stub my toe..." Fleur laughed wetly, pressing a hand delicately over her mouth.

"Ah, she 'as so much love in 'er 'eart, our 'Ermione. Eet makes me sad to zink zat 'er life 'as made 'er see all zee beautiful love inside 'er as a weakness zat she must 'ide away."

"Me too," Harry confessed.

"I wish—" Fleur started to say, but whatever she wished for was lost when she suddenly lunged forward to seize his arm, her other hand diving into her robes for her wand as she pulled him around.
"Fleur?" Harry asked in alarm.

"I saw somezing in zee forest," she said, all softness gone from her voice as she scanned the darkness with hard eyes. The sound of a stick snapping had Harry reaching for his own wand (Tom would be so pissed by his poor reaction time) just moments before a man staggered out from behind a tall oak. For a moment, Harry didn't recognise him— then he realised it was "Mr. Crouch the Elder".

"Barty?" He asked, confused, wondering both why Barty was polyjuiced as his father— maybe he'd been meant to accompany Bagman?— and what the hell was wrong with him.

The polyjuiced Barty looked as though he had been traveling for days. The knees of his robes were ripped and bloody, his face scratched; he was unshaven and gray with exhaustion. His neat hair and mustache were both in need of a wash and a trim. His strange appearance, however, was nothing compared to the way he was behaving.

Muttering and gesticulating, Barty appeared to be talking to someone that he alone could see. He reminded Harry vividly of the strung-out junkies he'd seen on the streets of London with Hermione.

"What the hell?" Harry asked as he rushed over, wondering if Barty had had some kind of post-Azkaban mental breakdown. Barty didn't even look at him, instead he started talking to a tree.

"...and when you've done that, Weatherby, send an owl to Dumbledore confirming the number of Durmstrang students who will be attending the tournament, Karkaroff has just sent word there will be twelve..."

"Oh. Oh shit," Harry suddenly realised, feeling his face pale.

"What eez eet?" Fleur asked, concerned, as she crossed over to stand beside him, her wand trained steadily on the madman.

"I think— I think that's the real Mr. Crouch," Harry said, horrified.

Mr. Crouch was still muttering, his eyes bulging as he stared at the tree. "...and then send another owl to Madame Maxime, because she might want to up the number of students she's bringing, now Karkaroff's made it a round dozen... do that, Weatherby, will you? Will you? Will..."

"Uhh, Mr. Crouch?" Harry asked cautiously. In response, Mr. Crouch staggered sideways and fell to his knees. Harry took a hasty step back, but that finally got a proper response out of the man— Mr. Crouch seized him hard around the knees, pulling him to the ground with a surprisingly strong grip.

"Merde!" Fleur swore, at the same time as Mr. Crouch started blabbering.

"Don't... leave... me!" he moaned, his eyes bulging again. "I... escaped... must warn... must tell... see Dumbledore... my fault... all my fault... Bertha... dead... all my fault... my son... my fault... tell Dumbledore... Harry Potter... the Dark Lord... Harry Potter is—"

A stunning spell slammed into Mr. Crouch from Fleur's wand, knocking the man back, his eyes rolling up into his head. His hands fell limply to the ground, his grip on Harry released and he quickly shoved the unconscious wizard away and stood up.

"Well... zis eez not good," Fleur observed, her lip curling slightly as she looked down at the man.

"No," Harry said grimly, "no it is not." He then groaned. "Boring— for once in my life, can I please
just have boring!" Fleur's laughter was strained but genuine.

"Oh 'Arry, I am afraid zat you 'ave been cursed wiz an eenteresting life."

"I know," he said glumly, before pulling up his jumper and starting to unbutton his shirt. Fleur arched a delicate eyebrow.

"Not zat I am against 'aving a frolic wiz you, 'Arry, but zis eez not exactly zee best time for eet." She said, which made Harry's face flame red as he tried not to choke on his own saliva.

"No! No, not that!" he said hastily, hurriedly yanking the last few buttons open and pressing his wand to the bare skin over his heart. ::Reveal:: he hissed and black ink spread across his pale skin as the ouroboros bled into view.

"Now zat eez very eenteresting," Fleur murmured as Harry pressed his finger against the snake. Immediately, the black ink burned a brilliant red, the same colour as Tom's eyes when he was experiencing a strong emotion, Harry thought.

"Um, Tom should be on his way now," he told Fleur. "I guess we just... sit and wait."

"I can zink of more eenteresting zings for us to do in zee meantime," Fleur said slyly and Harry blushed again, even as he shook his head.

"Tom is, um, kind of possessive. I mean, he's not against Hermione, and me I guess, you know, doing stuff with other people, but I'm pretty sure if he actually saw it he'd be, um, pretty pissed off."

"'E eez very intense," Fleur agreed, wincing slightly in memory. "'Ow long do you zink 'e will be?"

"I'm not sure," Harry admitted. "You don't have to wait with me, though." Fleur huffed, crossing her arms in a way that made her breasts very prominent against her blue silk uniform.

"Of course I will wait wiz you, do not be ridiculous, 'Arry!"

"Sorry," Harry apologised and Fleur sniffed.

"As you should be."

Harry would easily admit he was grateful for Fleur's presence beside him in the near pitch-darkness while they waited for Tom. It was eerie, so close to the forest, and he felt horribly tense thinking about a professor coming to find them. It was nearly an hour before Tom arrived, looking rushed and harried.

"This really isn't a good time—" he started to say before cutting off his sentence as he spotted the unconscious Mr. Crouch. "Oh thank Salazar!" He breathed, relief clearing the stress from his face.

"I'm guessing he escaped," Harry said dryly and Tom nodded, flicking his wand at Mr. Crouch, levitating him up into the air.

"Voldemort will reward you richly for this," he promised.

"Fleur was the one who spotted him and knocked him out," Harry said immediately, and Tom turned to Fleur, smiling at her. It was a genuine smile, one as devastatingly handsome as Tom himself was.

"You have done us a great service, Miss Delacour," he said. Fleur looked almost flustered.
"I merely did my duty as one of zee Dark Lord's loyal followers," she said quickly.

"Nevertheless, Lord Voldemort rewards those who serve him well," Tom told her, "it would have been disastrous, had Crouch reached Dumbledore. You both have our sincere thanks." Fleur nodded, still looking flustered, and Harry grimaced.

"Don't mention it," he said. "Really, please don't ever mention it." He hadn't thought twice about summoning Tom to hand Mr. Crouch over to him, but that didn't mean he wanted to actually think about what was going to happen to the man. He preferred his denial.

"I have to go; I need to secure Crouch immediately and then call off the search," Tom informed him and Harry nodded, stepping forwards to give him a quick hug, reaching up on his toes so he could kiss the taller boy. Tom kissed him back, their lips and tongues sliding together until Tom was pulling back, a reluctant expression on his face. "Soon," he promised and Harry smiled at him with kiss swollen lips.

"I'm holding you to that," he said.

"Well," Fleur said, after Tom and Mr. Crouch had disappeared off across the grounds, over towards, Harry knew, the secret passageway under the Whomping Willow, "'Ermione eez going to be very un'appy." Harry, who hadn't thought of that until now, groaned.

"Damn it."

Fleur laughed. "Better you zen me."

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**Rita's POV:**

The Hog's Head was an unfortunate establishment, though Rita was personally quite fond of it. She'd obtained a good deal of juicy gossip just by listening to its occupants in the past and it was the best place outside Knockturn Alley to find the sort of low-lives willing to... bend the law for her, if she needed a house or office broken in to.

This time, however, she wasn't here for any of the witches or wizards who frequented the establishment— she was here for its owner; Aberforth Dumbledore, the younger of the Dumbledore brothers.

She made her way over to the bar and slid onto one of the stools, curling her bright red lips into a smile when Aberforth turned in her direction.

"Whiskey, no ice," she said, sliding a sickle over the bar top with an inch-long sharp purple nail.

Aberforth narrowed his eyes at her, slamming a glass tumbler onto the bar and summoning a dusty bottle, yanking off the top and tipping the whiskey in. Rita let her fingers brush against his as she reached out for the glass, lifting it up to her lips and taking a long, appreciative sip without letting her eyes leave his oh-so familiar blue ones.

"I'm not interested in games," Aberforth warned and she smiled.

"That's a shame. I'm quite fond of them myself."
Aberforth grunted, scowling heavily at her. "I'm not going to talk to you about Albus."

"Am I really that transparent?" She asked lightly, taking another long sip of the whiskey, enjoying the burn as it slid down her throat. Aberforth snorted.

"Don't play stupid, girl."

"Fine." Rita said, placing the tumbler down and looking Aberforth straight in the eye. "I'm planning on taking down your brother and I want your help to do it."

"My help?" Aberforth scoffed and Rita smiled sharply.

"You can't tell me you're fond of him," she said without an ounce of delicacy. "How long has it been since the last time you both spoke? A decade? Two?"

"We're not close," Aberforth grumpily agreed. "But he's still my brother and you're a money-grubbing leech who feeds off the misery of others. Why the hell would I pick you over him?"

"Because I'm not just in this for the gold," Rita told him. "For once." She added with dry amusement when Aberforth looked at her in flat disbelief.

"You're doing this out of the goodness of your heart then?" His tone made it clear he didn't believe she had any good in her heart. He wasn't entirely wrong– but this time, he wasn't quite right either.

"Harry Potter." She said simply. "Your brother is ruining that boy's life. He's planning something for the poor child, why else would he have manipulated his life so drastically? And certainly not for the better!"

Aberforth scowled, yanking a dusty goblet and a rag from under the counter. Rita almost rolled her eyes as he began to aggressively polish it.

"You're right when you say I don't do things out of the goodness of my heart," she freely admitted, "but I owe Harry Potter a debt– we all owe him a debt. And I won't deny I'm getting something out of this exposé I'm planning to write, neither of us would believe me if I did, but I am trying to help that boy the best and most effective way that I, personally, can."

She could see Aberforth softening and she hid a smile as she wielded her next words like a knife, priming to cut deep to set the bait and let blood spill into the shark-infested waters.

"I don't trust your brother to have Harry's best interests at heart." Rita told the old barkeep, affecting an earnest, unhappy expression. "The opposite, in fact– I mean, for Merlin's sake, he left the boy with abusive muggles who wanted to stamp the magic out of him!" She shuddered in true horror, because that would always be disturbing– and then she went for the kill. "Can you even imagine the damage violence like that could do to a magical child?" She demanded.

"Yes." Aberforth said shortly, getting a distant look in his eyes as his mind was, no doubt, cast back to that sweet little sister of his who'd been oh-so viciously assaulted by muggles and left so terribly damaged. "I can."

"Got you," she thought smugly, the thrill of victory racing through her veins as she lifted her tumbler and took another sip to hide her burgeoning smile.

"Let's go out the back," Aberforth said gruffly, slamming the goblet and rag down on the bar counter. "I'll tell you what you want to know— I'll tell you everything. Just keep my name out of it and don't go embellishing what I say with any of your lies." He then snorted, shaking his head in
disgust. "Believe me, if you're going for shock, horror and scandal, you won't need to."

"Shock, horror and scandal— why, you know just how to sweet-talk a girl, don't you?" Rita purred, finally letting her triumphant smile cut across her face as she flourished a hand. "After you."

She might not be a good person, Rita reflected to herself as she followed Aberforth, but she was a bloody good reporter and this was going to be a bloody good book.
A/N: Surprise! Consider this an apology chapter and a thank you for everyone being so patient and understanding about the wait for the last chapter ;)

*Warning: contains sex scene*

CHAPTER LXX:

Harry's POV:

The day after he learned what the Third Task was, Harry received a note at breakfast that he'd been quietly dreading.

"Private lessons with Moody?" Draco, who’d read it over his shoulder, asked in horrified dismay.

"How the fuck did that happen?" Blaise demanded incredulously.

"Dumbledore." Harry said glumly, stabbing his bacon with his fork.

"Of course," Blaise groaned.

"Who else would it be?" Hermione spat, glaring viciously at the head table, specifically at Moody’s currently empty seat.

"Fucking wonderful," Theo said sourly.

"It's going to be torture," Harry said morosely, eyeing his goblet of pumpkin juice and wondering if it would be possible to drown himself in it. Draco patted his back sympathetically and Hermione, who was now glaring furiously at her porridge, was going to need a dentist if she kept grinding her teeth like she was.

Harry’s lessons all sped by frustratingly fast that day— even Hagrid's class seemed to pass in the blink of an eye, though Harry would admit the BilliWigs were pretty cool. The vivid sapphire-blue Australian insects had a wicked looking long curved stinger but when they stung, there was no pain, only giddiness followed by levitation. A class full of floating students was pretty hilarious—and thank Salazar it wasn't those bloody blast-ended skrewts again. The monsters were nearly eight feet long now and terrifying— and he had a terrible feeling that Hagrid was going to donate one to the Third Task.

All too soon, it felt, Harry was dragging his feet as he made his way to the DADA classroom.

Moody was waiting inside, his scarred face twisted into its usual scowl. To Harry's surprise, Tonks was also present— she had spiky green hair and pale grey eyes that almost looked silver. When she
winked at him, mouth curling into a sly smile, Harry recognised the colours for the subtle show of support they were.

It was undeniably a relief. Tonks was... strange, to say the least, but she'd also been loyal to her word, never revealing the truth behind Ron Weasley's death.

"Right," Moody said gruffly, dragging Harry’s attention back to him. “Pay attention, Potter, because what you learn here could save your life.”

“You’re teaching me how to get through the Third Task— it’s not exactly life-threatening,” Harry was unable to help retorting. Moody scowled, a nasty sight as the twisted scars on his mangled face distorted further with the movement of his mouth.

“I’m not teaching you how to play a stupid schoolboy game!” He growled angrily. “I’m teaching you how to survive when You-Know-Who comes for your head!” Apparently Harry didn’t look scared enough, because Moody leaned forwards, mouth twisting further into an ugly snarl. “You think that green-and-silver tie will save you, boy? You think that You-Know-Who will give a single fuck that you were Sorted into his old House? When he’s strong enough, he’s going to hunt your useless self down, never stopping until your tortured corpse is dumped at his feet!”

“Like you’re so much better!” Harry scoffed, his temper flaring hot. “How many times have you used an Unforgivable curse? How many people have you killed? Because I’ve heard all sorts of messed up shit about you, and I think you’re as big a monster as the witches and wizards you hunt down!”

“You stupid little boy!” Moody roared, banging his staff on the ground with a loud thud. “Why Albus is trying to save a lost cause like you, I have no idea— if it was me, I wouldn’t waste the time!”

“Like I’d want you trying to save me anyway!” Harry spat back at him.

“Your father would be so ashamed!” Moody growled. “A good man like him, having a son like you — it’s a right bloody shame, that’s what it is, the poor lad must be rolling in his grave!”

“You know what?” Harry snarled, a vicious look twisting his face into something he wouldn’t have even recognised, if he saw it in the mirror. “If my dad wanted me to give a flying fuck about what he felt, then you should have trained him better so he’d have lived long enough to tell me to my face!”

“Alright!” Tonks said loudly, stepping between them. “Time out, you two, time out!”

Harry realised he was panting, his hands balled into fists at his sides, knuckles bone-white he was gripping onto his wand. Moody had a look of hatred on his mangled face, his mouth twisted into a brutal snarl.

“This,” Tonks declared, “is obviously not going to work— apparently there’s too much bad blood between you both. I, however, have a solution.” She turned to Moody, her voice shifting into something imploring. “You’ve taught me everything I know, Alastor— you’ve made me into the Auror I am today. So why don’t I teach Harry?”

Honestly, Harry was pretty sure Moody would have agreed to anything to get out of teaching him — Tonks didn’t really need to have sweet-talked him at all. Still, he wouldn’t deny he was relieved when Moody made an assentive-sounding grunt.

“Take that ungrateful wretch out of my sight,” he ordered. “If he gives you any cheek, send him
away and tell him not to come back.”

“Fuck you too,” Harry retorted before Tonks seized onto his upper arm and dragged him out of the classroom.

As soon as the door had thudded shut behind them, the now violet-haired witch grinned down at him.

“I didn’t think you had it in you, kid. But yelling shit at one of the best Aurors Britain has ever had? That was ballsy. Especially considering all those skeletons hidden in your closet.” She winked. Harry ignored the brief squirm of unease in his stomach.

“I hate that man,” he said bluntly. “He hurt two of my best friends and got away with it, he put a whole bunch of people I like in Azkaban and he killed Tracey’s brother in front of her— and for some strange, unknowable reason I’m kind of sensitive about family members being murdered in front of their loved ones.”

“You’re a riot, kid.” Tonks told him. It almost sounded fond. “My Hogwarts years would have been a lot more interesting if you were there.”

“Fleur says I’m cursed with an interesting life,” Harry said glumly.

“That’s because my girl is hot and smart,” Tonks said approvingly.

“So… are you going to actually teach me? Or were you just rescuing me from Moody?” He asked.

“Tink I was rescuing Moody from you, actually,” Tonks corrected, amused. “But yes, I’ll teach you— probably not the same curriculum as Moody had planned, though; I’m much less interested in defence then he is. In my opinion, the best defence is the type of offence that doesn’t leave anyone left to defend from.”

“You know what?” Harry said thoughtfully, “I think I could get behind that.”

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Hermione’s POV:

With all the distraction about the Third Task, Tom, the ‘tethers’ Marvolo had told Harry about, her disastrous holidays and her weekly talks with Lupin, the upcoming exams had quite escaped Hermione’s notice until Draco, Daphne, Tracy, Blaise and Theo came to her begging for her History of Magic notes. Suddenly, the date seemed far too soon and racing closer by the minute— and considering her last exam was on the day of the Third Task, that only added to her nerves. Classes were starting to get busier as the professors began to pile homework on the students in preparation. Hermione had had to sacrifice an entire Saturday to helping Hagrid plan his exams for the third, fourth and sixth years, as well as putting together revision packets for the fifth and seventh years, who would be sitting their OWLs and NEWTs respectively. Lupin had actually helped with that; he had an extensive knowledge of magical creatures and lots of advice about what would be in the exams.

Hermione often thought that Harry’s friendship with Hagrid wasn’t worth it, but Dumbledore had a soft spot for Hagrid and Harry’s task was to gain Dumbledore’s trust and insinuate himself into the old bastard’s confidence— a task that had taken a blow after the shouting match he’d had with
Moody, although she wouldn’t deny that she was relieved Harry was learning from Tonks now.

Still, in her opinion the sooner Voldemort took over the world and Dumbledore was killed the better.

She’d formed a sort of routine, one of studying, helping Harry train, spending time with Fleur and her Slytherin friends and talking to Lupin. It was full-on and often tiring, which honestly helped with keeping the nightmares at bay and she’d always done better with a busy schedule.

There was, however, a hiccup— a persistent, annoying hiccup that refused to go away as hiccups were wont to do. The Weasley twins were fucking menaces. She wanted so badly to feed them to the Basilisk, she hated them so Morgana-damned much.

While they weren’t targeting Slytherin House as a whole anymore, not like at the start of the term, they hadn’t let up at all at tormenting her. She could deal with it, she wasn’t about to go begging a professor for help, but it was immensely frustrating when she was constantly been hit in the back with curses, everything from tripping, sneezing and hiccuping jinxes to hair-loss charms.

When they hit her satchel with a cutting curse while she, Daphne and Tracey were walking back to the Slytherin dungeon, Harry busy with Tonks, Hermione swore violently, her temper snapping as her belongings spilled out everywhere, not helped at all by the blasting curse one of the twins cast that then scattered her books, scrolls and homework across the corridor.

“You wankers!” Tracey shouted furiously as she and Daphne helped her gather all her belongings, Hermione keeping one hand pointing her wand steadily in the direction of the twins to defend against any further curses.

“What are you going to do about it, huh?” One of them sneered, while the other outright laughed.

“I’m going to fucking make you regret this!” Hermione spat, dumping the last of her books back in her satchel, Daphne having repaired it for her, fixing them both with a venomous look.

"Little girl trying to be scary with her threats!” Mocked one twin.

"Ooh, I'm shaking in my boots!" Mocked the other.

Hermione bared her teeth at them. “I don’t make threats,” she snarled, hate dripping from her voice, “I make promises and I’m going to fuck you up!”

Both twins smiled meanly at her. “We’ll see, Granger.” They said together.

“Oh yes you fucking will,” she said darkly, watching as they sauntered off while snickering.

“What are we going to do to them?” Daphne asked eagerly while Tracey gave the direction they’d disappeared off to a vicious look that reminded Hermione of just how many of Tracey’s relatives had been locked up in Azkaban (she’d even met one of her brothers at Riddle Manor, recognising him by the same strawberry-blond curls he shared with his sister).

“I’m going to fucking ruin them,” Hermione promised darkly, before grinning sharply. “Starting with their reputations— how soon can either of you get your hands on polyjuice?”

“Within a week,” Daphne said confidently.

“Good.” Hermione said, sharp grin widening. “Now I just need to start a fight so I can get my hands on their hair.”
“And their blood,” Tracey advised, with a smile sweet as poison. “My father has taught me extensively about blood magic—you’d be amazed at what you can accomplish with just a few drops of blood.”

“I’ve read about what can be done with blood of the tortured and maiden’s blood, as well as blood oaths and keying wards to individual blood signatures, but that’s the extent of my knowledge of blood magic,” Hermione admitted interestingly.

“My family has a long, extensive history of using blood magic,” Tracey told her. “And believe me, very little of it is pleasant.”

“That’s music to my ears,” Daphne said vindictively.

“You’re both brilliant,” Hermione told them, genuinely impressed by her two fellow Slytherins.

“Of course we are,” Daphne said smugly, “we’re your best girlfriends.”

“Best friends in general, I think,” Hermione admitted, before pausing slightly. “I’ve never really had female friends before that I wasn’t fucking. Not since I was really young and they were all older then me, more mentors then anything, and they’re all dead.”

“Your life is honestly so tragic it makes me want to cry,” Daphne sighed. Beside her, Tracey nodded emphatically.

“Oh Morgana, yes.”

“You’re… not wrong,” Hermione confessed. “But things have definitely turned around since I came to Hogwarts.”

“Of course it would have,” Daphne said primly, “you were living in the muggle world before—that’s a horror unto itself!”

Hermione laughed, the anger and frustration from her encounter with the Weasley twins bleeding away until all that was left was a blooming warmth in her chest.

That changed abruptly, however, when she went to unpack her satchel later that afternoon and came to the chilling realisation that the journal Lupin had given her, the one she’d been writing in for the better part of the term, was missing.

“I’m actually going to kill them,” she told Harry through numb lips, ice having replaced the blood in her veins. “I’m going to skin them alive.”

“Those— those—” Harry made an inarticulate sound of rage, apparently unable to find a word horrible enough to describe the Weasley twins.

“They shouldn’t be able to get into it,” she said anxiously, “it’s keyed to my blood—but that technically makes it a Dark object, and if they hand it in to Dumbledore…”

“He’ll expel you in a second.” Harry said grimly. “We need to get it back—now. And breaking into Gryffindor Tower can’t be any harder then stealing the Philosopher’s Stone and we did that in our first year.”

“Get your cloak and the Map that Lupin gave you,” Hermione instructed, her mind spinning frantically as she formulated a plan. “We need to find Longbottom.”
“I’ll be sixty seconds,” Harry promised, dashing off to the boy’s dorm, nearly bowling over Draco, Blaise and Theo.

“What’s his problem?” Draco frowned.

“Or should we be asking what’s your problem?” Blaise asked shrewdly and Hermione tried to smile, only it came out more like a snarl.

“Oh shit,” Theo said, taking a hasty step backwards. Draco looked like it was his pride alone stopping him from doing the same, but Blaise was well used to being around terrifying women and didn’t appear even remotely phased.

“Well?” He prompted. “If you tell us, we can help.”

“The Weasleys took something of mine,” Hermione said sharply, her hands twitching by her sides as she imagined pushing a knife through one of the twin’s gut, going up through the stomach to his heart, his hot blood gushing over her hands, down her forearms and splashing over her until she was coated in it. “Something that could get me expelled,” she added reluctantly.

“Merlin’s arse!” Draco blurted out, looking horrified.

“I’m going to get it back,” Hermione promised darkly, “and I’m going to take it out on their hides. Specifically, I’m going to flay their sorry hides.”

Harry sprinted out of the dorm then, skidding to a stop beside them. “Come on,” he said breathlessly, “I’ve got the stuff— let’s go!”

“Is there anything we can do to help?” Blaise asked swiftly and Hermione shook her head.

“Not right now… but thanks.”

Harry easily located Longbottom’s dot on the Map that Lupin had given him for his fourteenth birthday, making Hermione wonder if there was some kind of innate magic in it that made the Map easier for the Marauders and their possible offspring to use as it seemed he was always the first to find whoever they might be looking for. Unsurprisingly, Longbottom was in one of the greenhouses. Surprisingly, however, there was a dot labelled ‘Viktor Krum’ next to him.

“That’s weird,” Harry commented, as they made their way to the grounds of Hogwarts “Did you know Nev and Viktor were hanging out?”

“They could have just ran into each other,” Hermione offered.

“In greenhouse five?” Harry asked doubtfully. And he was right— greenhouse five was one of the more out of the way greenhouses, definitely not somewhere that Longbottom and Krum could have crossed paths by accident.

When they skidded to a stop in the greenhouse, both of them flushed and panting, both Longbottom and Krum looked up in surprise. Krum was the most relaxed Hermione had ever seen him, his seemingly permanent scowl gone. It made him look younger, more like his actual age of seventeen.

“Harry? Hermione?” Longbottom asked in surprise. “What are you two doing here?”

“We need a favour,” Harry told him and Longbottom nodded.

“Yeah, of course— anything I can do,” he said earnestly.
“The Weasleys stole something precious of mine,” Hermione told him, “I need it back yesterday.”

“They’re so awful,” Longbottom muttered, shaking his head. “They’ve been targeting me because they know I’m friends with you guys. Pretty much all of Gryffindor hates me for being a so-called ‘traitor’ to our House and to the Light and those two are at least half responsible for it. I mean, I was always bullied before,” he shrugged slightly, “but it’s definitely gotten worse.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Harry asked in concern.

“Because it’s nothing I can’t deal with,” Longbottom told him firmly. “I’m used to it and it doesn’t affect me so much anymore, not now that I have friends.”

“Look, touching as this all is, we really don’t have the time for it right now,” Hermione cut in. “I’m sorry, Lo-Neville, but if I don’t get my journal back I am fucked.”

“I will meet you again later,” Krum told Longbottom.

“By the Lake tomorrow?” Longbottom checked and Krum nodded. He then dipped his head towards her and Harry in acknowledgement before leaving the greenhouse, his gait not as shuffling as usual—she wouldn’t exactly call it ‘a spring to his step’, but it was probably the Krum-equivalent.

“What can I do to help?” Longbottom asked.

“We need someone to let us in the Gryffindor Common Room,” Hermione told him, “Harry and I will hide under Harry’s invisibility cloak and you can lead the way to the Weasleys’ dorm— if they’re in there, we’ll stun them, if they’re not then we’ll strip the room.”

“Okay.” Longbottom said, not hesitating for a moment about letting the ‘enemy’ into the Gryffindor’s sacred space. Harry making friends with the shy boy had turned out miles better then she’d ever thought it would.

Longbottom easily kept up with them as they jogged back to the castle, barely out of breath—apparently he’d been continuing working out, even with the Yule Ball behind them.

The Gryffindor Common Room was in one of the towers, hidden behind a portrait of a large woman.

“Password?” She drawled with a toss of her head, not seeming to realise she’d left a curler in her hair.

“Fairy lights,” Longbottom told her and she sniffed dismissively before swinging open. She and Harry stayed close behind Longbottom as he made his way through the Gryffindor common room. It wasn’t too full, but there were enough red-and-gold ties around to make her feel like retching. Several of them sneered at Longbottom as he passed them, one boy—a sixth year, she thought—sticking out his foot, though Longbottom managed to dodge it instead of tripping.

Longbottom led them up a wooden spiral staircase, stopping outside a door. “Get your wands ready,” he whispered.

“Stay behind us, don’t let them see you.” Harry whispered back and Longbottom nodded. Hermione took a breath then reached out to shove the door open. Both twins only had a moment to look towards the ‘empty’ doorway before they were thrown backwards by twin stunners.

“Right,” Hermione said, pulling off the cloak. Once both Harry and Longbottom were in the dorm
room, she closed the door and tapped it with her wand. “Colloportus!”

Confident that they wouldn’t be disturbed, she rushed over to the bed both Weasleys had been on, almost groaning with relief when she saw it was her journal they’d both been bent over. The cover was scorched with spell-marks and even damage from what looked like a knife.

“Fucking bastards!” She snarled, scooping it up and stashing it in her robes. She wanted desperately to hit them with some sort of curse or to trash their belongings, but that would be leaving evidence of their presence that the twins would be able to report—they couldn’t say anything about her taking back her journal without revealing that they’d stolen it in the first place.

Except—

“Hair,” she said, suddenly. “I need their hair—and blood.”

“I’m not even going to ask,” Harry said. Hermione rolled her eyes at him before glancing around the room, spotting several broken quills and a cracked inkwell that she summoned over to transfigure into glass phials. “Get the hair,” she told Longbottom, tossing a glass phial over to him, giving him a moment to catch it before throwing the second. He nodded and Hermione turned her attention to the closest unconscious Weasley.

Pulling a face, she rolled him onto his stomach then yanked up his shirt, baring his back to her. “I take it back—I actually am going to ask,” Harry told her.

“I don’t want to take it from somewhere obvious,” she told him.

“Makes sense,” Harry agreed and she nodded as she pulled her switchblade out from her sock. Picking a spot just under his shoulder-blade, she nicked the skin, holding the phial under it so the blood trickled in.

“You do the other one,” she told Harry, handing him the other phial. Harry pulled a face but did as she said, fishing the switchblade she’d given him two years ago out of the pocket of his robes.

Once she had collected enough blood she put pressure on the small cut until it stopped bleeding then fixed Weasley’s shirt back to how it had been before. Standing up, she looked down at the unconscious red-head and pulled a face.

“It’s so fucking annoying to have them in this position and not be able to do anything,” she said, annoyed.

“There’s something we can do,” Harry said with a sly grin, turning his wand towards one of the twins and muttering an unfamiliar incantation, then repeating it with the second twin.

“What’s that?” she asked, interested.

“A slow acting curse that will have them itching until they’re peeling the skin off their bones if they don’t get to Madam Pomfrey in time,” Harry said in satisfaction. “Tonks taught me that one.”

“I should ask her for lessons too,” Hermione replied, impressed.

“I’m really trying to feel bad about that,” Longbottom admitted, reminding her of his presence. “And I’m failing completely.”

“You’ll probably end up feeling bad about not actually feeling bad,” Harry told him, “that happens to me all the time. Eventually you’ll just learn to go with it.”
Longbottom’s mouth tugged into a reluctant grin. “If I keep hanging around with you Slytherins, probably.” He said and it took Hermione a moment to realise he’d made a joke. Harry laughed, clapping Longbottom on the back.

“Gryffindor doesn’t deserve you anyway,” he said. “Bunch of hypocrites, all of them— you’re the only real Gryffindor in Hogwarts, brave enough to step outside the stereotypes and traditions of the school and make your own path.”

“Come on, you can pledge your undying love later,” Hermione said impatiently as Longbottom’s face flushed pink at Harry’s words. “In case you’ve both forgotten, we’re still in enemy territory.”

“Right,” Harry said, turning to scoop the invisibility cloak back up and Hermione stepped in close, letting him throw it over them both.

“Finite Incantatem.” She said, flicking her wand at the door to undo her previous enchantment. Once again closely following behind Longbottom in order to avoid any of the Gryffindors walking into them, she and Harry both let out sighs of relief when they all exited the portrait hole undetected.

They didn’t remove the cloak until they were two corridors away from the ‘scene of the crime’, and then Hermione held her hand out for the blood and hairs, which Harry and Longbottom handed over.

“Excellent,” she smiled, immensely satisfied. The Weasley twins would regret ever messing with her— like she told them, she followed through with her threats and she was going to fuck them up.

Bidding farewell to Longbottom, she and Harry returned to the Slytherin common room where she immediately crossed over to the sofa Daphne and Tracey were lounging on. She held up the phials of blood with a smug grin and Daphne and Tracey both gave delighted smiles.

“Come on,” Tracey said, jumping to her feet with barely restrained excitement— she looked a moment away from rubbing her hands together and cackling. “Let’s go to our dorm!”

“Well, it’s not exactly Hermione’s dorm,” Daphne said dryly. “Hermione spends her nights sleeping in the sweet arms of love.”

“Oh we don’t just sleep,” Hermione said smugly which made both other girls laugh, even as Daphne’s cheeks turned pink.

In the girl’s dorm room that Hermione had spent three years living in, the three of them sat on Hermione’s neatly made and unused bed. Tracey held out her hand and Hermione carefully passed the phials of blood over.

“Perfect,” Tracey murmured as she examined them before looking back up at the other two. “What most people don’t realise, is there’s a lot you can do with blood,” she explained, “blood is life; it’s an intrinsic part of every being and is incredibly useful to use for anchoring curses. Most of the really Dark blood magic can’t be cast while at Hogwarts, too many wards here for detecting Dark spells and there’s often other ingredients needed, the sort of ingredients that are very… morally questionable, to say the least. Nuisance curses, however, can add up very quickly— and when you combine curses such as bad luck and clumsiness, the results can be brilliant. Then there’s curses like insomnia, loose tongues, toothaches, the seven deadly sins— gluttony, sloth, lust, pride, envy and greed. The effects of nuisance curses weaken over time if they aren’t redone, but they’re potent enough while they last.” Tracey grinned at them. “Blood magic is one of the most versatile out there and the possibilities are practically endless; it’s just about finding the right timing and
combinations for the best impact.”

“And let me guess— it’s all very, very illegal?” Hermione asked and Tracey laughed.

“Like that would ever stop you.”

Hermione smirked. “No, it just means I have to be extra careful that I’m not caught.”

“We,” Daphne corrected and Tracey nodded.

“Blood magic isn’t straightforward magic and it’s not easy to learn,” she explained. “I’ve been trained in it half my life; there’s only so much I’d be able to teach you in a short space of time.”

“I like the sound of bad luck— I think it’s a good place to start,” Hermione suggested. “And after a day or two, we can add clumsiness to it, maybe insomnia too.” Tracey’s expression was vicious and vindictive.

“Perfect,” she said with satisfaction. “Let’s get started.”

The twins confronted her when she was on her way to dinner, having left later then the other Slytherin fourth years as she’d had to redo one of her essays that had been ruined by the blasting curse from earlier, the one the Weasleys had used to scatter her spilled belongings. Both twins looked livid and both had their wands out.

“You little bitch!” The one on the left snarled— she mentally assigned him to be Twin One.

“You’re going to pay for that,” the one on the right spat— Twin Two.

Hermione just curled her lip in a sneer, not at all intimidated by either of them or the promise of violence in the way they held themselves— and for a very good reason too.

“And just what,” Snape demanded in a dangerously soft, silky voice that all Hogwarts students knew to be very, very afraid of, “is going on here?”

Hermione looked challengingly over at the Weasleys, daring them to say something about her breaking into their dorm and knowing that they couldn’t.

“Nothing!” Spat Twin One, stashing his wand angrily back in the pocket of his robes.

“That’s ‘nothing professor’, Mr. Weasley,” Snape said silkily, “five points from Gryffindor for your disrespect. And another five for causing a disturbance in the corridors and twenty for pointing your wand at another student— each.”

Twin One opened his mouth furiously, but Twin Two was apparently the smarter one because he elbowed his brother hard enough to get him to close his mouth with an audible click.

“Now either go to the Great Hall for dinner or return to your common room,” Snape said coldly, “before you lose any more points from Gryffindor.”

Hermione felt a great deal of satisfaction watching the twins storm away, turning the corner out of sight. She couldn’t help but wonder if Snape being close by enough to overhear their exchange had been Tracey’s bad luck curse at work.

“Dare I ask what that was about?” Snape asked her, sounding exasperated.
“They’ve been harassing me,” she answered honestly. “I may have retaliated earlier and it pissed them off.” Snape scowled and Hermione was surprised to see real anger on his face.

“I’ve told McGonagall to get them in line,” he said viciously, “I think I’ll be having another chat with her.” He then turned his glare on her. “And why haven’t you said anything about their bullying?”

Hermione paused. “I… don’t like being seen as a victim,” she admitted, pulling a face at the words. “Going to you would have made me feel like one.”

“I don’t doubt that you can handle them, Hermione,” Snape said, exasperated again. “But you shouldn’t have to. If it continues, I expect you to tell me immediately.”

“Alright,” she agreed, after a long moment.

“Good,” Snape said and Hermione bit back a smile when he accompanied her down to the Great Hall for dinner, clearly wanting to make sure the twins weren’t waiting somewhere to jump her—he was definitely a mother hen.

The Weasley twins weren’t lying in wait to ambush her, however—their revenge came the following day. Hermione had been walking with Harry and the other Slytherin forth years to class when she was hit in the back by a tripping jinx. That wouldn’t have been so bad if she hadn’t been stepping onto a staircase at the time and the jinx had her pitching down the flight of stairs headfirst.

Her reaction time was fast enough that she got her hands out in front of her, so it was her wrists that bore the brunt of the initial impact and then she curled her arms protectively over her head, tucking her chin against her chest, as she tumbled down the marble stairs.

When she reached the bottom, she stayed in place, chest heaving as she fought back the shock and panic, adrenaline surging through her strong enough that it took a few seconds for the pain to hit.

She bit clean through her lower lip in an effort to stifle the scream that tried to escape, the hot liquid dripping down her chin as her brain dizzily tried to figure out if she needed to be on her feet, if she needed to go for a knife or run, because she was injured and she was defenceless and it wasn’t safe.

There was something wrong with her hands, something painfully, horribly wrong, but her legs still worked and she managed to stagger to her feet. Dazed, she panted, frantically looking around, trying to locate the danger. And then Harry’s warm arms were carefully wrapping around her and the panic slowly started to release its hold on her as she registered safety.

She hid her tears in the collar of Harry’s robes, teeth clenched tight to keep any sound, any sobs, locked away. She could hear shouting but she ignored it, eventually pulling back from Harry to look down at her arms, to inspect the damage they’d sustained from taking the brunt of the impact from her fall.

“My left wrist is broken,” she told Harry, her voice mostly steady, only catching slightly in time with the waves of pain. “The right one’s just sprained, I think. My right elbow hurts, though.” Actually, ‘hurts’ was an understatement, but she’d long since learned not to show her pain. Pain was weakness, weakness invited trouble—weakness got people hurt, got them killed. She would not allow herself to be weak.

“Someone ran to get a professor,” Harry told her. He looked pale.

“Don’t look so worried,” she told him, “it’s not that bad.”
“Your wrist is fucking mangled!” Harry growled. “Yes, it’s that bad!”

“I’m fine,” she lied, fixing him with a harsh look. “Stop panicking!” Harry exhaled loudly, visibly frustrated.

“Fine. You’re ‘fine’.” He said, his sarcasm almost a tangible thing. “But do me a favour— when Snape gets here, make sure I’m with you when you tell him that. I can’t wait to see his expression.” He gave her a sudden wicked smile. “And Tom too— because he’s definitely going to take this well.”

(Despite the pain, that look made something inside Hermione lift its head in interest— wicked was a good look on Harry)

She would have replied to his threat with something equally as mean or sarcastic, but had to grit her teeth against a new surge of pain so she fixed him with a glare instead. “Still fine?” Harry asked, arching an eyebrow in a brilliant imitation of Tom.

“What you.” She told him succinctly. She still leaned into him, of course, relaxing against his warmth, and he still wrapped an arm around her, pressing his lips to the shell of her ear.

“Tell me if it gets really bad, okay?” He whispered.

“Of course,” she whispered back.

“And you really should sit down.” He added, at a normal volume this time.

“Don’t push your luck,” she advised.

The first professor on scene was Sprout, which was actually a stroke of luck for her— no one could ever accuse Sprout of favouritism; she was the Head of Hufflepuff, fairness was practically coded into her DNA (that bad luck blood curse that Tracey had put on the twins was amazingly effective).

Sprout escorted her, Harry and the Weasley twins to the hospital wing where the Herbology professor had her sit down on one of the cots while she fixed the Weasleys with a disappointed look so profound that it had both red-heads squirming guiltily in place.

“It’s always one of you, isn’t it?” An exasperated Madam Pomfrey sighed when she came out of her office to see what was going on. The medi-witch cut away the sleeves of her uniform, tutting when her arms were revealed.

Violent-looking bruises were already blooming along her skin, her right elbow was… not in good shape, her right wrist had started swelling and her left wrist was obviously broken.

“Hermione, dear!” a distressed Sprout cried out in horror, “I didn’t realise you were so badly hurt, love! Why didn’t you say something?”

“Ridiculously good pain tolerance,” Hermione answered, mostly honestly. Sprout turned back to the Weasley twins, her disappointed look now impossibly increased by threefold— Hermione felt guilty and she was just a bystander and she was the wronged party (mostly).

Though it hurt almost as much as gaining the injuries in the first place, Pomfrey was easily capable of fixing broken bones in a jiffy and the healer then vigorously slathered both her arms with swelling solution and bruise paste. “Honestly, you lot, you’ll turn me grey.” She muttered under her breath as she did so. Hermione wisely didn’t mention that the witch was already had grey hair.
Snape and McGonagall both stormed into the hospital wing at about the same time and Hermione bit back a groan when Dumbledore followed after them. There went her hopes for getting the Weasley twins expelled.

Oh well, she still had her plans in place—she’d promised to ruin the twins and she fully intended on doing just that.

“What happened?” Snape snarled, casting a vicious look over at the Weasley twins who had both wilted from their exposure to Sprout and her highly potent magical powers of guilt-inducement.

“Several witnesses informed me that the Misters Weasley spelled Miss Granger from behind with a tripping jinx,” Sprout told him. “Miss Granger was standing at the top of a staircase when it happened and the poor dear fell down the entire flight of stairs.” The Herbology professor shook her head sadly.

“If she hadn’t used her arms to protect her head, then we’d be having a very different conversation right now,” Pomfrey added grimly, casting a stern look over at the Weasleys.

“I thought I told you both that this unacceptable behaviour would no longer go unpunished!” McGonagall snapped at the twins, her nostrils flaring in rage.

“We didn’t mean for her to fall like that!” One of the twins argued.

“But it was alright to cast magic on another student?” their Head of House snapped. “There will be serious consequences for this! You can both count yourselves as extraordinarily fortunate that Miss Granger was not hurt worse then she was!”

“She’d deserve it!” Burst out the other twin, jumping to his feet and jabbing a finger in her direction, a hateful look on his face. “She murdered Ron! She murdered him and she’s still walking around free while we had to bury our brother!”

“Miss Granger was cleared by the Aurors of any wrongdoing!” McGonagall told him sharply. “And even if she hadn’t, you would still not be within your right to attack her! As it is, right now expulsion is a genuine possibility!”

“Minerva,” Dumbledore cut in, just like Hermione expected him to. “I believe we should escort the Misters Weasley to my office and summon their mother and father before we decide on how their ill-thought actions should be punished.”

“Lead the way, Headmaster,” McGonagall said tightly, fixing both Weasleys with a severe expression. Hermione watched the four of them leave the hospital wing and let out a frustrated sigh.

“I bet they’re not even going to get suspended.”

“Even when their pranks put other students in mortal danger, Dumbledore rarely punishes his favoured Gryfffindors.” Snape said darkly. Pomfrey sighed, patting Snape on his shoulder.

“It’s not fair, Severus, I know,” she agreed, suddenly looking very tired. “Minerva will do her best to ensure that they are not entirely exempt from punishment for their actions today. And she will make sure they know that if something like this ever happens again then not even the Headmaster will be able to help them.”

“Music to my ears,” Hermione muttered. She then paused, turning to Harry and lowering her voice. “Let’s agree not to tell Tom.” She whispered. Harry’s mouth quirked into a smile.
“Not a chance.”

This time Hermione wasn’t surprised by Tom sliding onto their bed. The dip of the mattress felt more like a promise then a threat and there was no violence in the way her hands reached for Tom, snagging the front of his robes and pulling him down for a deep, lazy kiss.

Harry had been sleeping lightly enough that he woke up without any aid, Tom easily conjuring another ball of light for them all to see by without even having to stop kissing her—the older boy could be show-off sometimes… or all the time.

When she and Tom did separate, Tom shifting so he was sitting between her and Harry, leaning up against the headboard of the four-poster bed, she could see instantly that he didn’t look happy. On the contrary, Tom was looking down at her arms, the bruises yet to completely fade, with a murderous look on his face. “I despise seeing marks on you I didn’t put there,” he hissed, a simmering fury audible in his voice. “I’m going to kill them both.”

“No,” she said immediately, her voice firm and leaving no room for argument.

“No?” Tom repeated incredulously and even Harry gave her a bewildered look.

“No,” she reiterated. “Tom, you need to trust me to be capable of getting my own revenge—I don’t need you doing my dirty work for me or taking my satisfaction of getting my own back. I’ve already planned out what I’m going to do to them and this is my grudge, Tom, not yours.”

“You are mine,” Tom snarled, twisting in place so he was facing her, one of his hands going to her throat, to the choker that was fastened there like it always was. “You are mine, so your grudges are mine—I look after what belongs to me and only I am allowed to hurt you!” Harry cleared his throat pointedly. “And Harry,” Tom added grudgingly.

“Young to explore your inner sadist, Harry?” Hermione asked, genuinely interested in the idea even though she was fully aware Harry would not be—Harry had his personal preferences in bed, just like everyone did, but delivering pain certainly wasn’t one of them.

Predictably, Harry looked horrified at the very idea. “No!” He exclaimed and she lightly elbowed him, smiling.

“I know, Harry, I was teasing.”

“Teasing…” Tom mused, curling the word around his mouth like he was tasting it, savouring it, turning it from a collection of relatively innocent syllables into something drawn out and dirty. He then smiled, playful with just a hint of predator. “Now that gives me ideas… do you two want to play a game?”

Harry gave Tom a cautious look. “I’ve learned to be very careful when you say that,” he said, and Tom’s smile widened, his lips pulling back just enough to reveal the sharp edge of his teeth.

“Is that a yes?”

Harry turned to her and Hermione eyed Tom, eyed the predatory way he was looking at them, and felt that familiar tingle shiver up and down her spine. She stretched, rolling her shoulders back before flashing the young Dark Lord a smile. “Sounds fun.” She said, heat thickening her voice as her tongue darted out to wet her lips. “Count me in.”
“Undress.” Tom immediately ordered, already moving to shuck his own clothing, his elegant fingers dancing along the silver clasps of his dark-as-night robes. As Hermione tugged open the laces of her nightgown, slipping the silken material off over her head and gently letting it fall to the ground, knowing it would be less likely to come to harm down there, Harry moved out from the bed-covers and down towards the foot of the bed to give them space.

When they were both naked, Tom reclined against the headboard of the bed and gestured for her to move so she was kneeling between his spread thighs. He then reached up, one hand sliding to the back of her neck, the other winding in her hair, and then used his grip to pull her into a kiss that was all heat and harshness, tongue and teeth.

To her slight surprise, Hermione felt a second set of hands on her, this pair gently settling on her hips from behind, fingers curving around her hipbones and nails digging into her skin the way she liked. She could feel the fabric of Harry’s pyjamas brushing against her bare skin as she was pressed between him and Tom, and Tom made a sound that was definitely approving. He released her hair and neck, moving his hands down so they were pressed over Harry’s then used his new grip on her hips to push her so she was leaning back against Harry.

“Our standard rules apply,” Tom said, his voice less smooth, less controlled. “Harry, tell me our safe words.”

Hermione could feel Harry tense slightly against her. “Um,” he said, sounding uncertain, “Green for go, Yellow for wait and Red for stop?”

“Good boy,” Tom said approvingly, before switching his attention to her. “Your turn, Hermione.”

"Green is 'yes', Yellow is 'please slow down' or 'I need to check in with you' and red is 'stop right now'." She immediately recited. “And I click my fingers twice if I can’t speak.”

“Good girl,” Tom smiled and Hermione let the praise soak into her, let her mindset shift and settle into a headspace that was growing more and more familiar. “Now turn around for me, darling.” He instructed and Hermione did as she was told.

Both Harry and Tom released their hold on her hips so she could move, Tom recapturing them once she was facing Harry entirely and pulling backwards until she was leaning back against him between his spread legs, practically in his lap as he reclined against the headboard. His hands fastened like manacles around her wrists and he used the grip to cross her arms across her chest, crossing his own over them to hold them trapped in place. It was an odd way to be restrained but she couldn’t deny that she liked it. “I want you to keep still now,” Tom told her in the tone of voice that wasn’t permitted to be disobeyed. “Don’t move unless you want it to stop. Understand?”

“Yes,” she said, breathy and anticipatory.

“Harry,” Tom turned his attention towards the younger, green-eyed boy. Hermione couldn’t see Tom’s face, but she could hear the smile in his voice. “Hermione liked teasing you— shall we see how she likes it when she’s the one being teased?” Harry sucked in a breath, maybe in surprise, maybe in anticipation (she was a bit too distracted to tell) and then gently spread her legs open, settling himself between them. “And remember, Harry,” Tom added, the dark heat in his voice positively sinful, “our Hermione likes teeth.”

Hermione let out an eager sound at that; she wanted desperately to squirm in excitement, her heart already speeding up in her chest, but Tom’s firm squeeze of her wrists reminded her of the order she’d been given.
Harry smiled at her before kissing her on the mouth first, nipping lightly on her lower lip before moving the wet heat of his mouth down her chin to her neck where he let his teeth drag down her throat. Hermione moaned as his teeth grazed over her clavicle, pausing at the hollow of her throat to suck hard enough that she knew it would leave a mark. His mouth then continued the slow journey down her body, teeth still dragging against her skin which felt hypersensitive under his touch.

He increased the pressure when he reached her breasts, digging his teeth in harder as he bit down first on the firm curves of flesh and then her pebbled nipples. She was moaning out loud at this point— his teeth on her skin, scraping and biting and marking her, was perfect; the attention to her breasts alone was nearly enough to build her up to the climax that was teasing at the edge of her senses. That was the moment that Tom squeezed her wrists harshly and spoke up again.

“No,” he said simply. “You don’t get to come, Hermione. Not until I say you can.”

Protests rose to her lips, her indignation at being denied hot and fierce— his order was one of the most frustrating, infuriating things anyone had ever told her, and yet… it was also almost unbelievably arousing, sparking within her an odd thrill that had her entire body tingling.

“You too, Harry,” Tom commanded, and she mentally cursed him ordering her not to move— she wanted to twist her head so she could see her lover’s expression as he gave Harry the order. She could picture his glittering eyes, dark pupils swallowing up either the crushed-violet colour of his irises or the bloody, burning red— they’d be red now, she thought. And his mouth, she imagined, would be curved in that knife-sharp smile, wicked and dangerous and flirting on the edge of cruel— maybe he’d even have curled his lips so his teeth were showing, a subtle, predatory threat that always quickened her breath.

“Okay,” Harry breathed, wide-eyed, his breath hot against her skin and his mouth barely half an inch shy of the curve of her breast. “Okay.”

“Good boy,” Tom praised, his satisfaction almost a tangible thing in the air. “Continue.”

The power-play added a new level to their game of teasing lips, sharp teeth and hot, wet tongue. Harry’s mouth scraped down the centre of her ribcage, to the slight curve of her stomach, digging his teeth in harder as he reached her abdomen and bit bruises from one curved hip-bone to the other. It took all her willpower to stay still, her muscles clenching, her thighs trembling and her toes curled tight, as Harry lifted his head up from her body, shuffling back on the bed so his hot breath was brushing against where she was so wet she was almost dripping.

A cry of frustration escaped her unbidden when instead of moving his mouth down onto her soaked sex, Harry shuffled further back so he was lowering his lips down to her inner thigh, just barely above her knee. She felt like crying in both frustration and pleasure as he bit his way up her inner thigh, the sting and heat perfect as he left a trail of red, crescent-shaped welts that stood out vividly on her flesh, neat little ridges forming imprints of his teeth. She almost sobbed when he reached the crease where her thigh met her groin and switched legs, starting the process a second time from the inside of her right knee.

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Her breath was coming shallow and laboured, her body locked in place as she fought against her instincts to move, to react to the teasing. She actually did let out a sob, this one of relief, when Harry once more reached the apex of her inner thigh and this time dragged his mouth sideways with a light scrape of teeth. To her shocked delight, he then very carefully bit down on her clit, just hard enough to hint at pain. Pleasure spiked violently through her, and Hermione was unable to stop herself from throwing her head back as she nearly screamed, an inarticulate sound of pleasure escaping parted lips.
And then Harry was dragging his teeth down her pelvis, nipping ever-so-lightly on her soaked inner-lips before finally, finally pressing his mouth against her hot, dripping centre, pushing his tongue inside her.

Hermione let out her loudest moan yet, fighting every urge inside her to clamp her thighs tight around his head, to dig her heels into his back and ride his face until she’d reached her climax.

Instead she lay there helpless, whines and whimpers and barely muffled cries escaping her as his clever, clever tongue worked her body up to a frenzy until she was moments from tumbling headfirst into what promised to be an explosive orgasm. She’d completely forgotten Tom’s order, had forgotten his command for her to keep from reaching her completion, which was why it was such a sharp shock when his voice suddenly rang out, a harsh and unforgiving order of; “

Stop.”

Harry instantly pulled back, leaving her crying out wordlessly in desperate protest, her hips lifting slightly from the mattress in order to seek out Harry’s mouth before she remembered Tom’s first order and reluctantly froze in place even as she whined in frustration, her body slipping back down from the brink of climax. Tom squeezed her wrists again, this time digging his nails into the thin skin there until it hurt. “Stay still, darling,” he warned, before his voice shifted as he turned his attention towards the other player in their game. “Good boy, Harry,” he said, approval thick and heavy, “very good.”

Harry made a sound that was positively debauched, which matched his appearance perfectly; his face was wet from her, his slick, reddened lips parted slightly to allow light pants of breath escape, his hair mussed, his cheeks flushed and the brilliant green of his irises drowned out by his lust-blown pupils.

“Continue Harry,” Tom said smoothly and Hermione made a relieved sound when Harry’s mouth lowered back down onto her. It took barely any time at all to build her body back up so she was once more teetering on the edge of an orgasm, only for Tom to once again order Harry to stop, denying her the release she was growing more and more desperate for. Hermione almost started crying, pleas spilling unashamedly from her lips. Tom made a low, approving sound. “So, so pretty when you beg,” he breathed, heated and aroused. “I love you like this— wanton and desperate and all ours.” Hermione could only moan her agreement.

Again and again Harry and Tom teased her, bringing her to the brink before backing off, until she finally broke, nearly wailing as she fell to pieces in Tom’s arms, under Harry’s touch. She was trembling and desperate, soaked in sweat and begging herself hoarse. “Please— please, please— I can’t— I can’t take it— please!”

“Hmm,” Tom said, his voice smooth and darkly amused. “I don’t think so, not yet. I think you can hold on a bit longer, darling girl. Unless there’s something you want to tell me?”

The word ‘red’ was on the tip of her tongue, battering desperately against the ivory prison of her teeth when she hesitated. Because Tom thought she could do it, he did, and she found herself wanting to prove to him that he was right to think that, that he was right to believe in her strength, fortitude and willpower.

“Green,” she whimpered before she could change her mind, her voice hitching in a half-sob as she let her head loll back against Tom.

“Good girl,” Tom praised her; warmly, proudly, “you’re doing so well, my beautiful girl.” He kissed the top of her head, clearly pleased, and Hermione just let out another half-sob in response. Tears streaked down her cheeks while moans interspersed with quiet sobs came unhindered as Harry took her to the brink of climax over and over, needing less and less time to get her there the
more she was denied that final release, Tom mercilessly catching the exact moment before the point of no return every time without fail.

She was so distracted she barely noticed when Tom changed the position of their arms, shifting so that instead of holding hers criss-crossed against her torso, one of his arms wrapped firmly around her body, just below her breasts, now trapping her arms by her sides — and she didn’t notice at all when he murmured the cleansing spell, not until she felt the light burn of a long, slippery-wet finger sliding into where she’d previously been untouched.

A shocked sound escaped her, her muscles automatically tightening and her breath hitching in alarm at the alien sensation. “Shh,” Tom said soothingly, “don’t tense; just relax, my sweet girl. Trust me, Hermione.”

She exhaled sharply, gathering her scattered thoughts together and getting them in order long enough to realise where Tom intended to take this. It was… intimidating, to say the least, but she suddenly she found she wanted it, she desperately wanted it; oh sweet lady Morgana, she did.

“How,” she breathed, letting her thoughts scatter apart once more, closing her eyes and allowing herself be ruled by sensation alone. Tom was careful and thorough, stretching her out until he had four fingers deep in her while still managing to order Harry to stop and start.

Once he was apparently satisfied with the preparation, he pulled his fingers out and ordered Harry to strip. Hermione managed to pry her eyes open, watching Harry pull his pyjama shirt over his head and throw it to the side, his pants following a moment later.

“Harry, swap with me,” Tom instructed, hefting her up so he could pull her with him as he and Harry traded places, Harry now at the head of the bed while she and Tom faced him from the centre of the mattress. “Sit with your back against the headboard,” Tom next ordered and Hermione watched as Harry immediately obeyed, reclining slightly against the headboard like Tom had, his eyes bright and fixed on them both.

Tom lifted her again like she was little more then a rag doll, moving them both forwards up the bed and arranging her limbs until she was straddling Harry’s legs. Excitement spiked inside her, lending new strength to her limbs. Tom was rocking his hips slightly, sliding his hardness between her legs, against her soaked sex, slicking himself up as he laid kisses down her neck, his strong hands holding her waist steady, squeezing. And then, without warning, he lifted her up and sank her down onto Harry.

Hermione was so soaked from the drawn-out teasing that Harry slid into her easily and without any resistance, no pain or feel of stretching as she was lowered onto him until she was sitting straddling his thighs, just the satisfaction of being filled up entirely. Both she and Harry were breathing raggedly by that point; for her, the sensation of it all was fast tipping towards overwhelming.

“Don’t move,” Tom commanded them both and Hermione could feel him shifting into position. There was a nervous, uncertain fear spiking through her that made her tremble slightly, as well as an anticipation that had her breath catching as she felt him move behind her, his hands moving to her hips, his fingers digging harshly into her skin. He pushed her forwards against Harry, whose arms instinctively came up to hold her tight as Tom lined himself up then slowly pressed into her.

Despite his thorough preparations, it still hurt; it was a dull burn veering uncomfortably on the wrong side of pleasure-pain. Harsh breaths escaped her, even as Harry kissed and nipped down the side of her neck. "Such a good girl, Hermione," Tom's voice was tight, strained, but approving. "Such a good girl. You waited so well, darling— you both did."

"Such a good girl. You waited so well, darling— you both did."
"Does that mean—?" Harry asked hopefully, and Hermione was glad he did because her words were stuck in her throat along with the pained sounds of discomfort she was holding back, and Tom laughed, the sound breathless.

"Yes, Harry— you can come now, both of you can."

"Finally," Harry groaned, moving his mouth back to her neck, kissing hungrily down along the curve until, without warning, he bit down painfully hard on her shoulder, not enough to break the skin but still hard enough to leave deep toothmarks pressed into her skin.

And that was all it took— her boys buried deep inside her, Tom’s nails digging into her hips and Harry’s teeth in her shoulder; Hermione opened her mouth in a silent scream as her climax hit her with the force of a bludger, rattling her out of her bones as pleasure crashed through.

It didn’t end there, though; she’d barely come back down from her high when first Tom and then Harry started moving, Tom now holding her up by a bruising grip under her arms as he thrust in while Harry held her hips, pushing off the bed and into her. Panting, trembling, she reached out over Harry’s shoulders to brace herself against the headboard. Pressed between their bodies, aching and wet all over, she could barely believe how both her boys could both fit inside her body, how they could move together like they were.

All she could do was hold on, to let herself be moved by them. It was tight and edging on painful as she felt so unbelievably full, but she was quick to be distracted by the coil of heat in her abdomen as the grinding pressure started to build her up to a familiar high. Her second orgasm wasn’t quite as violent as the first, but it still ripped its way through her and left her feeling like she was floating, losing her grip on the headboard and falling onto Harry, sagging against his body without the energy to prop herself back up.

The new angle had her clit grinding against the sharp ridge of Harry’s pelvis, had her sobbing with twisted pleasure as she was almost violently overstimulated to point of pain. Her third orgasm hurt; it had her wailing and clenching every muscle in her body as she came so hard she saw stars. Harry went taut under her, his hips straining up as he reached his own climax with a loud groan.

Panting and sweat-slick, he held her tight, her head resting on his chest, over his heartbeat, as Tom’s hips slammed into her, the endorphins she was drowning in dulling the pain the increased speed and strength behind his thrusts caused so she that barely registered its existence at all.

Endless tears were trickling down her cheeks, onto Harry’s skin, and he ran a hand soothingly through her sweat-matted hair until Tom pushed deep inside her one final time and stilled, groaning quietly as he reached his completion buried in her up to the hilt.

A thin sound of discomfort left her as he slowly pulled out and then lifted her off Harry with uncharacteristic gentleness. Quietly murmured spells vanished the mess leaking out of her and onto the bed-sheets and Harry shifted over so Tom could carefully lay her down with her head rested on the pillow, sliding down into place behind her while Harry laid down in front of her so she was nestled between them.

Hermione was ready to fall asleep but something was niggling at her, something important—and then she remembered. “Tom, you said— you said you loved me,” she realised, her voice sounding almost slurred in her exhausted state but her words still audible and clear. “You said that you loved me how I was— all yours and Harry’s.”

Silence followed her words; silence, and then a long-fingered hand smoothed down the curve of her spine. “Sleep, silly girl,” Tom murmured.
“No take-backs, remember?” she replied sleepily, reaching out to wrap an arm around Harry in front of her, while Tom fitted himself against the curve of her body behind her.

Harry entwined his fingers with her, squeezing lightly, and Hermione fell asleep feeling safe and loved between the two people she loved most.
Chapter LXXI:

Severus's POV:

After assuring himself of Hermione's wellbeing (and deciding to write to Rem—*Lupin* and get him to come in earlier for his weekly chat with her) Severus made his way up to Dumbledore's office.

He didn't bother knocking, not in the mood to observe the social niceties, and stalked into the room, making sure to send both Fred and George Weasley withering looks as he did so. Both Molly and Arthur Weasley were already present, Molly looking unrepentant and Arthur just looking tired, as was Moody— who, as usual, was scowling.

"What is he doing here?" Severus sneered, turning his withering look towards the ex-Auror.

"Alastor served as an Auror for many years," Dumbledore answered him calmly, "I thought it prudent that he impressed upon Misters Weasley the gravity of their ill-thought actions today."

Severus held back his biting response, instead crossing the room so he was standing beside Minerva, his arms folded across his chest. Despite his anger at Moody's involvement, he'd grudgingly admit that it was well-thought out of Dumbledore, involving the ex-Auror— Moody had been acting like an old, grizzled bear with a thorn in its paw since he got into a shouting match with Harry; no matter the fact that the twins were Gryffindors, he doubted that in his current foul-tempered state Moody would go easy on them.

Severus was personally ticked off about *that* whole incident too— mostly that nobody had thought to inform him about the 'private lessons' that had been arranged between Harry and Moody until after the fact. He wouldn't deny he was relieved it had all gone up in flames, but of course he wondered why Harry had tried to go along with it in the first place— he knew Dumbledore's angle, of course; he wanted his Golden Boy back under his thumb and was starting to get desperate about getting Harry there (his reaction to the failed 'lessons' between Harry and Moody had been... *unhappy*, to say the least; according to Minerva, he'd been furious with Moody for failing to be the 'bigger person' and reacting to a child's insults).

Harry, on the other hand, had had no reason to cooperate with Dumbledore's obvious machinations that Severus was aware of— the boy had no shortage of willing tutors available, should he so desire one.

Actually, the whole ordeal had brought to mind Harry's cooperation with spending the Eostre holidays with the Weasley family, not attempting to escape their... *homey* abode and hospitality even once. It certainly hadn't been what he'd been expecting and it was making him suspicious. Harry had never been one for manipulation or ulterior motives before, so either this was personal growth for his young Slytherin or there was someone else behind the attempts to integrate the boy with Dumbledore and his followers— and there was no prize for guessing just who that 'someone' was.

The thought of Harry being groomed as a spy was an uncomfortable one. Severus knew firsthand
the trials and tribulations of spying and the toll it had had on him was certainly not something he'd wish on anyone but his enemies. And while he'd like to believe that Harry, at least, would not be put in the same danger as he'd been in when he'd been spying on the Dark Lord and his followers, he knew better then to believe that the Light were the saints they were purported to be—the Weasley twins, for example; they'd almost killed Hermione today and Harry had recently been forced to spend two weeks in their house and would likely be forced to spend time there again in the future should he continue with inserting himself into Dumbledore's confidences.

The fact that the twins would not receive the punishment that their crime deserved— because it was a crime— would only encourage their bullying behaviour too, would only strengthen their belief that harming Slytherins was acceptable as the adult witches and wizards who should know better let their malicious actions slide.

It brought to mind the 'prank' that had been 'played' on him during his school years, when Black had set him up to be attacked, to be killed even, by a werewolf— through either maliciousness or thoughtlessness on Black's behalf, it didn't matter, not when he'd almost died. Back then, the Gryffindor had only lost House points and been given detention— and even though Severus knew it would do little to no good, he would be damned if he didn't at least try to get the Weasley twins to face a greater consequence then Black had, to fight for them to be given the punishment they deserved.

"I want them both expelled," he snarled at Dumbledore, which prompted an indignant squawk from Molly Weasley and angry protests from the students in question.

"There will be no expulsions today," Dumbledore stated firmly, tone absolute.

"I should think not!" Molly exclaimed indignantly, giving him a furious look for daring to suggest such a thing.

"My student could have died!" He hissed furiously at Dumbledore, ignoring Molly entirely.

"It is my understanding that other then a few broken bones, the same injuries that could be acquired in any Quidditch match and were easily healed by our Madam Pomfrey, Miss Granger came out of the incident with no serious or lasting damage." Dumbledore remarked.

"That's a load of hippogriff dung, Albus, and you know it!" Severus snarled back. "Even Poppy stated that it was pure luck that her injuries weren't more severe then they were— at the absolute very least those two should be suspended!"

"That's enough, Severus!" Dumbledore said firmly, speaking now with enough authority that Severus knew better then to keep arguing. "Upon much consideration, I have decided that the extenuating circumstances of the recent terrible tragedies experienced by young Fred and George will exempt them from expulsion or suspension as a punishment, as I believe it would do them both more harm then good and as a school we must strive to support all the students within these castle walls to aid them in reaching their full potential. Both boys will receive detention that they will serve separately three times a week for the remainder of the year and they will be prohibited from attending the Third Task of the Triwizard Tournament."

"That's all?" Severus demanded incredulously.

"Albus," Minerva spoke up with a disapproving frown on her face. "While I believe wholeheartedly in second chances and allowing students to redeem themselves, I also believe that they should not be shielded from the consequences of their choices— and as both Deputy Headmistress of this school and Fred and George Weasleys' Head of House, I am permitted to make my own
additions to their punishment as I see fit." Without waiting for Dumbledore to respond, she turned to the twins, fixing them with a severe look as she crisply addressed them. "Fifty points each will be taken from Gryffindor for your appalling lack of insight in casting magic against another student, a younger one at that. And as much as it pains me, until I feel that you are both appropriately repentant for your actions and can prove to me you are responsible enough I am removing you both from the Gryffindor Quidditch team."

"What!?"

"You can't do that!"

"That's not fair!"

"That's rubbish!"

The voices of the twins layered on top of each other as the boys leapt to their feet, both loudly protesting without seeming to care just who it was they were speaking to—or at. By her pursed lips, Minerva was clearly not impressed.

"That is my final decision," she told them sternly. "And no amount of ill-mannered shouting will change my mind."

It wasn't expulsion, it wasn't even suspension, but Severus was still viciously pleased—because for the Weasley twins, he suspected the Quidditch ban was an even bigger blow then either of the previous punishments would have been.

And best of all, Dumbledore couldn't do anything to remove the ban without undermining Minerva's authority as Head of Gryffindor House and Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts.

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Voldemort's POV:

A suffering worse than death. Black ink on yellowed parchment, a warning of the utmost agony that would accompany the healing of a torn soul.

But Voldemort had died and even now the suffering he had experienced that night at Godric's Hollow far outdid that of reintegrating with a horcrux. Perhaps not in the degree of actual pain, but suffering wasn't just pain; it was the terror of unbecoming, the knowledge that everything he had worked for was being ripped from him; it was the obliteration of his flesh, his sense of self stripped away until he was left a mere shade of who he had been.

That was a suffering like nothing he'd felt before, that he would never allow himself to feel again; reintegrating with torn pieces of his soul was nothing in comparison.

That wasn't to say it wasn't an agony greater than even the Cruciatus; even now he was feeling the consequences, a persistent ache from a place deep within him, a place that magic couldn't touch, couldn't heal, a weakness he couldn't eradicate. But it lessened each day, the intensity fading.

Of course the consequences were not all physical in nature, he reflected, stroking a hand over smooth-as-silk scales, now cold to touch. A single *Avada Kedavra* had gifted Nagini with the only true kindness, true mercy, that he was capable of.
He was not one to admit to mistakes, but he had miscalculated when he created the spell to allow him to reintegrate with a single horcrux and not every separated piece of his soul. The creation of the spell had been complicated, but he felt no remorse for the creation of his horcruxes and had had to find a different method of reintegration. It had focused on proximity and subsequently he'd held the Lost Diadem of Ravenclaw in his hand while chanting the incantation, but like he'd admitted, if only to himself— and by extension, Tom— he had miscalculated. The spell had worked just as it was intended, seamlessly reintegrating the closest piece of separated soul back to his main soul, the ephemeral mass that resided still within his flesh-and-blood form.

Then, however... the miscalculation. For once the Diadem soul piece had been absorbed into himself, the proximity of the nearest horcrux had changed— and Nagini had paid the price, the piece of his soul within her violently ripped out for reintegration. Tom had been the next closest horcrux, but by then Voldemort had realised what was happening, even through the agony of his suffering, and had managed to cut off the spell. Tom had been left drained, immensely so, but still anchored within the Diary. He suspected if the link he'd created between Tom and the girl, Hermione Granger, had not existed, Tom would not have been able to resist the reintegration long enough for the spell to be cut off. He was certain that Tom suspected it too.

Almost ironically, in the aftermath of the reintegration he felt the closest to remorse that he was capable. Nagini had been a valued companion, a worthy horcrux, tethering him to life. The way in which his separated soul piece had been ripped from Nagini had irrevocably damaged her; she had never woken up and rather then keeping what remained of her, just the automatic processes of her nervous system keeping her body functioning even when the essence of who she was had long since been erased, he had granted the empty vessel of who she had once been a painless death— a gift for her service to him.

He would need a new companion, of course. Nagini had been a living symbol of his ancestry; he was the Heir of Slytherin, descendant of Salazar Slytherin himself. The blood that ran through his veins was ancient and noble; she had been a constant reminder of his status amidst his Death Eaters— and later, he had planned, a reminder to the world of just who it was they were kneeling for.

Nagini's inglorious end, however, had made him cautious— she had been vulnerable, more so then he had considered; his new companion would need to be a magical breed of serpent, one not susceptible to the same weaknesses Nagini had been. A basilisk would be too large, though its defences were formidable, but it was not the only magical serpent out there.

The loss of Nagini, however, had not been in vain; already, he could sense the difference within himself. He could now feel the warmth of the sun on his skin, the bite of cold in the breeze. He had smelt the tang of fresh-spilled blood when he had slaughtered dozens of muggles in his rage at Nagini's loss, had smelt the smoke of the fiendfyre he'd used to dispose of the piles of discarded corpses. He had tasted the richness of wine, the bitterness of coffee, the sweetness of fruit; parts of him he hadn't even truly noticed had been missing had been returned.

Amidst them, of course, was desire; the memories of Cygnus and Lucretia, his longest-lasting lovers, no longer brought with them a cold, factual analysis of their coupling, instead a spark of interest accompanied his recollection of the times they'd spent together— it wasn't the raging inferno of lust he remembered experiencing as a teenager that Tom, both the youngest yet oldest of his horcruxes, experienced now in his place, but the spark was more then he'd felt in decades.

He considered sating the new need; it wouldn't be hard, there would be more then enough volunteers amongst his most loyal— and many witches and wizards would be ecstatic to be bedded by the Thaddeus Dagworth. But the idea made him hesitate; not only was he reluctant to grant anyone any perceived power or equality to him through the unfortunate side-effect of intimacy that
sexual intercourse created amongst those too deeply entrenched in the weakness of emotion, but he had witnessed firsthand just how Tom's attachment to Harry Potter and Hermione Granger had affected his manifested soul piece—*damaged* it, even.

It would likely be wiser not to indulge, but he was curious—he'd always craved knowledge; ignorance was inexcusable and he'd always seen little reason to deny himself his wants.

With the decision made, his choice of partner was obvious to him; someone he knew would not take liberties with what he so generously gifted them with, a boon they did not deserve, that no one did for he had no true equal on this planet, no one who was truly worthy of him, but perhaps one of the closest to it.

And occasionally, he would admit to sentimentality—Cygnus and Lucretia had sated his lust well; they stood out amidst the memories of his school days. Lucretia had been free and wild, the opposite of the rest of the snobby, 'proper' girls who had turned their noses up at poor, orphan Tom Riddle before he had proved his superior power and worth beyond any other. She'd liked to kiss until their mouths tasted of blood, lips bitten and torn by sharp, greedy teeth. Her nails were long and vicious and her pale, fragile throat had fluttered like a hummingbird's wings when he wrapped his fingers around it and squeezed, holding her life in his hands.

Cygnus had called her "Lulu"; they were cousins, not siblings, but they were mirror images of the other; bloodthirsty and sadistic with a fleeting grasp on sanity. He, Cygnus and Lucretia would spend their time in bed attempting to tear each other to pieces, using teeth and nails and even the sharp steel of blades to rip and break and bleed and fuck. And after, when the sheets were a mess of blood, tears, saliva and more, Lucretia would curl up like a kitten, sleepy and pliable, while Cygnus licked them all clean of the blood drying on their skin.

Their deaths were a frustration, the unspoken arrangement between them had been appreciated, but through their bloodline they had left him their legacy, one who had long-since pledged herself to him; life, body and soul.

He stroked Nagini's corpse one last time before vanishing it with a sigh—he had no interest in preserving the body, despite his tendency towards keeping trophies; dead snakes reminded him far too vividly of the Gaunt Shack, where the low-bred fool he had the misfortune to call 'uncle' had nailed their corpses to the wooden door.

Summoning Bellatrix to him was simple, his dear Bella always answered his call as promptly as possible; devoted, eager to serve and fanatically loyal to her last breath. She was his best lieutenant, one of his few followers who he held anything that resembled 'trust' towards.

When she apparated into the room, he didn't waste time explaining; instead, a careless wave of his hand and an accompanying burst of wandless magic sent her crashing into one of the walls. She hit the stone with a muffled thud then stumbled forwards off it to where he was waiting. He stifled any meaningless babble or irritating questions with his hand, strangling her without receiving any resistance and waiting until her lips were blue before shoving her head back against the stone. The wet crunch of it was gratifying, as was the noise she made in response, hoarse and barely a whimper as she slid down the wall in a ragged heap of skin and bone, tangled curls and dark silk.

After pausing a moment to take in the sight and finding it to his satisfaction, he seized her by her hair, wrenching her back up to her feet and slamming his mouth to hers. The kiss was bloody, vicious; her soft mouth was pliant, submissive even, under his, easily yielding to the violence he offered her. Bellatrix whimpered into his mouth as he split her lip with his teeth and the blood smearing their lips and tongues prompted a stirring interest inside him that in response to he bit down hard, tearing a chunk of flesh away.
Deciding he'd had his fill of the kissing, he pulled back and slammed her head back against the wall a second time; attractive as she was, Bellatrix was far more appealing to him when her face was twisted in pain. Her eyes rolled back into her skull for a moment, blood leaking steadily from her mouth and trailing down her chin, her neck, splashing onto the pale curves of her breasts and painting vivid streaks of red against the pale-white of her cleavage; a visually pleasing contrast enhanced by the black silk of her bustier framing the tableau.

"M-My L-Lord," Bellatrix finally managed to rasp out from her abused throat, her words slurred by what was likely a concussion but still reverent and adoring, wholly worshipful in a way that reminded him of something he'd read as a child.

The caretakers at Wool's Orphanage had always made their charges to attend church every Sunday, and to combat his boredom as he was forced to listen to the dull, droning services of the useless, prattling priests he'd read the bible from cover to cover, so as to break up the monotony of it all. He remembered every word of it, the way his brain had always kept record of all that he'd read, and Bellatrix's devoutness brought to mind one of the verses, Romans 12:1; *I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercy of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, pleasing unto God.*

He was her God, rightfully elevated above all others in her life, and she was his willing sacrifice, offering herself to him in true and proper worship— just the way it should be.

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Hermione's *POV*:

Hermione woke with a pained groan. Her body throbbed in discomfort and she felt rubbed raw inside. Pulling a face, she elbowed Tom in the stomach none-too-gently. He let out a hiss of surprise, his arm around her waist tightening.

"What was that for?" He demanded.

"I hurt," she snapped back at him and his arm relaxed, any irritation apparently fading in response to her annoyance.

"Feeling well-used, then, dear?" He asked, tone more heated then mocking. She twisted around in the bed so she was facing him, studying his face.

"You like that," she observed, intrigued. Tom smiled.

"I do," he said, easily as breathing. "I like knowing that with every ache and throb and sting, you'll remember exactly what caused it and who is responsible; that you'll carry me with you, even when I'm not there."

"That is an unexpectedly arousing thought," Hermione admitted. When Tom raised an eyebrow, however, she shook her head sharply. "No. Not happening. Do you not remember how this conversation started? I fucking hurt, Tom."

"Fine," Tom sighed, turning his speculative gaze towards the still-asleep Harry.

"No." Hermione repeated, exasperated. "Let him sleep while he can— we had a late night last night and a full day of classes today, Tom."
"I'm busy too, but I always make sure I have time for you, even when it means sacrificing sleep," he argued. When she gave him an unimpressed look he just shrugged. "It was worth a try."

"You're the worst," she said fondly.

"You could even say that I'm evil."

"Mm, speaking of evil, I need a favour," Hermione told him and Tom's lips immediately curled into a coy smile.

"Oh? And what's it worth to you?"

She smiled sweetly at him, leaning forwards so her face was barely an inch from his. "Oh, I don't know, darling," she breathed, watching the way his pupils dilated, "I suppose it depends on if you actually want to fuck me again any time soon or not?"

"Wicked girl," Tom laughed, closing the short distance between them to seal their lips together, less of a kiss and more him stroking the inside of her mouth with his tongue.

She pulled away first, giving him a playfully-stern look. "You can't distract me," she informed him. "I still need that favour."

"But I'd feel so un-Slytherin to agree without compensation," Tom mock-sighed dramatically.

"But you looooooove me, remember?" She teased and Tom practically blanched, his face immediately losing any trace of humour.

"Fine!" He snapped. "I'll do it, whatever it is, just never mention that again!"

"Aww Tom," Hermione cooed, utterly delighted by his reaction. "Are you embarrassed?"

"I will choke you unconscious," he threatened darkly.

"And you know I'll love it," she purred back, fluttering her eyelashes at him.

"You two have the weirdest foreplay ever," Harry mumbled sleepily and Hermione laughed while Tom made a highly disgruntled sound.

"Doesn't feel too good being teased, does it?" She smirked at him and his agitation smoothed out as a wicked grin replaced his scowl.

"Well according to last night, that's highly debatable."

"True," Hermione admitted, shivering slightly at the memory. "That was... really something."

"Yes it was," Tom agreed, before giving her a considering look. "Alright then, so what is this favour?"

"I've found myself in need of unicorn blood," Hermione said, "do you think you could get your hands on it for me?"

The half-dozing Harry appeared to abruptly shift into full consciousness, jerking upright with an aghast expression on his face, Tom looking just as horrified.

"What!? Why would you want unicorn blood?" Harry demanded. "Don't you remember all that 'cursed half-life' stuff? You can't have forgotten, you were the one who told me about it in the first
"If you need its healing properties, for whatever bizarre reason, I do happen to have access to the Philosopher's Stone," Tom added.

Hermione didn't know whether to roll her eyes or smile fondly at her silly, over-protective boys. "I'm not actually—" a complete, blithering moron— "going to drink it myself," she told them, deciding on amusement over exasperation (and carefully not commenting about what she thought of Voldemort's decision to use it to strengthen himself—at least he'd had the intelligence and foresight to get Quirrell to drink it, not himself*).

"Not going to... oh my god," Harry breathed, his eyes suddenly widening as comprehension visibly dawned across his face. "Holy shit, Hermione!"

"What is it?" Tom demanded, eyes narrowing in annoyance. "What are you both talking about?"

"It's— it's so brilliantly, sadistically evil!" Harry didn't seem upset by that at all, she noted as he looked eagerly at her. "You're going to give it to the Weasley twins, aren't you?"

"I am," she confirmed with a dark smirk, flicking her eyes over to Tom to take in his reaction— she was proud to say he looked very impressed.

"I wouldn't have thought of that," the older boy admitted. "That is... creative. And impressive."

"Thank you," she preened, not bothering to conceal her pride and smugness. "It's part of a three-pronged approach—to be exact, it's part three. Also, while I'm getting everything prepared, Tracey is teaching Daphne and I blood magic and we're having all sorts of fun using the twins as target practice, cursing them with all sorts of assorted maladies."

"Going by your previous methods of dealing with the Weasleys, I'd assumed you'd want the twins dead," Tom said curiously.

"Yeah, I thought so too," Harry added, just as curious as Tom. Hermione shrugged.

"Maybe I will, later on. But too many dead Weasleys would bring on suspicion I don't want falling back on me— besides, once they're dead I can't exactly do anything else to them, so I'm trying out the whole 'they should live and be made to suffer' approach first."

"I'll get you the blood," Tom promised, "it might take a week or two, but it's relatively simple to get your hands on if you have the right connections and are willing to part with a not insignificant amount of gold," he then flashed them both a smirk, "which is why it's a good thing we have a Philosopher's Stone handy."

After applying several parseltongue glamours over the more visible bite-marks covering her skin—she left the bruise Harry had sucked into the hollow of her throat visible, mostly to scandalise the professors but also partly because the possessive part of her preened at openly wearing the marks Harry left on her—Hermione went down to the common room, where she was immediately waylaid by Daphne and Tracey. Daphne was bright-eyed with excitement and there was something viciously eager about Tracey's grin.

"I wrote to my parents yesterday about what the Weasleys did to you," Daphne immediately started to explain, lowering her voice as she and Tracey pulled Hermione over to one of the corners of the common room for privacy. "They were appalled, especially when they heard the twins weren't
even suspended, let alone expelled as they should have been—"

"Which surprised exactly nobody," muttered Tracey sourly.

"—and this morning Mother sent me this!" Daphne continued on like Tracey hadn't interrupted her, pulling a stoppered potion phial from the pocket of her robes, shifting her body to hide it from view of the students still in the common room.

"Is that the polyjuice?" Hermione asked in surprise, lowering her voice to match Daphne's. Daphne nodded eagerly.

"Mother wrote that she paid extra to get it sent to me overnight— she's furious about your accident and she knows how cruel the Weasleys have been to Slytherins; after all, they cursed Astoria earlier this term," Daphne's expression darkened briefly at the memory of her little sister in the hospital wing, courtesy of the twins. "Mother is a Slytherin, she fully believes in getting even."

"This is perfect," Hermione said fervently, before pulling a face. "Also, it's going to be unbelievably disgusting, but it's still perfect!"

"Disgusting?" Daphne frowned. "Do you mean the taste?"

"I wish," Hermione groaned with a wince. "I'm referring to the fact I plan to use the polyjuice with the hair I took the other day to take photos of the 'twins' in various incestuous acts and then send those photographs to their parents and brothers, as well as various others." Seeing the shocked, wide-eyed looks on Daphne and Tracey's faces, she smiled weakly. "Surprise?"

"That is... oh Morgana, that is so incredibly evil of you and it's brilliant!" Tracey told her with a laugh, her shock quickly transitioning into wicked amusement. "I mean, you're right, it's disgusting as all hells, but it's creative—"

"Not the first time I've heard that today," Hermione noted dryly.

"—and it'll be amazingly effective, because not only is it incest but they're both boys— the Weasley family is pretty much as Light as it gets; I bet their parents will disown them!" Tracey finished gleefully.

The connection between magical twins was very different to their muggle counterparts— the nine months they shared in the womb together formed a close bond between their developing magic, one that left twins just as closely entwined with each other and each other's lives as their magic. Because of the strength and intensity of the magical bond, it wasn't considered unusual amongst traditionalists (or, as they were labelled by the Light, amongst Dark witches and wizards) for twins in the Wizarding World to share a lover between them, or even for both to marry the same person.

The Weasleys, however, were decidedly not traditionalists— not only did they disapprove of wizards being with wizards and witches being with witches, but incest between twins was viewed by the so-called 'progressive' magicals with the same disgust as it was in the muggle world. Arthur and Molly Weasley would be mortified— not to mention that even amongst traditionalists, twins being lovers without the involvement of a third person was... well, it wasn't something discussed in polite company; whatever happened in the bedroom happened at the discretion of the involved parties, but it wasn't advertised to the world.

And advertising was exactly what Hermione intended to do.

"You know what," Daphne said slowly, a decisive look dawning across her pretty face, "taking down the twins is worth this sacrifice. Besides, I've always sort of been curious to know what it
feels like having a penis."

"I'd love to say 'you won't regret this' right about now," Hermione told her with a grimace, "but we most definitely will."

"We make sacrifices for that which we're passionate about," Daphne said sagely, before turning to Tracey. "Don't think you're getting out of this," she warned, "we need someone to operate the camera."

"Damn," Tracey muttered before shrugging. "Well, objectively speaking the Weasleys are kind of hot. I mean, I hate their guts and would gladly see them disembowelled but you can't deny that all the Quidditch training has paid off."

"Keep hold of that positivity," Hermione advised her. "We're going to need it."

Ultimately, it was... well, it was a bizarre, disturbing and harrowing experience that Hermione mostly tried to blank it out of her mind. It was veering towards feeling like sexual assault, almost, which turned her stomach, but like Daphne said— sacrifices had to be made. Besides, nobody had actually been hurt— if she ever became the sort of person who thought sexual assault was an acceptable means to an end she'd kill herself right then and there—and it wasn't all terrible. Not that she planned on ever going into details about what she, Daphne and Tracey did after classes that day. Ever.

(Though Daphne had been a surprisingly good kisser and Tracey had shown remarkable talent in getting her and Daphne to pose so it looked like they were being much more intimate then they actually were)

They'd borrowed the camera and potion used to develop the photographs in so they'd move from a second year Slytherin— they'd traded a copy of Hermione's History of Magic notes from her second year for it; when it came to trading favours amongst the Slytherins in their year level and below, Hermione's History of Magic notes were highly sought after and easily her most valuable currency— and by the time dinner was over, the photographs were ready.

"Holy fuck," Hermione breathed as she, Daphne and Tracey flipped through them. "These are perfect."

"Did we actually do that?" Daphne asked, sounding stunned as she stared down at one of the moving photographs. "I could swear we didn't. I think I'd have noticed."

"You know what photos are like," Tracey shrugged, giving one of the moving red-heads a vicious poke which caused it to flinch and scurry away from her sharp fingernail, "they've got minds of their own half the time."

"Still," Daphne muttered, her eyes still wide, "that is... certainly showing initiative."

"I'm going to sign them from 'a concerned party'," Hermione said gleefully. "This is going to be fucking brilliant."

The Weasley twins hadn't taken it seriously when she'd promised to ruin them— they should have, though, because Hermione had fucking meant it. She wasn't referring to what most teenagers viewed as life-ruining, either— public humiliation, dates gone bad, failed tests, expulsion, and so on. No, she literally meant she was going to ruin them, that she would find what mattered most to them in the world and shred it at the root, then salt and burn the very earth it grew in.

Her plans for the Weasley twins were as cruel as they were creative, but at the core of it all was the
simple fact she wanted them to suffer— and suffer they would.

First she planned on destroying their reputation and their family's reputation by sending the incest photos to their parents and brothers, getting Tom to have them subtly leaked at the Ministry where Arthur Weasley worked and posting them around Hogwarts herself (after asking Argus not to take them down off the walls— seeing as he hated the Weasley twins, she didn't doubt he'd do it). Even if the twins protested the authenticity of the photos until they were blue in the face, even if they swore Oaths on their magic that it wasn't them depicted, the damage would already have been done.

The second part of her revenge was to fracture their relationship with each other. Her plan for that was relatively straightforward, with the added bonus of the fact that she knew just how much the twins enjoyed the fact that they were identical, each indistinguishable from the other— and she was going to take that away from them. It wouldn't even take much effort, she just needed to wait for the sixth years Potions students to be set an appropriately complicated, volatile potion then bribe one of the Slytherins in the class to cause the twins to have an "accident" with the potion exploding in one of their faces. The magical properties of potions made it difficult to heal or hide damage caused by them; scars were guaranteed and glamours worked poorly to conceal them. Hermione only planned on disfiguring one twin— she only needed to, in order to ruin the relationship they currently had.

When the twins were together, they'd always be stuck looking at each other's once-identical face. The twin who wasn't disfigured would always feel the guilt of not being the one who was badly scarred, while the disfigured twin would have to stare at what his face would have looked like if it was still undamaged; Hermione had no doubt that a bitterness would form surrounding the fact that he was the one who'd been disfigured, who was ugly, while the other twin was still whole and unscarred— it was just human nature. The guilt, bitterness and resentment would build and build between them and while she didn't believe it would destroy their relationship, it would certainly strain it, putting an end to their current closeness.

The final, and definitely most evil, part of her plan was dosing them with unicorn blood. She planned on getting the Gryffindor Tower password off Longbottom and sneaking in under the cover of night to stun both twins while they were asleep and then drip the blood into their mouths— it only took consuming unicorn blood once to invoke the accompanying life-long curse. The curse was a potent one that affected the very soul of a person; the senses of the body would steadily fade, such as food losing its flavour and colours losing their brightness, and emotions would dull, with none of the positive among them able to gain a foothold. At its essence, the consumed blood cursed the drinker to a half-life— and that was the life she intended on cursing the Weasley twins with.

She wouldn't be implementing her plan all at once; she planned on spreading it out over the remainder of the term— people would get suspicious otherwise, only so much misfortune could happen to someone without doubts being raised about the so-called 'coincidences'— but by the time Hogwarts let out for the summer, the lives of Fred and George Weasley would be forever ruined, just as promised.

- After posting off the photographs to all members of the Weasley family and Tom at just past dawn the following morning, Hermione was expecting Molly Weasley to send a howler to the twins with the morning post— what actually happened, however, was for Fred and George Weasley far, far worse. Hermione had barely sat down at the Slytherin table for breakfast when Molly Weasley, face red as her hair and positively apoplectic with rage, stormed into the Great Hall and made a
beeline to the Gryffindor table where her sons were sitting.

"HOW DARE YOU?" She shrieked, slapping her hand across the face of the closest twin hard enough that the loud smack was audible across the suddenly silent Hall.

"Molly Weasley!" McGonagall exclaimed, aghast, on her feet in an instant and hurrying across the Hall, though not in time to stop Molly from hitting the twin again. The other twin caught Molly's hand before she could rain down a third blow, and his mother turned on him, her expression one of utmost fury.

"NEVER IN MY LIFE HAVE I BEEN SO DISGUSTED AND ASHAMED—" she started shrieking at him at the top of her lungs but was cut off when McGonagall forced her and the twin apart with a sharp slash of her wand.

"Enough!" She ordered, the look on her face so severe that even Molly Weasley was struck momentarily silent. "Sinistra, find the Headmaster and alert him that his presence is needed for a situation in the Great Hall," she directed Vector, before turning narrow eyes to Molly. "What in Hecate's name could have possessed you to enter this castle to assault two students, your sons at that?"

"They are no sons of mine!" Molly spat, visibly trembling with rage.

"Mum? What the hell are you talking about?" Demanded one of the twins— the one without the bright red handprints on his face.

"I'm talking about these!" Hermione hadn't even noticed that the photographs were clenched in Molly's hand until she threw them onto the Gryffindor table. Students on the other three House tables were all standing up, trying to see what it was.

On the Gryffindor table, however, there was no need to stand up or crane their heads— "Oh my god!" One of the Gryffindor Quidditch players, Spinnet, gasped loudly, her shocked voice ringing out across the still mostly-silent Hall. "Is that— is that you two having sex?"

Actually, it had been 'Fred' and 'George' simulating having sex, but the angle of the photo made it impossible to see that— aided by the 'initiative' shown by the figures in the moving photographs.

Immediately an explosion of voices filled the Hall; shock, disgust, intrigue and glee were just a handful of the emotions going around.

One of the twins— Twin One— had gone white with horror, which made the handprints on his face stand out even more then they already had, while the other twin— Twin Two— looked more grey with shock as he stared down at the table, at the photographs with disbelieving eyes.

"That isn't us!" Twin One croaked, while Twin Two looked lost for words.

"Don't lie to me!" Screamed Molly, tears of rage glistening in her eyes. "You two are— are—" She couldn't even finish the sentence.

McGonagall seemed lost for words too, wide-eyed and open-mouthed as she stared down at the photographs strewn across the Gryffindor table. "Headmaster's office," she finally managed to get out. "Now."

As the twins were marched out by McGonagall and Molly, the Hall exploded into noise. Hermione didn't bother hiding her wide smirk and Harry turned to her, looking impressed.
"Part one, I'm guessing?" He asked, not bothering to lower his voice with the cacophony in the Hall.

"Tracey and Daphne helped," Hermione smirked at him. "But yes, that was part one."

"I'm guessing that's why you wanted their hair," he thought out loud before blanching. "Oh Merlin, but that means..." He looked sickened.

"We didn't go as far as the photos make it appear," Hermione admitted, pulling a face. "But I don't want to talk about it—I really, really don't want to talk about it."

"Deal." Harry said hurriedly.

The chaos at breakfast continued throughout the whole day—everyone had an opinion and rarely was it a kind one. Things weren't helped when students started finding the photos stuck over the castle walls. The professors destroyed them where they could, but most ended up being circulated amongst the student body and everyone got an explicit look at every bare inch of the two Weasleys and the "unnatural" acts they were engaged in.

Even better, in Hermione's opinion, nobody suspected her at all—even the Gryffindors, were entirely convinced the photos were genuine and she couldn't be more gleeful about it.

Things only improved when Percy Weasley sent the twins a howler disowning them as his brothers—his enraged shouts were audible across the castle from where the twins were sequestered in Dumbledore's office, revealing that the photographs had been leaked across the Ministry making Percy—and the rest of the Weasleys—a laughing stock. An exhausted looking Arthur Weasley was escorted through the castle by McGonagall when he arrived, disappearing off into the headmaster's office.

By the time dinner rolled around, the interest in the scandal hadn't diminished even slightly. When Dumbledore swept into the Hall and stood up at the podium everyone immediately went quiet, all hoping for more information about what was going to happen to the Weasley twins.

"I understand there has been a great deal of conversation amongst you all today regarding certain fraudulent photographs distributed throughout the school," Dumbledore began, his voice ringing out across the silent Hall.

"Wait, fraudulent? You're trying to convince us they're fakes?" Evander Rosier, one of the sixth year Slytherins who was a long-time victim of the twins due to his bad luck in not only being a Slytherin in their year level but also having an uncle who was a Death Eater involved in the murders of Fabian and Gideon Prewett, demanded incredulously, his face twisted into a sneer of disbelief.

"Both twins have sworn Oaths—"

"Sure they did," another Slytherin sixth year, Theodora Rowle, interrupted, scoffing loudly. Others joined in from across the Houses, voicing their own disbelief, a gradual increase in volume as they spoke over each other until Dumbledore interrupted.

"Enough!" He thundered, the sound of his raised voice enough to silence the entire student-body to the point that the sound of a pin dropping would be audible across the Hall. "The photographs are confirmed to be fraudulent and any student found possessing or passing along one will automatically lose fifty House points and be assigned a month of detentions! I expect you all to
support Fred and George Weasley through this difficult time and anyone with information on who created the slanderous photographs should report to their Heads of Houses immediately."

When Dumbledore sat down, noise rang back out across the Hall.

"The lady doth protest too much, methinks." Hermione said, loud enough for her voice to carry further then the Slytherin table, scattering seeds of doubt across the Hall—not that she really needed to; Dumbledore should have had the twins defend themselves in front of the school, not keep them sequestered away. It made them look guilty—not to mention that banning the photos would only make people keener to see them.

Really, she couldn't have arranged that whole scene better if she'd tried.

It was two days before either twin were spotted in the castle; a small band of Gryffindors had come together to support and defend them, but Fred and George Weasley were subdued and withdrawn, and despite—or likely because of—their banned status the photographs were still circulating the student body in impressive numbers.

And Hermione soaked everything in with glee—watching the twins be ostracised by the school the way Harry had been, both when everyone was convinced he'd entered his name into the Tournament and back in second year when everyone were convinced he was the Heir of Slytherin, was fucking perfect.

And she wasn't done with the twins yet. Far from it.

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*Tonks' POV:*

Meeting with Fleur had been made much easier since she'd been assigned to Hogwarts. The Ministry was concerned by the murder at Hogwarts, the third death at the school in as many years, and had decided that an Auror presence was required while the two foreign schools were visiting. They didn't, however, want to advertise that fact and Tonks, with her recent promotion from Trainee to Junior Auror, had been chosen as her relationship with Moody and skill with infiltration had made her an obvious candidate for the job.

Tonks didn't particularly care about the politics behind the matter (*politics were dull, uninteresting — she preferred the idea of the times of long past, when the kings and queens of old had ruled the lands following no law but their own; a system of death, of torture, of absolute power*), she was just pleased by the ease of access to her lovely French witch and her proximity to Harry Potter, the lynchpin of chaos (*cursed to live in interesting times, oh how she craved the thought of that*) and his oh-so interesting friends.

The revenge reaped by Hermione Granger towards Charlie's twin brothers had been *delicious*; the creativity had made her shiver in delight and the cruelty had had her hunting down Fleur and tying her spread-eagled to her bed before carving ladders of deep, weeping cuts up the insides of her thighs and drinking up all that pretty, pretty red before eating her out until she was screaming for mercy (*oh Fleur, always so pretty when she came over and over, that lovely face of hers twisted in a beautiful ecstasy that could so easily be mistaken for a frozen rictus of agony*).

The end of the school year was approaching, however, and Tonks was all-too aware that with the conclusion of the Triwizard Tournament came Fleur's return to France and she was *not happy.*
She'd told Fleur, more then once now, that she was never going to let her go and she meant it.

Her pretty little dove, feathers pale as dead ash, always so good for her, always saying yes-yes-yes to all Tonks's twisted, tangled, turned-around-and-upside-down urges and cravings; how could she ever let Fleur escape through her fingers and fly away?

Tonks thought she'd kill Fleur, kiss those cupid-bow lips made cold by death good-bye and bury her in a shroud of asphodel, camellias and orange lilies, before she ever let Fleur leave her (Charlie's face when she'd admitted that had been amusing; she didn't tell him that if he tried to leave her she'd light him on fire and let the hungry flames burn them both up, swallowing them whole (She thought he probably knew anyway))

Charlie had encouraged her to actually ask Fleur what her plans were at the end of the school year, before she started planning to murder her lover to ensure Fleur stayed with her forevermore. Charlie's advice when it came to dealing with messy, confusing things like ‘emotions' and ‘sanity' and ‘normal' was always worth listening to (and had helped her through many tight spots over the past few years; Moody might be old, but he was known as one of Britain's greatest Aurors for a reason— and a fucking good one at that. Fooling him had not been easy).

She broached the subject when Fleur was drunk on pleasure and wine (that had maybe been laced by some Veritaserum she'd pinched from work). All fucked out and bloody, hemp ropes having dug deep bruises into her creamy, delectable, sliced up flesh, Tonks's little porcelain doll all broken and shattered and blissed out for her pleasure while she dragged her fingers through the drying pools of blood, tracing her name on Fleur's skin over and over, the dark, wicked creatures that made their home inside her head purring and preening at the sight of her handiwork. Charlie would probably remark about the ethics of drugging her lover and questioning her in such a fragile emotional state when she told him (his voice in her head certainly was) but Fleur was always so yielding and suggestible in this state; no proper filter between that clever mouth kissed bloody and sharp mind turned foggy. It really was the ideal time to get her answers— Fleur was far too far gone to recognise the effects of the truth potion and attempt to twist the forced truth or omit any dirty little details.

"What's your plan for when the Tournament finishes, pretty girl?" She asked, lifting her red-red-red fingers to her mouth to lick them clean. Fleur blinked slowly, eyes glazed, her mind floating and fluttering up-up-up in the clouds where angels danced and played. 

"France," she mumbled in her own language, her words slurring, and Tonks went predator still, eyes flicking over to the dagger, still resting on the silk sheets where she'd left it. "For my examinations."

"Finishing your exams, then?" Tonks carefully kept her voice casual as she switched to French. "And what will you be doing after that?"

"Coming back here," Fleur's words were barely legible, swimming into each other. "I have a job."

"Oh," Tonks said, relaxing immediately. "Good." She really would miss Fleur if she had to kill her. "What sort of job?"

"In Ministry... liaison for the Department..."

"Of?" Tonks pushed. Fleur mumbled tiredly, words inaudible as her eyelids drifted closed. Impatient, Tonks dug her nails into one of the still-open wounds on her little French doll and Fleur gave a hoarse, pained scream, eyes fluttering back open. "Which Department?" Tonks demanded.
"Magical Creatures," Fleur whimpered, fresh tears in those pretty blue eyes, trickling down those pale cheeks and Tonks bent over to lick them up, her sweet-tasting flower immediately relaxing again under the kinder touch.

"Magical Creatures... hmm, now that's a pretty neat job— and you've already got it? Without even finishing your exams?" She asked casually, once Fleur's tears had slowed and she'd lifted her head.

"Yes," Fleur murmured, all soft and pliant as Tonks leaned over her, a not-so benevolent predator hungrily eyeing her prey.

"Now that's impressive, pretty girl." She said. "Who gave you that job?"

Fleur shifted slightly in place, a sense of unease apparently managing to pierce through the wine-veritaserum-pleasure drunk haze she was floating in. Tonks shifted her hand to press on one of the open wounds again, but Fleur spoke again before she could, just a frightened little whisper that Tonks could barely make out. 

"... the Dark Lord... my Lord."

And oh, that was interesting. Tonks had certainly always been impressed by Fleur, had always been aware of the monsters that lurked inside the French girl, different from her own but no less monstrous for it, but this... now, this was unexpected.

"And the Dark Lord has the power to give you that job?" She asked, still carefully casual despite the sudden thrill of excitement surging through her, stealing her breath and quickening her heartbeat with thoughts of possibilities.

"By the time I have finished my examinations?" Fleur murmured, after a bit of prodding, "He has said that yes, he will."

"Now isn't that something?" Tonks breathed, in English this time. She stopped pressing her precious, vulnerable, drugged little doll for answers, instead concentrating on corralling her wildly twisting-tangling-tripping thoughts. She cleaned Fleur up while she did so, going through the now-familiar routine of healing all the open wounds and rubbing essence of dittany on them until they were just faint silver scars on creamy skin, dosing her part-Veela lover with a blood-replenishing potion, vanishing the blood and then wrapping her in blankets and lying down beside her, while she waited to see if sleep would claim her.

Unsurprisingly, Tonks barely dozed at all, her mind just too busy, and when Fleur started stirring as the thin light of dawn started to lighten the room Tonks was already wide awake and sitting up, leaned back against the headboard as she stroked a hand through silky silvery hair, winding long strands of it around her fingers.

"Morning, beautiful girl," she greeted her.

"Mmm," Fleur hummed agreeably, turning her head to press her rosy lips against Tonks's fingers playing with her hair. "Last night, eet was very intense."

"You say that a lot," Tonks grinned wickedly down at her.

"For good reason, non?" Fleur replied with her own amusement and Tonks snickered.

"True."

There was a moment of silence then; Fleur's eyes were shrewd and considering as they caught and
held Tonks's own. "You 'ad a great many questions for me," the French witch finally commented, her voice deceptively light.

"I was wondering how much of that you would remember," Tonks admitted, unbothered by the accusation.

"Enough," Fleur said dryly.

"What can I say? I'm a curious girl." Tonks countered. Fleur made a noise of agreement.

"And certainly a dangerous one." She murmured, looking up at Tonk's from under her lashes. "But you are clever too, I zink. And eet would not be clever of you to repeat anyzing zat I may 'ave said."

"Let me guess— you have very powerful protectors who aren't afraid to get their hands dirty?" Tonks asked, recalling Hermione's threat— one that had been followed by a visit from a Dark wizard who'd forced her and Charlie into an Unbreakable Vow.

"Oui— and I would so 'ate for all zee fun zat we 'ave togezzer to end." Fleur agreed with a teasing curl of those poison-sweet lips, and Tonks couldn't stop herself from leaning forwards to taste them, becoming an animal with the first touch of their lips; biting and claiming and devouring.

Fleur finally pushed her away with a surprising strength, smiling with wet crimson lips as she moved off the bed and rose to her feet, re-dressing in her blue silk uniform while Tonks pouted.

Fleur moved to leave the room serving as Tonks's temporary quarters, the location of their most recent tête-à-tête, before pausing at the doorway and turning her head back slightly with a smile on her face that was sharper then the blade Tonks had used to carve into her, a lovely predator with gleaming white teeth stained red. "Per'aps we weell get to work togezzer, sometimes, non?" she purred, rich and throaty. "Why, just zink of all zee fun zat we could 'ave!"

And Tonks licked her lips as she watched Fleur saunter out the door, her thoughts whirling as she imagined it; imagined working with Fleur, imagined dragging her off to broom cupboards and empty offices, and most importantly imagined what it would be like to work in a Ministry where Dark Lord Voldemort had the power to hire witches and wizards at his discretion.

She imagined, she wanted, she craved— and she needed to talk to Charlie.

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Rita's POV:

The international portkey to Slovakia was as uncomfortable as international portkeys always were. Adrienne had promised, however, that her great-grandmother— her dédanya— would have information for her exposé on Dumbledore that would be worth the discomfort.

After arriving in Slovakia, Addie had apparated them to a castle that stood on a hill overlooking the muggle village of Čachtice, which until the twentieth century had been part of the heavily war-torn Royal Hungary. The Gothic castle, which appeared to muggles as old, decayed ruins, was starkly different to Hogwarts; it had a rugged look to it, less tame then the school, a dark, wild beauty that sent a shiver down Rita's spine.

Addie led her to the magnificent doorway where her dédanya was already waiting for them. Lady
Zsófia Somlyó appeared a cold, elderly woman. Her robes were elegant and clearly hand-tailored, made of incandescent fine white silks and sleek matching furs. With her porcelain-pale skin and long hair turned silvery-white with age, the choice of colour should have made her look washed out, even sickly, but instead she just looked wintry; the icy sort of whiteness that made Rita think of the bite of frost, of the frozen chill that sunk deep into bones and the dead silence that accompanied falling snow.

To Rita's surprise, Zsófia spoke English with a confident (if slightly choppy) ease, though she supposed when someone was as old as the ancient witch before her then they had the time to learn a few extra languages if they were so inclined. "Welcome to Čachtice Castle," she greeted them, her speech silvery with an accent thick as her voice was cold.

"It's beautiful," Rita said, because it was– richly-decorated and bedecked in finery, it was beautiful and rugged and... off, in an eerie sort of way that she couldn't quite name, like the castles of old where battles had been fought, won and lost, where blood had soaked the stones and left behind echoes of violence and death. "It has... quite the atmosphere to it."

"My family, we are direct descendants of the Terror of Royal Hungary," Zsófia sounded viciously proud of the fact, "it was within these walls that she lived, killed and died."

Feeling like her heart had just stumbled in her chest and Rita glanced around the grand foyer of the castle with new, wide eyes. Erzsebet Báthory, the Bloody Countess of seventeenth-century Eastern Europe, was an infamous figure in both muggle and wizarding history; muggles saw her as an alleged serial killer, while the magical world understood Erzsébet Báthory, daughter of the Named Fey Szépasszony*** [Sayp-uh-sohn-ye], to be the most prolific Changeling ever known.

The fey were true examples of how the most comely faces could hide the most dangerous, horrifying monsters. They were a type of fey and, most fortunately, the fey rarely involved themselves in the human world, either muggle or magical; they had their own realms nestled in-between the cracks of reality that they rarely left, with hundreds of years passing between any of them setting foot on Earth. The Countess of Báthory was an aberration in this regard, an anomaly and exception– and a true warning of the danger of fey, as she'd left behind blood-soaked pages in history as a legendary figure of horror and death.

Rita had always suspected there had been something other about Adrienne, the infamous Black Widow of Magical Britain; to learn that Addie had fey-blood in her veins, no matter how diluted, was less of a shock then it should have been, but still a shock nevertheless (but she supposed the truth had always been there, if she'd chosen to look instead of looking away— it was in Addie's very name; Adrienne Erzsébet Zabini).

"That is... quite something." Rita finally said and Zsófia's answering smile was cold, a menace to it that hadn't been there before— or maybe she just hadn't been looking properly.

With gliding footsteps, the elderly witch led them through to a sitting room where a tea-tray had already been set up. Zsófia lowered herself gracefully onto one of the chairs and Addie carefully poured tea into the porcelain tea-cups, serving first her dédanya before pouring Rita's and her own.

Zsófia was first to sip her drink and first to break the silence. "My Adrienne," she said, her piercing eyes a pale hoarfrost-blue, "she tells me you are viting a book. And she thinks I will be able to help you."

"Yes," Rita answered carefully, "my book involves Grindelwald, you see, and Adrienne said you had... inside information on him."
"Ahh," Zsófia murmured with a dawning comprehension. "Yes. My third husband, László, he vos von of Grindelvald's. István, my only son, and four of my daughters vere as vell." The ancient witch sighed, shaking her head slightly as she elegantly lifted her porcelain teacup by its bone-white handle and took another delicate sip. "István vos killed, fighting for Grindelvald. Or Gellert, as he alvays called him. László and my daughters vere put in Nurmengard. They all died there, within a decade. I had just von daughter left; Adrienne's grandmother, Ancsa, who ran off to marry an Italian." Zsófia sounded most put out by that, which was more emotion then she'd showed talking about the premature deaths of her family.

"I'm sorry for your loss," Rita said politely anyway. Zsófia made a dismissive motion with her hand.

"It vos many years ago now. I have long made my peace."

"Dédanya," Addie said, her back iron-straight and hands folded together demurely as they had been since she sat down after serving the tea and Zsófia had run her steel-sharp gaze up and down her, presumably looking for any faults. "Rita was wondering what you could tell us about Albus Dumbledore and Gellert Grindelwald. You've said my Great Uncle István was close to Grindelwald, before he was killed. Did István ever mention Dumbledore?"

"I vood not say István mentioned Albus Dumbledore," Zsófia said dryly. "More, he complained incessantly about the man. Grindelvald vos obsessed vith him, to hear my son speak of it."

"Bathilda Bagshot mentioned they were close childhood friends," Rita offered and Zsófia's pale lips curled slyly, dark amusement painted across her delicate features.

"Ah, but 'friends' vos not the rumour that vent around, not back then."

"What?" Rita asked, genuinely surprised. Zsófia made a small tch sound of disapproval at the interruption, managing to make Rita feel chastened in a way she hadn't for at least two decades.

"There vos none of the silliness too many have now, about men vith men," Zsófia said with clear distaste, "but the politics of the matter kept most people silent, even more so after the world-famous duel."

Aberforth and Bathilda had both talked about how close Dumbledore and Grindelwald had been, but neither of them had alluded to a possible romance between the two. *Albus Dumbledore* having a male lover was big enough news, but that lover being *Gellert* fucking *Grindelwald*? That was huge; it was a bigger, more shocking reveal then even the truth of Harry Potter's childhood upbringing at the hands of abusive muggles. She was going to be paid a *fortune* for this from the Dagworths alone, not to mention just how many copies of the eventual book would sell!

Zsófia was eyeing her with amusement and just a hint of something dark and predatory. "You look like a hunter," the elderly witch told her, the approval stark in her voice, "a hunter that just caught its prey." Her smile this time was hungry, her teeth white and sharp. "I do hope you enjoy your meal."

Chapter End Notes

Just to clarify a few things...
*While not strictly canon, for the purposes of my story Quirrell was the one who drank the unicorn blood that strengthened Voldemort, who was possessing his body, so he was the one who invoked the curse.*

**In this story, the reason the unicorn blood symptoms are so similar to the symptoms experienced by Voldemort (and Tom, to a degree) is because both Horcruxes and the unicorn blood curse damage the soul.**

***References in the trial testimony of Erzsebet Báthory (1560–1614), the 'Blood Countess', suggest that she may have venerated Szépasszony. I've taken poetic license with the mythology, but in pre-Christian Hungarian Szépasszony was a love goddess who, Post-Christianity, was demoted to a beautiful but dangerous and malicious winter witch, developing a malevolent reputation as a femme fatale; a dangerous, tempestuous demon similar to Hans Christian Andersen's Snow Queen. Szépasszony was considered a true White Lady, a very fair-skinned woman with long white hair who always wore incandescent white dresses. I've focused on the fact that she has also been described as one of the fair folk (fey) and made Erzsébet Bathóry her Changeling daughter.*
Part Four: The Goblet of Fire - Chapter LXXII

CHAPTER LXXII

Tonks’s POV:

For once she and Charlie didn’t plan to rendezvous at the Hog’s Head— what she had planned wasn’t the sort of conversation that was safe to have in public (quite the opposite, in fact). Although Tonks was currently living at Hogwarts, she still had her apartment so she and Charlie had planned to meet there.

First to arrive, she’d considered pulling out a bottle of Firewhiskey but reluctantly decided it was best to be sober for what was ahead and when Charlie arrived, fresh from Romania and still smelling of sulphur with soot-dusted hands, he took one look at her and grimaced. “Fuck, I’m not going to like this, am I?” He asked, already appearing to resign himself to her reply (Charlie really was the only one who’d ever mastered reading the barely perceptible shifts in her expression— it could be immensely frustrating at times).

“Not even slightly,” she agreed and Charlie sat down heavily on her couch.

“Alright,” he sighed, “Alright. Tell me.”

“I spoke to Fleur about what she’s going to do next year,” she began and Charlie looked at her, alarmed.

“You didn’t kill her, did you? Do you need an alibi? Do we need to get you out of Britain?” He demanded.

“No, no, she’s alive,” Tonks reassured him.

“Oh thank fuck,” Charlie groaned, running a hand agitatedly through his hair, accidentally smearing soot through the fiery-red strands.

“But she told me what she’s going to be doing next year— Charlie,” Tonks paused, wondering how to word it, “Charlie, you’re running out of time to make a choice. Things are starting to move, You-Know-Who is gaining power— I’ve just found out he’s got significant influence in the Ministry, enough to have his followers hired into the Departments he wants them in.”

“Fuck,” Charlie whispered, his face paling. “And Fleur—?”

“She’s one of his,” Tonks confirmed. “Which I’ll admit surprised me more then it should have, considering she’s friends with Harry Potter and the occasional lover of Hermione Granger.”

Charlie closed his eyes, looking pained. Tonks wasn’t quite sure whether she should be consoling him or not (should she pat his back?) but decided to just go with being honest.

“You have to decide whether we’re going to be fighting for Dumbledore, for You-Know-Who or if we’re going to permanently move to Romania,” she said bluntly. “You know I’ll follow your lead, whatever you choose, wherever you go. But you have to choose.”

Charlie opened his eyes, fixing her with a weary, resigned look. “You want to fight for You-Know-
Who,” he said quietly. Tonks blinked, surprised, but nodded.

“I do,” she admitted, “but that doesn’t mean I won’t follow you, wherever you go.” Charlie’s lips tugged into a weak smile.

“Yeah. I know.” And then he buried his head in his hands and started to cry. Tonks was alarmed to see his shoulders shaking slightly with silent sobs. Emotions were not her forte and she wasn’t even sure why Charlie was crying. Should she be comforting him? Letting him cry it out? Bringing out the whiskey and weed? What the fuck was she supposed to do?

“Stop freaking out,” Charlie’s voice was thick and wet-sounding, muffled by the fact his head was still in his hands. “I can hear you panicking right now.”

“I’m not panicking,” Tonks lied (maybe she was, just a little— it discomfited her, when Charlie wasn’t happy).

Charlie lifted his head, his eyes now red-rimmed and puffy. “I really want to fuck off back to Romania, right about now,” he said, voice scratchy, and Tonks sighed internally but still nodded.

“I’ll resign tomorrow,” she told him. “I’ll be packed and ready to go in two days. And… I’ll say goodbye to Fleur.”

There was an uncomfortable twist inside her at the idea of leaving Fleur and not seeing her again. It made her want to kidnap Fleur, to force her to come to Romania with them and keep her locked up tight until she agreed to stay. It was a really fucking tempting thought and without waiting for permission her brain started to work through the logistics of abducting her beautiful French witch, latching onto the finer details of a rapidly developing plan. It wouldn’t be too difficult, she was sure, it would just take—

“Tonks,” Charlie interrupted her planning, “I said I wanted to go back to Romania and hide away from all this shit, not that that’s what I decided. But… thanks. For keeping your word.”

“What did you decide then?” Tonks asked, her breath catching slightly. It could go either way, she knew— Charlie had familial ties to the Light, but she knew he agreed with certain ideals of the Dark, starting with their acceptance of his sexuality (either way, though, there’d be fighting and blood and death, so much death, and she already could feel her heart racing at the thought, could feel herself starting to get wet as she imagined it).

Charlie let out a shaky breath, appearing to steel himself. “Talk to Fleur,” he said, “find out how she was recruited… and how she can get us recruited too.”

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Tonks pulled Fleur aside the following day and was unsurprised when the French witch directed her towards Hermione Granger. When she then approached the younger girl, Tonks also wasn’t surprised by Hermione’s lack of surprise.

“Fleur told me,” the curly-haired girl said coldly, in lieu of any sort of greeting. “I’ll arrange for you to meet with Tom. He’ll handle the rest.”

“And it’s that easy?” Tonks asked, raising a purple eyebrow. Hermione smiled, all teeth and threat.

“Of course not. It will be the most dangerous ‘job interview’ of your life with only two possible outcomes— one of which is an early grave.”
Tonks grinned back at her, just as dangerous. “Sounds fun. Sign me up.”

*(Live fast, die young and leave a sexy—and likely mutilated—corpse)*

Fleur passed on the message before dinner that a meeting had been arranged for that evening, at the Hog’s Head. “Eef you are late or do not go, zey weell see eet as you no longer being eenterested in entering zee service of zee Dark Lord.” Fleur warned. “And zat would ‘ave… dire consequences.”

“Don’t worry about me, pretty girl,” Tonks leaned forwards to nip Fleur’s nose, causing her to jerk back in surprise, “I’ll be fine.”

Fleur gave her a long, searching look and Tonks held herself still, not quite sure what the other woman was looking for with eyes sharp as knives flaying back her person-skin to expose the lurking cold-eyed monster underneath. Whatever she was looking for, Fleur seemed to find it because she nodded.

“Good.” She said simply before moving in to kiss her and Tonks was more then happy to reciprocate, left feeling oddly exposed and… not vulnerable, but something startlingly close by Fleur’s appraisal and attacking the sweet heat of Fleur’s mouth with her teeth made her feel less off balance, unsettled.

“I think we have time before you have to go to dinner, don’t you?” she coaxed as she moved one of her hands moving to the small of the French witch’s back to pull her flush against her body, grinding against her while her other hand tangled in Fleur’s long hair.

“I zink we can make zee time,” Fleur gasped out, all sweet and breathy, head tilting back when Tonks yanked on her hair, baring the swan-like curve of the part-Veela’s neck to her sharp teeth.

“*Good*,” she growled—if she was going to *die* tonight, she was going to *die* with the taste of Fleur fresh on her lips (*her pretty girl with a dangerous smile*).

After dinner, she left the castle, apparing to Hogsmeade as soon as she’d left the Hogwarts grounds and making her way to the Hog’s Head. Charlie was already there waiting for her, seated at one of the corner tables. He looked like he was about to be sick.

“Do I need to conjure a bucket?” She asked curiously. Charlie let his head thud against the table. “Just… tell me when it’s time to sign over our souls.” He muttered into the wood.

“I’d say you’re being rather over-dramatic,” a familiar, smooth voice said, “but that’s actually startlingly accurate in this case.”

Tonks jerked her head around to the dark-haired youth who’d managed to sneak up on her with silent footsteps. He had an expression of cold amusement on his handsome face, dressed in similar dark, expensive robes to the last time she’d seen him (*same blue-red-red-red makes purple eyes; so much mouthwatering Darkness*).

Charlie looked closer to green then white now and the youth’s—Tom’s—eyes bore into him. “The Dark Lord’s service is for life,” he warned, “once you have joined, there is no backing out. You serve him or you die.”

“That is ominous and terrifying and consider me warned.” Charlie said, his voice hoarse.

“Then consider this the point of no return,” Tom replied, a cruel smile on his face as he held out his
hand, presenting each of them with a small silver serpent. Tonks carefully took one, Charlie doing the same, her best friend peering down at it like it was about to come alive and bite him.

“Portus.” Tom said casually and Tonks let out a surprised sound as the familiar sensation of a hook behind her navel sent her spinning through space until the world turned solid around her and she found herself standing in a grand hall that was all drama and theatre; dark stone floors, glittering silver candelabras carved in the likeness of serpents, cold marble walls and an elegant throne upon which a single, robed figure who could only be the Dark Lord Voldemort was seated.

The Dark Lord was tall and pale-skinned, with dark hair, darker eyes and a face that could only be called striking. It took her a moment to recognise him, considering just how jarringly out of context he was, but the moment she matched his face to Senior Undersecretary to the Minister Thaddeus Dagworth, the very same wizard that people at the Ministry were talking about being in running for the new Minister of Magic once Fudge’s term was complete, Tonks wanted to laugh, because Dumbledore was fucked, he was so fucked, and he had no idea.

There was a witch dressed in black silk with dark, tangled hair kneeling by the throne and at the sound of their arrival she’d glanced up. When her eyes caught— and held— Tonks’s own, Tonks felt her breath catch in her throat because the the look in her eyes, it was a reflection of every mad, dark, dangerous thing Tonks felt deep inside, the monsters she hid from the world. The woman’s eyes were grey, such a familiar grey, and they were manic, they were glittering, they were hungry, and Tonks knew, she just knew, that the woman was hungry for the same things that she was, yet the woman was older, grounded, sated.

She wondered if it was because of the crimson-eyed Dark Lord seated on his throne that she was kneeling in front of, wholly worshipful and reverent, or if she’d learned to deal with it in some way Tonks had yet to find, some way to make it all make sense before she went mad and had to cut and rip and tear herself apart to look inside and remind herself she existed, some way that quieted the raging want and need inside for all of the dark, filthy, wrong things she craved (flesh between her teeth, blood in her mouth, fingers shoved deep in guts and clawing through pulsating organs, a still-beating heart clench in her fist).

The witch, her Aunt, grinned; wide, mad and beautiful, so beautiful and free and easy, like she knew that she could do anything she wanted, like she could get away with anything, like the world was hers to take and desecrate and to lay at the feet of the Darkest wizard in known Magical history.

Other than Bellatrix Lestrange, there were only five other Death Eaters in the room— Tonks recognised Antonin Dolohov and the Lestrange brothers, but the young blond man with a pale freckled face and the handsome, older wizard wearing a pair of white silk gloves weren’t familiar to her.

“Nymphadora Tonks, Charles Weasley,” Dagworth, Lord Voldemort, greeted them, his voice a dark, heavy velvet that settled over her, sank into her bones and weighed her down until she felt she should be kneeling as he rose from his throne.

Tonks would admit she hadn’t been expecting to come face-to-face with Lord Voldemort himself, that she had been expecting one of his lieutenants instead, but apparently the Dark Lord wasn’t one to leave his recruitment to others. As he approached them, his movements elegant and predatory, she didn’t know how to feel— afraid, she was sure was the appropriate reaction, but she had never being good at fear.

When Lord Voldemort stopped in front of her, he was close enough that if she wanted she could reach out and touch him. “Look at me,” he spoke, ordered, as he inclined his head, his gaze
trapping hers, *crimson-burning-bloody* eyes boring into her own grey.

Tonks knew what he wanted without him having to ask, lowering her Occlumency shields so he could scan her mind— looking for betrayal? Doubt? Regret? All of them?— an unpleasant sensation, thoughts and memories flashing through her mind too-fast for her to pick apart and identify.

When Lord Voldemort broke eye-contact, Tonks gasped for air, staggering slightly. Charlie caught her (*always catching her, always saving her, protecting her*), holding her upright until she’d regained her balance before letting go.

Lord Voldemort didn’t say anything as he turned from her to Charlie. Tonks felt her first sense of stirring unease as the Dark Lord stepped directly in front of her best (*only*) friend. Charlie’s face was white but he still met Lord Voldemort’s eyes without flinching, his spine straight and shoulders squared as he stared back into those *crimson-burning-bloody* eyes.

The Dark Lord stared into Charlie’s eyes longer then he’d stared into hers, Charlie twitching and flinching minutely as his mind was laid open, every thought, emotion and memory no longer his and his alone, no longer private and protected and personal.

And then Lord Voldemort blinked and Charlie staggered back like she had, his breathing ragged and his pulse racing as she caught him, like he had caught her (*she and her darling firebug, co-dependant until the very end*).

Without saying anything to either of them, Lord Voldemort returned to his throne, not sitting back down but standing in front of it as he turned back to face them. “Welcome,” he said, mouth curved in a charming (*cruel and cold*) smile; *dangerous*, *so, so dangerous*, and yet drawing her in despite (*or because of*) it. There were promises in that smile, dark and dangerous and deadly, and *she wanted to be consumed by them*.

“Magic is our birthright,” Lord Voldemort spoke, eloquent and elegant, his voice starkly audible in the silent room, “this world is our heritage yet our culture is being lost, everything that our ancestors once carved out for us corrupted by those who were not born to the world we were yet seek to change it to their image like it is their right— and those who would let them, who would conform to their demands through either fear of exposure or betrayal to our rich history.”

Tonks didn’t particularly care (*Politics. Were. Dull*… though she supposed the Dark Lord may well end up ruling like the kings and queens of old; *feared and worshipped* and *loved*). Charlie, however… Charlie could read her like nobody else, but that went both ways— she could read the interest in his face, the slight yearning.

And Lord Voldemort seemed to read it too, because all of his terrifying, terrible focus turned to Charlie. “You’ve seen the prejudice,” he said, smoothly sibilant, his words winding their way around Charlie’s wrists like manacles without her best friend even noticing; trapping, claiming, *owning* him. “You’ve felt it, *lived* it. Raised by a family that would see you disowned, would despise you even, if they had learned the truth… such an intrinsic part of who you are *demonised*…” Lord Voldemort shook his head. “It disgusts me, to see what has been done to our world. I have sworn to preserve our way of life, to restore our once-great culture, and I will do so.

“That is what I offer each of you… now tell me, what can you offer me? Why should I initiate you into my ranks?” Lord Voldemort questioned them, gesturing his hand towards her which Tonks took to meant she was to answer first.

“My job,” she told him, “I was trained by Moody and he considers me his protege. He trusts me
and now so does Dumbledore. My bloodline— I am a daughter of House Black and inherited my House’s metamorphmagi gift. And my willingness to fight for you, to follow you and cut down your enemies.”

Lord Voldemort nodded. “You will be a valuable recruit,” he said, “but first, there must be a show of loyalty.” He then turned to Bellatrix. “Bring them in.” He ordered and she rose to her feet, bowing to her Lord.

“At once, my Lord,” she said breathily before hurrying from the room.

Charlie had tensed up again and when Bellatrix returned, bringing with her two bound, levitated figures, Tonks watched him blanch. Lord Voldemort smiled slow and cruel as Bellatrix let each figure drop to the floor before she seized the closest one by its hair, yanking it to its feet. Male, Tonks labelled it, and muggle going by its attire. Lord Voldemort turned back to her and gave one simple order.

“Kill it.”

Tonks didn’t hesitate to pull the dagger she used to carve into Fleur from her robes. As a Black, her soulmate would always be violence and as she stepped forwards she finally did what she’d been dreaming about for years, always counting down the inevitable day where she’d give in to the monster who hid under her skin. The blade in her hand was her first and only true love and it carved a perfect red smile in the muggle’s throat to match the one on her own red lips.

She would never forget the moment the almost-boiling blood sprayed over her. It felt like she’d been holding her breath all her life and could finally breathe; it felt like release, like relief, like revelation.

“Oh niece,” cooed Bellatrix, dropping the bleeding-out muggle and licking the blood spray off her fingers before stepping forwards, over the body, to curl her fingers around the curve of Tonks’s jaw, her thumb brushing over her lips and pressing against her teeth as if testing the sharpness, “oh my sweet, darling niece… we’re going to have so much fun playing together.”

And Tonks smiled.

Bellatrix released her face, instead reaching for her left wrist, holding it tight while she pushed back Tonks’s sleeve with her other hand. The skin there was soaked with blood and Bellatrix bent her head and licked her forearm clean before dragging her by the grip on her wrist over to where Lord Voldemort stood, waiting, moving her free hand to Tonks’s neck and forcing her down on her knees at his feet while stretching out her left arm, her newly-cleaned forearm facing up in offering to her Lord and Master.

The Dark Lord pressed the tip of his bone-white wand against the skin there and murmured an incantation Tonks didn’t catch, not over the sound of blood roaring in her ears, and then there was pain; a second, an eternity, white-hot and crackling, and then it was gone and seared into her flesh, red as blood framing it, was the infamous Dark Mark.

Tonks swayed, dizzy, barely noticing when Bellatrix pulled her to her feet and led her from the room until she felt the cold breeze against her skin and blinked, not recognising the rough-stone surroundings. “Shh, shh, no need to be afraid,” her Aunt cooed, patting her cheek, “your boy will be fine… I just thought we should get to know each other a bit, do some family bonding.”

“Family… bonding?” Tonks asked slowly, her head still not-quite-right, like she’d been getting high with Charlie. Bellatrix smiled, wide and gleeful and entirely mad, kicking a rough-hewn
wooden door open to reveal a dank, dark cellar that stank of old, rancid blood and mildew and contained several weakly stirring figures, all chained to the ceiling by their wrists, their toes just barely touching the ground.

“Your Auntie is going to teach you everything she knows.” Bellatrix promised and Tonks could only tilt back her head and laugh and laugh and laugh.

(She and Bellatrix barely left the cellar for days as they took apart their victims piece-by-piece; Bellatrix was a master of her art, for in the hands of her Aunt torture truly was an art, and Tonks ate up everything the older witch taught her like she was starving for it, the part of her that had been missing for so long finally slotting into place)

Charlie’s POV:

“What an interesting young witch,” You-Know-Who mused as Bellatrix Lestrange led Tonks away, before he turning all that terrifying attention back to him. “Tell me, Charles Weasley,” he said; softly, dangerously, “what can you offer me? Why should I initiate you into my ranks?”

Charlie had to swallow through the stranglehold of his fear before he could answer. “I’m not a fighter,” he said honestly. “I’m not a killer.”

“Then why would I want you? What good would you be to me?” You-Know-Who asked, the unspoken threat obvious.

“Because I have connections,” Charlie told him, speaking with more confidence then he felt. “Connections to different underground smuggling rings of magical creatures and beings, both in Britain and internationally, as well as contacts with foreign witches and wizards who have the right… temperament to be interested in your cause.”

Charlie had always been one of the dragon handlers most commonly sent to infiltrate the different circuits that smuggled magical creatures and beings to purchase exotic dragon eggs and hatchlings for the reserve; while technically classified as “rescue missions”, they were not-quite-legal and not something his bosses advertised. It did mean, however, that he had nurtured a number of connections within the smuggling rings over the past few years, building up a circle of ‘trusted’ contacts.

“That is very interesting,” You-Know-Who said quietly. “Very interesting indeed. Very well, Barty?”

A blond Death Eater with a pale freckled face stepped forwards, the tip of his tongue darting out to lick his upper lip. You-Know-Who flicked his hand over at the bound muggle woman, her bruised face streaked with tears, and the wizard— Barty— moved over to her, pulling her to her feet by her wrists bound behind her back.

“A show of loyalty,” You-Know-Who told him softly and Charlie swallowed again. He pulled his wand slowly from his robes, his hand shaking slightly as he pointed it at the muggle, ignoring her desperately pleading eyes and the way her mouth silently begged him for mercy, no sound audible.

He wished he could grant her the mercy of a quick ‘Avada Kedavra’ but he knew he couldn’t speak the spell and mean it; she’d end up with a headache or a blood nose, at best. As a dragon handler, however, he knew enough spells that could be lethal if used on a human being and he spoke one of
them now, one that sucked the oxygen from a pocket of air around situated around the head in order to prevent dragons from breathing fire—or, if cast on a human, to deprive them of oxygen and stop them breathing.

Charlie didn’t look away, refusing to hide from the consequences of his choice as the woman thrashed desperately, her face going red then tinging purple-blue before her eyes, now red from burst blood-vessels, rolled back up into her skull and she went limp.

“Dead.” The blond— Barty— announced about half a minute later, dropping the now-corpse. Charlie stared at the muggle’s lifeless body, his stomach churning at the meaty thud it made when she hit the ground. He felt frozen in place, his limbs having turned to unresponsive stone, and like Bellatrix Lestrange had guided Tonks after she’d slit the muggle man’s throat, Barty guided him.

The blond wizard pushed back the left sleeve of Charlie’s robe then pulled him over to You-Know-Who, shoving him to his knees at the Dark wizard’s feet before stretching out Charlie’s arm in offering, left forearm facing up.

Charlie stared into You-Know-Who’s eyes, like twin pools of blood, as that white-as-bone wand pressed against his vulnerable skin. The sudden pain burned all the way through him, in some indefinable way that left him feeling desecrated inside as well as out.

When the pain stopped, he had to blink away the tears that had welled up in his eyes before he was able to see the Dark Mark on his skin. Like a vivid red tattoo, the brand of the snake protruding from the mouth of the skull was a symbol of everything his parents had raised him to hate… everything that he had now rejected, from this moment until his death.

Nausea swelled up inside him and Charlie barely noticed that Barty had guided him out of the hall, just as Bellatrix had Tonks, until after he’d leaned forwards to throw up, bile burning his throat and nose as he retched violently, and when he’d straightened back up he’d found himself in a smaller, much better-lit room with furniture—a woven silk rug, a crackling fireplace, tall cabinets and a coffee table all carved from deep red cherry wood and a set of armchairs and a settee with dark blue velvet upholstery.

Barty vanished the sick from the gleaming floorboards then steered him over to the settee, pushing him so he fell back onto it before crossing over to one of the cabinets and retrieving from it a bottle of expensive-looking wine, removing the cork with a tap of his wand and passing Charlie the whole bottle.

Charlie, grateful that Barty hadn’t bothered with the pretence of pulling out glasses to pour the wine into, started to chug back the bottle, barely noticing the wine’s rich flavouring in his haste. He drained about two thirds of the bottle before he started to slow down, eventually lowering the bottle to suck in a few deep breaths.

By chance, he looked up and over at his companion. The blond wizard was lounging on one of the armchairs and upon seeing Charlie looking his way he let his pale blue eyes trail the whole length of him, a kind of lazy, curious heat in his gaze that reminded Charlie of a particularly unpredictable cat.

“Who are you anyway?” he asked and the blond, Barty, grinned.

“Barty Crouch Junior, convicted and officially deceased Death Eater at your service,” he said, standing up and giving a mocking bow.

“Charlie Weasley, officially now a Death Eater, at yours.” Charlie replied, standing up to give his
own bow, only swaying slightly. He then grimaced and had to take several more deep gulps of
wine when he fully registered what he’d just said, anger and grief and exhaustion sinking deep into
his bones.

“And a natural at that,” Barty said with a grin, tongue tip darting out again as he moved forwards,
closing the distance between them. “I have to say, that spell you used— fuck, that was hot.” The
blond shuddered as if in actual pleasure at the memory. “You have to teach it to me!”

“Right.” Charlie said, suddenly unable to hear anything over the roar of blood in his ears. And then
he punched Barty.

He shouldn’t have, he knew that as soon as he’d done it, but even as he watched blood drip from
Barty’s mouth and soak into the collar of his robes he didn’t regret it at all. Barty didn’t even seem
pissed off, just surprised.

“Huh,” the blond wizard muttered to himself— and then he swung a fist.

With the alcohol slowing his reaction time, Charlie just barely managed to duck under Barty’s first
punch but wasn’t able to avoid the second to his jaw and he gasped in pain, swearing and
retaliating with a vicious elbow to Barty’s face, catching him just under his eye.

There was no actual technique in their brawling, just fists and elbows and shoving before Barty
launched his whole body at him, the impact sending Charlie staggering back then tripping over the
damn rug and landing on his back with Barty on top of him. For a moment, they both stayed there,
panting. And then, without warning, Barty’s mouth was on his; hot, lewd and wet.

Charlie, his head spinning from a combination of shock, alcohol and what was probably a
concussion, considered pushing Barty off, he really did. But he was hard from the brief fight, from
all that adrenaline and thrill building hot and tight in his gut since the first punch, so when Barty
went to move off him he grabbed the back of the blond’s neck and pulled sharply, wrenching
Barty’s head to where he wanted it and then it was just spit and tongues and teeth, heated and slick
and too much pressure on bruised mouths and broken lips.

Barty ground down against him, against where they were both hard and shoved up against each
other, and Charlie rocked his hips back up in turn; there was no finesse to their actions, just two
men rutting against each other like animals in heat, seeking gratification in the violence, heat and
sheer animal physicality of it all.

Charlie came before he’d even really realised and Barty growled as Charlie shuddered in pleasure,
his head heavy and swimming with a confusing mess of tangled thoughts that skated just at the
edge of his comprehension. He didn’t even notice Barty coming with a drawn-out hiss, his breaths
hot and heavy next to his ear, instead he let the drowsiness reach out and drag him down.

Charlie woke up with a pained groan, his head pounding and his face feeling like it had come into
contact with a bludger one too many times. He quickly registered that he was stretched out over an
unfamiliar couch but it took his hungover brain a few minutes to put everything else together— of
course, when he did he immediately wished he hadn’t. Everything that had happened the previous
night, from the murder to being Marked to fucking a Death Eater, was like a nightmare.

A nightmare that, apparently, hadn’t ended, as a mockingly cheerful voice remarked, “try not to be
sick on the silk rug. Again.”

Charlie swore out loud, turning his head too quickly towards the sound which almost did result in
him emptying his stomach on the floor beside him.
Barty Crouch Junior was draped lazily over one of the armchairs, his face coloured by bruises in shades of dark red, purple and blue and his lips all cut up and swollen. Charlie felt a flicker of what was almost pride at the sight of his handiwork, as well as a whole heap of confusion.

“Why haven’t you healed yourself?” he asked.

“Didn’t feel like it,” Barty answered easily, tongue darting out in that frustratingly distracting tic.

“...the last thing I remember is being on the floor,” Charlie said slowly, looking warily over at the blond.

“I moved you to the couch,” Barty said casually, like it was no big deal that a Death Eater had bothered to consider his comfort.

“Any particular reason?” Charlie pressed, suspicions growing.

“Maybe I just felt like being nice,” the blond shrugged.

“Nice. Sure.” Charlie snorted in response, because he knew enough about the last War to know that Barty Crouch Junior had been sentenced to Azkaban for helping torture two Aurors into insanity—'nice' was not something that came to mind as he looked over at the other wizard.

“So suspicious,” Barty shook his head in mock-upset, “don’t you trust me at all?”

Charlie actually laughed at that, because the mere idea was laughable, pure insanity. Trusting Barty would be about as sensible as taking a cobra to bed and expecting to still be alive by the time morning and rolled around.

"Not for a second," he told the Death Eater and Barty grinned wildly at him with split lips, showing far too many of his teeth.

“Now that hurts my feelings.”

“Like you have feelings.”

“Ouch!” Barty gasped dramatically, hands over his heart, and all of it was ridiculous that Charlie had to laugh again, the sound only edging slightly towards hysteria.

“I didn’t break you already, did I?” Barty asked, sounding honestly curious, “because that wouldn’t be any fun.”

“Shut up,” Charlie told him, finally reeling the laughter back under control. “I need to take a piss—where’s the loo?”

“Follow me,” Barty instructed and Charlie winced slightly as he stood up, head pounding and stomach lurching, and did as Barty said. The blond led him out of the room and down an unfamiliar corridor that he didn’t even remember walking along the previous night, he’d been that out of it, to a lavishly decorated bathroom. After relieving his bladder and taking a long drink from the tap, Charlie finally braved looking down at his forearm.

Bold even against the shiny-pink and twisted scar tissue that marred his arm, the Dark Mark was oddly captivating, mesmerising even. The red of the tattoo was darker and more vibrant than blood and it was cold to touch, like the skin had been pressed against snow.

“Beautiful,” Barty breathed and Charlie wasn’t even surprised that the blond wizard had apparently
disregarded common decency and propriety entirely and let himself into the bathroom when Charlie took too long for his liking.

“Mark or not, there are a few too many scars to be called ‘beautiful’, by any stretch,” Charlie said wryly and Barty grinned.

“Nah,” he said, “I like them.”

Charlie looked at Barty in consideration, easily recognising the heat in his voice and recalling the night before—the memories were foggy, but he remembered that Barty had been just as hard as he’d been during that fist-fight. “Which gets you off then, violence or pain?” he asked.

“Depends,” Barty countered, nodding at the scars, “how many of those did you do to yourself?”

“I like playing with fire,” Charlie told him, carefully casual despite the sudden speeding and reflexive twist of anxiety, and Barty grinned, wide and manic.

“So do I— admittedly never quite so literally before, but I do love watching things burn.”

Charlie shook his head, more amused then anything—there was something very wrong with Barty, something twisted up and broken and not put together quite right. The other man reminded him of Tonks, which would send Charlie running screaming if he had any sense. Sense, however, was not something he could claim to be in great possession of for quite some time—clearly, considering his current situation.

“You’re kind of a nutter,” he told Barty, who just laughed.

“Oh Weasley,” he said, with a wide, wild grin, “welcome to the mad house.” And then the grin twisted into something much more sinister. “Time to finish admiring your new ink and make yourself pretty, well prettier—our Lord wants to talk to you.”

And that? That was exactly what Charlie did not want to hear.

Several spells later, Barty deemed him presentable and dragged him out of the bathroom, back down towards the room he’d spent the night in but going straight past the still ajar doorway without stopping.

Charlie focused on not hyperventilating as Barty took him to the room he’d mentally dubbed ‘the throne room’ the night before.

The Dark Lord Voldemort was already in there, waiting.

Barty immediately let go of him and dropped to his knees, shuffling forwards to kiss the hem of his Lord’s robes. Charlie wondered if he was supposed to do that too and started to internally panic, desperately wishing he’d thought to ask Barty beforehand. In the end, he hastily bowed to You-Know-Who—or should he be referring to him now as the Dark Lord? Probably.

“Charles Weasley,” the Dark Lord said, those terrifying eyes boring into him like they were piercing right through to his very soul. “Your services are required.”

His services?

“O-Of course, er, my Lord,” he said, only stammering slightly.

“I find myself in need of an exotic animal, a serpent to be exact,” the Dark Lord said smoothly. “It
needs to be rare, intelligent and powerful.”

“Do you have any preferences, my Lord?” Charlie asked, already starting to plan who he needed to get into contact with. “Off the top of my head, I know people who can procure a runespoo, basilisk, naga, maledictus or quetzal-coatl, but if there’s a specific breed you’re thinking of, I can reach out for prospective sellers.”

The Dark Lord was silent for a moment, a contemplative expression on his strikingly handsome face (which Charlie would admit was unnerving, considering the fact the wizard was technically in his early seventies).

“A quetzal-coatl, I think,” the Dark Lord said finally. “You will be provided the gold necessary to make the purchase.”

“Do you have a preferred colouring, my Lord?” Charlie asked.

“Of course,” the Dark wizard said, almost amused-sounding, “green.”

Naturally, Charlie thought, wondering why he’d even asked. “I’ll make it happen, my Lord,” he promised out loud, bowing again.

Compared to the first order the Dark Lord had given him— and he’d never forget killing that poor woman, no matter how long he lived— this would be easy as breathing.

Now he just had to figure out where the fuck Tonks had ended up then drag her back to her apartment and find that emergency stash of cocaine she kept so he could get high as fuck and forget, for however long the drugs were in his system, the past twenty-four hours.

…and on second thoughts, considering who Tonks had gone off with, he’d probably be better off leaving without her— he’d really prefer to avoid the additional mental scarring.

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Neville’s POV:

Neville half tumbled off the broom with a laugh, windswept and exhilarated. A few feet ahead, Viktor landed his broom with ease, stepping off with actual talent and balance, and Neville grinned up at him from where he was sprawled on the ground.

“That was amazing!”

Flying had never been something Neville been good at— the opposite, in fact, and he’d barely sat on a broom since he’d broken his wrist back during the first flying lesson in his first year. He’d told Viktor that and the Bulgarian had insisted that he give Neville a lesson, claiming that there was nothing better then the freedom of the skies. Neville had given in, because Viktor rarely looked as happy as he did when talking about flying. Quidditch, the older boy had told him, had only been something he’d gotten involved in due to his love of flying— being exceptional at the popular game had given him an excuse to be on his broom as much as possible, but flying would always be his first and greatest passion.

Neville had often wondered, at first, just why Viktor Krum was spending so much time with him, as their relationship grew from exercising together in the early mornings to actually spending time together talking, and it had taken him a long time to realise that the older boy was just as lonely as
he had been, before Harry and Fleur had taken him under their wings. He and Viktor were kindred spirits, Neville privately thought; both of them knew what it was like to be surrounded by people and still feel so alone.

Before his rise to fame in the Quidditch world, Viktor had been overlooked by teachers and classmates as an unexceptional student and now he was fully aware that the people constantly clamouring for his attention had no interest in who he was outside of being an internationally renowned Seeker. Viktor had long since admitted to him the lie about being betrothed; it was a falsehood he purposefully spread, to avoid obsessive female fans. Even then, it didn’t always work — he had to check everything he ate for love potions and had to have his mail scanned.

Neville wasn’t sure which was worse— having nobody who wanted to be friends with you or being constantly bombarded with people who only wanted to be associated with your fame. Either scenario, he’d ultimately decided, was just as lonely.

He’d been skeptical about Viktor’s offer to teach him how to fly but had decided to trust that his friend wouldn’t let him fall—and Viktor had let him share his greatest passion in life, giving the older boy a tour around the greenhouses, so Neville had wanted to let Viktor share his too.

And Viktor hadn’t let him fall— he’d been patient and thorough and to Neville’s utmost shock by the end of two hours he’d been able to fly laps around the Hogwarts grounds with Viktor. Admittedly, they had been very slow, careful laps and he’d been so stiff by the time they landed he’d basically fallen off the broom the moment he touched the ground, but there had been something so freeing about soaring through the skies.

“You did vell,” Viktor told him while helping him to his feet and Neville practically beamed.

“That was brilliant!” He exclaimed and Viktor’s small smile grew slightly, a rare sight from the reserved boy.

As they both started walking back towards the Durmstrang ship— Viktor had lent Neville one of his brooms, it turned out that he had several for practicing— they maintained an easy conversation between them which was no longer so stilted, Viktor’s English steadily improving the more they’d talked over the past weeks.

“What’s Bulgaria like?” Neville asked as they approached the ship— Viktor rarely talked about his home country and he couldn’t help but be curious.

"It is… changing," Viktor answered, looking as if he was searching for the right words. "Mundane politics— you call them ‘muggles’ in Britain— they haff affected all our country, the magical world too. Living standards are low and our people are poor. But ve are strong too, ve do not give up."

Viktor then smiled. "Ve are a beautiful country. Our magical population, much of us live in a hidden city in the Southwestern Rila Mountains. It is very cold there in vinter, but to fly over the mountains... I haff never seen more beauty."

"I think I'd like to visit there one day," Neville said, trying to imagine what it could look like, and Viktor clasped a hand over his shoulder.

"You must visit when the Tournament is over— you vill be a welcome guest in my home," he promised. "I vill take you flying with me over Rila. There is much plant life, some which only grow on the mountains."
“I’d like that,” Neville said honestly, feeling excitement beginning to bubble up inside him, and Viktor smiled one of his rare smiles.

“I vood too, my friend.” He said warmly.

Neville still wasn’t entirely sure how his life had managed to turn around so completely this year, but he knew that in all his life he’d never been happier. He had no idea how he could possibly thank Harry for the priceless gift he’d given him when Harry had decided to take a chance on “loser Longbottom” but he knew he’d never forget what he owed the other boy, not for as long as he lived.

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Severus’s POV:

As the last days of May crept up on them, Severus left the castle to meet Re- Lupin— okay, fine, Remus— at the Three Broomsticks. The cheerful atmosphere in the warm pub filled with merry chatter and laughter was a stark opposite to the dark storm of emotions he was feeling and irritated him in a way that had him want to do something rash and regrettable, like set the whole Merlin-damned place on fire.

He found Remus sitting at one of the more private tables, thankfully set away from the worst of the happy masses. It was only a few days after the full moon so the other man looked more tired then usual, but his face still lit up when he spotted Severus walking in. Severus felt the stress that had been weighing him down lift slightly as he sat down across from the other wizard, who’d already ordered them both foaming pewter tankards of butterbeer. Personally, he wouldn’t have minded something stronger, but he, Minerva, Poppy and Pomona had been going through wine like pumpkin juice recently so giving his liver a break was probably a good thing.

“You’re looking about as bad as I feel,” Remus said dryly and Severus snorted.

“I’m not surprised.” He’d barely been sleeping, strung-out and stressed as he was. The Dark Lord was building up to something and he was constantly feeling like everything was teetering on a fine edge and all he could do was hold his breath and wait for the inevitable fall-out.

And, of course, there was the whole situation with Harry.

“I’m… concerned about Harry,” he admitted to Remus— because there was a lot to be concerned about, and not just limited to the Third Task, the boy’s apparent attempts at becoming a spy and the Dark Lord’s plans surrounding his student.

“I am too,” Remus sighed, slumping further down in his seat. “Hermione as well— our weekly sessions have been… concerning, as of late. Not only is she constantly anxious and angry, but her main coping strategy when it comes to dealing with emotions she’s uncomfortable with, as well as all her past traumas, is to abuse Occlumency and I’m not sure what to do about it— I don’t suppose you have any suggestions?”

“I am possibly the least helpful person to talk to in that regard,” Severus said dryly, thinking of his own frequent abuse of Occlumency. Remus sighed again.

“You Slytherins,” he muttered, shaking his head. “Haven’t you ever heard of talking about how you’re feeling? Or discussing emotionally challenging experiences and how they’ve affected you and are still affecting you, in order to work through them instead of shoving them to the back of
your heads, locking them away, throwing out the key and pretending they never happened?"

“We don’t always have an abundance of people we’re comfortable discussing such vulnerabilities with,” Severus pointed out.

“You know that I’m always here if you ever need someone to talk to though, right?” Remus asked, looking at him earnestly, and Severus arched an eyebrow.

“I was under the impression that’s what we’re doing at this very moment,” he drawled and Remus looked almost comically surprised.

“Oh!” he said, shocked, before his surprised expression shifted to pleased. “I hadn’t realised.”

Severus snorted, though not meanly. “Clearly.”

There was a slightly awkward pause before Severus turned the conversation back to its original topic of Harry and his worries regarding the boy. “A concerning number of dangerous magical creatures are in the process of being imported to Britain for the Third Task,” he told Remus with a grimace. “Harry’s been getting specialised training from an Auror, but I thought that perhaps after your sessions with Hermione you could give Harry some advice— after all, considering you’re not a professor there’s no rules that prevent you from teaching him how to deal with the various magical creatures he could find himself facing.”

“I don’t know what he’ll be facing, though,” Remus pointed out and Severus was unable to help his smug smirk.

“I know,” he said, “but I do. And I’m going to accidentally leave a list of them on the table which you’re going to pick up.”

“That’s a bit obvious, isn’t it?” Remus said, amused. “You’re not even trying to be sneaky about it.”

“It’s not like you’re about to report me,” Severus countered.

“True,” Remus conceded with a small grin before tilting his head slightly. “You said he’s getting specialised training from an Auror?”

“Yes, she graduated a few years ago— Nymphadora Tonks, Andromeda Black’s daughter.” Severus told him and Remus frowned slightly.

“Isn’t she the one Moody’s been training?”

“She is,” he confirmed, now curious, and Remus’s frown deepened.

“I’ve met her before, briefly.” He said. “She’s a strange girl… a bit off. The, er, more instinct driven part of me was a touch too interested in her.”

“‘Interested’?” Severus arched an eyebrow, intrigued, and Remus flushed.

“Not like— not like that,” he stammered, clearly embarrassed. “The wolf, it just recognised— it recognised danger, almost? Like it was acknowledging a fellow predator. It has better instincts for that sort of thing then I do.”

Considering the long line of insane, unstable, sadistic psychopaths that Nymphadora Tonks was related to, Severus thought that the keener animal instincts Remus’s more feral side retained even
when it wasn’t the full moon were quite accurate. Remus’s reaction, however… “You recognised her as dangerous,” he said, partly incredulous but mostly amused, “and your immediate response was to find her interesting?”

Remus’s flush deepened. “Well, we all have our preferences,” he mumbled, hastily picking up his tankard and lifting to his face, like he was trying to hide behind it. Severus could feel the corners of his mouth curling up.

“Apparently so.” He drawled and as Remus hastily changed the subject Severus was merciful enough to let him. The memory of the exchange, however, lingered long after he’d returned to the castle, leaving him uncomfortable and irritated in a way he couldn’t quite define.
CHAPTER LXXIII:

_Hermione's POV:_

Bribing Evander Rosier, one of the sixth year Slytherins who shared the same Potions class as the Weasleys and, incidentally, held a large grudge against the two Gryffindors, to create an 'accident' had been far easier then she'd anticipated. Hermione had made sure to specify that only one twin be caught by the exploding potion and even though he'd been confused, Rosier had agreed.

Unlike the lower year levels, sixth and seventh years doing Potions had to have achieved an Exceeds Expectations or Outstanding for their Potions OWL to be eligible for the class. These students were held to a much higher standard and the potions they brewed were far more volatile and dangerous— and when things went badly with potions, they went _very_ badly.

Rosier had performed his role admirably— gossip abounded in the castle as it became known that a student had been rushed to the Hospital Wing following an explosion in class. When a Ravenclaw second year spotted several Healers from St Mungo's flooing into the Hospital Wing, the gossip increased threefold.

Dumbledore made the announcement before dinner, standing up at the head table with a heavy expression on his face and Hermione could feel the vicious satisfaction unfurling in her chest as the headmaster spoke.

"Today a terrible accident occurred," he said, with what appeared to be real sadness. It probably was— it had been one of his _precious Gryffindors_ who'd been injured, after all. "When each school year begins, your professors warn you of the dangers that accompany tomfoolery during classes. Magic is a wondrous gift to us all, but it is also dangerous— and the consequences when magic goes wrong has the potential to be catastrophic, fatal even.

"Earlier today during a Potions class, an argument between two students caused several ingredients to be knocked into an incomplete potion, which resulted in the potion exploding. Fred Weasley was closest to the explosion and was subsequently hurt very badly. While I know you will all be relieved to hear he survived, I'm afraid that the injuries he gained have left permanent marks, a severe scarring that will never fade.

"And so, I would like to make it very clear now that any student from _any_ year level who makes a derogatory comment towards Mister Weasley about the scarring will face very serious consequences. Bullying is _not_ accepted at Hogwarts."

As Dumbledore sat back down, Hermione turned to give Tracey and Daphne an incredulous look. "Is he fucking joking?" She asked. "_Bullying is not accepted at Hogwarts_"— what a load of utter bollocks!"

"Double standards as usual," Tracey said bitterly and Daphne looked quietly furious next to her.

Dinner passed with a low hum of chatter— Hermione caught Rosier's eye as they all stood at the end and the sixth year smirked at her, winking. Harry caught the look and as the students all started
making their way back to their common rooms, he grinned at her and asked, "so that was you, then?"

Harry, she thought to herself as she grinned back at him, was certainly both vicious and vindictive when it was someone he loved who'd been hurt— she'd never seen him so gleeful about someone else's misfortune before.

"What do you think?" She asked him and he laughed.

"I think you look like the cat that got the canary— so yes, it was definitely you."

"I told them I was going to ruin them," Hermione shrugged playfully, though her smile was sharp and cruel. "It's not my fault they didn't believe me— they really should have listened when McGonagall told them to stop fucking with me."

"Let's see how Weasley likes having a scar that people constantly want to stare at and gossip about," Harry replied, looking just as satisfied as she felt.

Fred Weasley didn't show his face for several days but as Hermione entered the Great Hall on Friday morning, the hissing whispers alerted her that something was going on. It only took her a moment to realise that everyone was trying to surreptitiously peek over at the Gryffindor table— it appeared that Weasley had finally dared to appear in public.

Hermione didn't bother to attempt to hide the fact she was staring right at the Weasleys, enjoying the look pure hatred on George Weasley shot her as he caught her stare, as well as the humiliation on Fred Weasley's face... well, the humiliation on half his face. The right side of Fred Weasley's face was perfectly smooth and unmarked, but the left side reminded her of a melted candle— it appeared as if his skin had been burned down to the underlying skull, with the left cheekbone and left side of his jawbone standing out harshly. Where his left eye should have been there was a flap of skin fused to his cheek in pink and white lumps, his nose was stripped completely of flesh, no nostrils just thin skin drawn tight over cartilage, and his mouth had no lips, sagging on the left in a way that pulled it down into a permanent grimace— there was no more laughing prankster to be seen.

"Merlin's balls!" Harry gasped at her side, also staring unashamedly over at the disfigured Gryffindor.

"And there's still part three to come," Hermione said with satisfaction.

"Part three...? Oh! Right!" Harry realised, his mouth curving into an unusually cold smile. "Has Tom—?"

"Not yet," she shook her head. "But he will." She had full faith in Tom's ability to get his hands on unicorn blood for her and when he did, she'd enact the final phase of her plan and destroy the Weasley twins for once and for all.

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_Fleur's POV:_

The time without any sighting of or contact from Tonks following the meeting Fleur had arranged between her lover and Lord Voldemort stretched on and on, and with each passing day Fleur found it harder and harder for her to remain calm.
It wasn't that she didn't trust that Tonks had the exact temperament required to thrive as a Death Eater, but she still worried— for all her bloodlust and psychopathic tendencies, loyalty meant something to Tonks and if the older witch had already decided to give her loyalty to the Light... well, Fleur thought it was quite reasonable for her to be worrying about her lover.

It was a full week after she'd last seen Tonks before she saw the other witch again. The moment she entered the Great Hall to the sight of a head of bright bubblegum-pink hair, Fleur's knees had turned weak with relief. Tonks's grey eyes immediately snapped over to meet hers and the older witch's mouth curled into a pleased smile. Fleur immediately smiled back, feeling a heavy weight lift from her shoulders.

After a breakfast she hadn't tasted and couldn't even remember what she'd eaten, Fleur had barely stepped out of the Great Hall before she was being dragged off into an alcove. Recognising the hands on her— for how could she not?— Fleur didn't hesitate for a moment to turn around and frantically attack Tonks's mouth with her own, kissing like she was drowning. She clung to the older witch with a grip that edged on desperate, pressing her body tight against Tonks's as the older witch opened her mouth, obliging, laughing into the kiss. Fleur bit her tongue and Tonks melted, moaning loudly as she drank in the violence.

"I'd almost think you were worrying about me," her lover teased breathlessly when they had to part for air and Fleur continued to cling to her, digging her nails into Tonks's flesh and fighting the urge to let them shift into talons so she could sink them that much deeper into her lover.

"Did you zink zat I would not?" she demanded hotly and as Tonks laughed again, Fleur took a moment to examine the older witch. There was something... different about her lover, something she only noticed due to the contrast of before and now; there had always been a pent-up energy thrumming through Tonks, a restlessness in her limbs, a sharp hunger in her smile and a wildness in her eyes. And yet now... now she finally seemed still; sated, satisfied and settled at long last.

"You are different," she murmured.

"I feel different," Tonks easily admitted with an unmistakable shiver of pleasure. "Come on, pretty girl, let's go catch up before your classes."

"Catching up" apparently referred to Tonks locking them in an unused classroom and bending her backwards onto one of the desks before eating her out until she was sobbing, her lover's tongue a hot, slick torture. The edges of the desk dug uncomfortably into her and the arched position Fleur's back was forced into was nothing short of painful, but Tonks clearly didn't care about her comfort, in all likelihood she actually enjoyed the thought of her discomfort, and that only made Fleur burn hotter as ever.

She was late to her first class and spent the day stiff and aching— and Tonks's promise that they would catch up properly once Fleur had finished her classes for the day had her in a constant state of distraction. Fortunately, her classmates and professors all seemed to blame her distraction on the upcoming Task, though in truth nothing was seemingly more irrelevant and further from her mind then the schoolchildren's competition.

The very moment her last class of the day finished, Fleur went straight to Tonks's temporary quarters where the older witch was already waiting for her with eyes glittering darkly and a hungry red smile.

"Eet all went well zen?" Fleur demanded before Tonks could distract her, needing to know that there hadn't been any problems.
"Oh it went very, very well," Tonks grinned wicked-sharp and dangerous, "I gave a few vows, killed a few people, made a few friends... I met my Auntie Bella for the first time and we did some family bonding... she told some very interesting things, too— tell me, pretty girl, I'm curious; what does it feel like to burn a man alive?"

Fleur froze, her nose suddenly filled with the sickly scent of burning, crackling flesh as she remembered how the fire in her veins had sparked so readily, the flames leaping eagerly from her fingers. Before her, Tonks licked her lips and started prowling forwards. The closer she got, the more Fleur could see the arousal evident in the older witch. "Gotta say, love," Tonks purred, "that was one of the hottest things I've ever heard."

"Zat was a 'orrible pun," Fleur said with a light scoff that was as fake as her composure, trapped in place as she was by Tonks's lust-blown gaze, mere prey before the predator she called her lover.

"Maybe," Tonks agreed; low, husky, hungry. "Doesn't make it any less true... I can't wait to work with you."

Somehow, Fleur was getting the impression that Tonks wasn't talking about them both working for the Ministry of Magic– and the look the older witch was giving her could level entire cities; it was as if Tonks could see straight through her skin, to her bones and soul. Fleur couldn't even reply, not with how her breath was caught in her throat, her heart fluttering wildly in her chest like a hummingbird caged by the curved ivory bars of her ribs. For a brief, wild moment, Fleur vividly imagined Tonks cracking them open and reaching within her to hold her fluttering heart in her hand.

The macabre thought had her abdomen tighten in anticipation and twisted arousal and, almost without thinking, Fleur fell to her knees before her lover— partially because her legs were shaking too badly to keep her upright any longer, but mostly from a sense of willing (loving) surrender. Trembling where she knelt, Fleur allowed the notions of supplication and submission to slowly wrap around her bones and sink into her head and heart as Tonks's eyes widened briefly in true surprise before her expression turned almost feral, smile pulled back to reveal hungry teeth that warned if she got her teeth locked around any vulnerable thing, she'd rip it to pieces.

*intense scene warning (basically, it's Fleur and Tonks, so beware and feel free to skip until the next asterisks)*

She didn't ask for permission and Fleur wasn't sure she wanted her to. Instead, Tonks laid her out spread-eagled on the floor, kissed her eyelids closed and carved open her tender, vulnerable belly until it felt as if her skin was clinging to muscle by nothing but thin connective tissue and subcutaneous fat— and it hurt, the pain was unbearable and the knowledge that Tonks knew that and kept hurting her anyway was positively electrifying in a way Fleur couldn't quite wrap her head around, let alone her mouth.

Her eyes fluttered open as Tonks eventually lowered the blade and the older witch smiled down at her as she pressed her left hand against Fleur's abdomen, over the open, bleeding wounds there, while her right hand moved even lower.

Fleur let out a thin whimper as the pain of Tonks digging her fingers into the open cuts warred with the pleasure of the fingers of Tonks's right hand curling inside her, thumb pressing against Fleur's clit with equal pressure to that of the nails digging into the bloodied mess of her abdomen.

The pain was horrible, horrific even, but that didn't stop the hot spiking pleasure from building up in her stomach and the base of her spine, the pleasure and the pain forming a kind of impossible balance, a coexistence. Pain-filled tears were spilling over her cheeks as she sobbed, but she was
also gasping in tiny, helpless moans and hitches of breath as Tonks's clever fingers worked their magic, the older witch watching her face with a starving want.

When she came, it felt like her mind shattered outward through her whole body and Fleur knew she'd screamed and she thought she might have babbled something as Tonks pressed her down flat when her body tried to curl forwards instinctively, as if trying to protect itself as pleasure tore her apart, until she went limp with heavy-limbed, trembling exhaustion.

*hardcore parts of the scene over*

"Pretty girl, so pretty when you come, so pretty when you're mine, all mine mine mine," Tonks breathed, her eyes smoked glass as her red-soaked fingers traced the cuts on her abdomen and she bent her head down to lick away Fleur's tears and press little kisses and nips over her face. "So perfect for me..." the older witch made a noise like a purr as she nuzzled at Fleur's neck, tasted the thin skin over where her pulse fluttered. "Your body is the altar I worship at," she breathed, "the blades, the bruises, the blood, all the scars that I leave... they are my prayers, my reverence and veneration, they are all for you my wælcyrge, my gydene*.

"You are mine, my perfect girl, my claim is carved into your very being, my sweet Fleur, and I am never letting you go."

"Yours," Fleur agreed in a voice hoarse from screaming as she let the claim, the ownership, wrap around her heart like iron, chaining itself to her ribcage and anchoring into her very magic and soul, "yours."

(It wouldn't be until much later that she'd realise what Tonks meant, when she'd talked about her claim being carved into her— once the blood had been vanished and the wounds had been healed, Fleur was finally able to see how the cuts to her soft belly hadn't been random at all; no, the silvery scars clearly spelled out N.T. for the entire world to see)

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*Harry's POV:*

The mood in the castle as they entered June became excited and tense again. Everyone was looking forward to the third task, which would take place a week before the end of term. Harry was practicing in preparation at every available moment but he felt more confident about this task than either of the others. Difficult and dangerous though it would undoubtedly be, Slytherin House had banded to support him, uniting under one cause– one of their own winning the Triwizard Tournament.

The older students were volunteering their time between revising for exams to teach him any charms, curses, jinxes and even pieces of transfiguration that they thought might come in handy while the younger students were volunteering their time to be duelling partners, research assistants and to help make sure his homework was completed. He was also training with Tonks three times a week, and honestly it reminded him of Bellatrix's "lessons"– all that was missing were the dead bodies. At his request, Tonks had even started including Auror infiltration and espionage tactics in their lessons; unsurprisingly, she was brilliant at them.

Remus had also asked him to pop by for a word after he finished his weekly chat with Hermione and had ended up spending the next four and a half lecturing him about a horrible variety of terrifying-sounding magical creatures. The fact that Snape had never returned to reclaim his office...
was both very telling and heartening—it cheered him up exponentially to think of all the people who were watching out for him and doing their very best to support him however they could.

His nerves still mounted as June the twenty-fourth drew closer, but they were not as bad as those he had felt before the First and Second Tasks. Considering everything else that had been going on in his life lately, Moody's words about preparing Harry for real life not a schoolboy game had unexpectedly resonated with him—no matter how well or badly he did, the Tournament would soon be over, an inconsequential hiccup in the long scheme of things and there were far more important things to be worried over (the upcoming summer holidays being a prime example).

Breakfast was a very noisy affair at the Slytherin table on the morning of the Third Task. The post owls appeared, bringing Harry many good luck cards from the parents of his friends as well as Remus, who had promised he'd be there, and Voldemort, who'd of course signed his 'Thaddeus' (and if the accompanying 'I expect that you'll do well' sounded more like a threat then encouragement, well, it was Voldemort, after all).

Even the upcoming History of Magic exam couldn't dull his classmates' excitement—though it certainly did nothing for Hermione's nerves. "Which text will you be reviewing while we do Binns' exam?" She asked him over her barely-touched toast, looking like she had a list ready if he wasn't quick enough to answer.

Exempt from the end-of-term exams as a Triwizard champion (except in Snape's case, his Head of House having insisted he sit his Potions exam anyway 'for practice', which he hadn't dared argue with), Harry had been sitting in the back of the exam classes, going over all the magic he'd learned and all the creatures he'd studied defence against for the Third Task.

"Well—" he started to say, but was saved from Hermione's likely insane schedule by Snape stalking alongside the Slytherin table toward him.

"The Champions are congregating in the chamber off the Hall after breakfast," he said shortly, looking about as anxious as Hermione—and not doing much better then she was hiding it.

"But the task's not till tonight!" Harry exclaimed, accidentally spilling porridge down his front, afraid he had mistaken the time.

"Yes, I'm vividly aware of that fact," Snape said, looking like he was trying very hard not to grit his teeth—Harry's only consolation was that his Head of House's foul mood wasn't actually directed at him, just the situation he'd found himself trapped in. "The champions' families are invited to watch the Final Task and considering you have been exempt from all exams, this has been assigned a suitable time for you to greet them."

Snape stormed away in a dark billow of robes before Harry could reply and he was left gaping after him. "He's not talking about the Dursleys, right?" He asked incredulously. "If they turned up, one of them would probably end up dead before the day's over!"

"There's no 'probably' about it. But they're in prison," Hermione pointed out, frowning. "Dumbledore's probably up to something—nothing new there. Be careful."

"I will," he promised and she leaned over to kiss him before standing up with a resigned sigh.

"I'll find you when my exam's over," she promised and he nodded, swallowing past a lump in his throat as he watched her leave the Hall, along with the other Slytherin fourth years who all passed along their support with encouraging looks, quiet words and quick shoulder squeezes.
Maybe Tom had shown up, Harry thought as he slowly finished his breakfast in the rapidly emptying Great Hall. Highly unlikely as that was, he couldn't think of anyone else. He eventually got up from the Slytherin table at the same time as Viktor, and Fleur glided over from the Ravenclaw table to join them as they crossed the Hall to the side-chamber.

"Maman and papa weell both be 'ere and zey want to meet you, 'Arry," Fleur chattered excitedly, her eyes sparkling and cheeks flushed a delicate pink in her excitement. Viktor didn't say anything but he wasn't slouching as much as usual as he walked with them.

Entering the chamber, Harry's eyes were immediately drawn to the radiant part-Veela family— not only was Gabrielle and the woman who had to be Fleur's mother present, there was also an older woman who was stunning enough that Harry suspected she was the full-blooded Veela grandmother, as well as a trio of silvery-blonde girls who looked to range from about eight to fifteen years old, the three of them and Gabrielle looking almost like a flock of birds with their brightly coloured robes, bright eyes and shining hair.

Fleur immediately darted over to her family, jabbering away in excited French. Viktor had slunk off over to one of the corners where he was conversing with his dark-haired mother and father in rapid Bulgarian. Diggory and his parents were there too— and, much to Harry's shock and pleasure, so were the Malfoys.

"Harry!" Narcissa beamed, gracefully crossing the room in order to gently wrap her arms around him in a tender hug that had Harry blinking back a suspicious wetness, not wanting to sniffle against Narcissa's expensive-looking robes. "How are you, sweetheart?" She asked, stepping back slightly and cupping his face in her hands so she could get a proper look at him.

"Nervous," he admitted. "And— surprised."

"Dumbledore wanted to have the Weasleys show up," Lucius sneered, his polished cane tap-tap-tapping against the stone floors of the castle. "Severus managed to convince him otherwise."

"And thank Circe for that," Narcissa said with a delicate shudder.

"'Arry!" Fleur suddenly appeared beside him, "Lord and Lady Malfoy, eet eez a pleasure to see you again," she added with a neat curtsey which Narcissa smiled graciously in response to, while Lucius dipped his chin in polite acknowledgement. "You must meet my parents and grand-muzzer," Fleur told him, slipping her hand into his so she could pull him over to her family, the three adults all looking various degrees of amused at Fleur's enthusiasm.

"Maman, papa, grand-mère, zis eez 'Arry Potter," she introduced, "'Arry, zis eez my muzzer, Apolline, my fazzer Claude and my grand-muzzer Adèle— and you know Gabrielle, my seester, and zese are our, ah, wards; Felicienne, Jessamyn and Suzette."

"We 'ave 'eard much about you, 'Arry Potter," Adèle said, stepping forwards and delicately holding out her hand. Fleur's grandmother was radiant as the moonlight at midnight; her hair was perfectly styled into an upward sweep, the colour matching the large drop pearls at her neck and ears, and she wore an ivory robe paired with a mulberry cloak, the formal attire hardly out of place on the stunningly elegant Frenchwoman.

"Um, only good things I hope," Harry said as he carefully accepted her hand and bent over to kiss the back of it, relieved for the etiquette lessons Narcissa had given him while they'd been staying at the Manor.

"Certainly very eenteresting things," Adèle said with a sweet, gracious smile that didn't at all match
the sharp calculation in her brilliant sapphire eyes.

Claude Delacour, a slightly plump and serious-looking man with a kind smile, was next to greet him, followed by Fleur's mother. Like Adéle, Apolline Delacour's beauty appeared almost otherworldly, her shapely curves complemented by tastefully-cut robes that matched the sapphire blue of her eyes, her lips painted a brilliant red and opals gleaming at her throat and ears in shifting hues of crimson, sapphire and violet. Her hair draped down her back like liquid starlight, softly curling along the ends, and her smile was enchanting as she gracefully held out her hand for Harry to kiss.

"Fleur says you 'ave made 'er feel very welcome 'ere at 'Ogwarts," Apolline said, her accented words gently curling as she smiled at him, lovely and genuine. "I cannot zank you enough for zat, 'Arry."

"Fleur's amazing," Harry said honestly and Apolline's smile warmed.

"Oui, she eez."

"Mama!" Fleur hissed, her cheeks flushing light pink in her embarrassment, and Apolline laughed, kissing her daughter's cheek with unmistakable fondness as Claude and Adéle laughed.

Narcissa and Lucius approached then, both of them smiling politely at the family of veela. Harry quickly introduced them and the adults traded pleasantries with one another. To Harry's surprise, Viktor also shuffled over to them with his dark-haired parents, looking a bit awkward but still introducing Elisaveta and Stoyan Krum to them all.

Of course, that meant Diggory also brought his parents over to introduce them and Olivia Diggory smiled politely and shook everyone's hand while Amos Diggory looked at the Malfoys with badly concealed dislike, his eyes actually narrowing into a glare as he briefly met Harry's eyes.

"Sorry about dad," Diggory muttered to him, "he's been angry since Rita Skeeter's article about the Champions, where she made it out like you were the only Hogwarts Champion."

"Don't worry about it," Harry replied with a wry smile, not bothered at all by the older Diggory's dislike— not when Narcissa kept looking over at him with such soft, warm eyes and Lucius had clasped his shoulder with unmistakable pride as Harry had introduced them. He wasn't sure he could put into words how much it meant to him, that Narcissa and Lucius had come to stand with and support him as his family.

"How about you give us all a tour, darling?" Narcissa suggested once everyone had been introduced.

"Eet weell be eenteresting to see zee famous grounds of 'Ogwarts." Apolline agreed, sounding genuine in her interest.

The Diggorys excused themselves, having plans of their own to spend time with their son, but the Krums joined Harry, the Malfoys, the Delacours and their wards for an enjoyable morning walk over the sunny grounds and through the gleaming castle which had been scrubbed clean down to every last stone (Harry would know, Filch had been grumbling about it incessantly as he and Hermione visited Iago, Mrs Norris and their now fully-grown offspring).

They returned to the castle for lunch where all three families joined Harry at the Slytherin table.

"Mother! Father!" Draco said, looking delighted. "What are you doing here?"

"We've come to watch Harry in the last Task, of course," Narcissa smiled brightly at her son as she
sat down beside him, giving his hand a quick squeeze but not trying to hug or kiss him in front of his friends. Harry sat on Narcissa's other side, with Hermione then beside him.

Introductions were traded around the table, with Neville and Luna coming to join them at his and Blaise's respective beckoning. Luna sat amongst the third year Slytherins, Flora, Hestia and Astoria, and the four younger girls managed to pull Suzette and Jessamyn into their conversation, the two soft-spoken veela tentative at first but slowly gaining confidence. Little Gabrielle Delacour was clinging onto one of Fleur's arms and chatting excitedly, while the girl Fleur had introduced as Felicienne was seated on her other side, holding onto Fleur just as tightly, if not even more so, but not saying a word. Stoyan Krum was about as talkative as his son, but Viktor had introduced Neville to his parents and Elisaveta Krum spoke enough English that she and Neville were able to have a slightly choppy but still clear-enough conversation.

"How did your exams go?" Narcissa asked as Draco carefully served her a portion of herbed Yorkshire pudding while Harry poured her a glass of pumpkin juice.

"Urgh, Binns's exam was as awful as always," Blaise groaned. Narcissa and Lucius both winced slightly.

"What do you think the chances are that the exam hasn't changed since we had to sit it?" Narcissa asked and Lucius chuckled.

"Very good, I'd say."

"I don't see why we should give a damn about Ulrig the Ugly or whatever their names were. Wizards acted like tossers towards other species, the goblins gave as good as they got, no one did anything particularly clever, everyone died, the end." Hermione said sourly as she stabbed at her lunch and Harry reached for her hand under the table, tangling their fingers together.

"You know it'll be fine," he said, dropping his voice to a lower murmur. "It's the last Task and in a few hours it'll all be over."

"And once it is, I'll sleep much easier." Hermione muttered back, not looking at all reassured.

After lunch, the Delacours and the Krums bid Harry and the Malfoys a polite farewell, separating to go spend personal time with their children. Harry, Lucius and Narcissa whiled away the afternoon with another long walk around the castle and then returned to the Great Hall for the evening feast, where Harry was surprised to see not only had Bagman and Barty posing as his father joined the staff at the head table, along with Madam Maxime and Headmaster Mitkov (Karkaroff's replacement), but so had the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge, and his Senior Undersecretary Thaddeus Dagworth.

Oh fuck... he really should have been expecting that.

Bagman and Fudge both looked cheerful and excited, "Crouch" was stern-faced and silent and "Thaddeus" had a charming smile on his handsome face as he conversed with the various professors. It made Harry feel as unnerved as it always did, to see Voldemort looking so normal—it was the same sense of discord he always felt when the Dark Lord was reading the Daily Prophet at the breakfast table while he sipped his steaming tea; the bogeyman of the wizarding world shouldn't be able to appear so human, it felt unnatural to him.

Hermione sitting down next to him disrupted Harry from his thoughts. Like all the other students starting to fill the Great Hall, she'd changed out of her school robes, replacing them with an emerald-green blouse made out of a soft, satiny material that billowed loosely around her upper
arms before cinching at her elbows and waist and an ivory coloured skirt that fanned out in gentle layers. Her dark, heavy curls fell freely down over her shoulders and back while long silver pins kept them off her face.

It was immediately clear to Harry that she was in a much better mood then she'd been in at lunch, less like she was going to shake out of her own skin from her anxiety— and the faint purple marks he could see peeking out from underneath the collar of her blouse were a good indicator to him of just why.

"Is Tom going to be watching?" he asked her eagerly, careful to keep his voice hushed enough that the noise in the Hall kept anyone but her from hearing and Hermione smiled at him.

"You didn't think he'd miss it, did you?" She teased softly. "He'll be under polyjuice, but he'll be watching."

The idea of both Tom and Voldemort being present to watch the Third Task was, in a way, terrifying, but it certainly provided him with the best sort of incentive to win the Tournament.

"Just so you know," Hermione added in a casual voice that ill-suited the accompanying sharp-eyed smile on her face that brought to Harry's mind images of blades and blood splatter, "if you die today, Harry, I will resurrect you just so I can beat you to death with my brand new limited edition copy of 'Hogwarts: A History' and bury you so far down that the heat from the earth's core will incinerate your sorry remains."

"I love you too," Harry told her, feeling warmth blossom in his chest— he knew Hermione well enough to hear the death threat for the declaration of love that it really was, and Hermione's eyes softened in response.

"You two are so freaking weird," Theo muttered and Harry laughed before twisting on the bench enough that he was facing Hermione then leaning forwards and kissing her. She made a soft sound as his lips slanted over hers, parting her lips to deepen the kiss. She tasted sharp and tangy, like the steamed lemon pudding she'd taken several bites of, as well as something sweeter, darker; something so purely Hermione that he knew it as well as he knew his own name.

"Really children," Lucius sighed and Harry pulled back from Hermione, his cheeks heating as he remembered the presence of the elder Malfoys at the table.

"Now, now, Lucius," Narcissa scolded her husband playfully, winking at Harry as she did so, "don't you remember your sixth year? You can't be scolding Harry and Hermione for kissing at the table when you spent half the year with your tongue down Sophronia Burke's throat."

"Mother!" Draco said, horrified, and Narcissa laughed at the joint embarrassment of her husband and son. Harry couldn't help but laugh too and Hermione slipped her hand into his, leaning into him, letting her head rest on his shoulder.

"I'll be fine." He said, quiet enough for only her to hear.

"I'm fairly certain I'm the one who's supposed to be reassuring you," she murmured back with wry amusement.

"But when do we ever do what we're supposed to do?" He asked and she laughed softly.

"If you ask Snape? Never."

As much as Harry finally started to enjoy the dinner, the anxiety in his stomach easing enough that
he could actually eat, the knowledge of what was to come still itched at the back of his mind like a particularly hard to reach bug bite and he was all too aware of the enchanted ceiling overhead fading from blue to a dusky purple.

When Dumbledore rose to his feet at the staff table, silence fell—and so did Harry's stomach. "Ladies and gentlemen," Dumbledore said, his voice easily carrying across the Hall, "in five minutes' time, I will be asking you to make your way down to the Quidditch field for the Third and Final Task of the Triwizard Tournament. Will the champions please follow Mr. Bagman down to the stadium now."

Harry stood up and the Slytherins all along the table applauded him; Hermione, the Malfoys and all his friends wished him good luck, and he headed off out of the Great Hall with Fleur, Viktor and Diggory.

"Feeling all right, Harry?" Bagman asked as they went down the stone steps onto the grounds. "Confident?"

"I'm okay," said Harry. It was sort of true; he was nervous, but he kept running over in his head all the information he'd gone over so many times already in his mind as they walked, from the hexes and spells he'd been practicing, to Remus's lessons on magical creatures, to the stacks of books on magical traps and enchantment, and the realisation that he could remember most of it made him feel much less like he wished he'd drowned himself in his pumpkin juice at dinner.

Fleur slipped her arm through his as they all walked down onto the Quidditch field, which was now completely unrecognisable. A twenty-foot-high hedge ran all the way around the edge of it. There was a gap right in front of them: the entrance to the vast maze. The passage beyond it looked dark and creepy, because of course it did.

"And you actually put your name down for this?" Harry whispered to Fleur incredulously and her giggle in response was only slightly hysterical.

Five minutes later, the stands begun to fill; the air was full of excited voices and the rumbling of feet as the hundreds of students filed into their seats. The sky was a deep navy blue now and the first stars were starting to appear. Hagrid, McGonagall, Snape, Flitwick, Moody, Tonks and Remus all came walking into the stadium, approaching Bagman and the champions. They were wearing large, red, luminous stars on their pointed hats, all except Hagrid, who had his on his moleskin vest.

Harry, surprised but pleased to see Remus, gave the sandy-haired ex-professor a quick wave and grin. Remus smiled furtively back at him, before they both switched their attention to McGonagall as she started to talk.

"We are going to be patrolling the outside of the maze," she said crisply. "If you get into difficulty, and wish to be rescued, send red sparks into the air, and one of us will come and get you, do you understand?"

Harry nodded, along with the other Champions.

"Off you go, then!" said Bagman brightly to the seven patrollers.

"Good luck Harry," Remus whispered while Snape nodded sharply at him, Tonks shot him a wink and Hagrid patted his shoulder hard enough to make Harry's legs buckle slightly as they all passed by, splitting off into separate directions, presumably to station themselves around the maze.
Harry, his heart starting to speed in his chest, gave the other Champions the best smile he could manage. "Good luck," he told them all, meaning it even if it wasn't very Slytherin of him.

Diggory was the only one to actually reply out loud— Viktor just nodded at him, easily looking the most comfortable out of the four of them (Harry supposed Viktor was used to performing under huge amounts of pressure, considering he was an international Quidditch player), while Fleur just squeezed his hand in response.

"I try to make my own luck," Diggory said with a weak grin. "It's a Hufflepuff thing, you know? But right now I think I'll take all the good wishes I can get."

Bagman then cleared his throat, silencing them, and pointed his wand at his throat, muttering, "Sonorus," so his magically magnified voice echoed into the stands.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the third and final task of the Triwizard Tournament is about to begin! Let me remind you how the points currently stand! In first place, with eighty-five points is Mr. Harry Potter, of Hogwarts School!" Cheers greeted this announcement, a majority of them from the Slytherins. Harry could just make out Hermione, Draco, Blaise, Theo, Daphne and Tracey halfway up the stands. He waved up at them, and they waved back, all of them with wide beams on their faces— even Hermione.

"In second place," Bagman continued once the cheers had died down, "with eighty-one points— Miss Fleur Delacour, of Beauxbatons Academy!" More applause. "In third place, with seventy-eight points— Cedric Diggory, of Hogwarts!" The cheers and applause for Diggory sent birds from the Forbidden Forest fluttering into the darkening sky and the handsome older boy smiled, embarrassed but proud as he waved at the stands where all the Hufflepuffs had jumped to their feet, waving black-and-yellow banners and knitted scarves in the air. The applause went on for so long that Bagman had to speak over the Hufflepuffs to announce Viktor Krum in fourth place.

And then— then it was time. Bagman was turning to them, a silver whistle in his hand and a silly grin on his face. "So... on my whistle, Harry!" He announced. "Three— two— one—"

When he gave a short blast on his whistle, Harry steeled his nerves and hurried forward into the maze.

The towering hedges cast black shadows across the path, and, whether because they were so tall and thick or because they had been enchanted, the sound of the surrounding crowd was silenced the moment he entered the maze. Harry felt almost as though he were underwater again and murmured, "Lumos." After about fifty yards, he reached a fork.

"Point Me," he whispered to his wand, holding it flat in his palm. The wand spun around once and pointed toward his right, into solid hedge. That way was north, and he knew that he needed to go northwest for the centre of the maze. After taking a deep breath, he turned right.

He heard Bagman's whistle for the second time and knew Fleur had entered the maze. He sort of wanted to wait for her, but instead sped up. His chosen path seemed completely deserted. He turned right again and hurried on, holding his wand high over his head, trying to see as far ahead as possible. Still, there was nothing in sight.

Bagman's whistle blew in the distance for the third time. And then a fourth. All of the champions were now inside the maze.

Harry kept looking behind him. The old feeling that he was being watched was upon him. The maze was growing darker with every passing minute as the sky overhead deepened to navy. He
reached a second fork and the path ahead was empty too. He didn't know why, but the lack of obstacles was unnerving him. Surely he should have met something by now? It felt as though the maze were luring him into a false sense of security.

“Point me,” he muttered at the next fork. His wand pointed straight ahead so he took the left, as it looked straighter than the right—and found himself abruptly face-to-face with a massive three-headed snake as thick as a grown man’s thigh with smooth, glossy black scales with poisonous-yellow cross bands along the entire length of its body.

"Tom,” Harry muttered through gritted teeth as he stared wide-eyed at the terrifying runespoor, its massive body coiled in place with all three heads arched to strike, fangs dripping with poison, "is a dirty, rotten cheater."

::Can we bite him?: the left head hissed eagerly.

::I want to rip out his throat:: the right head hissed in agreement.

::He smells tasty:: the middle head hissed happily. ::I'm going to eat him all up!::

::You can't eat him, you fool!:: Hissed the right head, and the middle head seemed to shrink backwards from the twin glares on either side of it. ::He's too big for you to eat! You'll give us indigestion again!::

::You idiot!:: added the left head, and wow; Harry hadn’t realised Parseltongue could sound so scornful.

::Um, I'd really prefer if you didn't bite me. Or eat me:: he told the runespoor with a grimace. ::I would definitely give you terrible indigestion:::

::A Speaker!:: hissed all three heads delightedly in an eerie sort of synchronicity.

::You have nothing to fear from us, snakelet:: assured the right head. ::We would never harm a Speaker:::

"Yeah, that's what I thought," Harry muttered. “Tom is a cunning, cunning bastard.”

He’d told Tom he didn’t want to cheat, so naturally the first obstacle he’d run into was serpentine in nature—and he very much doubted it would be the last.

::Can I pass?: he asked the runespoor with a sigh.

::Of course, snakelet::: the left head hissed and the eight and a half foot long serpent slithered to the side of the maze so he could step past it (them?) and continue on.

::Thanks::: he told it, carefully stepping around it, keeping his eyes on those dangerous hooked fangs until he’d turned at the next fork. Left… right… left again… Twice he found himself facing dead ends. He cast the Four-Point Spell again and found that he was going too far east. He turned back, took a right turn, and spotted an odd, hunched shape ahead of him that was accompanied by a strange sound, almost like a swarm of bees. He got a brief glimpse of a broad, round head with moving hair and a wide mouth with tusks and a lolling black tongue before stumbling backwards and swearing, throwing a hand over his squeezed shut eyes as he did so.

He could recognise the sound of a swarm of bees for what it really was now; the overlaying hissing of the hundreds of snakes that made up the moving “hair”—the creature was a gorgon. Even as far away as he was, he could smell the stink of its breath and it made him want to retch. Gorgons
weren’t often found outside Greece and the ones that were were kept as guards and anti-thief measures by rich witches and wizards. Meeting a gorgon’s gaze would turn any living creature—be it muggle, magical or animal—to marble and they’d stay that way until the head of the gorgon that turned them to stone was chopped off. As far as Harry knew, gorgons were prohibited in Great Britain.

How the fuck was he supposed to fight one when he couldn’t even look at it? He wondered frantically as he backed away; he could hear a guttural grunting, snorting sound and shuffling feet as the gorgon followed after him and the hissing grew louder, like the white noise of a television turned up to full volume, amidst which he could make out brief snatches of words—and realisation struck.

“Tom, you absolute fucker!” He shouted, equal parts frustrated and relieved. ::Stop!:: he hissed. ::Get back!::

The shuffling sound stopped and Harry cautiously opened his eyes so he was squinting, carefully looking only at the ground. The stink of rotted, fetid meat was overwhelming and he hastily kicked at the ground, apologising fervently to the Quidditch pitch as he used the reinforced toe of his dragonhide boot to make a shallow hole in the ground. “Aguamenti,” he muttered, pointing his wand at the hole, filling it with water that slowly started to seep into the ground. Harry could see the moon’s reflection in the puddle he’d just made and, praying it would work, he hissed, ::look at the water::

No snake had ever refused Harry a ‘request’ he’d made in Parseltongue—and apparently the gorgon was serpentine enough that the same went for it. He backed off as it shuffled forwards and then bent over the puddle, glimpsing its own reflection. Immediately, the gorgon stiffened—he could see how it went very still, its body locking in place as its skin rapidly hardened until it had turned to gleaming pure white marble under the moonlight. Harry finally opened his eyes properly, moving his gaze up from the ground to examine the stone gorgon with a sort of morbid curiosity. The detail of the “statue” was incredible; he could see every wrinkle, scale, fang and pore rendered in stone with startling precision.

“That is so creepy,” he muttered, giving the marble statue a wide berth as he edged around it then jogging away. He met nothing for the next few minutes and kept running into dead ends. Twice he took the same wrong turning and he could practically hear Tom laughing at him. Finally, he found a new route and started to jog along it, his wandlight waving, making his shadow flicker and distort on the hedge walls.

He shivered as the air started to turn colder, not unlike when approaching a dementor only without the overwhelming sensation of all the warmth and happiness being sucked out of him, and his dead parents’ screams echoing in his ears.

A strange smell began to thicken in the air; a sweet, sickly stench that made him think of dead, rotting things. That realisation was like plunging into the Black Lake during winter—death. The path smelled of death. Harry’s breath started to come quick and shallow, his suddenly sweaty grip tightening on his wand. He started to hear something moving out of sight, the rustle of feathers and frost barely audible yet loud as fireworks in the silence.

It was the eyes he spotted first; moon-bright and silver, they were luminescent and gleaming with far too much intelligence as they met his own. From the darkness around the eyes, a shape emerged, gliding to the ground on dark wings, the span of which easily reached over seven feet in length.

The creature, whatever it was, was about the size of a large crowned eagle but far closer in
appearance to a crow, though not quite. The sleek feathers all appeared as tangible as shadows, with the majority of the plumage ash-grey bar the pitch-black of its head and throat, giving an eerie impression of an executioner’s hood. Its massive, powerful-looking wings, legs and feet were just as dark as its hood, its talons and beak were intimidatingly razor-sharp and the dark red slice of its mouth was somehow curved into what was unmistakably a grin, impossible for a bird’s beak yet still a grin nonetheless.

“What the fuck are you?” He breathed, heart thudding madly in his chest. The gallows bird tilted its head, its beak glinting in a manner far too like the steel of a dagger for his comfort. He wasn’t expecting an answer, but he still felt a distinct, eerie lack of surprise when it spoke, its voice the deep raspy purr of a lioness with an undertone that made him think of ice cracking, the furthest thing from a bird’s harsh, shrieking caw.

“I am Badb of the Morrígu,” it purred. And that— well, that was a name that Harry recognised.

Eyes widening, he instinctively stepped back. “They brought the fey into this Task?” He asked in disbelief, already knowing as he said it that that wouldn’t be the case at all, that it would never have been allowed— wouldn’t even have been possible. The amused, cackling sound Badb let out was similar to a hyena and downright disturbing.

“No, no, they were not so foolish,” it— she— said, lazily prowling forwards, her gait far too graceful and cat-like for her two-footed avian form. Under her talons, sheets of ice formed and Harry could feel the biting chill deep in his bones.

He might be fairly new to the Magical world, comparatively speaking, but he knew enough to know that the fey didn’t involve themselves in wizard business, hadn’t for hundreds of years at that as they rarely left their courts, hidden in the forgotten cracks and crevices of Earth— and the wizarding world was appropriately wary of the affairs of the fey as to not involve themselves in theirs.

Callow-fey— pixies, devas (the little fairies that appeared as bright orbs of light with fluttering gossamer wings, the ones used as ‘fairy lights’ to decorate wizarding functions), garden gnomes, leprechauns and doxies— were some of the only types of fey still regularly seen by witches and wizards, none of which were known for their intelligence and mostly spent their time being annoying, mischief-making pests.

Veela were considered cousins of the fey, as were several other magical beings including hags, selkies, house elves, dryads, sirens and merfolk, but they didn’t quite classify as part of the fey courts.

Badb of the fucking Morrígu, one of the three Morrígna sisters, was most certainly classified as part of the fey courts— and the Winter Court, the Unseelie Court, at that.

She was known in ancient history as a harbinger of doom, taking the shape of a hooded crow as she appeared to predict the death of notable people, to foreshadow imminent bloodshed or prior to battles as a forewarning of the extent of the carnage to come. Even if she hadn’t already confirmed it, Harry knew there was no chance that the ancient fey was involved in the Third Task. No witch or wizard in their right mind would willingly go anywhere near her.

“Why are you here?” He asked, no longer bothering to try and hide the fact he was hastily backing away from her at that point. Babd continued to lazily stalk forwards, deadly hooked claws flashing like blades in the dimming light, thin sheets of ice left in her wake where she’d touched the ground.

“We’ve been watching, little Child of Fate,” she murmured, low and rustling. “You, and the Dark
One; we’ve been watching… listening… and such potential we see, such change is coming…”

“Why are you here?” Harry repeated, voice shaking slightly. “Why are you talking to me?”

“Because I want to,” she replied lazily, stopping and tilting her head, eerie, starlight-silver eyes boring into his own. “Because it amuses me… because I want you to know we’re watching… because tonight everything hovers on a precipice; a tipping point for potential… because when you make your choice, before the sun rises, I want it to be the right choice.”

She grinned again, blood-red and mocking, beak clacking like the meaty clunk of bones wrenched from their sockets. “So choose wisely, oh Chosen One,” she purred, before her wings flared open and she took to the air so suddenly that Harry couldn’t even react as she swooped towards him.

He shouted out, stumbling back, but the Morrígu passed straight through him, nothing but ghostly shadow, cold enough to coat every part of him she ‘touched’ in frost, but not doing any damage as she disappeared, only her mocking, rumbling laughter left echoing in its wake.

“What the actual fuck,” Harry choked out, pressing his hand to his chest as he gasped for air, the hot rush of adrenaline pumping through his body trying to fight the icy-chill that had sunk its claws deep into him.

The sweet-sickly stench of death and decay had vanished as if it had never existed, as had the smothering silence and gathered darkness he hadn’t even noticed until it was gone, but the sheets of ice on the ground remained and as Harry cautiously stepped forwards, it cracked and splintered under his dragonhide boots with a sound like the crunch of breaking bones.

It was fucking awful and beyond creepy.

“At least I know I’ve already survived the most dangerous thing in this hells-damned maze,” he muttered aloud to himself as he hastily brushed away the frost clinging to his clothes. Ignoring the cryptic warning Babd had given him for the sake of his own sanity, Harry focused on the maze—specifically, on finding its centre and winning the Tournament (because Tom would never shut up about it if he didn’t).

He started jogging and took a left path then hit a dead end, a right, then hit another. He forced himself to stop, heart hammering, and performed the Four-Point Spell again, backtracked, then chose a path that would take him northwest but not near where Babd had lurked in wait for him.

He had been hurrying along the new path for a few minutes, when he turned a corner and stopped dead. The newest creature he’d found himself facing was immediately identifiable to him; chimaeras were three-headed fast, strong fire-breathing monsters. The one he was facing was nearly five feet tall with the heads of a fierce-eyed lioness and a goat with four great, curving bone horns over its muscled shoulders, a powerful body, clawed lion paws, heavy cloven hooves and a hissing serpent in place of a tail.

Because of course she was also part-serpentine.

::Go away:: He hissed grumpily. ::Go bother someone else::

The chimaera… she did not react particularly well to that. The angered bleating of the goat head sounded like a screaming child while the roar let out by the lioness head was loud enough that Harry was pretty sure it could have been heard miles away. The scaly tail with the snake head at the end violently swished from side to side, as if in agitation. ::You think we chose to be here?:: it demanded. ::We were stolen from our home! Kept in darkness, unable to move, barely able to
breathe!::

::You'll be returned to your home, I promise::: Harry told her, abruptly feeling sorry for his short temper when it wasn’t the chimaera’s fault she was here— in fact, technically it was his fault… well, it was Tom’s fault but it was because of him that Tom had arranged, through Barty, for the creatures chosen as obstacles to speak Parseltongue so Harry could order them around, or at least ask them nicely to not hurt him and please leave him alone.

::We have your scent::: the snake head warned, ::if you lie to us, we will find you and tear you apart:::

::Understood::: Harry hissed hastily, ::I swear to you, I’ll make sure they take you back home:::

The snake flicked out her tongue. ::You taste honest::: she hissed, as the chimaera dipped her lioness and goat head. ::You may pass:::

::Thank you::: Harry said, bowing back to the chimaera before carefully walking around her, not quite able to let his eyes stray from those fangs… or claws… or jaws… or horns… or the smoke wafting from the goat’s nostrils.

Holy Salazar, he was grateful he didn’t have to actually fight her.

Harry moved on, jogging along the dark path while continuing to use the Four-Point Spell, making sure he was moving in the right direction. Every so often he hit more dead ends, but the increasing darkness made him feel sure he was getting near the heart of the maze. Then, as he strode down a long, straight path, he saw movement once again, and his beam of wandlight hit another extraordinary creature, this one finally not part-snake— it was a sphinx.

It had the body of an over-large lion: great clawed paws and a long yellowish tail ending in a brown tuft, and its head was that of a beautiful, golden-haired woman. She turned her long, almond-shaped eyes upon Harry as he approached. He raised his wand, hesitating. She was not crouching as if to spring, but pacing from side to side of the path, blocking his progress. Then she spoke, in a deep, hoarse voice.

"You are very near your goal. The quickest way is past me."

"So… will you move, please?" asked Harry, knowing what the answer was going to be.

"No," she said, continuing to pace. "Not unless you can answer my riddle. Answer on your first guess, I let you pass. Answer wrongly, I attack. Remain silent, I will let you walk away from me unscathed."

Harry’s stomach slipped several notches. It was Hermione and Tom who were good at this sort of thing, not him. He weighed his chances. If the riddle was too hard, he could keep silent, get away from the sphinx unharmed, and try and find an alternative route to the centre. It was worth a shot, at least.

"Okay," he said nervously. "Can I hear the riddle?"

The sphinx sat down upon her hind legs, in the very middle of the path, and recited:

“He comes to bedsides, icy bridges, battlefronts, and crumbling ridges.
When he comes, he comes alone,
taps a shoulder, then is gone.”

Harry gaped at her.

"Could I have it again… more slowly?" he asked tentatively. She blinked at him, smiled her mysterious smile, and repeated the poem. It didn’t make any more sense the second time. “Crap," he muttered. Bedsides, icy bridges, battlefronts, crumbling ridges— what did all those things have in common? And who visited them? Nobody smart, that was for sure— apart from bedsides, none of those places sounded safe at all… no, they were the opposite of safe; they were the sorts of places where people died. And who visited the dead or the dying? Healers? Maybe, except they wouldn’t come alone, and they wouldn’t just go after tapping a shoulder…

So who else visited the dead and the dying?

“Oh!” He realised, surprised. “Death!”

The sphinx smiled more broadly as she moved aside for him to pass.

"Thanks!” said Harry, and, amazed at his own brilliance, he dashed forward.

He had to be close now, he had to be… His wand was telling him he was bang on course; as long as he didn't meet anything too horrible, he might have a chance… and what if he actually managed to win? Fleetingly, and for the first time since he'd found himself champion, he saw again that image of himself, raising the Triwizard Cup in front of the rest of the school, in front of Tom and Hermione and Voldemort, he could hear the roar of the crowd…

Harry broke into a run. He had a choice of paths up ahead. "Point Me!" he whispered again to his wand, and it spun around and pointed him to the right-hand one. He dashed up this one and saw light ahead.

The Triwizard Cup was gleaming on a plinth a hundred yards away. Harry started sprinting, so focused on the Cup that he almost ran straight into a massive dark shape. He hurled himself past the thing just in time to avoid colliding with it but in his haste, he tripped and as he hit the ground his wand flew out of his hand.

“Fuck fuck fuck!” he panted as a gigantic spider stepped into the path and began to bear down upon on him. He rolled desperately towards his wand, fingernails tearing against the ground as he scrabbled for the thin stick of wood. “Stupefy!” he shouted, as his grasping fingers snagged his wand and he thrust it up in front of him between him and the massive spider— an acromantula, he recognised, heart sinking.

The spell hit the acromantula’s gigantic, hairy black body, but for all the good that did, he might as well have thrown a stone at it. At least it gave him time to scramble desperately backwards as he chanted out, "Stupefy! Impedimenta! Stupefy!” until his back hit the hedge and he used it to help leverage himself back to his feet.

“Right, fuck it— Diffindo! Reducto!” He shouted desperately. But even the more violent spells were no use; the acromantula was either so large, or so magical, that the spells were doing no more than aggravating it. Harry had one horrifying glimpse of eight shining black eyes and razor-sharp pincers before it was upon him.

He was lifted into the air in its front legs; swearing, he curled his legs back from the pincers which were dripping poison, fighting the instinctive urge to struggle and kick out. Instead, he raised his
wand as the spider opened its pincers and snarled, “Incendio!”

It worked— the burst of fire made the acromantula drop him, but that meant that Harry fell twelve feet to the ground, jarring both his knees as he landed but with a gasp, he aimed high at the acromantula’s exposed underside and wheezed out, “Expulso!”

With a burst of bright light, a chunk of the acromantula’s vulnerable underbelly was blasted apart, splattering blueish liquid and chunks of spider… insides. Gritting his teeth, Harry jammed his wand inside the wound, shoving it up inside until he was almost elbow deep inside the thrashing acromantula and shouted, “Expulso!” a second time. A moment later, the full weight of the dying acromantula fell on top of him, knocking the breath right from his lungs and bruising his poor ribs.

“Fuck!” he wheezed, wriggling out from underneath the heavy weight then slumping against the hedge; he was aching all over and it hurt to breathe. And then, just to make matters worse, his stomach sank as he realised with a jolt of horror that he’d left his wand inside the acromantula. “I hate this stupid Tournament!” he seethed, glaring at the gigantic dead spider.

He gave the golden gleaming Triwizard Cup a longing look before turning back to the corpse. He’d never hear the end of it if he left his wand in the maze— ever. Also, he was sort of desperate to get the bits of spider off him before Rita Skeeter descended upon him with her photographer— that was, if one of the other Champions didn’t get the Cup while he was putting off getting his wand out of the spider.

With a groan, he tried pushing the acromantula over. When that didn’t work due to its weight, he resigned himself to having to slither back underneath it. It was vile and wretched and grossly mushy, and as he fished around its guts for his wand, he prayed that Tom and Hermione would never find out about this.

He could have cried with relief when he finally located the wand, gripping it tightly as he squirmed back out from under the dead acromantula. “Scorgify! Scorgify! Scorgify!” He chanted, even as he jogged over to the Cup. With most of the dead spider vanished off him, Harry stared at the Triwizard Cup for one brief, disbelieving moment, then grasped onto one of the gleaming handles.

Instantly, Harry felt a jerk somewhere behind his navel. His feet had left the ground. He could not unclench the hand holding the Triwizard Cup; it was pulling him onward in a howl of wind and swirling colour until he felt himself slam flat into the ground; his face was pressed into grass; the smell of it filled his nostrils. He had closed his eyes while the Portkey transported him and he opened them as he rolled onto his back. A torrent of sound deafened him; there were voices everywhere, footsteps, shouts…

He caught a brief glimpse of the pale, familiar faces of his house-mates crowding over him before Hermione dropped to her knees and seized the front of his robes, yanking him into an upright position so she could throw her arms around him and hug him so tightly that his bruised ribs screamed in protest and he actually had trouble breathing.

“He’s turning blue,” Blaise pointed out, though Harry could hear how relief had softened his usual snark.

“Sometimes a person just needs a hug,” Hermione said, sounding entirely unapologetic, though she did let him go and Blaise and Theo helped pull him back to his feet while Draco and Tracey hovered.

“And sometimes a person needs oxygen,” Harry joked, rubbing his sternum before looking around and frowning. No professors had rushed over to him, he couldn’t see Bagman or Crouch or even
any of the Headmasters—or Madam Maxime—anywhere. Not to mention, all the students in the stands seemed to be in a state of agitation and not paying any attention at all to his appearance with the Cup. "What happened?" He asked. "What’s wrong? Everyone’s looking all panicky… and where’s Nev and Daph?"

The Slytherin fourth years all exchanged looks and it was Blaise who spoke. "There was an incident." He said reluctantly. "Part of the enchantments on the Maze failed."

Harry felt his face go cold as the blood drained from it, because he just knew that they wouldn't be looking this grim about one of the Champions being injured. Someone had died.

"Who?" He croaked, "who was it?"

"It was Krum," Hermione told him quietly and Harry felt a momentary stab of guilty relief—it wasn't Fleur, thank Merlin it wasn't Fleur— and then the grief hit him.

“Oh god,” he breathed, barely able to choke the words out in his horror and sheer disbelief, “Viktor’s dead.”

Chapter End Notes

*Wælcyrge is the Old English cognate of valkyrie, it is used as a word for a human "sorceress", to translate the names of the classical furies in two manuscripts and has been used in reference to the Roman goddess Bellona, an Ancient Roman goddess of war whose priests were known as Bellonarii and used to wound their own arms or legs as a blood sacrifice to her. Gydene means "goddess".*
There was a heavy, sick sort of anticipation in Hermione's stomach as she watched Harry disappear into the Maze.

“Honestly,” Blaise muttered next to her, “this Tournament’s turned out to be a terrible spectator event— the only Task we actually got to see was the first one, with the dragons. The Second Task was underwater and now this one’s in a bloody maze too tall for us to actually see anything interesting.”

“Perhaps I should have worn my Spectrespecs,” Luna said thoughtfully, from where she was curled up on the other side of Blaise. She was wearing his green-and-silver scarf and he’d wrapped one of his arms wrapped around her. “They let you see through solid objects, you know— mummy created them. She let me choose the colours.”

“I don’t know,” Longbottom said, the Gryffindor no longer hesitating so much to speak up and disagree anymore. “I found actually watching the Champions in danger much more stressful.”

“I’ll just be glad when it’s over,” Daphne said with a sigh. “Though I’ll miss Viktor.”

“And I’ll miss Yosef,” Tracey said glumly.

“I thought Sashko said your parents had arranged a betrothal,” Theo said and Tracey sighed mournfully.

“They did, but Yosef’s parents are traditionalists. From now until we’re married, when we’re together we’ll have to be chaperoned.”

Hermione snorted softly at that. “I’m so glad I’m not a pureblood,” she said, unable to imagine not being allowed to be alone with Harry or Tom. Or not having sex with them, another big pureblood no-no.

The light banter between them carried on for a while and Hermione was acutely aware that her friends were trying to take her mind off the Task, but she appreciated it all the same. The tension in her stomach didn’t abate, however, and she was so fixated on the Maze that she was one of the first to spot the sudden shower of red sparks.

Instantly, her heart started to speed up, her breath catching in her throat. “Fuck,” cursed Blaise, the second out of their group to spot it. Around them, Hermione could hear the explosion of chatter as people started loudly debating what could have happened. For the next few minutes, she waited with baited breath, hoping that one of the Champions had just found themselves in over their head and had called for help. That hope shrivelled up and died a miserable death when a bear patronus bounded out of the Maze, a brilliant burst of silvery-blue light that caught everyone’s attention as it made its way straight to the healer’s tent that had been set up. Moments later, a cat patronus
followed, streaking through the air towards the stand where all the staff were seated.

There was an explosion of noise in the stands, everyone speaking over each other as they stood up on their chairs, craning their heads to get a look at what was happening. Mitkov, Maxime and Sprout were descending down the stairs of the Quidditch stands to the ground, while Dumbledore twisted on the spot, apparating out of view. The other professors started to stand up too, making their way through the stands and stopping the spectators from trying to leave their seats.

Hermione felt like her whole body was humming with nerves—and then her blood turned to ice in her veins as Dumbledore, Snape, Lupin, McGonagall and Moody all exited the Maze together, two stretchers hovering between them as they made their way straight to the healer’s tent where Madam Pomfrey was waiting to usher them in and out of sight, a grim look on her face.

There was no excitement in the air now, only a tense anxiety and terrible sense of anticipation amongst the students, parents and guests alike. Hermione felt like she was going to be sick and she abruptly turned to face Blaise beside her. “I need you to cast a disillusionment charm on me in a moment,” she murmured and his eyebrows rose but he nodded.

Glancing around her to make sure nobody but a few of the Slytherin fourth years were looking at her, she shifted into her animagus form, easy as breathing.

“Holy fuck!” Theo swore loudly, while Blaise said something rude-sounding in Italian. She hissed impatiently at him, snapping her fangs lightly in his direction.

“Right,” he muttered, pulling out his wand and gently tapping the top of her diamond-shaped head. Hermione—Tox—felt the strange cracked-egg sensation sliding along her scales and made an unhappy noise but slid down from the seat, safely hidden from view as she darted down the steps, easily avoiding the patrolling professors keeping everyone in their seats as she made her way down to the grounds, rapidly weaving her way across the grass to the healer’s tent.

Still hidden from view, she slipped under the heavy canvas into the tent. The inside, like all magic tents, was much larger than the outside and almost a perfect replica of the hospital wing. There were two figures laid out on the cots that Pomfrey, Dumbledore, Moody, Snape, McGonagall, Lupin, Moody, Maxime and Mitkov were crowded around, Maxime having to bend her upper torso to fit. Bagman and Crouch were also in the tent, though they were standing apart and out of the way.

Hermione-Tox flicked her tongue out, tasting the scents in the room—there were too many for her to pick apart, bombarding her unpracticed senses. She wanted to get closer but she was too wary of being stepped on by the constantly moving staff and instead, she waited impatiently, listening for information. It was Madam Pomfrey that gave it to her.

“It’s too late for the boy,” she said, her voice strained and furious. “It would have been too late for him, even if I was right beside him when it happened—someone needs to contact St Mungo’s and the Department of Magical Law Enforcement immediately, I need to try and save Cedric; he’s still got a heartbeat, so he’s got a chance of pulling through!”

She roughly shoved back several of the witches and wizards crowding her, focusing her attention to the cot to her right. A very pale Lupin gently slid the white sheet of the left cot up over the face of its occupant and Mitkov rounded on Dumbledore, pure rage visible on his pale, pointed face. “How could this happen?” He shouted, “I vos assured the Champions vood not be put in mortal danger! Ve all vere! And now my student is dead!”

“Lyubomir—” Dumbledore started to say, but Mitkov interrupted him, slashing his hand harshly
The success of the Triwizard Tournament would have brought prestige and respect to the British Ministry—and likewise, its failure was going to have severe consequences.

“Do we stop the Tournament?” Lupin interrupted Mitkov’s shouting, the Durmstrang Headmaster not allowing Dumbledore to get a word in edgewise.

“We can’t,” Bagman said fretfully, wringing his hands. “It’s a magically binding contract—Harry and Miss Delacour don’t have a choice, they have to continue—“

Sprout bustled into the tent then with a grim look on her round face, interrupting Bagman who looked relieved at the disruption caused by her arrival. “The families of the champions are demanding to speak to someone,” she said and Dumbledore sighed, his shoulders slumping. He abruptly looked very old and very tired.

“Very well,” he said quietly. “I will go speak to them.”

“I’ll return to patrolling,” Snape said, his dark eyes flashing with a badly concealed worry. “There’s nothing I can do here.”

“I’ll go with him,” Lupin added, just as pale and worried.

“After you, Dumbledore,” Mitkov spat, a vicious look on his face as he gestured violently towards the entrance to the tent.

Hermione-Tox slithered out after them, following closely as the two headmasters and Ministry officials followed Sprout to where Fleur’s parents and grandmother, the Diggorys, the Krums and Lucius and Narcissa were waiting impatiently, apart from the Quidditch stands.

“Vot happened?” Stoyan Krum immediately demanded once they were close enough.

“A terrible tragedy has taken place—“ Dumbledore started to say, a sorrowful expression on his face, but Mitkov interrupted, barking out something in Bulgarian. Stoyan and Elisavetta Krum both gasped, Elisavetta letting out a wounded noise like she’d just been stabbed in the chest, her husband having to catch her as her legs collapsed out from underneath her.

“Moĭ sin*,” she moaned, “moeto sladko momche!**”

Stoyan looked like he was going to be sick and Apolline Delacour loudly demanded,

“What eez going on? What did ‘e say?”

“Something went wrong in the Maze, some sort of malfunction,” Crouch(Barty) said, his voice stiff. “Two of the Champions were injured. Viktor Krum passed away nearly instantly and Cedric Diggory is very badly wounded. We’re unsure if he will make it.”

“Moĭ sin*,” she moaned, “moeto sladko momche!**”
“My son!” Amos Diggory cried out, immediately charging towards the healer’s tent. Olivia Diggory stumbled after him, tears already streaming down her face. Stoyan was also crying; great, heaving silent sobs that shook his entire body. Elisavetta was moaning, clutching onto her husband with desperate hands.

“I vant to see him,” she choked out, her voice thick and wet. “You vill let me see him!” She amended, almost instantly.

“Mrs Krum—” Dumbledore started to say, but Elisavetta drew herself up to her full height, letting go of Stoyan as she stepped threateningly towards Dumbledore.

“How do you know who I am?” She demanded. “Before I vos married, I vos Elisavetta Oblansk— and I vill see you all burn for vot has happened to my son!”

Dumbledore’s face went very pale, but before he could say anything—or Hermione could figure out why that name sounded so familiar—Fudge and Dagworth approached.

“What the hell is going on here?” Fudge demanded. “Do you have any idea what sort of spectacle you’re all creating?”

Elisavetta turned on Fudge then, her face twisted in a pale, stricken mask of fury. “My son is dead!” She screamed at him, “my son is dead and you vill all pay—” a sob tore out of her throat, interrupting the furious words spilling from her and Stoyan rushed forwards to help her as she swayed dangerously in place. She collapsed back onto him again and Hermione-Tox finally slipped away, allowing the couple their grief.

She returned to the Slytherin portion of the Quidditch stands, slithering up the steps, winding her way around legs to make her way back to her seat. She shifted back before using her wand to undo the disillusionment charm.

“What the fuck—!” Blaise swore, his whole body flinching in surprise. Hermione ignored the similar sounds of shock around her, instead turning to Theo and Tracey.

“What’s so significant about the name Oblansk?” she asked.

Surprisingly, it was Draco who answered her, instead of either of the two she’d directed her question towards, having guessed that with their Bulgarian connections they were most likely to know.

“Well, we met him, didn’t we?” he said, seeming confused by her question. “At the Quidditch World Cup— Oblansk is the surname of the Bulgarian Minister of Magic.”

That was the moment that Hermione got a very bad feeling. A dead foreign student, one who just so happened to be a Quidditch global sensation and the nephew of the Bulgarian Minister of Magic? Politically, it was going to be an absolute nightmare for everyone involved—and the three people who’d be copping the most heat? “Crouch”, Fudge and Dumbledore.

There was no way it could have been an accident that Krum was killed; it was too convenient, too perfect—she’d bet her wand arm that Voldemort had arranged for Krum to be murdered, and Diggory? He’d just been collateral, with the convenient side-effect of being the badly injured son of a Ministry of Magic worker.

“Hermione, what’s happening?” Daphne interrupted her grim thoughts, her pretty face pale and strained. “None of the professors are telling us anything, what’s going on?” She pleaded.
“I…” Hermione hesitated, her gaze flicking over to Longbottom. Fuck. “Something went wrong,” she said reluctantly, “Kr— Viktor… I’m so sorry, Neville— Viktor died.”

Longbottom’s face drained of all colour. “No,” he whispered while Daphne let out a sound of distress, her hands flying up to cover her mouth. As she watched tears brim up in the golden-haired girl’s eyes, Hermione belatedly remembered that Daphne had been Krum’s “date” to the Yule Ball.

“No,” Longbottom repeated and Daphne reached for him, grasping onto his shoulder as she fought to keep her composure even as tears started to trickle down her cheeks.

Hermione closed her eyes, unable to watch their shared grief when she was uncomfortably aware of just who she suspected was responsible. Not to mention, she was still horribly anxious about the fact Harry was still in the Maze… and Fleur too. Not for the first time that night, and probably not for the last, she desperately wished that the Task was over.

The next half an hour dragged on. The news about Krum and Diggory had spread amongst the stands despite the best efforts of the professors to prevent it. Hermione was the only student who’d actually seen either of the boys, but that didn’t stop wild rumours about the two Champions being torn apart by a cerberus or poisoned by a rampaging nundu or strangled by a devil’s snare— the most popular theory, likely due to how plausible it actually was, was that one of the now gigantic Blast-Ended Skrewts was responsible.

The sudden stir caused by the Triwizard Cup suddenly appearing in front of the maze with Harry clutching onto one of the golden handles was almost deafening. Hermione didn’t care— all she cared about as she shoved her way past Professor Sinistra to get to the grounds was that Harry was out of that fucking maze at last. The fact that he was laying face-down on the grass, however, had her panicking until he suddenly rolled onto his back. Moments later, she was dropping to her knees beside him, seizing onto the front of his robes to pull him up so he was in a sitting position and then hugging him as tightly as she could.

He made quiet wheezing sounds in her arms and Blaise gently nudged her shoulder. “He’s turning blue,” her house-mate commented, a gentle reminder that Harry could be injured and that she could be hurting him without actually stating it outright.

“Sometimes a person just needs a hug,” she said, admittedly referring more to herself at this moment, but she was already releasing Harry and both Blaise and Theo grabbed one of his hands to help pull Harry to his feet. He was still holding the Triwizard Cup and he grinned tiredly at them, even as he rubbed his sternum, sending a pang of guilt through her.

“And sometimes a person needs oxygen,” he joked, before looking around, his eyebrows starting to furrow as he began to register the mood around them— and the distinct lack of jubilation. “What happened?” He asked, looking understandably confused— he’d just won the Tournament, after all, and there was no clapping, no cheering and no judges approaching to congratulate him… “What’s wrong?” he demanded. “Everyone’s looking all panicky— and where's Nev and Daph?”

Hermione hesitated, not sure how to answer. Thankfully, Blaise took the unpleasant task off her hands. “There was an incident,” he said, his expression tight. "Part of the enchantments on the Maze failed.”

Hermione’s stomach churned with guilt as she watched Harry’s face drain of blood. “Who?” he croaked, immediately understanding the seriousness of the incident. “Who was it?”

Was. Past tense. “It was Krum,” she said quietly, knowing she didn’t have to say anything else. She was close enough to see the brief flash of relief on Harry’s face before it crumpled.
“Oh god,” he choked out, looking at her with horror-struck eyes, silently pleading with her to tell him that he was wrong, that it was some sort of terrible joke. When she stayed silent, Harry could only choke out, “Viktor’s dead!” before dissolving into tears.

From there, things finally started to move along. Professor Vector was sent over to escort Harry to the hospital wing, not the healer’s tent, and Hermione accompanied him. With Harry now officially the winner, a patronus would be sent to the professors patrolling the maze, Vector explained, and Fleur would be located and removed from the now-completed Final Task. Hermione didn’t say anything in response and Harry seemed like he couldn’t— by how clammy he looked, she thought he was probably in shock. His hand was icy-cold in hers.

Once they arrived at the empty hospital wing, Vector instructed Harry to sit down on one of the cots. When he just sort of stared at the bed, silent tears dripping down his cheeks, Hermione gently urged him into motion, guiding him so he was sitting on the edge then stripping off the muddy boots and jacket he was wearing. She then pushed him so he was laying down against the pillow and kicked off her own shoes before curling up in the bed beside him.

“You’re freezing,” she murmured, pressing her hand to his cheek. She wasn’t exaggerating either, his skin felt like ice to touch.

“That’s a long story,” Harry mumbled, with a visible shudder. “A very long and very disturbing story.”

“You’ll have to tell me it some time,” she replied, trying to keep her voice light when she felt anything but. Any further conversation was interrupted by Snape and Lupin’s entrance into the hospital wing, along with a blood-stained and weary-looking but very much alive Fleur walking between them, her feet dragging slightly from what appeared to be exhaustion.

“Sit,” Snape ordered Fleur, rolling up the black sleeves of his robes. He flicked his gaze over to Harry and asked briskly, “are you injured?”

“No, sir,” Harry said, sounding hoarse. “But I will be, if someone doesn’t get the pissed-off chimaera in the maze back to her home— she’s promised to find me and tear me apart if I don’t keep my word about getting her returned.”

“I’ll alert the Ministry that they need to make it a priority,” Snape promised. “Madam Pomfrey is currently busy, so I’m officially serving as the school medi-wizard right now. Lupin, I’m sure you’ve patched yourself up enough after a full moon to deal with any scratches and bruises Harry has while I take care of Ms Delacour.”

As Lupin approached the bed she and Harry were laying on, seeming remarkably unbothered by Snape being so blunt about his condition, Hermione turned her attention back to Fleur, taking a better look this time and noticing the awkward way she was holding her left arm. “Agrid’s skrewt,” Fleur said with a grimace, noticing where her attention was. “I ’ave a broken arm and some ‘orribly painful burns zat I gained trying to fight eet off.”

“I knew we should have killed those things back when Hagrid first showed them to us,” Hermione muttered, grimacing in memory. “We’d have saved so many students from so much trauma.”

“Zey are insane,” Fleur huffed, hissing slightly as Snape cut away a charred section of her shirt with his wand. Hermione winced at the sight of the painful-looking burns underneath. A few minutes passed in relative silence, apart from a few sounds of pain from Fleur as Snape had fixed her broken arm and slathered burn healing paste on her burns. Lupin, after checking nothing was broken or needed stitches, had given Harry tubs of bruise paste and swelling solution to apply.
He’d also given Harry a pepper-up for his low temperature; it was probably the shock, he’d said. Hermione didn’t mention that he’d been icy to touch before he learnt about Krum’s death, as Harry seemed fully aware of just why his skin was freezing cold and he’d chosen not to tell the professors.

“Eez anyone going to explain why everyzing eez… wrong?” the French witch asked, once Snape finished rolling bandages over her burns. “Nobody ‘as said anyzing to me.”

“Officially, we’re not allowed to tell you anything,” Snape said shortly. “Unofficially, Viktor Krum was killed when the magic in the maze malfunctioned and he and Cedric Diggory were trapped in a dead end with a cerberus. They should have been able to leave the path, there was a magical barrier hidden from view the cerberus would have been unable to cross that humans could, but… as I said, the enchantments failed. Mr Diggory managed to send up red sparks, but it was too late for Mr Krum by the time we got there and Mr Diggory has yet to regain consciousness. His survival is… uncertain.”

“Oh god,” Harry said weakly, looking green.

“**Bordel de merde,**” Fleur shuddered in horror.

Hermione couldn’t deny the intense nausea she felt. Being torn apart by a cerberus was a horrific way to go; it was a fate she’d wish on very few people, and Viktor Krum was certainly not one of them. She found herself feeling more shaken then she’d ever expected to be when faced with the realisation that Voldemort had arranged such a grisly murder of an innocent seventeen-year-old schoolboy who was entirely uninvolved in his war, and with such callous disregard to any possible collateral.

*What if it had been Fleur who was trapped with Krum, instead of Diggory?*

Before Snape could say anything else, McGonagall and Madam Maxime both entered the hospital wing. McGonagall’s expression was tight while Maxime looked emotional. The Beauxbatons headmistress immediately descended upon Fleur, murmuring to her in quiet French, too low for Hermione to overhear. After a minute or two, McGonagall cleared her throat to get the attention of both Frenchwomen.

“Mr Potter, Ms Delacour, I am afraid that the ceremony announcing the winner of the Triwizard Tournament has been indefinitely postponed.” The deputy headmistress informed both Champions crisply. “Harry, Madam Bones will be interviewing you tomorrow on behalf of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement to discuss what occurred tonight. It’s also very likely that representatives from the International Confederation of Wizards will want to arrange to speak with you.”

After Harry nodded, McGonagall turned her attention fully to Fleur. “Ms Delacour, Madam Bones, the Head of the British Department of Magical Law Enforcement, has also requested to speak with you. She will liaise with the French Ministry to set up an appointment as your parents have decided to take you back to France, where they say they will discuss with Madam Maxime the remainder of your school year.”

McGonagall’s face then softened slightly as she sighed, sweeping her gaze across the room to meet each of their eyes. “I’m very sorry that this tragedy has occurred.” She said quietly. “You all have my condolences for Viktor’s loss.”

“Is Cedric— is he going to be okay?” Harry asked hopefully.
“I’m afraid it’s too early to tell,” McGonagall said, looking very tired.

“How about take me to the Slytherin dorms?” Harry asked, after a moment of silence as everyone digested that. “I really don’t want to spend the night in the hospital wing.”

“If whoever examined you agrees that you’re medically stable, then you may return to the Slytherin dormitory.” McGonagall allowed.

“I don’t see an issue with it,” Lupin immediately told her and Harry let out a sigh of relief, slumping slightly beside her.

“Thank god,” he muttered. “Can I go now?”

“You may,” McGonagall said with a nod. “And Harry? If you need to talk to someone, Professor Snape, Mr Lupin and I are all available.”

“Thanks,” Harry said to the professor a bit awkwardly as she slid off the cot and crossed over to Fleur.

“You okay?” she murmured, quiet enough that only Madam Maxime would be able to overhear her.

“I ‘ave certainly been better,” Fleur sighed.

“I’m an owl away if you need to talk,” Hermione spontaneously offered. “Or a floo call away, once the term ends.” She added.

“Oui, I weell keep zat een mind,” Fleur smiled softly and Hermione, taking care not to press against any of her injuries, leaned forwards to give Fleur a gentle hug. She pressed her lips against Fleur’s cheek before stepping back.

“Goodbye, Fleur. Don’t be a stranger.” She said firmly. Harry, who’d walked over too, gave Fleur a gentle hug of his own.

“We’re all going to miss having you at Hogwarts,” he told her.

“I weell miss you too, ‘Arry,” Fleur smiled warmly at him. “Despite ‘ow eet ‘as ended, zis ‘as been one of zee ‘appiest years of my life. Eet ‘as been a pleasure getting to know you all.”

As she and Harry left the hospital wing, Hermione couldn’t help but sigh. “I’m really going to miss her.” she admitted.

“Me too,” Harry said quietly.

They walked in silence the rest of the way to the Slytherin dungeons. Entering the common room, Hermione was relieved to see that the Slytherin students seemed to have decided to give Harry his space. Nobody came rushing over, asking questions about the Task and what had happened in the maze. There was staring, of course there was, but nobody tried to stop them as they went straight for the boy’s dormitory.

Blaise, Theo, Draco, Daphne and Tracey were all waiting there— surprisingly, so were Luna and Longbottom. Hermione briefly wondered if they’d been smuggled in, or if the other Slytherins had decided to let them through in a silent show of support for Harry. Longbottom’s eyes were red and puffy from crying and Daphne’s cheeks were splotchy from tears. Tracey was stroking Daphne’s hair, comforting her, while Luna and Blaise had sat on each side of Longbottom, Luna holding one
of his hands in her own while Blaise seemed to be keeping the slumped Gryffindor upright.

“You’re here, that means you’re okay, right?” Draco immediately asked as they entered the dorm room, his face pinched with worry. “Dumbledore wouldn’t let mother and father go see you and they couldn’t force the issue because they’re not blood relatives and legally, he’s got custody over you.”

“Dumbledore can go fuck himself,” Harry said bitterly, his hands clenching into fists at his sides. “Lucius and Narcissa have been better parents to me in the past three years then the Dursleys were in the twelve and a half years I spent in their custody!”

Hermione urged Harry over to his bed, making him sit down on it then curling into his side, resting her head on his shoulder. He slumped against her, wrapping his arm around her waist, his brief flare of anger drained.

“Do you two know anything more about what happened?” Longbottom asked, his voice hoarse and scratchy.

“Snape told us, unofficially, that the enchantments on the maze failed,” Hermione said quietly, when Harry seemed unable to answer. “Viktor and Diggory ended up trapped with a… with one of the magical creatures.”

“So it’s Dumbledore’s fault?” Longbottom demanded, sudden rage visible on his face.

No, Hermione thought silently to herself. “He was responsible for ensuring that the champions wouldn’t find themselves in life-threatening situations,” she said aloud. “Obviously, he failed.”

Harry shivered beside her and she frowned, touching his face. “You’re still freezing,” she said. “What the hell happened to you in that maze?”

“I, uh,” Harry hesitated, suddenly looking very unsure.

“Harry?” she pressed, past concerned now, having entered worried.

“I had a… visitor,” Harry said hesitantly. “In the maze.”

Hermione’s thoughts automatically turned to Voldemort, or perhaps the polyjuiced Tom who had never approached them (and who, now she thought of it, was very likely the one responsible for sabotaging the maze— either him, or Barty), but she wasn’t sure why Harry would be reacting in such a way, or why his temperature would be so low.

“What sort of visitor?” she asked with a frown.

“A… dangerous sort.” Harry said, uneasy. “Is it… do any of you know if it’s common for the fey to involve themselves in the Wizarding world?”

“The fucking what?” Blaise demanded, straightening up in alarm— it was a reaction echoed in all the Slytherins; even Luna and Longbottom looked horrified.

Hermione didn’t know a lot about the fey, they were barely discussed and wizards seemed as happy to ignore them as the fey were happy to ignore wizards— meaning, over the fucking moon. That Harry had been approached by one of the fey… well, it sent a cold frisson of fear down her spine, because she knew it couldn’t be a good sign.

“Which one?” Blaise asked, ashen-faced. “Was it one of the Named?”
“Yeah,” Harry admitted quietly. “It was Babd.”

“Babd of the fucking Morrígu?” Blaise looked astounded, and not in a good way.

“My thoughts exactly,” Harry said grimly.

“She predicts the death of important people,” Blaise said, his hands trembling slightly. “Krum is important—the effect his death is going to have… he’s internationally renowned, his uncle is the fucking Minister of Magic… and not to mention Babd’s supposed to foreshadow imminent bloodshed— fuck, I really hope it’s metaphorical bloodshed because otherwise… otherwise, we’re looking at a carnage here.”

“Is it really that bad?” Harry asked, looking horrified.

“Yes.” Blaise said grimly. “It is. The fey do not involve themselves in wizarding affairs.” He hesitated slightly then, brief indecision visible on his handsome face before he forged on. “One of my ancestors was one of the fey,” he admitted, and Hermione’s eyes widened at the show of trust and faith Blaise had just given them all. The other Slytherins, and Longbottom and Luna too, looked as astounded as she felt. “She was of the Winter Court, an Unseelie. However weak the bloodline is by now, I’m still part fey— and I’ve never been approached, I’ve never seen one of the fey in my life. They don’t involve themselves in the mortal realm. Our realm. They just don’t, and we are all the better for it.”

Blaise looked genuinely afraid and, as he appeared to be the authority on the fey amongst them, it wasn’t a promising sign.

“What did she say to you?” Hermione asked Harry, managing to keep her voice steady through sheer willpower alone.

“She called me Child of Fate,” Harry said slowly. “She said… she said that something important is going to happen tonight, before the sun rises. She called it the tipping point for potential, or something like that. And then she, well, she kind of flew right through me. Like, literally right through me, like some kind of ghost.”

Well, that would explain why he was still icy-cold to touch. Still, she was getting the distinct impression that Harry wasn’t telling them everything. She didn’t call him out on it, though, trusting that he had a good reason not to tell them all whatever it was.

“I’ll… I’ll talk to my great-grandmother, over the holidays,” Blaise promised them. “She’ll have a better idea about this stuff then I do. Just… don’t write it down. Word of mouth only, the last thing we want is someone getting their hands on information like this.”

“Agreed,” Draco said with a shudder.

“You look very tired, Harry,” Luna piped up suddenly in her sweet, dreamy voice. The others, seeming to remember that Harry had just completed the Third Task of the Tournament, hurriedly jumped up then, the girls saying goodbye before leaving for the girl’s dorm, Tracey telling Luna that she could spend the night in the spare bed that used to be Hermione’s. Blaise offered to bunk with Longbottom for the night and she could see why he’d hesitate to send the Gryffindor back to his own dorm— Longbottom’s grief was practically a tangible thing in the room and leaving him alone in this instance would be a foolish thing to do.

Hermione changed in the bathroom into her sleeping clothes, before returning to slide into the bed next to Harry. They curled up under the heavy covers, tangling their legs together as Harry tucked
her against his chest, his face buried in her hair. From his hitched breaths, she could tell he was trying not to cry. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered to him and he held her tighter until the exhaustion of the emotional evening lulled her into sleep.

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Harry’s POV:

Harry wasn’t an idiot. He certainly wasn’t as politically savvy as his Slytherin housemates and his lovers, but he wasn’t an idiot. He remembered the conversation he’d had with Hermione in their Potions class before the Weighing of Wands ceremony, when she’d mentioned how a successful Tournament would grant the British Ministry of Magic prestige and respect on an international scale. He’d told her that she wasn’t allowed to sabotage one of the Champions in order to get revenge on the Ministry and she’d warned him that Voldemort’s thoughts had likely followed a similar path to her own and that the death of one of the Champions during a Task would be an excellent way to get Fudge sacked, or at least well on the way to being sacked.

It was no accident that Viktor had been the one to die. Other then perhaps Harry himself, it was Viktor’s death that would have the furthest reaching impact. There was no way that Fudge could escape the consequences— and he doubted that Dumbledore would either.

His emotions were a tangled knot inside him. He didn’t know what to think, to feel. One of his friends had died a gruesome death at the hands of… well, he wouldn’t call Voldemort a ‘friend’, but at the hands of someone he respected and supported. How was he supposed to react? How was he supposed to feel? Betrayed? Hurt? Distressed?

He mostly just felt sick.

It was no surprise to him, when the drapes around his four-poster rustled and a dark shape was revealed by the parting fabric. “Not here,” he said quietly, not looking at Tom as he carefully untangled his limbs from Hermione’s before sliding off the mattress, ducking under the drapes. Tom followed him silently as Harry walked over to the bathroom. He waited for Tom to enter then shut the door behind them, flicking up some silencing charms.

“You killed Viktor,” he said, before Tom could even opened his mouth. It wasn’t a question, it was a statement.

Tom, to his credit, didn’t try to deny it. “Not me personally,” the older boy said quietly.

“Barty, then,” Harry said bitterly and Tom dipped his head in confirmation. Harry felt even colder in this moment then he had when Babd had flown through him. It was like his lungs had been transfigured into a block of ice and he wanted to scream, to shout, to hit something— or someone.

Tom remained silent, watching him warily and not trying to approach. His pale violet eyes were guarded. Tom was concerned, Harry realised, about his reaction. He probably should be concerned. Harry didn’t think he’d ever been this furious with Tom and Voldemort before, which was really saying something considering Voldemort had fucking murdered his parents, and right now he had no idea what he should do.

...when you make your choice, before the sun rises, I want it to be the right choice...

Was this what Babd had been referring to, he wondered. The decision about if he could bear to continue following Voldemort, having found himself finally facing the reality of who the Dark
Wizard truly was—a powerful man who saw the world as a chessboard, and the people as mere pieces to move as he wished.

For all the latitude Voldemort gave him and Hermione, the balance of power between them and the Dark Lord was wildly unbalanced. When it came down to it, they were just another two pawns for his game and Harry was sick of being a pawn—to Voldemort, to Dumbledore, to the entire fucking wizarding world. He was sick of having no power, of being jerked around like a puppet on strings.

He could walk away. He could leave Britain, leave Dumbledore and Voldemort to their battle for power and never look back. He knew Hermione would follow him without question. They could make a new life for themselves, far away from those who wanted to use them for their own means without true care for either of them as a person.

Or he could stay, but not as a pawn. Not anymore. He might not be able to play political games and power grabs the way most purebloods, trained from birth by their parents, could—but he had an advantage for dealing with Voldemort that no one else did; he held one of Voldemort’s tethers inside him, a treasure infinitely precious to the Dark Lord, he just didn’t know how to use it to his advantage. Yet.

But he had someone who could teach him—Marvolo had already proven himself helpful, explaining the truth of the tethers when neither Voldemort nor Tom had. He had called Harry “immeasurably valuable” and it wasn’t implausible to think that he could be open to teaching Harry how to be more cunning, more capable (more able to keep the tether safe, Harry could tell him, to convince him. He didn’t think it would take too much work—Marvolo was lonely).

And Harry did have an entire summer, after all, where he’d be away from Tom, Voldemort and Hermione, trapped wherever Dumbledore saw fit to stash him, with Marvolo his only companion aside from Dumbledore’s blind worshippers. It would give him time to learn, to grow, to improve.

So did he walk away from Voldemort now, or did he stop being a pawn and start being a player?

...choose wisely, oh Chosen One...

Except, he thought with a sigh as he met Tom’s cautious gaze, it wasn’t really a choice at all, was it?

He didn’t doubt Tom’s affection and attachment to Hermione and himself, not even Tom was a good enough actor to fake that, but Harry knew their relationship for what it was; a trap he’d walked into with his eyes open, a manacle that he’d willingly cuffed to his own wrist (literally). Voldemort had known exactly what he was doing, when he’d laid out the baited hook that was Tom out before them—and he and Hermione had bitten.

When it came down to it, Harry would sooner cut off his own wand-arm then betray Tom. And betraying Voldemort, even indirectly so by running, would be a betrayal of Tom.

“Why did you do it? What was the purpose?” He finally asked, breaking the weighted silence, wanting to hear the reasoning in Tom’s own words.

“To set in motion our most ambitious move yet,” Tom told him, a brief flicker of relief evident in his eyes as he realised Harry wasn’t about to start raging at him. “We’re taking power.”
Voldemort’s POV:

The Wizengamot was in chaos. It was a satisfying sight, after spending so long preparing. The emergency meeting had been called at one in the morning but everyone was there. People were worried, they were concerned—and most of all, they were angry.

Dumbledore had been raked over the coals repeatedly as the hours passed by, he’d been stripped as Chief Warlock popular vote early on in the proceedings and the only reason he wasn’t removed as Hogwarts Headmaster too was because the Ministry had no influence over the school (a pity). Investigation into the incident would decide if any criminal charges would be made against him—Voldemort lived in hope.

Fudge, “Crouch” and Bagman were also in disgrace. “Crouch” didn’t have the reputation to protect him that Dumbledore had, though that reputation was slowly been eroded away and when Ms Skeeter’s book came out it would be rotted beyond any possible repair, and had subsequently been arrested. Rookwood and Tonks had already swapped Barty Junior with the real Bartemius Crouch and staged a suicide. At any point now, the body of Bartemius Crouch would be discovered.

Bagman had likewise been arrested and early interrogations had revealed his massive gambling debts to the goblins and his ill-thought wager that Harry would win the Tournament, opening the possibility to investigators that he had sabotaged the Task to ensure Harry’s victory. It was an avenue of investigation that would lead to nothing, but it would detract investigators from the real saboteur.

And now Fudge… well, he was currently facing an upcoming vote of no confidence and it was immensely satisfying to watch the worm who he’d had to ‘serve under’ in his position as Senior Undersecretary squirm. He’d need to wait a few months to waylay suspicion, of course, but he planned on ensuring very soon that Fudge would not be dying of old age—nor would the worthless maggot’s death be painless.

Proceedings were moving at an unmercifully swift pace—his servants in the Wizengamot had ensured that. The right whispers in the right ears had encouraged prompt action to demonstrate to the Bulgarian and French ministries that it was individuals who had been responsible for the disaster, not the British Ministry as a whole, and Britain was determined to provide closure to the family of the dead boy and punish those responsible for cutting his life ‘tragically’ short.

After all, the boy was an international sensation—the entire magical world would be watching how they handled this. They needed to be swift, decisive and dedicated to seeking justice.

Fudge would be forced to step down in disgrace, there was no doubt there, and the immensely popular Thaddeus Dagworth would be proposed by a neutral member of the Wizengamot who Thaddeus Dagworth had taken care to “befriend” as the next Minister of Magic.

By the time the emergency Wizengamot meeting wrapped up, he would, at last, be in control of the British Ministry of Magic.

Chapter End Notes

Foreign Language Translations (which may not be correct, please feel free to message me with corrections):
*my son [Bulgarian]

**my sweet boy [Bulgarian]

***oh fuck [French]
CHAPTER LXXV:

Hermione’s POV:

“Fuck!” Draco exclaimed, stunned, before seeming to be struck mute in shock. Hermione arched an eyebrow at him across the table and he shoved the tureen of sausages sitting between them aside and smoothed the Daily Prophet down in the centre of the Slytherin table in response.

VIKTOR KRUM DEAD!

DUMBLEDORE IN DISGRACE!

FUDGE SACKED IN VOTE OF NO CONFIDENCE!

THADDEUS DAGWORTH NEW MINISTER OF MAGIC!

 Those,” Hermione said faintly, her eyes wide as she stared down at the blaring headlines, the bold black letters flashing across the front page before disappearing to allow the next headline to flash, “are some impressive headlines.”

It was the morning after the Final Task of the Triwizard Tournament with its unfortunate conclusion. Hermione had woken up feeling uneasy, her worry stemming from her fear of Harry’s reaction. Harry had genuinely liked Krum. She hadn’t minded the International Quidditch Star, but she wasn’t the sort to form strong emotional attachments to people she knew would be only briefly present in her life.

To her relief, Harry appeared far more steady when he woke that morning then he had last night. “Tom came and spoke to me last night,” he told her, as they sat up in his (their) four poster, their conversation hidden from their dorm-mates– and, more importantly, from Longbottom, who had spent the night in their dorm– by the silencing charms on the heavy green and silver drapes drawn closed around the bed.

“How did it go?” She asked, a little hesitantly. Harry sighed, shrugging his shoulders slightly.

“As well as it could, really. Voldemort killed Viktor and Tom knew about it, but he didn’t tell us because he knew it would upset me and I’d want to stop it.”

“It really reminded me,” Hermione said quietly, “that this silent war Voldemort is waging against Dumbledore, it may not consist of open conflict and battlefields, but it’s still a war, people are still dying and Voldemort...”

“He’s not a good person,” Harry completed her sentence for her. “In fact, he’s actually a really bad person, considering he was perfectly willing to kill an innocent boy who wasn’t even involved in Britain’s civil war in any degree, just so he could speed up a political move that was already in play.”
“It seems stupid to say that I forgot just who he is and what he’s capable of,” Hermione admitted, “but... I did. He appears civil and human, and despite knowing the contrary to be true, I eventually started to see the mask as who he is, not who he’s pretending to be. He is dangerously charismatic, dangerously intelligent, dangerously powerful and dangerously driven.”

“Basically,” Harry said with a wry smile, “he’s a very, very, very dangerous person who’s actually an evil bastard and who we’ve irreversibly allied ourselves with.”

“We could run,” Hermione offered. “The world is a very large place, and you have a very large pile of gold.”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed, “except–” he leaned forwards, pressed his hand lightly over her heart, where Tom’s Mark was branded into her skin, and into her soul, “–we can’t hide from Tom. And I don’t want to hide from him, anyway. I love him.”

“And he won’t leave Britain,” Hermione stated with a sigh. “He won’t leave what Voldemort has set into motion, because he wants the same thing, just as badly.”

“So we’re stuck here,” Harry summed up their situation.

“We’re stuck here.” She agreed and Harry gave her a grim look, his green eyes hard.

“Voldemort thinks he owns us, that we’re just children playing at war– well I don’t plan on playing any longer.”

Hermione blinked over at Harry, her eyes widening slightly. “Harry,” she said, “I’m not going to lie– I am very attracted to you right now.”

Surprise flashed over Harry’s face before his eyes softened as a real smile curved his mouth into something more gentle, more recognisable on his face.

“And you’re right,” she added, leaning forwards slightly, looking Harry straight in the eyes, “we’re not powerless, we don’t need to sit back and just accept whatever move Voldemort decides to make– we are not pawns. Remember what Voldemort said to us? We’re not lone wolves anymore, there are people who will follow us. We have the loyalty of the Slytherins, of the Veela through Fleur, you have a hugely influential position in Magical society and the support of the court of public opinion, you have that tether inside you, we have Snape who’s trusted by both Dumbledore and Voldemort, and we have Tom who’s acted against Voldemort for us before; he’s ours, not Voldemort’s– that plan of his backfired, Voldemort handed us Tom on a silver platter and we will never give him back.” She said fiercely.

“Not just Tom,” Harry said quietly, flicking his gaze down to where his bare hand was resting on the green silk sheets. It only took her a moment to understand what he was implying and her eyes widened.

“The Ring?” She asked, hushed, and Harry nodded.

“Marvolo was the only one who told us about the tethers,” he explained, “and he... well, I’m pretty sure he likes me– or at least he wants into my pants. He’s a resource Voldemort just handed over, thinking it would draw me further over to his side, but he’s wrong,” Harry said fiercely, “he messed up and now I’ve got an entire summer to work on Marvolo and to get what I can out of him.”

“If you’re staying wherever Dumbledore stashes you, likely with his stupid Order, then you’ll have to be careful about wearing the Ring around Moody,” Hermione warned and Harry grimaced.
“Shit,” he muttered, “I didn’t think of that.”

“But we can fix it,” she told him and he gave her a curious look.

“How?”

Hermione smirked. “By doing what we do best, of course— pissing him off. He’s not protected anymore, Dumbledore’s name will be mud in the ministry by now.”

“So if he pulls a stunt like he did at the start of the year...” Harry said slowly.

“Then we can slap charges on him and this time they’ll stick,” Hermione finished.

“Who would have the biggest impact? Me or you?” Harry asked and she hummed slightly as she considered his question.

“Well, I would say you, except it’ll be much harder to get him to actually attack you. You’re still the Boy Who Lived; you’re Dumbledore’s ward and Moody’s got a total hard-on for Dumbledore.”

“But what if,” Harry suggested with a mischievous grin, “you piss him off to the point he cracks, but then I push in front of you— just imagine the headlines: ‘Boy Who Lived Attacked By Mad Ex-Auror While Defending Girlfriend’.”

“Oh my god, I am really turned on by you right now,” Hermione told him, completely truthfully, and he laughed before his expression turned serious again.

“Babd said something else to me, in the Maze,” he told her quietly and Hermione felt her face drain of blood.

“What did she say?” She whispered, fear gripping at her with icy claws.

“She said I had a choice to make,” Harry explained, shivering slightly. “That I’d make it before the sun rose.”

“The Morrígu are known for their connection to prophecy,” Hermione grimly recalled. “Do you know what choice she was talking about?”

“I’m pretty sure she was talking about if I could continue following Voldemort after this,” Harry said and Hermione made a thoughtful noise as she considered that.

“Maybe,” she said, “or maybe she was talking about choosing not to just accept what Voldemort’s doing— it would be easier and simpler to just bury our heads in the sand, but you’ve chosen not to, and you know I’d follow you anywhere.”

“Yeah,” Harry said warmly, reaching out to grasp onto her hand with his, “I do know.” Hermione smiled back at him, squeezing his hand.

“I was going to say it’s a pity Tom didn’t stick around this morning, but now I’m actually glad he didn’t,” she said, “this would have been an awkward conversation to have around him.”

“Oh!” Harry exclaimed, sitting up straighter suddenly, “I almost forgot– he left something for you, before he left.”

“Left something for me?” Hermione asked, confused– the confusion quickly cleared up, however, when Harry leaned over the edge of the bed to yank something out from where it had been shoved under the mattress and sat back up with a tiny glass phial about the size of her pinky finger filled
with a shimmering silver liquid she recognised from their first year. “The unicorn blood,” she murmured. Harry nodded in confirmation and as he handed the phial over she couldn’t help her vicious smile at the thought of the fate awaiting the Weasley twins.

It wasn’t long after Harry had passed on the blood that Snape summoned everyone to the common room, Blaise rustling on the closed drapes of their bed before sticking his head in to pass on the message. Their Head of House said nothing about the presence of Longbottom or Luna, nor did any of the other Slytherins. Last night Hermione had put that down towards pity, but now she wasn’t so sure. Ever since their second year, when the Slytherins came to the conclusion that Harry was the Heir of Slytherin, they’d been afforded a certain... leniency. A respect.

She and Harry were also close friends with the Malfoys; one of the biggest names of the Sacred Twenty-Eight families– Lucius and Narcissa had taken her and Harry under their wing and everyone knew it. Hell, they’d turned up to fill the place of Harry’s family for the Third Task! And, now that she thought of it, everyone knew they had Snape’s favour too– she and Harry had been sharing a bed for the entire year, which was most definitely against the rules and everyone was aware of, and Snape hadn’t said a thing, nor was he saying anything about Longbottom and Luna now.

Hermione had been very aware of the political status they held in regards to having Voldemort’s favour, mostly as insurance of their safety, but she hadn’t given a lot of thought before now to the potential influence they had just as themselves.

She didn’t care so much about Krum’s death– it had disturbed her, yes, but she’d been more focused on both the political repercussions and Harry’s reaction then anything else. What she did care about was the lack of care Voldemort had shown in regards to collateral damage– it could have been Harry or Fleur, not Diggory, who’d ended up as collateral, and if they had... what could she have done?

Alright, if it was Harry she’d have razed the world to fucking ashes, happily sacrificing her magic in order to rip and tear Voldemort to pieces with her bare hands, to butcher him with her knives and grind his bones to splinters under her booted feet.

If it had been Fleur... well, Hermione wasn’t sure what she’d have done. She wasn’t sure what she could have done, considering any consequences to her actions wouldn’t just affect her alone, but Harry too. It made her feel uncomfortably powerless, not unlike how she’d felt that time in Gringotts, with Bill Weasley. She refused to be powerless. She hadn’t been expecting Harry to be the one to say they needed to start taking action, but she was glad he had and she fully intended on backing him every step of the way.

Snape’s speech to the Slytherins was short and concise– he briefly explained what had happened, that Krum was dead, Diggory was stuck in St Mungo’s for the foreseeable future, the foreign schools had both left, and that they should keep their heads down for the last few days of term. Hermione almost felt bad about their plans for Moody and the Weasley twins. Almost.

After he’d finished passing on the explanation and warning, Snape instructed them all to go down to the Great Hall for breakfast. The Hall was decorated in a manner reminiscent to when Weasley had died; black banners, black drapes, grim expressions. The Durmstrang students had been conspicuously absent from the Slytherin table, likewise there were no students in pale blue silk present at the Ravenclaw table. Dumbledore was also absent, and the delivery of the Daily Prophets with its blaring headlines gave a likely explanation for why.

“Rita’s article about Dumbledore is savage and her conclusion is a work of art,” Daphne declared, looking up from her own copy of the Daily Prophet. The smile on her face was a viciously pleased
slash of teeth as she cleared her throat to read out loud, “We trusted Albus Dumbledore with upholding justice in our legal system, and he failed. We trusted Albus Dumbledore to keep our children safe, and he failed. Now we’re trusting him with the life of Harry Potter? I’m already dreading the headlines I fear to be inevitable, when Dumbledore once again fails– all we can do is hope that this time the results aren’t fatal, and that we won’t be burying another child.”

“I actually love Rita a little bit right now,” Harry said, the corners of his mouth tugging up.

“She has an enviable way with words,” Hermione agreed.

“Forget that!” Hised Draco. “D-Dagworth is Minister of Magic!”

“Is this about your weird crush on the bloke?” Blaise asked and Draco let out a noise like he was dying as he made an aborted motion like he wanted to lunge across the table and strangle Blaise before anyone could hear what he was saying.

“If you value my life and sanity, you will never say that ever again!” The blond ordered, his voice shrill with panic.

“Alright princess,” Blaise agreed, not that Hermione trusted that amused glint in his eyes. By the way Draco was glaring at Blaise, he clearly didn’t believe the part-Italian either. Blaise was also looking curious, though, and Hermione wondered how much longer the secret of “Dagworth’s” true identity would be kept amongst the Slytherins.

Barely a half hour after Snape had sent them all down to the Great Hall, their head of house approached them looking sour. “The Headmaster has requested the presence of his ward,” he announced, his lip curling in disgust.

“Fuck– he isn’t taking me already, is he?” Harry asked, alarmed, and Hermione’s mood immediately turned just as sour as Snape’s expression.

“No, not yet,” Snape assured them both, but before she could feel relieved about that bit of news, he added, “unfortunately, considering he is summoning you in the capacity of a legal guardian, there are no grounds upon which anyone can demand to be present during the meeting.”

Hermione’s hands clenched into fists at her sides.

“I hate that man,” she seethed and Snape sighed.

“I’ll escort you to the headmaster’s office, Harry. Hermione, after you’ve finished eating, I’ll be expecting you in my office.”

“Yes, sir,” Hermione agreed, jaw stiff, before turning to give Harry’s hand a squeeze. “Give him hell for me.”

“For us,” Longbottom corrected, his eyes dark with grief and fury.

“Of course,” Harry promised. Tellingly, Snape only smirked.

Hermione’s breakfast tasted like ashes in her mouth, but she forced herself to eat it anyway before bidding the other Slytherins, Longbottom and Luna goodbye and heading down to the dungeons, to Snape’s office. He was already waiting there for her and she closed the door behind her, giving them both privacy.

“First, I wanted to assure you, Hermione, as I assured Harry on our way to the headmaster’s office, that wherever Dumbledore decides to stash Harry, it will be the headquarters of the Order of the
Phoenix, of which I am an active member,” Snape began. “I will be seeing him in person at least once a week, likely more. Lupin also plans on asking Dumbledore if he can live at the Order’s headquarters full time, so you can be assured that Harry will be protected, he will not be left to fend for himself against the likes of Dumbledore and the Weasleys.”

“Thank god,” Hermione couldn’t help but mutter, relieved.

“Which brings us to the second purpose of this meeting, which is to inquire as to where you will be spending your summer holidays.” Snape said, his dark eyes very serious as they met hers. “I know we have the journals to contact each other– and I plan on charming a third so that Harry will be able to contact me in the case of an emergency too– but your safety and well-being is important to me, Hermione.”

“I can’t guarantee I’ll always be safe,” she admitted to him, choosing to be honest. Snape deserved it. “There’s going to be many instances where I’m not going to be around safe people, but none of the Dark Lord’s people would dare harm me— Bellatrix, Tom and the Dark Lord himself would tear apart anyone who tried. Narcissa too, actually, and she wouldn’t even use magic to do it.” And so would you, Hermione thought to herself, but didn’t say out loud. “I don’t know where I’ll be staying, other then with Tom, though I am planning to spend some time in France. And in the interest of advanced warning, there may be... incidents that happen while I’m over there. None that should reach an international scale. Hopefully. With a bit of luck, anyway. And good planning.”

"Lovely." Sighed Snape, pinching the bridge of his nose.

Hermione bit back her smile, feeling far more relaxed then when she’d entered his office. Snape really did have a gift for settling her unease and anxiety… it was a shame he probably didn’t think the same about her, considering the long-suffering expression he was always pulling.

“If it’s not too presumptuous, Professor,” she said suddenly in a moment of impulsivity, “I wouldn’t mind catching up with you over the summer.”

She wasn’t sure who was more surprised by her words– her or Snape. They both sort of just… just stared at each other for a several moments before Snape visibly swallowed then jerked his head in a nod.

“I would be... amenable to that,” he said stiffly before dismissing her so they could both retreat from the display of emotion that was quite beyond both of their comfort.

As she returned to the common room, Hermione hoped Harry’s talk with Dumbledore wasn’t going too badly... for Harry, anyway.

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_Harry’s POV:_

“Oh, Harry, my boy!” Dumbledore exclaimed as Harry stepped off the spiral staircase and into the headmaster’s office, dragging his feet as he did so. Dumbledore’s appearance did cheer him up slightly, though— the old bastard looked terrible; his beard was untidy, his face was wan and there were faint purple smudges under his eyes. Clearly, he’d had a terrible night.

“Professor,” he muttered back in greeting.

“Nonsense, my boy,” Dumbledore said, shaking his head, “in informal settings such as these, you
Harry almost blanched at the very idea. The old bastard wanted him to call him Albus? Had he, by chance, suffered some kind of grievous head injury in the past twelve hours? Elizaveta Krum had looked fierce, he bet she had a good right hook— had she taken a swing at the old man?

“Now I know we’ve had our difficulties in the past,” Dumbledore continued on like he hadn’t just broken Harry’s mind slightly, “but I think we both know that the best thing for us to do going forwards is to bury the hatchet, don’t you agree?”

“Sure,” Harry said, forcing his mouth into a smile. “I’d like to bury the hatchet.” In Dumbledore’s chest.

“Excellent!” Dumbledore beamed, really playing up his act of a harmless, eccentric old man. Harry smiled back, knowing that Dumbledore knew he was playing the man just as hard as Dumbledore was playing him. Dumbledore was arrogant, though– he believed that even if he couldn’t get Harry to be his perfect puppet Boy Who Lived, he could still control him. He didn’t realise that that was exactly what Harry wanted him to think.

Harry hadn’t been given the task of infiltrating the Order, but rather to ingratiate himself within it in the eyes of Magical Britain. His task was to convince everybody, from Dumbledore’s pet sheep to the wider herd of Magical Britain, that he was the boy hero they could rally around, to let the Order and Dumbledore build up that image to the populous– and then that symbol of Light that had been created for the witches and wizards of Britain to throw their support behind would publicly announce his allegiance to Thaddeus Dagworth. And it would be fucking brilliant.

“Now,” Dumbledore said, his wrinkled face shifting into a more solemn expression, “I have a... sensitive matter to discuss with you. It concerns your godfather, Sirius Black.”

Harry couldn’t help the automatic tension he felt at the mention of Black’s name. His stomach twisted and he was unable to keep from sharply inhaling. Fortunately, Dumbledore didn’t think anything of his reaction— considering all Rita’s articles and the massive fuss about Black’s innocence, his reaction was actually probably more contained than Dumbledore had likely been expecting.

“Not long ago, Sirius’s Will was presented,” Dumbledore told him. “As your guardian, I attended the reading of the Will in your place— of-fucking-course he had, Harry thought sourly– “and Sirius, it turns out, left his every worldly possession to you, with the exception of a sum of gold he left to our dear Mr. Lupin.” Dumbledore explained. Harry wanted to be sick and he had to look away from Dumbledore in order to have some privacy to process the turmoil he felt inside.

“Give it to Remus, I don’t want any of it,” he muttered, “I didn’t even know him.” The one and only time they’d actually met, he’d killed the man— he wasn’t exactly winning any best godson awards.

“You know,” Dumbledore mused, stroking his beard thoughtfully, “if that’s how you feel, then I might possibly have an idea– Sirius left you a house, you see, and the Order of the Phoenix is in need of a headquarters.”

“Remus mentioned the Order of the Phoenix– he said my parents were members.” Harry said with faked curiosity as he fought the urge to roll his eyes— yeah, like Dumbledore hadn’t planned on getting him to let him use the house as a headquarters for his precious Order before Harry had even set foot in the office.
“Ah, yes,” Dumbledore said, his blue eyes twinkling, “you’ll be meeting a number of other witches and wizards who knew your parents when they were a part of the Order over summer.”

“Great,” Harry said, hoping his attempt at enthusiasm hadn’t fallen too flat and he was relieved when McGonagall knocked on the door with the announcement that Madam Bones and a representative from the ICW, a middle-aged American witch called Sabrina Picquery, had arrived to question him about the Triwizard Tournament, specifically the Third Task.

It turned out he didn’t actually have to lie much during the interview, both witches clearly saw him as a victim not a suspect, and two hours later, he was free to go find Hermione. After he filled her in on both his meeting with Dumbledore and with Bones and Picquery, she then filled him in on what Snape had said, about how Dumbledore planned on having him live at the Order of the Phoenix headquarters, which Harry had already suspected considering the pithy little comment Dumbledore had made about meeting Order members who knew his parents over the summer. With the confirmation, however, came a certain, annoying understanding between them.

“It’s even more important that we get Moody out of the way now,” Harry said, frustrated. “Otherwise, he could turn up at any time, without any warning, and catch me with the Ring with that bloody eye of his.”

“Right,” Hermione said, looking determined. “We need to engineer a confrontation.”

“Which, considering the mood Moody’s probably in– no pun intended– shouldn’t be too hard,” Harry snorted.

“Let’s get the Map so we can find him,” Hermione suggested. “Then we’ll go cross paths with him and let everything play out from there.”

It wasn’t much of a plan, but Harry was pretty sure they wouldn’t need much of one. Hermione was an expert at getting under the ex-Auror’s skin, and considering last night’s disaster and Dumbledore’s subsequent fall from grace he doubted Moody was in a particularly tolerant mood.

The Map led them to one of the fourth floor corridors, where he and Hermione purposefully placed themselves around a corner located in Moody’s path and then they started heavily making out– a lover’s rendezvous gave them a good excuse for being in one of the more out of the way corridors of the school, where Moody was apparently stomping around in anger. Hermione’s robes were unbuttoned down the front and her hand was in his pants while he bit bruises against the curve of her neck when Moody rounded the corner and spotted them. Harry grinned against Hermione’s skin at the disgusted, enraged sound the ex-Auror made.

“Look at you both, cavorting about like someone hasn’t just DIED and a good man’s name is being dragged through the mud!” Moody bellowed and Hermione pulled back from him so she could turn around and face their DADA professor.

“Who in the seven hells are you talking about?” She asked with a sneer Harry recognised from Pansy. “I haven’t heard anything about people dragging the name of any good man through the mud.”

“Albus Dumbledore is worth more then the likes of you could ever hope for!” Moody spat, a look of rage on his face, and Hermione tipped her head back and laughed, high and mocking.

“You think Dumbledore is a good man? You’re the only one– oh Salazar, I got such a laugh this morning reading about how everyone is trashing that worthless shit-head. It’s about time people realised what a fucking faker he is– I hope he gets fired. Or, even better, can you imagine how
hilarious it would be if he was actually sentenced to Azkaban? I swear to Merlin, I’d get myself arrested for something just so I could walk past his cell and see him having to get all cosy with the dementors. Actually, I think I’m going to ask Uncle Thaddeus– you know, the new Minister of Magic– if he can press some sort of charge to get the old bastard arrested, even if it’s just for a few days. He feels awful about how I had to grow up with filthy muggles, I bet he’d do it for me as a belated present for all those birthdays he missed.”

Hermione then laughed again, the sound just as mocking, “oh sweet Salazar, can you just imagine what the papers would say? I bet Uncle could get me into Azkaban to see him in the prison uniform so I can take photos and send them to everyone I know–” here she shot Moody a cruel smile, “oh, don’t worry, professor, I’ll send you one too. I wouldn’t want you to miss out on an update of how your precious ‘good man’ is being dragged through the mud, like the wallowing pig he is–”

Harry was honestly surprised Moody had managed to hold himself back for so long. The ex-Auror had honestly appeared to have been struck dumb by the filthy vitriol spilling from Hermione’s mouth in her most sugary, saccharine voice paired with a sneering, superior smirk, and seemed to be existing in some sort of state of disbelief until Hermione had addressed him directly, mocking smile in place. And then he snapped.

Harry shoved Hermione back instinctually, not even remembering in that moment that it had actually been the plan for him to do so anyway. Thanks to Tonks’ training, he managed to snap a shield in place, but it shattered immediately when Moody’s curse hit it. Hermione laughed again, though Harry could hear the tension in the forced sound this time, and the laughter served its purpose of enraging Moody further. Harry barely managed to get up a second shield in time, only for that one to shatter too and Moody’s third curse hit him straight in the chest with the force of a bludger.

There was a muted crunch-ing sound that seemed unnaturally loud to his ears as he hit the wall behind him and slid down it, followed by an explosion of white-hot pain that turned his vision briefly grey. Hermione let out an enraged yowl which seemed oddly echoed, but he didn’t realise why until his vision cleared again and the unexpected sight before him caused his vision to grey out again as he burst out into laughter– Moody was being attacked by fucking cats. He recognised Iago, Mrs Norris, Sycorax, Duke, Duchess and Princess, but there was also a large orange cat with a squashed face that appeared to be doing its very best to claw out Moody’s remaining eyeball, and even if he wasn’t probably concussed and definitely loopy from the pain, it would still be one of the funniest things he’d ever seen.

Things turned very fuzzy after that. Hermione later informed him that Filch had actually been first on scene– unsurprising, considering the presence of the cats– and the professors hadn’t been far behind.

Moody was escorted straight from the castle to the Ministry of Magic where Harry suspected an unfortunate accident would befall the ex-Auror– too many of Voldemort’s people had suffered at Moody’s hands for Voldemort to let this chance slip past him– while Harry had been escorted to the hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey had been too exhausted to heal him after expending so much magic and energy on stabilising Diggory the night before, so healers from St Mungo’s had to be called to treat what turned out to be a bone-breaking curse (Harry remembered Tonks teaching him how effective they were for breaking shield charms) directly to the chest.

The two days following passed in a blur of sleeping, skele-grow and Madam Pomfrey’s muttered swearing when she thought he couldn’t hear. Madam Bones came around again at some point for a statement and by the time Pomfrey had announced he was able to leave her care– with stern
instructions *not* to do anything strenuous– Moody was gone for good and Hermione smugly handed him a copy of the Daily Prophet where Rita’s work had once again made front-page news as she slammed Dumbledore for hiring such an unstable man to teach children, including information in the article such as Moody’s attack of Hermione and Draco earlier during the year, Harry’s medical records following Moody’s most recent attack, Moody demonstrating the Unforgiveables by torturing and killing rats in front of students as young as twelve and a whole lot of information about Moody’s use of excessive force during and after the war and all the complaints against him that had previously been dismissed because he was considered a war hero.

“He’s already been given forty years in Azkaban for attacking you with a potentially lethal curse,” Hermione informed him. “There will probably be more charges pressed forwards, but he won’t live long enough to attend any trials for those– he’ll ‘commit suicide’ a few weeks into his imprisonment in Azkaban so Voldemort can bring him back to Riddle Manor, or wherever he’s holed up now considering the fact that Thaddeus Dagworth is actually going to need a fancy home for entertaining guests now that he’s Minister, in order for he and his Death Eaters to get their revenge on the bastard. Which reminds me,” Hermione pulled a stiff piece of fancy-looking parchment from her robe pocket and handed it to him with an amused look on her face.

Curious, Harry glanced down at it then almost started laughing when he realised it was a thank-you letter from Bellatrix for their success at setting up Moody. “Narcissa passed it along for you through Draco,” Hermione explained with a grin. “Apparently Bellatrix also tried to send you a stiletto knife with a cursed blade as a present but Narcissa managed to convince her not to.”

“Bella’s such a loon,” Harry said fondly, “I mean, she’s totally brilliant, but she’s an absolute nutter. Though what was that thing you said once, to Tom? Who cares if she’s off her rocker, all the best people are.”

“That they are,” Hermione agreed with a laugh.

Harry’s good mood faded somewhat when Snape summoned him and Hermione to his office. Their Head of House was extremely unimpressed with their method of dealing with Moody and had no qualms about letting them know it as he called them each about a thousand different synonyms for idiot. By the time he let them go, Harry was feeling thoroughly scolded, but he felt a lot better after returning to the Slytherin dungeons, where the entire House was waiting in the common room where they broke out into loud applause as he stepped inside.

Tracey hugged him in front of everyone and about half the House came over to thank him in person, giving brief explanations as they did so of whatever atrocity Moody had committed against their friends and/or families. It turned out to be a horrifyingly long list and Harry wondered just how many of his housemates had contributed to Rita’s article by sending her their stories.

Hermione’s re-telling of how Moody had been defeated by several very pissed-off cats was very popular amongst their housemates– apparently she’d waited to tell everyone the story until he was there to corroborate it because of just how bloody unbelievable it was.

“Whose cat was the orange one?” Harry asked her later, after things had calmed down and they weren’t the centre of attention any longer, remembering the ugly cat he hadn’t recognised.

“He’s Luna’s, actually,” Hermione explained with an amused smile. “His name’s Crookshanks and apparently he followed her halfway up Diagon Alley when she and her father went shopping there over the Easter holidays. She told me he’s been wonderful at guarding her belongings from other Ravenclaws.”

Hearing that, Harry immediately stiffened, his eyes narrowing. “Wait– they’re still bothering her? I
thought you and Blaise put an end to that!” He said angrily.

“I thought so too,” Hermione said flatly, her amusement being replaced with a very displeased look. “Luna now knows better then to hide information like that from me again.”

“I hope you didn’t scare her too badly,” Harry said and Hermione huffed.

“Like Blaise would have let me,” she said, shaking her head. “No, I just told her that by not saying anything about them continuing to bully her, she was letting them make a mockery of me. She was appropriately horrified and apologetic at that and the bullies have been dealt with.”

“Oh?” Harry asked, feeling a stab of satisfaction– a decade of suffering at the hands Dudley and his gang, as well as remembering the physical scars that Tom wore from his time at the orphanage, had instilled a particularly strong and vicious hatred of bullying in him. He had absolutely no sympathy to spare for those who beat down on others to make themselves feel better.

“Their belongings were set on fire,” Hermione told him, with a dark grin. “Greek fire, to be exact, I hear.”

“Greek fire?” Harry asked with a startled laugh. “How’s that different from normal fire?”

“It’s green and it isn’t extinguished by water.” Hermione explained. “When those bitches tried to cast *aguamenti*, all they ended up doing was spread the fire around. They tried to blame me, of course, but my wand was clean and the professors all know that I never left your side.”

“So Blaise set the fire, then?” Harry asked knowingly.

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“So Blaise set the fire, then?” Harry asked knowingly.

“Of course,” Hermione said. “He wanted to poison them, but the pun of ‘Blaise’ setting a ‘blaze’ made Luna laugh, and he’s so soft on her that he immediately agreed to my idea.”

“It is a funny pun,” Harry grinned, his mood lightening once more as he listened to the antics of his friends. “Anything else I missed?”

“Well, while we’re on the topic of bullies…” Hermione said, her smile turning sly as she drew something else from the pocket of her robes and held it up between them. The small empty phial glittered in the air and it only took Harry a moment to realise what it meant.

“Oh my god, the twins!” He breathed, his eyes widening. “You really did it?”

“Longbottom gave me the password to the Gryffindor Tower,” Hermione confirmed, looking deeply satisfied as she re-pocketed the phial that had previously contained unicorn blood. “I stunned both twins while they were sleeping and dripped the blood into their mouths before renervating them. They have no idea I was ever there.”

“You are evil and I love it,” Harry announced and Hermione laughed, her expression warming to something gentle and he couldn’t help but reach out to curl his hand around the curve of her neck, using the careful grip to pull her forwards into a soft, slow kiss. When they pulled apart after several long, lazy minutes, Harry let his forehead press against hers and Hermione sighed, stroking one of her hands through his messy hair.

“The summer won’t last forever, you know,” she murmured. “It won’t be long until you’re with me again, Tom too.”

“I know,” Harry said quietly. “I’m going to miss you, though. Both of you.”
“Me too, Harry,” Hermione whispered, her voice thick as she tightened her grip on him. “Me too.”

Much to Harry’s resignation, though not to his surprise, Dumbledore ended up not even having the decency to let him attend the end of year feast before fetching him himself. Considering his multiple disappearing acts over the years, Harry wasn’t ignorant as to why, but it still pissed him off when he returned from breakfast on the last day of term to find his belongings missing and Dumbledore waiting.

Hermione immediately drew him into a tight hug, kissing him fiercely for as long as she could before Dumbledore snapped out his name—the headmaster was not in a good mood, and neither he or Hermione felt like testing the old wizard’s temper after what they had just done to Moody. “I love you,” Harry told her and Hermione’s eyes were soft and pained as they met his.

“I love you too,” she whispered and then that was it. He didn’t even get the chance to go find the other Slytherin fourth years or Neville, Luna, Astoria, Flora and Hestia to say goodbye before Dumbledore’s hand closed tightly over his shoulder and the headmaster apparated them both away from the school.

Harry was confused when they appeared at what appeared to be a very ordinary street, albeit populated by old-style houses that were at least a hundred years old and not in the best condition; all with grimy fronts, some with broken windows, paint peeling from the doors and heaps of rubbish lay outside several sets of front steps. A muggle wearing a patchy coat and walking a large, skinny dog strode right past them, her eyes sliding across where they were standing as if they weren’t there, though the dog tugged at its lead in their direction, growling slightly.

“Now, Harry, my boy,” Dumbledore said, as if there was nothing out of the ordinary happening at all and bringing him to this place wasn’t at all strange, “I need you to listen, this is very important—the Order of the Phoenix headquarters is located at number twelve Grimmauld Place, London.”

Harry was confused for a moment, then a battered door emerged out of nowhere between the houses numbered eleven and thirteen, followed swiftly by dirty walls and grimy windows. It was as though an extra house had inflated, pushing those on either side out of its way. Harry gaped at it.

“Let’s go,” Dumbledore said shortly, and Harry silently followed him up the worn stone steps, staring at the newly materialised door. Its black paint was shabby and scratched. The silver door-knocker was in the form of a twisted serpent. There was no keyhole or letterbox, but Dumbledore simply pulled out his wand and tapped the door once. He heard a number of loud, metallic clicks and what sounded like the clatter of a chain then the door to the house (his house) creaked open.

Stepping over the threshold into the almost total darkness of the hall, Harry was met by the smell of dampness, dust and a sweetish, rotting smell that reminded him of Babd, the memory of which caused him to shudder. With a soft hissing noise, the old-fashioned gas lamps sputtered into life all along the walls, casting a flickering insubstantial light over the peeling wallpaper and threadbare carpet of a long, gloomy hallway, where a cobwebby chandelier shaped like serpents glimmered overhead and age-blackened portraits hung crooked on the walls.

Movement at the end of the hall jerked his attention away from the largest portrait, which was strangely covered by a heavy pair of curtains, towards the witch and wizard walking over to him, and his eyes widened.

“Wotcher Harry,” Tonks greeted him, her hair a brilliant, bloody red and a wide grin on her face that looked only slightly manic. Beside her, Charlie was also grinning widely as he stepped forwards past Dumbledore to throw his arm around Harry’s shoulders.
“Heya Harry,” he said, amusement bright in his sharp blue eyes, “welcome to the Order, mate.”

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Rita’s POV:

Rita shivered, wrapping herself even tighter in her cloak. Despite the sun she knew was shining up in the sky, it felt like winter in the dark, shadowy passages of the towering black building. It was a good thing her recent articles had all paid so well, because it had cost her a fortune in gold, favours and blackmail to get herself here, which morbidly amused her for she knew that for the sole inhabitant of the grim fortress the very opposite would be true. There was likely very little, if anything, that the wizard wouldn’t do to be free.

Her silent escort slash guard had a mask over his face that left only his dull brown eyes visible and he wore grey robes as colourless as their surroundings. He carried his wand in one hand and a wooden, three-legged stool in the other as he led the way up the staircase carved of jet-black stone. Rita didn’t try to make conversation, focusing instead on keeping herself calm, locking all uncertainty and fear away behind a mask of cool professionalism.

Finally, after what felt like a small eternity, they reached the top-most cell of the highest tower of the forbidding fortress. The guard slammed the stool down in front of the cell, the sound loud enough in the oppressive silence that Rita nearly jumped. He then moved back, nodding briskly at her, and Rita stepped forwards into view of the iron bars.

The cell was nearly bare, only containing a small window too narrow for the prisoner to throw himself from, a hard bed and a thin blanket. Its sole occupant was severely emaciated; a frail skeletal figure with a skull-like face, stringy hair and skin so white it looked almost translucent. But despite the obvious age and poor physical condition of the wizard, his sunken eyes were clear and sharp with cunning and intelligence as they met hers.

“Mister Grindelwald,” Rita greeted the imprisoned Dark Lord, settling herself onto the provided stool with the grace her mother had relentlessly drilled into her, her back straight and her legs slanted elegantly to one side as she placed an open notebook on her lap and held her favourite quill in hand, the blood-red feather a vivid splash of colour in the darkness of Nurmengard. “I’m here to ask you some questions. You’re free to not answer of course, and as I understand it you haven’t given a single interview since you were imprisoned here fifty-one years ago, but I think you’ll find my questions quite different from those you’ve had in the past.”

“Oh?” Rasped Grindelwald, a clearly mocking expression on his face, as well as a dismissive arrogance. Rita wasn’t deterred, instead leaning forwards, towards the caged predator instead of away, and showing Grindelwald her teeth in a challenging smile.

“I don’t want to talk about you,” she said, enjoying the brief flicker of confusion in those eerie, mismatched eyes, “you see, I have no interest in you at all, not beyond what you can tell me of a certain boyhood friend of yours.”

Another flicker of confusion and then a dawning comprehension crossed the face of the imprisoned Dark Lord and slowly, very slowly, a smile like blood seeping down a dagger cracked shallowly across Grindelwald’s face. It was just about the most ghastly expression Rita had ever seen in her life, but far from being afraid, a thrill of anticipation shivered up her spine.

“Albus,” Grindelwald breathed, and there was something heavy in his voice, something dark and
dangerous that danced between hungry and covetous.

“Yes,” Rita confirmed, tapping one of her inch-long black-painted nails against her open notebook and smiling back at him. “I want to talk to you about Albus Dumbledore.”

THE END OF PART FOUR

Chapter End Notes

I wrote most of this on my phone during several plane flights and train rides after my computer died, so I apologise for any dodgy grammar or typos that I’ve missed. I hope you enjoyed The Goblet of Fire!

Note- The Order of the Phoenix will be the last part of this series, as it will steer wildly away from canon and everything will all finally come to a head.

Hope you enjoyed the chapter!

~CC xxx
Welcome to the Order of the Phoenix, everyone! I hope you enjoy the journey of the final arc of “The Anti-Heroine” :D

**CHAPTER LXXVI:**

*Harry's POV:*

Number Twelve Grimmauld Place was exactly as its name advertised; a grim, old place. Harry Potter had only been living confined within its walls for two and a half days and he already hated it.

It wasn't the house itself that he hated, surprisingly enough—despite his first impression of it as filthy, rundown and honestly only fit for a few *bombardas,* and possibly a muggle bulldozer or two, beneath all the gloom and grime it was actually quite interesting. Underneath the dust and cobwebs, he was quite certain that the chandeliers and candelabras, all carved in the likeness of serpents, were made of real silver, not steel or brass, the wooden panelling had once been of excellent quality, the peeling wallpaper looked to be tastefully decorative under the mouldy discolouration and the filthy rugs and carpets were a silk and wool blend. With proper attention, Harry was pretty sure Grimmauld Place could be restored to its former heights of grandeur—and, of course, with the help of a good deal of magic and money too.

But it wasn't just the bare bones of former glory that made Grimmauld Place so interesting; it was what it held within its decrepit walls. There was a library lined with hundreds of books (and Harry was pretty sure that Dumbledore had already gone through it and taken out any obviously Dark ones, but there were plenty of Grey Magic books he'd left behind), there was a drawing room that at one time must have been exquisite and was still filled with all sorts of magical artefacts as well as an entire wall covered with a tapestry of the Black family tree, and a wildly overgrown backyard filled with all sorts of terrifying, man-eating and rare, poisonous flora and fauna.

So the house was interesting, tolerable even, but its current inhabitants? They were not "tolerable". They were the *furthest fucking thing* from "tolerable". And that was where all the hate came in.

Tonks and Charlie were a godsend (though he didn't really think he should be inflating Voldemort's ego like that, considering who had ordered them both to join the Order of the Phoenix), but they were only two people of an organisation of Dumbledore-worshipping vigilantes who treated him with the height of suspicion.

It had taken Harry exactly three minutes to get into an argument after arriving at the Order's "Headquarters"—Molly Weasley had tried assigning him Sirius Black's old bedroom to sleep in, much to his horror, and it had taken him snapping at her that Grimmauld Place was actually *his house, thank you very much,* to get her to stop pushing. They'd eventually all settled for him staying in Regulus Black's old bedroom, which neither Mrs Weasley or Dumbledore had been happy about, but they couldn't argue about it either considering Harry was right about owning the
Regulus Black's room was on the topmost of four floors, which Harry liked as spending his school year down in the Slytherin common room, under the Lake, could sometimes get a bit claustrophobic. He knew Hermione also got tense about being underground, after a few months passed by. It had been worse in their first year, when her claustrophobia had been more severe—a result of being locked in a small, windowless room by the nuns running the orphanage when she was a small child. She was growing out of that fear, but there were times when it just got to be too much for her, and a childhood living in a cupboard under the stairs meant that it sometimes got too much for him too.

The topmost floor of Grimmauld Place only had two rooms—Sirius Black's bedroom and Regulus's. Charlie had ended up being the one to move into Sirius Black's room—Tonks had her own apartment in Britain already, so she wasn't moving into Grimmauld Place. There was a sign on the door of Regulus's bedroom—"Do Not Enter Without the Express Permission of Regulus Arcturus Black"—and Harry could tell that the room had once been beautiful, with its carved wooden headboard on the bed, velvet curtains, and fine wall hangings and furniture. His later explorations of Grimmauld Place revealed to him that Regulus's room was in slightly better condition than most of the house, which he couldn't deny made him feel smug.

The bedroom had a distinct Slytherin theme to it when it came to its colouring and decor, as well as a Black family crest painted over the bed and newspaper clippings about Voldemort donning the walls, which certainly explained Dumbledore's reluctance to let him claim it as his room for the summer holidays. He wondered why the headmaster hadn't tried taking the newspaper clippings down but after giving the closest one a quick tug, more out of curiosity then a genuine desire to pull it from the wall, he realised there was some kind of sticking charm in place to stop them being removed. He was pretty sure they must have some kind of magic in place to protect them from fire and other physical damage too, which made him grin at the thought of Slytherin teenager Regulus outwitting the oh-so Great and Mighty Albus Dumbledore.

Happy with the room, he'd started to immediately unpack before Dumbledore could come up with some sort of excuse to try and move him, and it was upon opening his school trunk that he realised he'd brought with him a stowaway. Sycorax appeared as smug as a cat could look (which was very, very, very smug indeed), looking like the cat with the cream who'd also caught the canary as she delicately groomed her whiskers from where she had been curled up in his favourite dress-robes, the ones made with real silk and were now coated in cat hair.

"What the hell are you doing here, Cory?" He asked her in surprised delight, scooping the fluff-ball of a menace up into his arms, where she rubbed her head against the underneath of his jaw and purred loudly. "You sneaky little devil," he said fondly. He'd left Hedwig with Hermione, figuring his beautiful owl wouldn't be so bored with his best friend as Hermione would be wanting to keep in touch with Fleur and he very much doubted Dumbledore would let him send letters to his Slytherin friends— not that he'd even have much to put into any letters, considering he bet Dumbledore would be reading everything he wrote and received. He was relieved that Snape had given him that journal that let him write to Hermione, and through her Tom; he wasn't sure he'd have coped otherwise.

He really was thrilled to have Sycorax at the Order's headquarters with him— the now fully-grown cat was, by popular consensus of the student body, a terrifying mixture of her parents in attitude, mannerisms and general behaviour, and she spent the school terms slinking unseen through the corridors of Hogwarts until she spotted rule-breakers (and it was quite interesting just how often those rule-breakers she caught turned out to be Gryffindors) who she'd either stalk until Argus arrived, or attack outright with her teeth and claws. Out of all of Iago and Mrs Norris's litter, the
student body had unanimously declared Sycorax to be the most horrifying of the bunch, and she
was popularly known as "that devil-cat", though Hermione referred to her as "my sweet Queen".

"You're going to give everyone here hell, aren't you, Queen Cory?" He asked the cat affectionately
and she purred even louder.

Even Sycorax's presence, however, didn't put him in a good mood for long (though he did
appreciate the loyal companion while surrounded by enemies) because the whole deal with the
bedroom turned out to not be the only argument he had with Mrs Weasley, it was just the first.

It seemed that Mrs Weasley had taken the Malfoys stepping in as his family, that day of the third
task, very poorly. Apparently she'd thought that the two weeks he'd spent at her house over the
Eostre holidays somehow trumped the literal months in total he'd spent living with the Malfoys, and
not only did she keep making comments about him having betrayed the Weasleys generosity in
opening up their family to him, but also about how ashamed his parents would be, to see him
treating the Malfoys as kin, how they must be turning in their graves in horror.

Charlie tried to intervene where he could, but he had work to go to. Apparently now that he'd left
Romania to live full time in Britain, he'd been newly employed by the Ministry of Magic's
Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, the speed of the hiring not
surprising Harry at all considering Charlie's actual alliance, and the second-oldest Weasley now
worked to officially track down smugglers and poachers of different magical creatures (and, Harry
suspected, recruit the ones who fit Voldemort's requirements for his followers).

Mrs Weasley was the only one other than Fred and George who spent all her time at Grimmauld
Place as she didn't have a job to go to during the day hours, which meant she was always there.
He'd managed to mostly avoid her that first afternoon after the bedroom argument and then the
following first full day he'd spent at Grimmauld Place, during which he'd explored the house with
Sycorax then hid in the library to get started on his holiday homework (fifth year meant OWLs,
which meant the professors had given them more holiday homework then he'd ever had in his life.
It also meant that Hermione was going to be a slavedriver when they got back to school,
particularly around exam time... but he was almost guaranteed to get good grades through
following her study timetables, so the pay-off would be worth it).

His second day, however, he wasn't so lucky, even though he came down to the kitchen late for
breakfast in the hope of avoiding her. Instead, Mrs Weasley was there waiting for him, informing
him that after breakfast they would be spending the day cleaning the house and then holding out a
pair of protective gloves for him to take.

"I spent more than ten and a half years of my life cleaning like a house elf for adults I didn't like,"
Harry told her flatly, ignoring the gloves she was practically shoving in his face. "I'm not going
through that again. You're the adult and you've got magic– it would take less than a hundredth of
the time for you, or any of the other of-age witches and wizards who are living free of rent in my
house, to use your magic to clean Grimmauld Place then it would for me to clean by hand."

Truthfully, he wouldn't have actually minded helping clean up Grimmauld Place, except for the
fact that Mrs Weasley hadn't asked for help, she'd just expected him to jump to it and fall in line,
listening to and obeying her orders, doing everything she said. She wasn't his mother, no matter
how she acted. She didn't get to tell him what to do, like he was one of her kids she could boss
around. It was even his fucking house they were all staying in, for Salazar's sake! Not to mention
that Mrs Weasley could just use magic to accomplish what would take hours of cleaning by hand
with a few flicks of her wand!

The Weasley matriarch seemed to swell up in indignation before him, her face flushing an angry
red which reminded him of Ron Weasley. "How dare you talk to me like that, you rotten little boy!"
She yelled shrilly at him, looking like she was moments away from slapping him— and that was
how Harry ended up first encountering the portrait of Walburga Black. Mrs Weasley's screeching
was loud enough to wake the dead, and certainly loud enough to wake up a painted likeness of one
of the dead that had been infused through magic with the memories and personalities of the witch it
depicted the image of— and Mrs Weasley had made the mistake of cornering him in the kitchen,
which was located right next to the entrance hall of the house where Walburga Black's portrait was
hung high and proud up on the wall.

"Stains of dishonour, filthy half-breeds, blood traitors, children of filth!" The portrait immediately
started shrieking at the top of its— her— lungs, and Harry took advantage of Mrs Weasley's sudden
distraction to make his escape, ducking out of the kitchen, through the nearest doorway which led
to the boiler room, which he hadn't visited yet while exploring the house.

His spare wand was hidden in his trunk, surrounded by wards to keep it protected from nosy
Weasleys and prying headmasters, along with the journal from Snape, Marvolo's Ring and the bone
dagger Bellatrix gave him, but he had his holly wand with him and he knew that any magic he cast
wouldn't be detected by the Trace as he was in a house full of adult witches and wizards, so he cast
a quick *lumos* so he could look around.

The wand-light lit the boiler room up; it was only about four by five yards, containing just the
boiler and a cupboard. Curious as to what could be inside the cupboard, he opened the doors only
to let out a yelp of surprise, almost falling onto his backside as he hurriedly stumbled back.
Sycorax hissed loudly beside him, her fur bristling.

The cupboard wasn't empty. He wasn't talking about the rags, smelly blankets and photographs of
witches and wizards he vaguely recognised from the tapestry in the drawing room— and he was
pretty sure that was Bellatrix's face there— either, no; he was talking about the fact he'd just found
himself looking into a narrowed pair of large, bloodshot eyes.

Harry had a curse ready, sparking a threatening greyish-blue at the tip of his wand, when he
realised what it was the eyes belonged to— a house elf. It looked nothing like the Malfoy's elves, all
of them twitchy things that hurried to disappear from sight whenever he glimpsed them out of the
corner of his eye. This house elf appeared ancient and emaciated, with many folds of loose skin
hanging off a bony frame, a bulbous, snout-like nose, and white hair growing out of bat-like ears.
It— he, Harry was pretty sure— was wearing a filthy-looking towel and his teeth, which were bared
threateningly like he was a rabid dog, were yellowed and rotting.

"What the actual fuck?" Harry blurted out, shocked. "Who the hell are you?"

"The bloodtraitor's boy is talking to Kreacher," the elf hissed disgustedly, before clutching at his
ears and yanking on them hard, as if in horrified despair, "oh, my poor mistress, what would she
say if she saw Kreacher serving him?" The elf— Kreacher, Harry was guessing, moaned. "Her
house, the magnificent house of Black, filled with bloodtraitors and mudbloods and—"

"Look, I don't like them either, but who's your mistress? Can't you go back to her, if you hate it
here so much?" Harry asked, still not lowering his wand, though he was starting to get an idea of
what was going on.

"Kreacher's poor mistress, the most wonderful Lady Black, is dead, poor Master Regulus is dead,
and now Kreacher must serve filth!" The elf spat at him, bloodshot eyes filled with malevolence.

Despite the foul language, Harry couldn't help but feel sorry for Kreacher. "Have you— have you
left the house since, uh, Lady Black died?" He asked the barmy old elf, and was unsurprised when
Kreacher shook his head, bat-like ears flapping. "Why didn't you go stay with Narcissa when Lady Black died? She was born a Black, and she wasn't in prison," Harry pointed out. "Or you could have gone to Bellatrix, after she escaped Azkaban."

"Kreacher was bound to serve Master Sirius, after his poor mistress's death," the elf said sullenly.

"And... since Sirius Black gave me everything he owned..." Harry said slowly.

"You are Kreacher's new Master." The elf hissed hatefully at him.

"And you're stuck with all these awful people in your house," Harry finished, pulling a face. "Salazar, that's rough. Would you like me to free you, so you can go to Bellatrix or Narcissa? I'll write to them and explain."

Kreacher slowly blinked, looking almost comically surprised. "The spawn of a mudblood knows the Mistress Narcissa and the Mistress Bellatrix?"

Harry, usually sensitive to comments made about the woman who'd died so he could live, decided to just ignore the old elf's insults. He honestly wasn't sure Kreacher realised he was being so offensive, the old elf just seemed... off, like he wasn't all there.

"I spend most of my time away from Hogwarts at Malfoy Manor," he told Kreacher, "Narcissa's like a mother to me. And Bellatrix decided to become my mentor last summer. She's kind of insane and sadistic, but I like her. She's fun."

Kreacher stared at him in silence, and after over a minute of him not replying Harry was about to speak up, only for the door to burst open, revealing Mrs Weasley.

"So this is where you ran off to!" The woman huffed, and Harry immediately glared at her.

"I didn't 'run off'," he said coldly (he didn't count a strong desire to leave her presence with as much haste as possible as 'running off', but instead a sensible reaction that anyone with an iota of common sense would have), "I went to go explore my house."

"Well, after your earlier rudeness, such atrocious behaviour, you're grounded for a week--" the Weasley matriarch started to say but Harry interrupted her by laughing.

"Are you serious?" He asked incredulously. "I don't give a shit about you, and I don't acknowledge your authority. You're not someone I like or respect or have any reason or inclination to obey, so you can take your 'grounding' and shove it."

"You--!" Mrs Weasley's face had turned red again and she looked like she was about to resume her earlier shrieking when Kreacher interrupted.

"The bloodtraitor thinks she can give orders in a House of Black," the old elf spat in disgust, "oh my mistress would skin her alive, for even daring to try!"

"Oh you hateful little beast!" Mrs Weasley exclaimed, glaring at Kreacher. "I order you to leave this room, at once!"

"Oi! You don't get to tell him to do anything!" Harry immediately angrily retorted, before glancing back to Kreacher. "You should meet me in Regulus's room," he told the old elf, "we can finish our conversation there."

The old elf nodded and disappeared with a small pop and Harry reluctantly turned back to Mrs
Weasley, who was opening her mouth to start yelling again, when Sycorax pounced, digging her long, curved claws into Mrs Weasley's leg. Harry once more took advantage of the witch's distracted state to make his getaway, ducking past the shrieking Mrs Weasley then storming up four flights of stairs, slamming the door of the room shut behind him. He felt a bit like a child throwing a tantrum, stomping his feet and slamming the door, but he was honestly so pissed off at Mrs Weasley for just assuming she could take over the role of his mother that he didn't care.

He might have overreacted a bit, he'd admit, but he was miserable here, and he hated being away from Hermione and Tom, and thinking about Narcissa had filled him with a fierce sense of homesickness.

"Master Harry does not like the bloodtraitor," Kreacher observed, from where the elf was standing next to the dresser and eyeing him warily.

"Can you keep a secret, Kreacher?" Harry asked and Kreacher immediately scowled.

"Of course Kreacher can keep a secret! Kreacher is a good house elf!"

"I never thought you weren't," Harry hurried to reassure the offended elf, "it's just, if anyone finds out about this secret, I could be sent to Azkaban."

Kreacher was still scowling at him, but there was new interest on his wrinkled face. "Kreacher will keep Master Harry's secrets." The elf promised.

"And there aren't any eavesdropping or monitoring spells in the room?" Harry double-checked and Kreacher shook his head.

"The old bloodtraitor, Dumbledore, oh he tried, he did, but Kreacher protects Master Regulus's room, he didn't let that nasty wizard leave any of his nasty magic on Master Regulus's things." The elf said, sneering as he said Dumbledore's name. Harry was definitely starting to get the impression he and Kreacher could probably get along quite well if they tried.

"Well," Harry said, dropping his voice, "I hate the Order of the Phoenix– and I hate Dumbledore the most out of them all. I'm really here to trick them into thinking that I'm one of them."

It was a risk, telling Kreacher, but Harry wasn't oblivious as to how useful of an ally Kreacher could be, if given half the chance– people didn't think much of house elves; they talked in front of them, ignored them, discounted their presences as inconsequential. A loyal house elf could be a dangerous spy

"Is the mudblood's boy trying to trick Kreacher?" The old elf asked suspiciously and Harry shook his head, pulling up his shirt to expose his bare chest. He then pressed the tip of his wand over his heart, and the black ink of the Ouroboros tattoo bled into existence against his pale skin. Kreacher's large, bloodshot eyes widened.

"Kreacher knows that magic," the house elf whispered reverently.

"Yeah," Harry said, looking pointedly at one of the newspaper clippings on the wall which featured Voldemort's Dark Mark up in the sky. "I'm pretty sure you would. Regulus was a Death Eater, wasn't he?"

Kreacher went very, very still then. "Kreacher will take Master Regulus's secrets to his grave," the old elf warned, before slowly adding, "just as Kreacher will take Master Harry's secrets to his grave too."
"Does that mean... do you want to be my house elf, Kreacher?" Harry asked carefully. "Because my earlier offer is still open– you can become Narcissa or Bellatrix's elf instead."

Kreacher shook his head decisively, a fierce look on his face. "Kreacher will serve Master Harry for now– he is not a pureblood, but he is not a bloodtraitor. Kreacher will speak to the portrait of his mistress, the Lady Black will want to speak with Master Harry."

"I can't talk to her where anyone could overhear us," Harry warned and Kreacher gave a sly smile that made the emaciated, wrinkled elf not look quite so decrepit, making Harry wonder just how much of his seemingly barmy state was an act– it was only now that he found himself noticing how much better Kreacher's language and grammar was then the other house elves he'd met.

"Wizard magic cannot move Kreacher's Mistress's portrait." The old elf told him, sly as any Slytherin, "but house elf magic is different to wizard magic."

Harry couldn't help but laugh. "I bet you're the one who stopped Dumbledore taking down all Regulus's decorations," he realised with a wide grin and Kreacher nodded, looking equal parts smug and proud.

It honestly baffled Harry, how idiotic wizards could be. Dumbledore himself had failed to undo Kreacher's magic, and the elf had taken down all the spells Dumbledore had tried to put up to monitor him– how could wizards underestimate house elves so badly?

"That's bloody brilliant, Kreacher," Harry told him and the old house elf looked like he was preening.

"Wizards are stupid." The elf told him bluntly and Harry nodded.

"Really, really stupid," he agreed and Kreacher smiled again, the approval obvious on his wrinkled, saggy face.

"Kreacher thinks that maybe Master Harry is not so stupid, though. He thinks that the Lady Black will like him."

"Well I look forward to meeting her," Harry said honestly, unable to help his own smile. He felt like he was well on his way to gaining himself an ally here in Grimmauld Place– he liked Charlie and Tonks, and Remus too, who was supposed to arrive at some point over the next few days, but he didn't fully trust any of them and Grimmauld Place wasn't going to be Snape's permanent residence.

Technically, he should be able to automatically trust Kreacher considering the guarantee that came with being his 'master', as house elf magic meant an elf couldn't betray their master or mistress, but after the conversation he'd just had with the elf, Harry wouldn't put it past Kreacher to figure out a way to betray him if the old elf really wanted to. Kreacher was clearly much cleverer then he let on, and besides, Harry already knew that the loyalty of allies shouldn't just be forced– ruling by fear alone only worked until someone more powerful came along.

No, to earn true allies, to earn their devotion, you had to finding out what they wanted, what they desired, then offer it to them in exchange for their loyalty– and it wasn't exactly rocket science, figuring out what Kreacher wanted. Harry had known Tom and Voldemort long enough to understand how to cultivate loyalty in people, now it was time to actually put into practice what he'd learned through his observations.

Earning Marvolo's favour, however, was going to be a much bigger challenge then earning the
favour of a house elf already bound to serve him. It was a challenge, though, that Harry was fully prepared to face— and fully determined to conquer.

Dumbledore summoned him for his first Talk of the summer after he skipped dinner. Harry was lying on his bed with Sycorax on his lap and reading 'Magick Moste Evile' in a secret rebellion to make himself feel better (Hermione had switched its cover to 'Sherlock Holmes: The Hound of the Baskervilles', which was also on his reading list for the summer holidays, at her suggestion) when Charlie knocked on his bedroom door with the bad news.

It took a lot of effort to wipe the automatic scowl from his face, instead having to force his facial muscles into adopting a neutral expression. Dumbledore was waiting in the kitchen and Harry kept his breathing even as he sat down opposite the elderly wizard.

"I hear you and Mrs Weasley had a little argument today," Dumbledore began, and Harry carefully didn't react defensively.

"We disagreed on her presumed authority over me," he said instead, keeping his voice carefully even, "which considering we're not only living in my house, but she is not my parent or guardian, she has no authority to order me around."

"Now, now, Harry," Dumbledore said chidingly with a look of disappointment on his face, "that's not the way to treat the woman who's opened up her family to you."

"I never asked her to do such a thing," Harry countered, "and I have no interest in being part of her family— or have you forgotten everything her sons have done to me? Why would I want a woman who raised bullies like the twins and Ron Weasley to act in any capacity as my mother?"

Dumbledore's mouth thinned with every pointed, acidic word Harry coolly dealt out. "Whatever feelings you have towards Mrs Weasley," the headmaster told him, "she is an adult and your elder and I expect you to treat her with the respect she deserves."

"I'll treat her with the same respect she treats me," Harry said, showing his teeth as he smiled at Dumbledore in a distinctly unfriendly way. "So you can tell her if she wants me to be polite to her, then she better stop making offensive comments to my face about my parents and my House and my friends. And she should probably refrain from raising her voice at me and calling me names, though really, you'd expect a grown woman to refrain from such juvenile behaviour. I suppose I shouldn't expect anything better from the likes of her."

"I will talk to Molly about her insults," Dumbledore allowed stiffly, and Harry nodded.

"Then I'll mind my manners," he said.

Dumbledore leaned forwards then, resting his elbows on the surface of the table and steepling his fingers together. "I think it's time for us to have a conversation, Harry," he said, without a single twinkle in his blue eyes. "You have to understand that the friends you've made at Hogwarts belong to dangerous families. Now I haven't interfered in those friendships, because I understand how important it is to get along well with your housemates, but the circumstances have changed now. No longer is Lord Voldemort a temporarily vanquished threat, he is rapidly regaining his power and strength. My spies in his ranks have informed me of his growing influence— these are dangerous times we are living in, no matter if the Ministry of Magic chooses to admit it or not. Voldemort is once again at large, which means that you, Harry, are in terrible danger."
"I can understand the split loyalties you must feel," Dumbledore continued, those blue eyes not leaving his. "I understand that you consider your fellow Slytherins to be your friends. But you will find that they will be pulled in a certain direction now by the loyalties of their families, a direction in which you will not be welcomed. Voldemort wants you dead, Harry, and the parents of any of your friends will give you up to him without a single hesitation. And once Voldemort recruits your housemates, when he officially claims their allegiance to him, they will not hesitate to hand you over too."

There was a metallic taste in Harry's mouth and his hidden hands were trembling with rage. The complete and utter bullshit coming out of the headmaster's mouth made him want to shut the man up with a fist to the face. It didn't matter that he knew it wasn't true, that he knew his Slytherin friends had already chosen him over Voldemort before they knew of his truce with the Dark Lord, hearing Dumbledore speak such ignorant, hateful presumptions about his friends like it was solid, indisputable and inevitable fact made him furiously angry.

It was only through sheer strength of will and the aid of some intense application of Occlumency that Harry stayed seated, that he kept his face blank and his eyes clear of the rage he was feeling.

"I know it is upsetting to hear, Harry," Dumbledore said gently, "but the truth is, you cannot trust them. But you're not alone, my dear boy. I believe that there is the potential for tremendous good in you yet. All you must do is to choose to be good, to learn how to take the moral high ground, to not stoop to their level and work to follow the ways of the Light. I believe you can do this, Harry. Do you believe it?"

"I think I could learn," Harry said slowly, keeping eye-contact with the headmaster. "But what I can't do is promise to leave anyone who hurts my friends in anything but pieces."

"Yet in time, I believe that will come," Dumbledore said with an expression of great understanding on his lined face. "Your parents were both beacons of light and hope in very Dark times, Harry, and you are their son." The headmaster then smiled at him, a warm and grandfatherly smile that Harry didn't trust for a second as the old man announced, "I have utmost faith in you, my boy."

And I'd like to impale you on a blunt, rusted fire-poker, Harry thought. Out loud, he told the headmaster; "I know we've had our differences, and we're probably going to disagree on a lot of stuff, but my parents... they died for me, Professor– uh, I mean Albus– and living up to their legacy, it really does mean a lot to me."

The best lies contained seeds of truth, and Harry knew it wouldn't be realistic for him to suddenly be all "the Light side is the right side!" but it was reasonable and plausible for an orphaned boy to want to live up to the legacy of his parents, to wish to follow in their footsteps. He wasn't a master manipulator like his lovers, but he was still a Slytherin and he had Slytherin cunning in his blood. He could sit here, opposite the man he hated most with a smile on his face and a mouth full of lies, meeting Dumbledore's eyes without giving away any hint of guilt.

There was satisfaction in Dumbledore's smile and Harry wanted to laugh. That urge to laugh abruptly vanished, however, when Dumbledore spoke up again, this time to inform him he'd received an invitation via owl.

"All your post has been temporarily redirected to myself, in the interest of your safety," the headmaster told him. "And yesterday, you were sent an invitation to the inauguration ball of the
new Minister of Magic."

Despite the fresh wave of anger he felt at Dumbledore's latest presumptions and overstepping, Harry couldn't help but straighten in his seat in eagerness. There was no way that either Tom or Hermione wouldn't be attending Voldemort's inauguration ball and the thought of seeing them was an exhilarating one.

"However," Dumbledore interrupted his excitement, "if you are to attend the ball, there will be certain rules and restrictions put into place, in the interest of your safety. Many of the attendants there will be Dark-aligned, and thus a danger to you. I will also be attending the ball, and I have organised with the Ministry for you be accompanied by an Auror of my choosing. Nymphadora Tonks will not be leaving your side for the duration of the ball, nor will the young Charles Weasley, who is to act as Auror Tonks' partner for the occasion."

Harry's initial fears when he heard Dumbledore would be putting into place 'rules and restrictions' had faded when he learned just who his "companions" would be, but he should have realised that wouldn't be enough for Dumbledore, because the old wizard opened his mouth once more to continue.

"Furthermore," the old bastard said gravely, "If you wish to attend, I will require you to swear an oath to me that you will not attempt any kind of escape."

"I don't feel comfortable swearing an oath to you," Harry said immediately; he could practically feel his magic cringing away from the very thought of it.

"Then I'm afraid you cannot attend the inauguration ball, my boy," Dumbledore said gently. Harry had to fight not to clench his teeth.

"That doesn't seem very fair, prof– Albus." He managed to say, albeit stiffly.

"Your safety is of upmost importance to me, Harry." Dumbledore told him, looking very serious. "I realise that you are young and don't yet understand the true danger you are in, and so I will do my best to protect you, even if it is from yourself."

Harry balled his hands into fists under the table, fighting to keep himself calm. "Fine." He said, even though it went against every instinct he had to swear an oath to this man. It really said something that it had been easier making an oath in his first year to the Dark Lord who'd killed his parents then to his current legal guardian and headmaster of his school. "But I get to help work out the wording of the oath."

It took him and Dumbledore nearly ten minutes to finally agree on the wording of an oath. Harry felt dirty as he spoke the words, almost wanting to throw up when he felt his magic briefly tighten over his skin; it was like a net, like it was trapping him, and he hated it, not able to hold back a shudder.

"An oath can feel uncomfortable, my boy." Dumbledore said sympathetically. Harry couldn't help but think about how his oath to Voldemort hadn't felt anything like this at all.

"It's done." He said stiffly. "Can I have the invitation now?"

"The invitation is a portkey, so I'm afraid it must stay with me for the time being," Dumbledore said. "But the inauguration ball is exactly seven days after the old Minister's... retirement, so will be in two days time. You will need to be ready to leave at a quarter to seven in the evening."

"Okay," Harry said, very ready for their conversation to have finished. Dumbledore, however,
didn't seem to get the hint.

"Now, my boy," he started to say, and Harry wanted to groan out loud, but before the old man could continue, he was interrupted by a sudden and ear-splitting caterwauling. Harry jumped slightly in surprise, the sudden and unexpected racket startling him. Before he or Dumbledore could say anything, however, the curtains covering up Walburga Black's portrait flew open with a crash and the old witch's deafening shrieks joined the yowling.

"Honestly--" Dumbledore muttered, rising to his feet. "I'm afraid we'll have to continue our conversation another time, my boy," he said apologetically, giving Harry a grandfatherly smile before heading out of the room, making his way over to Walburga's screeching portrait.

Harry didn't hesitate to jump to his feet and make his escape, not at all surprised to see Sycorax dart out of the hallway that led to the foyer, looking very pleased with herself.

"You're an absolute Queen among cats, Cory," he told her fervently, scooping the feline into his arms and rushing from the kitchen before Dumbledore managed to get Walburga to stop screaming at him at the top of her lungs. Sycorax gave a brief, very smug purr and he couldn't help but laugh, already feeling some of the tension leave his body. "Hermione and Tom are going to kill me," he muttered to her, once he'd reached the topmost floor of the house. "But they're not the ones trapped in the bloody headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix-- getting out to see them, even if it's just for a few hours, is definitely worth making an oath."

Sycorax gave a sympathetic sounding "mrrrt" which he took for agreement.

"Don't worry," he added, scratching her ears as he walked into his bedroom, "I'll smuggle you along with me-- you deserve a break too, you clever, clever little devil." And at that, Sycorax started to purr again.

As much as he was looking forward to the inauguration ball where he'd get to see his lovers and his friends again, there were still two days to wait and Harry turned his attention towards something else very important-- Marvolo's Ring.

Slipping it onto his finger felt like coming home; it was a similar sort of feeling he got being around Tom, and even Voldemort, one he guessed was related to the tethers (there was probably an actual name for the tethers, and it was definitely suspicious that Marvolo hadn't told it to him, but Harry had faith that now Hermione had something solid to go off, she'd find out what it was-- not to mention, he currently had access to a pretty impressive library too).

He hadn't figured out how to go into the mindscape while still awake, and an impatient check of the time told him it would be a few hours before he fell asleep. He was about to go lay down and continue reading 'Magick Moste Evile' when Kreacher appeared in his room will a small pop.

"Master Harry was very, very angry, talking to the old mudblood lover," the old house elf croaked. He looked pretty pleased by that.

"Was it that obvious?" Harry asked with a disappointed frown, not bothered by the elf's eavesdropping.

"Kreacher is short enough to see under the table," the old elf informed him. "Master Harry's hands said what his face and words did not."

"I should probably work on that," Harry muttered. Still, his hands had been out of sight, and it had
been a particularly stressful conversation, so he cut himself some slack.

"The Lady Black says she will grace Master Harry with her time," Kreacher informed him. Without waiting for Harry to reply, he clicked his long, knobbly fingers, causing a large, gold-framed portrait to appear on the wall. Peering down at him from it, a haughty expression on her angular face, was a pale-skinned woman with heavy lidded eyes a familiar shade of light grey, a sharp nose and thin red lips. Her dark hair, pinned up in a complicated style, had threads of silver amongst the black and she was dressed in pressed velvet robes with a stiff, high collar and a steel-grey choker around her neck with a large black diamond set in the centre.

She was not a conventional beauty, but she had a distinguished air of finery about her that had its own attraction and appeal. In her youth, Harry imagined she was considered very desirable.

"You must be Fleamont and Euphemia's grandson," the portrait of Walburga Black said, her words crisp and sharply polished.

"I was raised ignorant of magic and my ancestry," he explained carefully to the older witch. "I haven't had any real opportunity to study my family tree."

Walburga's lip curled in disgust. "Well that simply won't do," she said sharply. "Kreacher, fetch the copy of 'Nature's Nobility: A Wizarding Genealogy' at once."

Kreacher bowed so low to the portrait that his bulbous nose actually brushed against the ground before he disappeared with a pop, appearing back just moments later clutching a book in his hand which he placed on Harry's bedside table.

"I expect you to study that well, Mr. Potter," Walburga said sternly. "Start with the Potter family, then proceed to the family lines that intersect with the Potter family tree. Once you've memorised those, you'll move on to the Sacred Twenty Eight families. I will be quizzing you, so I suggest you study hard."

"Yes ma'am," Harry said, not stupid enough to turn down valuable information.

Walburga eyed him shrewdly before nodding sharply. "Good. Now stop slouching, it's unbecoming. Chin up, shoulders back, stand tall. You are the heir to the Potter line and, by the actions of my useless son, the heritor of the Black family estate. You clearly have been given no proper etiquette training, which is an utter disgrace that I will not stand for. Am I understood?"

There was only one acceptable answer to that, and Harry dutifully repeated, "yes ma'am," to Walburga's portrait.

"Kreacher will assist you, should you need aid. I am a woman of high standards and expectations, Mr. Potter, and I do not tolerate failure." Walburga warned, and as Harry repeated his agreement of 'yes ma'am' for the third time, he wondered what hell it was he'd just signed himself up to.

"I think I just signed my soul over to the devil," Harry greeted Marvolo, as he opened his eyes to the greyed-out world of the mindscape. He'd just spent the last two and a half hours pouring over the Potter's section of 'Nature's Nobility: A Wizarding Genealogy', starting all the way back in the twelve-century, with the very first Potter, a wizard by the name of Linfred of Stinchcombe, an eccentric man whose nickname, 'the Potterer', became corrupted in time to 'Potter'.

Linfred's reputation amongst his muggle neighbors as a well-meaning eccentric had allowed him to freely conduct a series of experiments behind closed doors that laid the foundation of the Potter
family's fortune. 'Linfred The Potterer' was the originator of a number of remedies that evolved into potions still used today, including Skele-gro and the Pepper-up Potion. His sales of such cures to fellow witches and wizards had enabled him to leave a significant pile of gold to each of his seven children upon his death (Harry himself was the descendant of Linfred's eldest son, Hardwin, who had married Iolanthe Peverell of Godric's Hollow).

In fact, Harry had been rather surprised to learn that an advanced skill in Potions was apparently supposed to run down the Potter line—his paternal grandfather, Fleamont Potter, had developed the Slekezeazy's Hair Potion, the sales of which had quadrupled the family gold, and on top of that, upon his retirement he'd sold the company that made the potion for a vast profit.

As interesting as that had all been, however, reading name after name after name had been mind-numbingly boring— and that was his own family's history; he was already dreading having to learn the histories of all the families that had intermarried with the Potter line.

Marvolo, the bastard, looked highly amused at his suffering. "You've sold your soul? Why, that's a pity. I wouldn't have minded owning it myself."

"You're evil enough to be the devil," Harry grumbled, flopping down on the winged armchair (and finding himself intensely relieved that Walburga wasn't there to see him 'conduct himself in such an appallingly uncouth manner').

"Oh my, you are in a mood," Marvolo observed and Harry groaned, lifting his hands to cover his face.

"Why are the women in my life so bossy and terrifying? Even the bloody cats are!"

"Perhaps you should explain this to me," an entertained Marvolo suggested.

"I'm staying with Dumbledore's vigilante group in one of the ancestral Black family houses that my dead godfather left me in his Will and there's a portrait of Walburga Black who's decided to teach me how to conduct myself in what she calls a proper manner for someone of my station." Harry said glumly.

Marvolo, to his surprise, winced slightly. "I knew Walburga, in my schoolboy days," he explained. "She was... very proper."

"She's a heartless slavedriver," Harry corrected, before looking over at Marvolo curiously. "I've never heard you or Tom or Voldemort really talk about your time at Hogwarts. Or your earlier years at all, really."

"There's not much to be said," Marvolo said with a dismissiveness that would have been far more effective if his crimson eyes didn't hold a sudden, muted rage. "I grew up hated and despised, and therefore hated and despised back."

"Is that why you're the way you are?" Harry asked, unable to help himself.

"It certainly isn't not a contributing factor," Marvolo admitted. "So many things contribute to who you turn out to be in the end. But even if I'd grown up differently, I suspect I'd still be who I am today. I killed my own father when I was just sixteen."

"You did?" Harry asked, his eyes widening– he'd always assumed Tom-Marvolo-Voldemort had been parentless, considering he'd/they'd grown up in an orphanage. News of a father was completely new to him, "Why?"
"Petty revenge," Marvolo said casually. "The man had all the right to refuse to take me in, and in the end he didn't even know I existed until I went there to kill him. My mother had deceived him with a love potion. You see, my mother, a descendant of Salazar Slytherin himself, fell in love with a Muggle."

"A Muggle?"

"Yes. Apparently others saw him as a good man, one who was generous and kind, but I killed him anyway and I'm glad I did. And I used that murder to later create the tether contained in this very Ring."

"That's..." Harry hesitated, struggling to find the correct word for the situation, "enlightening." he finally settled on. It certainly explained why Tom-Marvolo-Voldemort hated muggles so much, and it wasn't like he could judge-- he'd killed his godfather at thirteen, after all. What Marvolo had let slip about the 'tethers' was also enlightening; their creation, apparently, required murder. There couldn't be too many spells or rituals out there that needed the caster to kill someone. It would certainly make figuring out what the 'tethers' were easier.

"There's a curious lack of condemnation in you," Marvolo commented. "Though I suppose I shouldn't be surprised-- you've already committed your first murder, and at fourteen too."

"Only you could make that sound like a compliment," Harry said dryly. "And my first murder was when I was thirteen, actually-- I, uh, I killed my godfather. The one who was Walburga's son."

"You are a very interesting person, Harry Potter," Marvolo said with a slow smile. "You never cease to surprise me. It truly is easy to understand why my counterparts are so attached."

Harry felt his cheeks heat slightly, embarrassed by Marvolo's observation but also spotting the opportunity.

"I'm pretty attached to them too," he admitted, a bit awkwardly. "But I'm not going to be seeing them much for the next few months."

Marvolo's crimson eyes narrowed. "You did say you were living with Dumbledore's vigilante group."

"The old bastard got himself declared my legal guardian," Harry spat with the disgust that deserved. Marvolo looked appalled.

"And my counterparts allowed that to happen?" He demanded.

"Voldemort wants me to ingratiate myself with Dumbledore and his people," Harry explained. "He wants Dumbledore to put me up on a pedestal and use me as the icon for the Light, so when Dumbledore's dead and I turn around and pledge my allegiance to his public disguise, all of Dumbledore's followers and witches and wizards who identify as 'Light' will follow my example."

"A clever plan," Marvolo grudgingly admitted.

"Except, I'm not exactly the best double agent," Harry said, using the same technique of 'the best lies contain a seed of truth' on Marvolo as he had on Tom. "I've never been that good at all that charisma and charming people into liking me and following me stuff. And I've already gotten into several arguments with one of the witches here, the mother of the classmate I killed, actually, which isn't exactly helping me make a good impression when everyone here is already suspicious of me because I'm a Slytherin and known associate of Death Eaters."
"I'm a halfblood orphan who charmed traditional purebloods into kneeling at my feet," Marvolo said with a sharp smile, his red eyes glittering. "I think I can help you out there, starting with the first lesson– you need to sound much less earnest when you're trying to manipulate someone into doing something for you."

Harry felt his cheeks heat up but Marvolo just looked amused. "Don't worry, Harry," he said, "I don't actually care why you want me to teach you, boredom is incentive enough on its own."

"I still don't understand why you don't want a physical body, if you're so bored," Harry commented with a frown. Marvolo's smile faded slightly, losing its amusement.

"Not all of us were created with the urge for such a thing," he repeated his previous words. "There is something I desire far more than a body of my own."

"And going by how evasive you're being, you're not going to tell me," Harry stated and Marvolo's smile lost its stiffness.

"Clumsy but clever," he said, "you have potential, and I have months to train you. This is going to be very interesting."

And with those slightly ominous words, Harry found himself blinking awake to the green-and-silver bedroom he was currently calling his own.

To his surprise, though it was certainly a welcome one, Kreacher apparated into his room to deliver him a full English breakfast in bed– and, more importantly, far away from Mrs Weasley. The old elf also dropped off a dusty-looking book nearly three inches thick on wizarding etiquette with a slightly malicious smile and Harry felt himself withering just looking at it, but he steeled his spine and grimly dedicated himself to following Walburga's orders.

Still, the intimidating book couldn't do much to harm his good mood, not when he knew Marvolo had agreed to teach him now, as well as Walburga's training, and that he was going to get to see Hermione and Tom in just one more sleep. He felt like nothing could spoil the happiness he was feeling that morning– which, of course, meant he'd just jinxed himself, because when on the way to the Black family library he turned a corner and found himself withering just looking at it, but he steeled his spine and grimly dedicated himself to following Walburga's orders.

Moody's flinch when Sycorax let out a threatening snarl from the floor, her needle-sharp teeth bared, almost made Harry feel slightly better, but his shock and horror was just too great for him to find amusement in Moody's new wariness of felines.

The grizzled wizard certainly looked rougher then he had before his arrest; for one, he looked unkempt and unwashed with livid red half-healed scabs criss-crossed his face and other exposed skin, and where his magical eye had once so proudly sat there was now nothing but an empty gouge that would be more stomach-turning to look at if Harry wasn't so desensitised by Fred Weasley's nightmarish half-melted face.

At least their plan had sort of worked, Harry thought faintly as he backed away from Moody, not caring at all how cowardly it probably looked. Moody's magical eyeball was gone, but unfortunately their plan to have Moody "gone" with it had failed.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" he blurted out and Moody's mouth stretched into a frankly horrifying 'smile'.
"I bet you weren't expecting to see me again," the ex-Auror growled.

"Well, yeah, I certainly hoped not to!" He retorted, and Moody sneered.

"There are too many Aurors in the force loyal to me, boy, to let anyone lock me in prison then throw away the key!"

Harry made a mental note to pass that on to Tom, not caring at all that he'd just signed the possible death certificates of the Aurors involved, or that he'd certainly ruined their careers— he'd care a lot more about such things if they weren't the reason he was stuck with Moody once again.

"I think you should enjoy that while it lasts," he told his ex-professor in as mild a voice as he could manage, with a sharp smile copied directly from Marvolo and Tom. "Because that won't be true forever." Not with Voldemort about to be officially declared Minister of Magic. "Enjoy being a fugitive of the law, professor." He added, before turning and striding away, Sycorax his faithful shadow and ally.
Summertime in Bulgaria was just as breathtaking as Viktor had promised Neville it would be. The massive Rila Mountains in southwestern Bulgaria were a magnificent collection of jagged, majestic snow-capped peaks, centuries-old forests, glacial lakes, waterfalls and hot mineral springs, and endless pastures of green meadows filled with fragrant flowers and herbs. The air was clean and fresh, and the skies were clear of anything but blue as far as the eye could see.

Viktor's funeral had been swift and practical, as was the way in Bulgaria, but still as beautiful as the mountain range he had called home. The sturdy oak coffin displaying both the Krum and Oblansk families' traditional coat of arms within which Viktor had been laid to rest in had been open, granting each person present the chance to see Victor, wrapped in his crimson shroud, one final time, and to either hold his hand or touch his face or kiss him on the forehead.

Offerings had then been laid out; food, wine, candles, clothes and money, amongst other items. Neville had quietly placed the small model broomstick he'd bought at the Quidditch World Cup and a pair of gladiolus flowers—strength of character, faithfulness, honour, remembrance—with the other offerings.

Floating instruments, mostly drums and horns, had hovered in the air, independently playing their music as everyone said their final goodbyes to Viktor. After the coffin had been lowered into the ground, Elizaveta and Stoyan Krum, then Avitohol Oblansk, Elizaveta's brother, the Bulgarian Minister of Magic, and Evanka, Elizaveta's sister, poured water and red wine over the grave. All the attendees were then passed a piece of bread and asked to give prayers to Perun, the Slavic Old God considered to be master of the heavens. The bread tasted like ashes in Neville's mouth, coating his dry tongue and making it hard to swallow as he watched magic engrave Viktor's name into the marble headstone.

He wasn't sure how long he stood there, just staring at the headstone, at those awful dates carved irreversibly and forever into the marble, only that when Elizaveta Krum brushed her hand against his elbow, most of the guests had already left to the wake.

"Neville?" She asked softly. She had to repeat his name twice more before he responded; his head felt thick as cotton wool, grief making him slow and stupid.

"Sorry," he whispered, unable to find enough of his voice to speak any louder.

"Oh, skūpi moi," Elizaveta murmured, wrapping her arms around him, holding him to her. Her arms felt thin but strong and her perfume was an earthy sort of scent that brought to mind winding forest paths combined with warm notes of amber and ambergris. "Viktor is not here, not any longer," she told him gently and Neville nodded wordlessly, letting the grieving woman side-along apparate him back to the village where the Krum family home was located and the wake was being held.
Hidden along a long mountain ridge and amongst the snow-capped peaks of the Rila Mountains, Ubezhishte, the hidden magical village Viktor had called home, was completely segregated from muggles. The more centralised parts of the village consisted of houses built close together along a main road, where a market for trading was set up during daylight hours. Further out from the centre of Ubezhishte, along the outer-fringes of the village, were the farms that provided Ubezhishte with its produce, from fruits and vegetables to grain to livestock. Magic hid the farms from muggles, as well as allowing crops to grow out of season and in climates they were not accustomed to. Ubezhishte was completely self-sustaining, with no need for any interaction with muggles or any importation of produce or materials.

The Krums lived on a farm that bred horses and grew the crops required to keep the horses fed. It wasn't an overly large home, but it had enough space within its walls to comfortably hold the collection of Viktor's friends and family celebrating his life, eating and drinking salad, kofta and bread with special dish of oats and beans baked in a sauce. A separate, less personal and private memorial was being planned for everyone mourning Viktor Krum The International Seeker; this was just for those who knew Viktor as a person. There were many stoic faces present, stoic faces that reminded him of Viktor, but there were also many faces wet with tears.

Most of the conversation was happening in Bulgarian, meaning Neville could only catch snippets of what was being said. One word he did understand, though, one that needed no translation and was repeated over and over, was Dumbledore. Every time he heard it, Neville felt his stomach twist and his chest tighten more and more. There was genuine hatred within the walls of the Krums’ home for Albus Dumbledore, and Neville... well, if Neville wasn't currently so overwhelmed by grief, no room for anything else in his head, he thought he'd probably feel that same hatred too. His emotions towards the headmaster of Hogwarts were... well, to say they were currently an absolute mess would be an understatement.

Elizaveta approached him, maybe an hour after she'd apparated him to her house for the wake. Her eyes were red and puffy, but she managed a small smile as she held out her arm to him. Too exhausted to be curious, Neville let her lead him out of the house, taking him along a winding path to the large wooden stable where a number of the Krum family's horses were kept.

"My son," Elizaveta said quietly as she stopped outside a wooden side-door, grief carved into the lovely lines of her pale face, "he vos never truly happy vith his feet on the ground. He had only just learned to valk before he started riding horses, and that vos it. And then, vhen he vos thirteen years old, he flew on his first broom and he fell in love."

Elizaveta then laughed, the sound soft and wet. "You were the vun person he ever asked to have visit. He had friends, yes; you know Sashko, Yosef and Nikolina, I hear, but he vos not an, ah, how do you English say it? He vos not an outgoing boy; the fame, it vos... it vos hard for him. Home, it vos his escape. His freedom." She sighed then and pushed open the door, stepping into the stables. Neville followed her; the stables smelt of straw and manure, and curious long, narrow heads poked out of their stalls, ears flicking curiously as the bright eyes of the horses tracked their movements.

Elizaveta led him to a stall near the end where a particularly beautiful horse stood placidly in its stall. The horse had a gleaming white coat, bright even in the dim light of the stables at dusk. The strong, sleek lines of its body suggested it was built for speed and Neville could so easily imagine Viktor on its back, crouched forwards like he sat on a broom, the ground below a blur as the horse raced along the mountain slopes.

"My Viktor," Elizaveta murmured softly, reaching out to gently stroke the nose of the beast, "he loved our horses– he vos so clumsy on his own two feet, but graceful as a dancer on horseback. This is his childhood horse; he raised him from birth, named him Sharkoliya, after the heroic tales
of Krali Marko's adventures with his magical horse Sharkoliya. In our country, in the days of old, horses were sacred; they were seen as the companions of heroes, galloping between the worlds bearing the gifts of life and death, even carrying men from the netherworld to this world. Viktor, he always did love all the old Bulgarian songs and legends of the horses of heroes who were so fast that they could outrun even the sun."

"He did love going terrifyingly fast when flying," Neville said quietly, and Elizaveta laughed again, pained love in her eyes.

"He hated to be still or slow," she agreed. "He loved the wind in his face, loved to fly or gallop along so Sharkoliya's feet barely touched the ground."

"He taught me how to fly on a broomstick," Neville told her, smiling weakly back. "I was an awful flyer before. He said he'd teach me how ride a horse this summer too."

Elizaveta's eyes gleamed wetly and the horse, Sharkoliya, gave a soft whicker, leaning his elegant head out of the stall to nuzzle against Elizaveta's hair. Elizaveta turned slightly then so she could stroke the pale stallion's long nose and Neville was surprised when she opened her mouth and sang quietly; the lyrics were lost to him, as she was singing in Bulgarian, but no less beautiful for it.

"It vos his favourite," Elizaveta breathed, after the last syllable faded, then she cleared her choked throat and sang the song again, this time in English;

"Dawn is breaking
but such a dawn as
you've never seen.
The dawn is a young man
riding on a horse.
The horse breathes and
makes the dawn.
The moon is a ring on the
young man's finger,
and his weapons are
small stars."

It didn't quite rhyme or flow, the fluidity of the lyrics lost in the translation to English, but it was still beautiful and oddly fitting for the occasion. Elizaveta, at the conclusion of the song, finally started to cry and this time it was Neville who folded her up in his arms; she felt small and thin there, but there was still a strength in her as she clung to him. "My son vill not die for nothing," the fierce grieving mother promised as she wept into his hair. Neville just hugged her tighter, holding her until Stoyan came to find them and cradled his wife to his chest, nodding silently to Neville as he led them both back to the house.

The time to use his portkey to return to Britain came far too soon. The sun was long gone and the stars above were a heavenly blanket of brilliant, twinkling jewels; they'd never been so clear to him before as they were near the top of the mountain, not even from the Astronomy Tower. He wasn't surprised that he didn't want to leave, but the expectation didn't make it hurt less.

Neville hugged Elizaveta goodbye, shook the hands of Stoyan and Avitohol Oblansk, and said his farewells to all the extended family he'd been introduced to before accepting from Avitohol (and even in his grief it was still intimidating to be asked to call a Minister of Magic by his first name) an empty wineglass that glowed a faint blue.

His gran was waiting for him in the foyer of the house, her lips pursed tight in a thin line of heavy
disapproval— she hadn't wanted him to attend the funeral; Viktor was from _Durmstrang_, after all, and _everyone_ knew that Durmstrang taught Dark Magic (and hadn't Viktor laughed when he'd told the older boy about that; any magic could hurt or kill, Viktor had pointed out; whether it was categorised Light or Dark, magic was just magic, it was a wizard's choice that made the magic an act of good or evil), but it had been too difficult for her to say no to her grandson attending the funeral of the nephew of a Minister of Magic when a personal invitation had been given to him.

Neville gave an awkward 'goodnight' to his gran before hurrying off to his room, not inclined to linger under her harsh, judgmental eye. Sitting on his bed, his knees drawn up to his chin, Neville let out a shuddering breath. He couldn't help but wonder about fierce Elizaveta and her promise, of Viktor not dying for nothing, and it made his stomach twist with unease. He knew exactly who Elizaveta and the others blamed for Viktor's death and he wondered if Dumbledore could be in danger from the Bulgarians. Then he wondered if he would really want to do anything about it, even if the headmaster was.

(That night, he dreamt of Viktor riding Sharkoliya through the skies, his friend coloured pale as the white stallion in death, while Elizaveta's song murmured in his ears)

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_Harry's POV:_

"What do you know about wizarding nobility?"

Harry looked up from the meal he'd been carefully eating under the painted beaded eyes of Lady Walburga Black; the older witch had heard about the inauguration ball for the new Minister of Magic (probably through Kreacher) and had promptly started to quiz him on his table etiquette for formal dining. Upon discovering he knew the absolute bare minimum, she'd ordered Kreacher to serve him dinner in his bedroom with the complex dining set-up favoured by traditionalists and had been instructing him through how to "properly" eat the meal.

It was worse than revising for exams. Walburga Black was fucking _merciless_ and had ordered Kreacher to whack the back of his hands with a wooden spoon every time he made a mistake— she called it 'encouragement' to remember where he'd gone wrong. It therefore wasn't a surprise at all that his automatic response to her sudden question about his knowledge of wizarding nobility was panic. He also quickly tucked his hands out of the reach of Kreacher's spoon.

"Well," he answered her hesitantly, "I know that not all the Sacred Twenty-Eight families are nobility, only some of the Houses seem to have titles— though I've noticed that not everybody seems to acknowledge the titles."

Walburga Black's mouth pressed into a thin line. "That answer is not incorrect," she allowed. "But it is severely lacking in all actual detail. You are indeed correct, that the titles are not always acknowledged; the Ministry, as it happens, has not actively recognised the titles of the older families in decades— not since Dumbledore gained a position of power and influence. However, there are no laws in place that abolish nobility, so the titles may still be claimed."

"How did Dumbledore get away with it?" Harry asked, his expression darkening.

"The right to govern our people used to be linked to bloodlines," Walburga explained with a sharp sniff, "while the old families still have significant power and influence, when he became Chief Warlock Dumbledore decided that being a member of one of the old families, being nobility, didn't
grant us the right to rule, to have more power in government than any other magical family out
there. He introduced despicable muggle concepts of *electing* members of our parliament, claiming
that it wasn't fair to the mudbloods who wanted to be part of our government— but how could they
be part of our government, when they have no idea of our culture, our society!?

"Oh, Dumbledore pandered to them, that filth, then he turned around to whisper in the ears of the
bloodtraitor old families who followed his word like gospel that it was necessary to change, that
there were so many mudbloods, more and more every year, that if they weren't allowed to be part
of the government then rebellion could break out!"

Walburga was clearly spitting mad, the fury stark on her angular face. Harry found himself reeling
slightly at the new information— he knew from Fleur's research that Dumbledore was secretly
taking power away from muggleborns and 'halfbreeds', but apparently the old bastard was also
taking power away from the purebloods. It didn't make sense to him... except, when he really
thought about it, Dumbledore's actions did start to paint a horrible picture in his head; the sly old
wizard was taking power away from everyone— except himself.

"That absolute bastard," he muttered out loud only to yelp in pain as Kreacher whacked him on the
cheek with the spoon (his hands were still tucked out of reach).

"There is never to be any vulgarity at the table!" Walburga snapped. Harry thought about arguing
that technically he wasn't 'at the table', he was sitting at a bloody desk, but he instantly and
immediately thought the better of trying to argue with Walburga (he was a Slytherin, after all, and
self-preservation was kind of a *Big Thing* for them) and hastily apologised. She dipped her head
coolly in acknowledgement of the apology, before returning to the topic of wizarding nobility.

"The Black family, of course, are nobles; our lineage can be traced back to centuries before even
Hogwarts existed— why, only the Ollivanders can truly challenge us for the title of the oldest
British wizarding family! The Head of the Black family has always held the title of Earl, while his
wife held the title of Countess, though the official address was 'Lord' and 'Lady'. My useless son
was the last Earl, and with his death—" Walburga looked like she was going to be sick, "with his
death there is currently *no* Earl Black. While he could, and did, pass on the wealth of the Black
family to you, he could not pass on the titles."

"What about Tonks?" Harry asked, frowning. "Er, Andromeda Black's daughter, Nymphadora
Tonks," he quickly added, seeing Walburga's impatient confusion. "Could she inherit the title?
Andromeda's the oldest living Black— well, she's technically a *Tonks* now that she's married, but
she's still a Black by blood."

"Perhaps," Walburga allowed. "It is a complicated situation, one that as Sirius's heritor I place you
responsible for finding a solution to. I *refuse* to allow the Black family name to die, not after the
thousands of years we have existed!"

"I'll talk to Narcissa when I see her at the ball," Harry promised Walburga, "I'm sure she'll look into
it— she might be the Lady Malfoy, but she's a Black too."

"She is," agreed Walburga with a sniff, "and the Black family is by far superior to the Malfoy
family. Why, the Malfoys only arrived in Great Britain with the Norman Invasion! And while
nobility they may be, they most certainly do not hold a title as prestigious as Earl!"

"Er, speaking of titles," Harry said carefully, "is Voldemort's title of 'lord' actually authentic?"

Walburga fixed her pale grey eyes on his and was silent for a long moment. "Yes and no," she
finally answered. "Yes, the title of lord is an authentic one, but it is not a title of nobility— the title
"You don't need to use past-tense," Harry pointed out. "This is literally the headquarters of the vigilante group fighting him—we're all aware that he's back. And I don't think I'm wrong to say that you support him."

"I do support his ideals of the purification of the wizarding race, removing the muggle influence from our proud traditions, and restoring the power of the old families, particularly in government," Walburga agreed sharply. "But I was never one of his followers. I knew him, back when we attended Hogwarts. We all knew he would achieve great things, and when Regulus became one of his Death Eaters I was proud. And then my son died, and no one would tell me what happened to him, other than to pass on the ugly rumour going around that the Dark Lord himself was involved in Regulus's death. I supported Tom Riddle's ideals in my life, but I cared for my son more."

"I can ask," Harry offered quietly, shocked by what Walburga had just shared, and by how human she'd actually sounded for a moment. "I can find out what happened to Regulus."

"A kind offer, but a waste," Walburga immediately dismissed with a sharp sniff. "I am dead, boy. This portrait is a mere imprint, less than a ghost, and it cannot change; I am a reflection of how I was when I died, even knowing the truth of what happened to my son could not truly influence my emotions, his loss is as permanent to me as this portrait."

"I haven't really looked into the magic behind portraits," Harry admitted, a little horrified by Walburga's revelation. She clearly noticed.

"Don't look so wretched, boy," she barked out impatiently, "I am a portrait! The emotions I feel are mere copies, and shallow and fleeting at that—I do not suffer, I just exist. Though my existence would be less turbulent if my place of display wasn't somewhere filled with bloodtraitors and filth."

The familiar insults had Harry relax and at Walburga's snapped order, he returned to demonstrating his table etiquette and he got quite distracted trying to avoid more smacks from the spoon. Later however, after Kreacher had sneakily returned Walburga's portrait to the entrance hall, his thoughts returned to Regulus Black, the young man whose room he now lived in.

He'd realised Regulus was dead, of course, but he hadn't heard anything before about how Voldemort had actually been involved in his death. Naturally, his curiosity was piqued, and he quietly called for Kreacher.

The old house elf appeared with a muted pop and a suspicious scowl. "Er, sorry to bother you, but I had a question," Harry said, choosing his words carefully. "A question about Regulus."

Kreacher's face immediately turned stormy. "Kreacher will take Master Regulus's secrets with him to the grave!" He snarled and Harry hastily backtracked.

"I know, I know, I'm not asking you to betray him!" He rushed to reassure the old elf. "I just... I'm living in his room, Kreacher. I'm sleeping in his bed. It makes him... real. Really, really real. And after what Walburga said... I guess I just wanted to ask if you had any idea what happened to him."

"Master Regulus was the best Master that Kreacher has ever had," the old house elf croaked fiercely, aggressively snapping yellow-stained teeth in Harry's direction, "Kreacher will not betray Master Regulus!"
"I'm not asking you to!" Harry repeated, biting back a frustrated sigh. "Fine, fine, I won't ask you again, I promise."

Kreacher eyed him suspiciously before nodding slightly. "Kreacher will hold Master Harry to that," the old elf said threateningly before disappearing with a loud 'pop'. Harry stared at the empty space where Kreacher had stood and considered the elf's bizarrely strong reaction to that whole conversation.

"Huh," he muttered, feeling himself perk up slightly—it looked like he had a mystery to solve, something which he could occupy himself with this summer; figuring out what had happened to Regulus Black.

-Hermione's POV:

Hermione liked to wake up to a tangle of sheets and legs, to the heat of another body pressed against hers, and surrounded by the familiar scent that clung to her lover's skin. It put her immediately at ease, took away some of the edge that over half a decade of homelessness had carved into her, leaving behind ugly scars that existed out of sight; unseen under her skin, carved deep into her very bones.

"Don't think so much," Tom murmured, his voice still thick with sleep as he interrupted her thoughts, his hands finding their place on her hips and dragging their bodies closer together, leaving no space between them.

"I can't help it," she replied, nosing against the hollow of his throat, "I've missed this. I've missed you."

"I know," was Tom's reply, because of course it was, and she couldn't help her soft snort.

"I'm going to translate that to 'yes, Hermione, I missed you too'."

"It wouldn't be an inaccurate translation," Tom allowed, and she nipped his collarbone in response.

It had been four days now of waking up like this, of having Tom beside her once again.

It had also been four days of waking up without Harry by her side.

"He'll be back with us soon enough," Tom murmured, and she smiled half-heartedly.

"I'm that obvious?"

"Just to me," he promised. "I know you inside and out, my dear; there's nothing you can hide from me."

"It probably says something about me that I find that so sweet," Hermione noted dryly, and Tom scoffed.

"The opinions of lesser beings are inconsequential," he said with all the haughtiness of an aristocrat looking down his nose at a rabble of filthy commoners. Hermione managed a smile at that, appreciating the older boy's attempt to distract her, but she'd been much calmer about Harry being stuck in enemy territory before the news about Moody escaping from custody had come out.
She'd heard it first from Harry, in a hastily scribbled note in their enchanted journals— *Don't freak out, but Moody's escaped and he's living at the Order Headquarters. Can you pass on to Voldemort he told me other Aurors loyal to him helped him escape? And seriously, stop freaking out*— and unsurprisingly, being told not to freak out certainly hadn't stopped her from doing just that.

Voldemort, being the opportunistic bastard that he was, had used the convenient set of circumstances that had just presented themselves to start weeding out the hardcore Dumbledore supporters from within the Auror Department. He'd had all the Aurors interrogated with Verite serum, *allegedly* to find out who'd helped Moody escape, which was certainly part of it, but mostly in order to find out which Aurors would be a problem and needed to go.

Hermione wouldn't deny that Moody's escape had in all likelihood turned out to be more useful than his incarceration would have been, but the thought of Harry being stuck in close-quarters with Moody turned her blood cold. It took a great deal of trust not just in Harry's ability to handle Moody but in Lupin and Snape, as well Nymphadora Tonks and Charlie Weasley, the Death Eater spies in the Order, to have Harry's back against the ex-Auror.

"Hermione," Tom interrupted her increasingly anxious thoughts, drawing her attention back to him, "if anything happens to Harry, there will be hell to pay," her lover promised her, "for everyone involved." His tone was absolute steel, promising death and destruction, and it sent an excited shiver up her spine— a reaction which, going by his sly smirk, Tom noticed and as he brought their mouths together, Hermione willingly surrendered herself to the distraction.

Sex wasn't the only distraction the day was to bring, and Tom wouldn't be happy to hear it but the other distraction, this one planned, was even more exciting— it was officially moving day.

Hermione had been surprised to learn that much like the muggle Prime Minister had Number 10 Downing Street, the British Minister of Magic had their own official residence. Gamp Hall had been built two hundred and eighty-eight years ago for the first ever British Minister of Magic, Ulick Gamp. It was even larger than Number 10 Downing Street— unsurprising, considering that wizards could never stand to be outdone by muggles— with four floors and approximately a hundred and fifty rooms in total. Those rooms included a ballroom, multiple guest wings where government ministers, national leaders and foreign dignitaries could be hosted, conference, reception, sitting and dining rooms and overly lavish offices, as well as two entire floors serving as the Minister of Magic's private residence.

It was at Gamp Hall that the inauguration ball for Thaddeus Dagworth, the new Minister of Magic, was to be held. While in reality they'd already have *unofficially* moved in, on the night of the ball the Minister of Magic and his family would be handed over the keys and *officially* move into Gamp Hall— and much to her horror, Hermione had learned that this meant she was finally going to be revealed to the world as "Thaddeus's" niece and ward.

Tom's alias of Thomas Dagworth, the nephew of Thaddeus (on the other side of the family, of course), would sadly be unable to make it (the fact he was an exact copy of a teenage Lord Voldemort made public appearances where Dumbledore was around difficult). Thomas was of age, however, and not a well-known the way Hermione was through her connection to Harry, and would be represented as being in the midst of highly sensitive studies in the pursuit of his Mastery (details of his whereabouts and Mastery would purposefully be vague, in order to 'protect' Thomas). Tom's second alias as Thaddeus's "best friend" Basileus Sfor, however, *would* be attending. To Hermione's annoyance, Voldemort had actually made a point to order her and Tom not to go *cavorting* about while Tom was in his Basileus guise, as apparently there were plans in place for Basileus that he didn't want messed up because good old Basil had had some sort of public dalliance with an underage witch.
Despite her frustration and upset about her upcoming "reveal" as the Minister of Magic's ward, Hermione couldn't deny how excited she was about getting to live in Gamp Hall— the home she, Tom and Harry shared would always be her favourite, of course, but it felt wrong without Harry there and the opportunity to call such a distinguished piece of British Wizarding history her residence for however long she ended up staying there was too good to miss, even with Voldemort as a roommate.

After she and Tom dressed for the day, and Tom had donned his disguise as Basileus Sfor, he side-along apparated her to the entrance of the Ministry of Magic.

"You're teaching me how to apparate this summer," she informed him, with a grimace— side-along apparition was not pleasant. She was then mildly horrified and wholly incredulous to learn that in order to enter the Ministry of Magic she needed to step into a fucking loo— just what the actual fuck had the designers of the system been thinking? After finding Tom amongst the witches and wizards freshly arrived at the Ministry for work, Hermione gave him the incredulous look that entire ordeal deserved. "What kind of fucking ridiculous waste of time was that?" She demanded.

"Probably Dumbledore's idea," Tom said sourly, looking just as put out. "Ridiculous and unnecessarily complicated is his usual MO."

"Right," Hermione said, disgustedly, "my dear old Uncle is definitely going to have to do something about it."

"I'll make sure it's on my agenda, niece," a familiar, smooth voice cut in and Hermione turned slightly so she was facing her 'uncle' Voldemort. He was dressed traditionally in black Wizarding robes, heavy-looking and finely-tailored with a golden 'M' over the heart. Seeing the nod of approval the Dark Lord gave her, Hermione took a moment to feel relieved that she'd made the choice to wear robes instead of a dress, though hers were less traditional, cut from thin silk and coloured a deep wine-purple. She had a feeling she was going to have to start dressing to a certain standard while in the public eye, at least until her return to Hogwarts— with her "uncle's" focus on the restoration of the Old Ways, she guessed there was going to be a lot of traditional robes in her future.

"It's good to see you both," Voldemort greeted them, with a friendly nod to them both. Everything about the façade the Dark wizard was currently wearing was fake, Hermione was very aware, but knowing it was fake didn't mean she could actually pick out any fault in the mask Voldemort was wearing— other than the crawling sense of danger at the base of her skull present because she knew just how dangerous he was, none of her instincts were picking up anything wrong about "Thaddeus". It was impressive in a rather horrifying way.

Voldemort was accompanied by four Aurors; all of them, Hermione knew from Tom's previous comments, were associated with Dark-inclined families in some way, but only one, Cade Selwyn, son of the never-convicted Death Eater Calder Selwyn, was aware of Voldemort's true identity, and he was the only Auror who would be permanently assigned as the Minister's 'bodyguard'— the other three were currently only present because of the 'threat' posed by Moody. Of course, Selwyn (Jr) was aware that Voldemort had no need of a personal Auror at all, but appearances demanded it and Voldemort hadn't wanted someone who hadn't sworn their allegiance to him constantly being so close to him.

As well as the four Aurors, a member of the Wizengamot was there— the elderly gentleman was one of the Gamps, Hermione was fairly certain, as the Gamp family had a connection to Gamp Hall through their famous ancestor. It was the probably-a-Gamp Wizengamot representative who had the portkey for Gamp Hall and Hermione didn't even try to hide her anticipation as she reached out
to touch the old iron key that was glowing a faint blue– being able to not just visit the famous building, but actually live there, was almost surreal.

Unlike Harry, Hermione usually managed to land on her feet when travelling via portkey and this time was (to her private relief) no exception. Their whole party had all arrived inside the front entrance of Gamp Hall, which was just as overly grandiose as Hermione supposed was to be expected, the large space filled with floating crystal chandeliers, gold-framed paintings of former Ministers of Magic, statues and other symbols of wealth, station and class.

The Wizengamot representative– definitely a Gamp; he had the same chin and cheekbones as the portrait of Ulick Gamp– offered to give them all a tour of the building. While Voldemort accepted, Hermione and Tom both politely declined, going their separate ways from Voldemort.

Despite not wanting an official tour, Hermione fully intended on spending the day exploring and Tom was just as interested as her in learning his way around their new house. Walking deeper into Gamp Hall revealed the decor to be the sort of ostentatious that toed the line of being overbearing and was undeniably intimidating. The plush carpeting was a rich royal purple, the floors were either gleaming black marble threaded with gold or a deep, glossy mahogany, the dark oak-paneled walls were stark and looming, and pedestals displaying expensive vases and unusual magical artefacts lined all the halls.

"So," Hermione mused out loud as they looked around, "out of interest, are there any laws that exist to stop the Minister from using the treasury as their own private bank account?"

"This is the official residence of the Minister of Magic," Tom reminded her, the amusement in his voice doing nothing to hide the vicious satisfaction that accompanied the emphasis he put on 'Minister of Magic', "it's purpose is as a status symbol to be shown off– the Minister hosts foreign diplomats here, after all, the house needs to shine Wizarding Britain in the best light possible."

"That makes sense, though I wouldn't exactly call this place a house," Hermione said dryly– it was much too large for that, far closer to the size of a small palace which made her curious; "is there a dungeon here, do you think?" She wondered aloud, and Tom smirked at her.

"Want to go find out?"

"Tempting," she smirked back at him playfully, "but I'd rather go find the official personal wing of the Minister of Magic and fuck on the bed before it's actually Voldemort's, which would make it far too bloody weird."

Tom actually laughed at that, and the sound of his laughter was undeniably real. It always surprised Hermione and warmed her right through when Tom expressed genuine, spontaneous positive emotions like laughter. When he stopped laughing, Tom reached to cradle her face in his hands and looked her straight in the eyes as he told her fervently, "Hermione, I absolutely adore how your wicked mind works. Come on, darling, let's go find the bedroom."

Hermione let him pull her along, just as eager as he was. Locating the official private quarters of the Minister of Magic was straightforward enough, and Tom was easily able to dismantle the warding meant to prevent them from entering.

The Minister of Magic's bedroom was just as overly grandiose as the rest of Gamp Hall, and Hermione didn't waste any of her time stripping out of her robes and crawling onto the large, soft mattress. She was followed just moments later by Tom who pushed her up so her back was pressed against the large headboard, a heavy oaken design with decorative carvings. Hermione bit back a moan as Tom lowered himself between her spread legs, reaching back to brace herself against the
headboard as her lover ate her out until she was soaked and sensitive, her limbs shaky from pleasure.

"Come on, get up here," she urged, reaching out with one hand to tug sharply on Tom's hair until he complied, lifting his head from her and smiling smugly with his lips all wet and red and his chin soaked. Still with her hand tight in his hair, she pulled Tom up until he was finally kissing her, sharp and hungry and tasting of her. It took a little bit of shuffling to adjust their positions without stopping kissing so that they were stretched out flat on the bed, but then he was sliding into her and she was clamping her legs around his hips.

Neither of them lasted long, but it wasn't as if they were actually trying to. Soaked with a thin layer of sweat and curled up comfortably in Tom's arms in the aftermath, Hermione couldn't resist saying, "I also want you to fuck me over the Minister of Magic's desk. And in the Minister of Magic's chair."

"I'm sensing a bit of a kink here," Tom replied, amused, and Hermione just shrugged slightly and grinned, because he wasn't exactly wrong—power was always attractive, as was the idea of owning power, of possessing it, and she couldn't deny that if she was ever offered the post of Minister of Magic that she wouldn't snatch it up in a heartbeat.

"We'll have to do it at night, when there's less chance of people being around," Tom murmured, bending slightly so his mouth was moving against the back of her neck and she shivered. "We'll have to break in, and there's a chance we'll get caught— but you'd like that anyway, you like risks, like taking chances."

"And you like the idea of people seeing your claim," she added pointedly, because she wasn't the only one of them that enjoyed playing around in public places where there was a risk they'd be caught.

"Yes," Tom didn't even try to deny it, "and you never know," he added, lowering his voice so that she could barely hear it, "maybe one day you'll sit in that chair, in that office, and it will be yours."

Hermione immediately shivered again, a hot rush making her hips twitch slightly. "Don't tease!" She hissed, turning in his arms to glare at him, but Tom just smirked back at her, a glint in his eyes she didn't quite recognise.

"Who says I'm teasing?" He asked, so very softly, so very dangerously, and Hermione felt herself go very still. Those words, they were dangerous—treasonous, even, if Voldemort happened to overhear. They weren't anything she'd been expecting to hear from Tom, as loyal to Voldemort as he was, considering that part of him was Voldemort.

"You really shouldn't say things like that if you don't mean them," she said, hushed, lowering her voice to match his. He didn't look away from her as he replied,

"I'm aware."

The air between them felt electric; his eyes had trapped hers in a sudden, unexpected intensity, and Hermione wasn't quite sure how to respond—she was all-too-aware that Tom had, and without any sort of warning at all, the utter bastard, handed over to her a dangerous weapon, one she didn't fully understand how to handle.

Hermione swallowed, breaking the eye-contact. "We need to get out of here before Voldemort and his guide get here," she muttered, and Tom made a quiet, amused sound at the unsubtle change of subject, even as he took pity on her and went along with it.
Later, when she was alone, she'd think over his words, would puzzle over his angle and try to decipher the meaning. For now, they had a bedroom to clean, a Dark Lord to dodge and a historical building to explore.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was mostly world-building, as I'm sure you all noticed, but next chapter the action starts once more. Hope you enjoyed it!

~Cheshire Carroll xoxo
CHAPTER LXXVIII:

Harry’s POV:

When Kreacher came to Harry in a panicked fury the day before the inauguration ball, Harry was both happy that the old elf felt he could go to him for help, and outraged by the urgent news that Kreacher had brought him—apparently Mrs Weasley had started to go through Grimmauld Place’s drawing room, his drawing room, and get rid of anything she considered Dark or bigoted. Harry honestly didn’t understand what Mrs Weasley was thinking—who came into someone else’s house and started to throw out things they didn’t like?

He followed the furious house elf to the drawing room, feeling quite furious himself, barely taking note of how Charlie, when he stormed by the redhead, groaned; “oh shit, what now?” before following after him.

The door of the drawing room was slightly ajar and he could hear Mrs Weasley commenting to someone; “I can’t do anything about the tapestry, it seems to be permanently stuck to the wall—” and he interrupted with a loud thud as he shoved the unresisting door fully open with enough force that it smacked into the wall.

“What the hell are you doing!?” he shouted at Mrs Weasley, storming over to the shocked-looking woman and tearing from her arms the sack she was holding. A glance inside the sack revealed several coiled snakeskins and rusty daggers, an ornate crystal bottle with a large opal set into the stopper full of a dark liquid he was pretty sure was blood, a beautiful music box and a number of tarnished silver boxes inscribed with foreign languages—Harry recognised one as Old Norse from his Ancient Runes class.

A rough and unexpected shove to his shoulder in his distracted state had him stumbling backwards, automatically pulling out his wand as he glared over at George Weasley—apparently he’d been the one Mrs Weasley was speaking to. Fred Weasley was nowhere in sight, but seeing the twins apart wasn’t unusual anymore—Fred didn’t like to be around people, and he apparently suffered a great deal of pain from his injuries and had to rest. Harry was viciously satisfied, but George had been twice as much of an annoyance to deal with, as if in an attempt to make up for Fred’s absence.

Like now, when uncaring of the witnesses in the room the red-head had actually laid his hands on Harry in an act of violence. “Watch it, Potter!” George snarled, one hand moving to his wand too. “Don’t you talk to my mother like that!”

Kreacher, with a malevolent hiss, got between Harry and George, his long, bony fingers poised in front of him, ready to click. “Nasty little brat of a blood traitor!” He croaked angrily, his large eyes fixed on George. “Messing up my mistress’s house, oh my poor mistress, and threatening my master under my master’s own roof!”

“Oh! Everybody, calm down!” Charlie said loudly, fixing the whole room with a glare. “And someone explain what the f-heck’s happening!”

“I don’t have any idea, that rude little boy just stamped in here and—” Mrs Weasley started to exclaim indignantly, but Harry interrupted her.
“What the hell do you think you’re doing with my stuff?” he demanded.

“Watch it, you spoiled little shit!” George immediately shouted back at him, the tip of his wand sparking dangerously.

“George, what the hell?” Charlie exclaimed, aghast. “Go for a walk and calm down, for Merlin’s sake— now, George!”

Still with a vicious snarl on his face and his wand twitching in his white-knuckled grip, George shot Harry a last, filthy look before storming from the room. Charlie exhaled loudly, before turning to Mrs Weasley with a frown. “Mum, what are you doing with Harry’s stuff?” He asked.

“I— It’s Dark!” Mrs Weasley protested, her arms now crossed defensively across her chest. “I don’t feel comfortable living in a house with Dark artefacts just lying around!”

“Then leave!” Harry said furiously, and Charlie turned to give him a sharp look.

“Harry, watch your tone,” he ordered flatly. “Despite how everyone’s been acting, we are actually all civilised human beings here.”

Chastised, Harry fell silent, though anger and resentment still churned in his gut as he glared over at Mrs Weasley.

“Mum,” Charlie said, turning back to face Mrs Weasley, “you realise you can’t just go binning other people’s belongings? We’re guests here, this is Harry’s house and all of this,” he gestured around the drawing room, “belongs to him, whether you approve of it or not.”

Mrs Weasley’s cheeks were flushed an angry red as deep as her hair, but she tellingly didn’t argue. Charlie’s calm reasoning had done far more to shame her then Harry’s angered shouts and loud accusations. Marvolo, Harry thought morosely, wouldn’t be at all pleased with him if he heard about this.

He stayed silent as he watched Mrs Weasley bustle out of the room, before reluctantly turning to Charlie. “Sorry,” he told the redhead, embarrassed but needing to say it. “I didn’t mean to lose my temper and put you in that sort of position.”

Charlie just sighed. “Well, I can’t really blame you for being upset— I don’t know what she was thinking,” he said, shaking his head. “Here, let me help you and, er, Kreacher was it? Let me help you and Kreacher put everything back.”

Kreacher gave Charlie a very narrow-eyed look before slowly nodding. Between the three of them, they unpacked everything in the sack, Kreacher and Charlie doing their best to fix anything that had been broken by the careless treatment, and replaced the items back on their shelves in the towering glass-fronted cabinets— though Harry did set aside some things to take up to his room, like the large golden ring bearing the Black crest and a cursed jewellery box that turned out to contain the steel choker he recognised from Walburga’s portrait, with its large black diamond.

“We should probably add some wards to these cabinets,” Charlie mused aloud, as they worked. “Some of this stuff looks really valuable and Dung can’t keep his hands to himself, greedy bastard.”

“We could set this out for bait, it’d teach him a lesson,” Harry suggested with a smirk, gingerly holding up a silver snuffbox that kept trying to bite him with poisonous-looking fangs.

“Or this,” Charlie laughed, holding up a many-legged pair of tweezers that kept trying to puncture
his skin.

Harry was about to agree, when his hand closed around the next item in the sack and his entire body froze, a very recognisable pull and familiar sensation of rightness settling over him, muffling the rest of the room from his senses with its intensity.

He hastily pulled his hand out of the sack, fingers clutched tight around the object, and a shaky breath left him as he recognised the heavy gold locket he was holding, recognised it from the vision he’d had that horrible night in the dorms when he’d ended up in a coma for a week, the rush of images flickering behind his eyelids—fluttering yellowed pages bound in black, a cracked black stone set in gold, an ornate silver circlet with a sparkling blue gem, finely wrought handles framing a shining gold cup, a locket of heavy gold with a serpentine S in glittering green emeralds, a long, winding, sinuous form, jagged red lightning.

He was holding in his hand one of Voldemort’s most priceless treasures, one of the tethers that kept him immortal, and he had no fucking clue how that was even possible.

“Harry!”

It wasn’t the urgent tone in Charlie’s voice suggesting that he’d called out his name a few times that shook Harry out of his dazed state, but rather how the burly redhead tried to take the locket from him.

“Don’t touch it!” He hissed, snatching it away. Charlie looked deeply concerned, even as he held both his hands up in the universal demonstration of surrender.

“Harry, mate,” he said slowly, carefully, “I’m pretty sure there’s some sort of Dark thrall on that, I need you to put it down, okay?”

“There’s no thrall,” Harry denied, shaking his head. “I—I just recognised it. It shouldn’t be here—really shouldn’t be here. How the fuck is it here?” He asked the room in true bewilderment.

Charlie looked suspicious still and Harry sighed, crouching down to place the locket on the ground. “See? No thrall,” he said, straightening back up. This turned out to be a mistake because Kreacher immediately took the opportunity to dart forwards and snatch up the locket before scurrying back, hunched over the tether like an animal, teeth bared threateningly. “Kreacher?” Harry asked with a frown, concern sparking to life inside him. “What’s wrong?”

“You will not touch Master Regulus’s locket!” The old house elf snarled threateningly, his stance fierce as he clutched the locket protectively to his chest. And Harry… well, Harry’s brain sort of stalled.

“Master… Regulus’s locket?” He repeated slowly, incredulously almost. Kreacher inched back towards the still-open door, eyes fixed on Harry’s. The old elf looked like a cornered animal, trying to flee—but also ready to bite, if he had to. There was no way the locket belonged to Regulus Black, it was clearly one of Voldemort’s tethers—Harry could feel the magnetic pull towards it from half a room away—but this wasn’t a conversation he was prepared to have in front of Charlie Weasley. “Right,” he said, aloud. “Why don’t you take Regulus’s locket somewhere safe, then, Kreacher, and make sure it’s protected.”

Kreacher immediately obeyed—Harry only had a split-second to read the relief on the old elf’s wrinkled face before Kreacher vanished, leaving him alone with Charlie and his sharp, considering stare.
“That wasn’t suspicious at all,” the redhead remarked and Harry shrugged awkwardly.

“It was, uh, an unexpected find,” he offered, and Charlie snorted.

“Clearly. Are you going to tell me what the fuck it was?”

“No,” Harry said immediately, shaking his head. Charlie’s lips thinned slightly.

“Will you at least tell me if it’s dangerous?”

“To most people, yes,” Harry answered him honestly. “Very, very dangerous. But not to me.”

Charlie looked at him for a long, long moment before the redhead groaned. “Fuck it, whatever. If you think you know what you’re doing, then fine. It’s not my business. Just don’t die, for fuck’s sake—if you do, there’ll be three very terrifying people lining up to torture me to death and that’s not how I’m planning to go out.” And then, proving to Harry just why he was his favourite Weasley ever and the only one he could actually stand, Charlie dismissed the locket completely and turned the conversation back to warding the cabinets against robbery (though they did also leave out the biting snuffbox and stabbing tweezers as bait).

Once Charlie finished the creating the wards and keying them to Harry’s magical signature, which Harry was actually pretty impressed by, the red-head wandered over to the back wall which was covered entirely by the tapestry of the Black family tree. The tapestry looked immensely old and it was faded in places with a few gnaw-marks, but the sprawling family tree depicted was still oddly beautiful, in some weird, unexplainable way.

“Look, there’s Grandmamma,” Charlie said cheerfully, pointing to a small round burn mark between the names ‘Callidora Black’ and ‘Charis Black’ stitched in glittering golden thread.

“Wait, what?” Harry demanded, wide-eyed and scrambling across the room, over to Charlie’s side.

“What the fuck, your grandmother’s a Black?”

“Yeah, she was dad’s mum,” Charlie explained, laughing at Harry’s gobsmacked expression. “Cedrella Black, she married Grandpop Weasley and had dad, plus Uncle Bilius and Uncle Ignatius*. Not that any of us are on here.” He sounded amused by that. “Weasleys are the biggest family of bloodtraitors there is.”

“What the fuck,” Harry repeated, not really able to think of anything else to say to express the sheer amount of disbelief he was feeling.

“You can’t be that surprised,” Charlie said, with an amused look, “a whole bunch of the British pureblood families are related at least by marriage, if not by blood. Tonks’ mum is on here too,” he pointed to another burn mark, “and there’s your link to the Potter family,” he added, pointing up higher to ‘Dorea Black’, a beautiful, black-haired witch with the Black family grey eyes and black hair. “She married Charlus Potter, the cousin of—”

“Fleamont Potter,” Harry remembered from studying for Walburga’s genealogy lessons. “My grandfather.”

“And Dorea Black, Potter after her marriage, was the aunt of Walburga Black,” Charlie traced his finger down the glittering golden thread in demonstration, “whose portrait we’ve all unfortunately become well-acquainted with the screams of. Dorea was one of Phineas Nigellus Black’s granddaughters through his fourth son, Cygnus Black II, while my grandmother, Cedrella, was Phineas Nigellus’s granddaughter through his third son, Arcturus Black II.”
“What the actual fuck,” Harry repeated, feeling completely flabbergasted—and apparently looking it too, as Charlie snorted when he looked back at him.

“Like I said, most of us are related at least by marriage, and the Black family’s been around since the Middle Ages. That’s just two links, go back further and there’s bound to be more.”

Harry, looking up at the tangle of names before them with new eyes, silently agreed.

After saying goodbye to Charlie and with his head still spinning from the new information, Harry started to head back to his/Regulus’s bedroom before abruptly changing his mind and heading to the boiler room where Kreacher’s ‘nest’ was located, and where he was guessing Kreacher would be hiding. He closed and locked the door of the boiler room so they wouldn’t be interrupted, adding a quick silencing spell too, before carefully knocking on the door to Kreacher’s cupboard.

There was a long moment where there was no movement or sound, and Harry was just starting to rethink his guess when the cupboard door creaked opened just a crack, one that through which he could spy a glint reflecting light through the gap—Kreacher’s eye.

“We need to talk,” he told the old elf, keeping his voice firm but calm.

“Kreacher doesn’t want to talk,” came the slightly muffled, very sullen reply.

“That locket didn’t belong to Regulus,” Harry kept his voice firm. “I need to know how he got it. And I’m sorry, but that’s an order, Kreacher.”

“Master Harry told Kreacher he could keep Master Regulus’s secrets!” Spat the elf accusingly through the crack in the cupboard.

“But this isn’t just Regulus’s secret,” Harry said quietly, “it’s bigger than that. So much bigger. How did Regulus get the locket, Kreacher?”

The cupboard door slowly creaked fully open and the old elf crept out. Harry felt awful to see how the house elf’s arms were wrapped protectively around himself.

“You must not tell Kreacher’s mistress,” Kreacher croaked with an air of resignation, large eyes baleful. “Master Regulus made me promise, my mistress must not know.”

“I swear to you I won’t tell Walburga, Kreacher,” Harry promised and Kreacher hunched further into himself, practically curling into a ball.

“Master Regulus… Master Regulus, he always liked Kreacher,” the old elf muttered, “one day, Master Regulus, he came to visit Kreacher in the kitchen and he said… he said that the Dark Lord required an elf.” Kreacher shuddered then, and his legs seemed to lose the strength to hold him up; he fell to the floor and immediately brought his knees to his chest, huddling in a ragged ball with his wrinkled face pressed to his bony knees. Harry felt sick at the sight of Kreacher’s distress, and felt wretched too that he was forcing Kreacher to share this against his will, but he stayed silent, needing to hear how a tether had ended up in Grimmauld Place.

“Master Regulus, he volunteered Kreacher,” Kreacher said, his voice muffled against his knees but still audible in the small, locked boiler room. “It was an honour, said Master Regulus, an honour for him and for Kreacher, who must be sure to do whatever the Dark Lord ordered him to do... and then to c-come home.”

Kreacher began to rock himself, his nasally breath starting to come in sobs. Harry knelt beside the elf, wanting to comfort him but not knowing how.
"Kreacher went to the Dark Lord," Kreacher moaned through his sobs. "The Dark Lord did not tell Kreacher what they were to do, but took Kreacher with him to a cave beside the sea. And beyond the cave was a cavern, and in the cavern was a great black lake... There was a boat... There was a b-basin full of potion on the island. The D-Dark Lord made Kreacher drink it..."

Harry felt sick to his stomach as Kreacher visibly trembled from head to foot. "Kreacher drank, and as he drank he saw terrible things..." the old elf whispered. "Kreacher's insides burned... Kreacher cried for Master Regulus to save him, he cried for his Mistress Black, but the Dark Lord only laughed... He made Kreacher drink all the potion... He dropped a locket into the empty basin... He filled it with more potion. And then the Dark Lord sailed away, leaving Kreacher on the island..."

Harry swallowed back the bile that threatened to rise to his throat. He wasn’t a stranger to Voldemort’s evil, he’d witnessed it first hand and he’d suffered from its resulting effects for nearly his whole life, but there was something truly repugnant to him about such awful violence committed against an innocent creature— it made him think of the dead unicorn back in his first year, and the conviction he’d felt when he saw it that he’d never seen something quite as devastating.

“What happened next?” he asked quietly, his voice nearly as hoarse as Kreacher’s own.

"Kreacher needed water, he crawled to the island’s edge and he drank from the black lake... and hands, dead hands, came out of the water and dragged Kreacher under the surface..." the old elf moaned and Harry shuddered. “But Master Regulus told Kreacher to come home, and Kreacher did.”

Harry was briefly confused— why would Voldemort ride in a boat, if he could just apparate in and out of the cave where he’d stored his tether? Then again, house elves could apparate in and out of Hogwarts, while wizards couldn’t. Maybe there was magic meant to prevent apparation, magic that Voldemort hadn’t realised wouldn’t work on house elves— because Harry had no doubt that Kreacher wasn’t supposed to have survived. Voldemort had meant to test the defences he’d set up for the tether on something “disposable”, and Kreacher had been intended to die in that cave, either from the potion or the monsters with dead hands that had dragged Kreacher under the surface of the lake.

“What happened after you got home?” Harry whispered, finally gathering the courage to reach out and rest a gentle hand on Kreacher’s trembling back. He could feel the defined ridges of Kreacher’s spine, sharp and protruding.

"Master Regulus was very worried when Kreacher told him what had happened, very worried," croaked Kreacher. "Master Regulus told Kreacher to stay hidden and not to leave the house. And then... it was a little while later... Master Regulus came to find Kreacher in his cupboard one night, and Master Regulus was strange, not as he usually was, disturbed in his mind, Kreacher could tell... and he asked Kreacher to take him to the cave, the cave where Kreacher had gone with the Dark Lord..."

Abruptly, and in that moment, Harry knew how this tragic story was going to end. The ‘mystery’ of Regulus Black’s disappearance, the one he’d intended to occupy himself with solving over the summer, was a mystery no longer, and he listened with a heavy heart as a weeping Kreacher continued to recount the last, tragic moments of Walburga’s son’s life.

"M-Master Regulus took from his pocket a locket like the one the Dark Lord had," whimpered Kreacher, tears pouring down either side of his snout-like nose. "And he told Kreacher to take it and, when the basin was empty, to switch the lockets ..."
“And he ordered—Kreacher to leave—without him. And he told Kreacher— to go home—and never to
tell my Mistress—what he had done—but to destroy—the first locket. And he drank—all the potion—and Kreacher swapped the lockets—and watched... as Master Regulus... was dragged beneath the
water... and... and Kreacher did as Master Regulus ordered... and Kreacher left.”

“I’m so sorry, Kreacher,” Harry said, choked, carefully patting the sobbing house elf’s back. “Oh
god, I’m so, so sorry.”

Kreacher looked up at him then, eyes swollen and bloodshot and swimming in tears. "Nothing
Kreacher did made any mark upon it," the elf confessed with a small, wretched moan. "Kreacher
tried everything, everything he knew, but nothing, nothing would work... So many powerful spells
upon the casing, Kreacher was sure the way to destroy it was to get inside it, but it would not
open... Kreacher punished himself, he tried again, he punished himself, he tried again. Kreacher
failed to obey orders, Kreacher could not destroy the locket! And his mistress was mad with grief,
because Master Regulus had disappeared and Kreacher could not tell her what had happened, no,
because Master Regulus had f-f-forbidden him to tell any of the f-f-family what happened in the c-
cave...”

Kreacher began to sob so hard that there were no more coherent words. Harry didn’t know what to
say, or what to do, and the worst part was the relief he felt that Kreacher hadn’t managed to destroy
the tether (or maybe it was the memory of another dead, dark-haired Seeker that had died for
Voldemort’s ambitions).

“Kreacher,” he said, after a small eternity had passed and Kreacher’s tears had slowed to hiccups,
“will you keep the locket safe for me? Will you guard it against anyone who tries to take it, with as
much force as you want?”

He’d intended on taking the locket from Kreacher and hiding it himself, maybe even taking it to
the ball tomorrow and passing it on to Hermione or Tom, or even to Voldemort, but he couldn’t do
that now; it seemed like such an unspeakably cruel thing to do.

“Yes, Master Harry,” Kreacher promised him, his voice much hoarsier and croakier than usual.

“And... take the rest of the day off work for yourself,” Harry added, waiting for Kreacher’s nod in
response before retreating from the boiler room and returning to Regulus’s.

He sat on the bed feeling horribly sick and like he wanted to cry a little. He kept twisting the Ring
around and around his finger, wishing it was night-time so he could go to sleep and speak to
Marvolo—he was far too awake to fall asleep now, even if he tried, and he didn’t trust anyone here
enough to ask them to send him to sleep. He’d have to ask Marvolo if it was possible to
communicate when he wasn’t asleep.

He ended up staying in Regulus’s room until dinnertime. He’d turned his attention towards his
homework the best he could, trying to force the memory of Kreacher’s torment and wretched grief
from his mind the best he could, a memory that occasionally overlapped with Neville’s grief-
stricken expression those last few days of term, replacing them instead with the essays he was
required to write.

He felt drained as he made his way down to the dining room for dinner, and even the surprise
presence of Remus and Snape did little to cheer him. Dumbledore turned up too, halfway through
dessert, and Harry wasn’t surprised when the old man requested that he stay afterwards. Remus,
Snape, Moody, Tonks, and Charlie stayed too (which was slightly comforting in that it made it
four, maybe five, against two, maybe three— he wasn’t entirely sure of where Remus’s loyalties lay), and Dumbledore immediately began discussing the inauguration ball the following evening.

All the Hogwarts professors had been invited— Harry hadn’t realised just quite how prestigious a position teaching at Hogwarts was considered to be— and Snape had apparently invited Remus as his guest, which was a bit of a surprise, though Harry assumed Dumbledore must have ordered him to. Tonks was Harry’s official, Ministry-condoned Auror escort, and he wasn’t sure why she’d have Charlie as a plus one if she was on duty, not until it occurred to him that Charlie was probably technically Harry’s guest— he still hadn’t actually seen the invitation he’d been sent, as Dumbledore was keeping hold of it. He missed how it was illegal to open somebody else’s mail in the muggle world.

Basically, the short meeting consisted of Dumbledore telling him over and over again how he wasn’t permitted to leave Auror Tonks’s side and that he was to follow any instruction Auror Tonks gave him. He’d already sworn that oath that he wouldn’t use the opportunity to abscond, but Dumbledore didn’t bring it up in the meeting— Harry wouldn’t be surprised to discover it was illegal to coerce a minor into making a wizard’s oath. If he ever dared bring it up with Hermione and Tom, they could probably add it to the official (and rapidly growing) list of offenses against Dumbledore.

Once the meeting was over, Harry was again unsurprised when Snape requested a private word with him— though he was surprised when Remus followed after them, into the drawing room. Snape closed the door behind them and flicked up a silencing spell and some sort of anti-eavesdropping spell, before he turned and frowned at him.

“You were uncharacteristically subdued in there,” his head of house said suspiciously. “That’s the first time I’ve heard you speak to Dumbledore without any passive-aggression, or actual aggression, in years.”

Harry shrugged slightly. “Just wasn’t in the mood, I guess.”

Snape’s eyes narrowed. “Moody isn’t making trouble for you, is he?” he demanded, his wand hand twitching slightly.

“No, Cory— she’s a cat— she’s spying on him for me,” Harry explained, unable to help his slight smile at that. “She likes stalking him to freak him out and she comes and lets me know if he’s nearby.”

Snape snorted in amusement hearing that, and even Remus’s mouth twitched up at the corners. “Good,” his head of house said, “I’ve been… concerned to hear about your proximity with Moody, after your last encounter.”

“When he attacked me, yeah,” Harry said with a grimace at the painful memory; even if it had been planned, and the attack intentionally provoked, it still hadn’t been at all pleasant. “We’ve only had one one-on-one conversation, which was before I knew he was here and I came across him accidentally. I’ve been avoiding him since.”

“Good,” Snape repeated, before frowning again. “If it isn’t Moody bothering you, then, is it the Weasley twins?”

“No. Well, yes, but their very existence bothers me,” Harry said, pulling a face, “and mine bothers them, so we avoid interacting with each other whenever possible. And yes, before you ask, I’ve gotten into a few shouting matches with Mrs Weasley, but she’s not the one bothering me either, or Dumbledore. I’m mostly left to myself, which is a good thing, but this whole situation is… not
great."

“You’re not planning something tomorrow, are you?” Snape asked, and Harry winced.

“Sadly, no,” he muttered. “That’s definitely not an option.”

“And you promise nobody’s treating you poorly here,” Snape pressed, clearly very concerned by the prospect and doing a shitty job at hiding it.

“I promise,” Harry answered him honestly. “I don’t exactly enjoy the company of anyone here, except Charlie and Tonks when they’re actually around, but nobody’s treating me badly.”

“That’s good to know,” Remus said with a kind smile.

“Remus will be moving in tomorrow, and I will be visiting once a week at minimum,” Snape said briskly, his dark eyes serious as they met Harry’s. “I do not want you playing the hero, Harry; if anyone treats you unacceptably, then you come to one of us immediately. Is that understood?”

“Yes, sir,” Harry immediately answered, and his sincerity was evident enough that Snape finally relaxed and asked after his homework instead.

After Snape and Remus said their goodbyes, Harry returned to his/Regulus’s bedroom, but instead of continuing with his holiday homework, he settled down with his disguised copy of ‘Magick Moste Evile’ and continued reading it until he was finally tired enough to sleep. When he did, he immediately found himself in the greyed-out Riddle Manor, where Marvolo was waiting.

“You seem troubled, Harry,” Marvolo observed in place of a greeting, head tilting slightly in a vaguely avian and distinctly predatory fashion. Harry felt pinned by those burning red eyes, and he had to push past the sensation before answering.

“Learned some horrible stuff today,” he told Marvolo, shrugging slightly. “And… I, um, I found something.”

“Found something?” Marvolo asked curiously.

“Yeah,” Harry said, now watching Marvolo just as intently as the older boy was watching him. “A tether.”

A split-second of confusion— oh, they were so fucking not called ‘tethers’— then Marvolo’s eyes widened in brief, very real shock.

“You just found one?” Marvolo asked in disbelief.

“I had a vision, a while ago, where I saw some… images,” Harry explained, choosing his words carefully. “I saw a Diary, a Ring, a Diadem, a Cup, a Locket, a snake, and my scar. And I know that the Diary, the Ring, and my scar are all tethers, so it makes sense the others are too— plus, when I touched the locket today, it felt the exact same as how touching your ring feels.”

Marvolo remained silent a moment, his body predator-still and those red, red eyes sharp and assessing. “What are you planning to do with the locket?” he asked eventually, and Harry smiled at Marvolo, in a way that was more challenging than he meant it to be.

“I’ve had a few thoughts, but I’m actually more interested in what you’d like me to do with it.”

Marvolo smiled back at him, just as challenging. “Oh, I’ve got a few thoughts of my own.”
“Well, I haven’t told anyone else about finding the locket yet. Tell me what they’re, what we’re, really called, and I’ll listen to your ‘thoughts’ before I do,” Harry told Marvolo, making his way over to his favourite armchair here, the one with the winged back. Marvolo watched him with narrow eyes.

“You owe me,” he pointed out and Harry shrugged.

“Yeah, but you’ve already got something in mind for that favour. Unless you want to spend it up now.”

Marvolo had lost his shallow humour, his lips pressed thin and his narrowed eyes dark. “You should be more careful, dear Harry,” he said quietly, “and remember just how dangerous the people you’re dealing with are. Making deals with devils has a habit of not turning out so well for people.”

Harry didn’t bother responding to that, instead waiting for Marvolo to speak first.

And he did.

“If I give you a name, I want you to hide the locket and not breathe a word to anyone about finding it.” Marvolo told him; finally, abruptly. “And I mean no one.” His mouth slowly curved into a sharp smile, his eyes glittering in anticipation. “As you just mentioned, you owe me a debt, and it seems you’ve just laid hands on the best way to repay that debt.”

Harry frowned slightly. Marvolo had always been very vague about what he’d wanted in return for the information Harry had wanted, denying the offer of a corporal body out in the living world in trade for some other, secret, unspecified desire— one that Harry had made an oath bound by blood he’d help Marvolo achieve. He wasn’t sure if Marvolo was being honest about the locket being connected to that desire, that debt, but he couldn’t be sure that the older boy was lying either— and he’d really prefer that the debt he owed Marvolo wasn’t hanging over him anymore.

“Deal,” he told Marvolo, before quickly lifting his hands up, ready to push the older wizard away, “but no kissing this time,” he added, with a glare. Marvolo smirked, though there was a tenseness to him that was different to their previous interactions.

“We can shake on it, then,” he said smoothly, and Harry couldn’t quite stop himself from tensing when, with a casual flick of his hand, Marvolo caused a dagger to appear. The older wizard smirked shallowly at his reaction, before slicing a thin line down across the length of his palm then handing the dagger over to Harry, handle first.

Harry accepted it with a grimace, quickly cutting an identical, stinging line down his own palm then reaching out to shake Marvolo’s hand— another oath bound by blood, another secret to keep from Hermione and Tom. Just… great. At least when Marvolo released his hand, the cut had faded to a light pink line that was disappearing more with each passing second.

“The word you’re looking for, the true name of the tethers, is ‘horcrux,’” Marvolo said abruptly, jerking Harry's attention back up from his hand, and he frowned.

“I… I’ve heard of that. In the book I’m reading.”

“Really?” Marvolo asked, arching an eyebrow. “That’s surprising.”

“Well, it didn’t say much,” Harry admitted. “It just said, uh, something like ‘Of the Horcrux, wickedest of magical inventions, we shall not speak nor give direction’, which I remember so well because it’s such a useless thing to say, why would they even mention it if they’re not going to
write about it?"

“I found it particularly exasperating as a schoolboy to find information on horcruxes,” Marvolo agreed, before fixing him with a hard look. “I’ve fulfilled my end, now you must fulfill yours— tell nobody about finding the locket and keep it hidden.”

“I will,” Harry promised.

“Good.” Marvolo said. And then the greyed-out Riddle Manor blurred to black, and the next that Harry was aware, he was blinking his eyes open in Regulus’ bedroom, a chink of sunlight evident through the drawn curtains covering the window revealing it to be morning.

Harry had a feeling that he’d been kicked out of the mindscape early, and he wondered just what Marvolo might want with another horcrux. He didn’t think it would be anything good, but he’d made a deal and even if Marvolo hadn’t bound him to his word by blood-magic, he’d be bound to it by his own honour. Plus, he actually liked Marvolo, even when his fellow horcrux was acting strangely— he was too used to Tom’s mercurial moods to be bothered by it.

Though after thinking of Tom, Harry practically forgot about Marvolo entirely as he realised with a jolt of happiness that today was the day he’d get to see Hermione and Tom again, possibly for the last time until the return to Hogwarts at the start of the new school year.

The day didn’t drag by as horribly slow as Harry had expected it to considering just how much he was looking forward to the evening. Charlie and Tonks were home for the day, plus Remus was moving in to Grimmauld Place and Walburga had demanded he demonstrate all the pureblood formal dining etiquette she’d been drilling into his brain for the ball to her, making him repeat everything he got wrong seven times (Kreacher’s wooden spoon had made a reappearance, but Harry didn’t think he was imagining its lesser sting, almost as if its wielder wasn’t quite striking with the same force as previously).

Everyone attending the ball was fed an early dinner by Mrs Weasley, who was failing how jealous she was of them, before being sent off to go get ready for the evening.

“Um, I’ve got something for you two,” Harry told Charlie and Tonks as they started making their way up the flights of stairs, prompting curious looks from both. “It’ll only take a moment, I promise.”

“Sure, kid,” Tonks agreed easily, and Harry led them up to Regulus’s room, where he awkwardly fetched the items.

It had been Walburga who’d suggested it, actually— she’d been horrified by the thought of no proper representative of the Black family attending the inauguration ball of a new Minister of Magic, and had grimly decided on what had to be the next best thing.

The choker Walburga was wearing in her portrait, the one that Harry had recovered from the items being removed from the drawing room by Mrs Weasley, was a Black family heirloom; a heavy choker of steel-latticework with a large black diamond set in the centre. It was traditionally worn by the Black Family Countess, wife of the Earl Black, though it could also be worn on occasion by daughters of the House of Black when attending special events. Harry didn’t know if Tonks would realise the significance of wearing the choker, but others around her would.

For Charlie (who Harry had to explain was Cedrella Black’s grandson and a Death Eater before Walburga would even consider looking past his surname), Walburga had decided on a pair of vambraces made of black leather with inlaid steel and grey diamonds. They didn’t have the same
history behind them as the choker; Walburga had ordered them to be made for Regulus, for his seventeenth birthday, but they were still Black Family property.

Neither the choker or the vambraces actually had the Black family crest on them, but that was appropriate as neither Tonks or Charlie were Blacks; Walburga had decided, however, that considering they each carried Black family blood in their veins, they could serve as representatives of the family.

Harry didn’t really get it— he intended on having a conversation with Narcissa that would hopefully get him more of an explanation— but he’d gone along with it and promised to give the two the agreed upon items and impress upon them that they should wear them.

“Wicked,” Charlie grinned when Harry handed him the vambraces, though Harry could see the look of sharp consideration in his blue eyes. Tonks tilted her head, giving the choker an appreciative look before levelling her gaze on Harry.

“You’re up to something sneaky,” she observed aloud. Harry shrugged.

“I owe someone. Will you please wear them?”

“I suppose it'll go with my dress,” Tonks said with a playful smirk.

“And fancy up my dress-robcs,” Charlie added cheerfully and Harry smiled thankfully at them both, pleased for Walburga’s sake that they’d agreed.

“Thanks,” he told them, and Tonks’s smirk widened to show teeth as she lifted the choker from jewellery box (incidentally passing a test as she did so, as anyone without enough Black blood would have lost their fingers trying).

With Charlie heading next door to his room, and Tonks joining him, considering she didn’t have a room at Grimmauld Place, Harry started to get ready himself. He was wearing the same wizard dress-suit he’d worn to the Yule Ball, paired with its frock-coat style jacket, except instead of white he was wearing an emerald-green high-collared undershirt, and he’d replaced the ruby lapel pin and cufflinks with emerald ones (Voldemort had been thorough when supplying his wardrobe the previous summer). He was wearing contact lenses, as he usually did, and he’d tied his hair back with a green silk ribbon in the traditional low ponytail.

He and Hermione had coordinated their colours through the journals, partly to drive Dumbledore crazy wondering if it was a coincidence, a previous agreement or if they’d managed to communicate somehow, and partly to give the message loud and clear to everyone that they were a couple— apparently, considering the habits of purebloods to marry for money, bloodlines or political or business tie, Hermione was anxious about betrothal contracts being sent to Voldemort now that it was officially and publically known to the wizarding world that she was Minister of Magic Thaddeus Dagworth’s niece and ward.

With his wand securely strapped to his arm under his sleeve, Harry exited his/Regulus’s bedroom and started to make his way downstairs. He was only one flight down when Fred Weasley stepped suddenly into his path. Harry flinched back slightly, less from surprise and more due to the horror that was Fred’s face. Half-melted, like the skin on the left side of his face had been burned down to the skull, one eye gone, no eyebrows, nose stripped of flesh, and without nostrils or lips, he was a truly horrifying, gruesome sight, not helped at all by the fact his mouth now sagged in a permanent snarling grimace. Hermione had been ruthless with her revenge, which considering that over the years the twins had nearly killed both of them wasn’t at all surprising.
“Get the fuck out of my way,” Harry snapped, letting his wand slide into his hand. Fred Weasley’s remaining eye glittered with unmistakable malice as he moved further forwards into Harry’s space instead.

“So, you’re off to the ball to meet your princess,” the Weasley said, a rasp to his voice from the potion-damage. “Just like a perfect fairy-tale.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” Harry said with a scoff and Fred laughed, the sound hoarse, hacking and cruel.

“Ever read the original fairy tales, Potter?” he asked mockingly. “Bad things happen in those, especially to the princesses.”

Harry bristled, bringing his wand up between them. “Is that a threat?” he demanded angrily.

“No, it’s my happily ever after,” Fred taunted, and Harry saw red but he gritted his teeth and shoved roughly past the disfigured twin instead of punching or cursing him the way he really wanted, storming down the stairs with the back of his neck prickling the entire time. It wasn’t until he’d turned out of sight that the prickling feeling went.

The general discomfort remained, however, and Harry felt an uneasiness he couldn’t quite shake as he waited in the foyer for everyone to gather, ignoring the unfortunately already present Dumbledore in his grand royal-blue-and-gold robes. Remus didn’t take long to arrive, much to Harry’s relief, and his ex-professor was looking his age for once in a smart dress-suit and matching cloak. His hair was combed neatly and he looked nervous, Harry noted.

“Excited?” He asked him, managing a mostly genuine smile, and Remus laughed quietly.

“Nervous, more than anything,” he admitted. “It’s not exactly going to be my usual scene.”

“Mine either, but the women in my life are terrifying and they’ve trained me for it well,” Harry grinned, the lurking discomfort finally fading completely as Remus laughed again.

They chatted quietly together for a few minutes until Tonks swept into the foyer, Charlie at her side, and both he and Remus were shocked silent— Harry had only ever seen Tonks wearing Auror robes, muggle-fashion (usually leather was involved), or, on that one very memorable occasion, completely naked, and her hair rarely wasn’t some bright, unnatural shade of bubblegum pink, turquoise or violet.

Tonight she looked entirely different, almost unrecognisable. Her hair was ebony-black and braided in a coronet across the crown of her head while the rest hung dead-straight in a sheet that fell down her back. Her gown was silver, cut from a thin silk that wrapped tightly around her upper torso and hips, then gradually loosened until it reached the ground. Her eyes were the familiar grey of the Black family, made bold by dark, shadowy make-up, and her lips were a deep wine-purple. The choker, with its steel lattice and large black diamond set over her throat, looked fierce as she did.

Beside her, and in spite of his usual easy smile, Charlie looked just as fierce clad in traditional dress-robes coloured the grey of storms and ashes and shadows, the black leather vambraces standing dark against his forearms, the thin lines of steel flashing like knife blades in the light. The red of his hair looked darker against the grey of his robes, while his blue eyes looked paler and brighter, glittering like the grey diamonds.

Standing together, they were a startlingly attractive couple; it was a shame that their interests lay
elsewhere.

Mrs Weasley, who was present to send her son off, looked like she didn’t know whether to be shocked, impressed or horrified. She settled for a mute combination of the three, wordlessly patting Charlie’s shoulder when he kissed her cheek farewell, and Harry had to look away to hide his smirk.

He finally got his hands on his invitation (and like he’d guessed, Charlie was apparently his plus one), which, at the time specified—a time that, much to Harry’s glee, turned out to be nearly a full half hour before Dumbledore’s own scheduled arrival time—started to glow a light blue, before transporting him, Tonks and Charlie all to, according to the invitation, a place called Gamp Hall.

*Arthur Weasley is confirmed to have two brothers, but only 'Bilius' is named, so I used Percy's middle name 'Ignatius' for the second brother*
CHAPTER LXXIX:

Harry's **POV**:

Harry's first impression of Gamp Hall was that it was an ostentatious monstrosity (with pretty decent architecture) that someone with way too much money had mistakenly called a "house", as he was pretty sure it was actually a medium-sized palace. He was also pretty sure that it was absolutely perfect for Voldemort— even if the Dark Lord didn't decide to become the permanent Minister of Magic for as long as the Philosopher's Stone kept him alive, Harry didn't doubt Voldemort had no intentions of ever giving up Gamp Hall. He just wondered how long it would be until the Dark Lord proposed a new name for it, and then charmed Wizarding Britain into going along with it— Voldemort could sell water to a drowning man and get thanked on bent knee for it.

The portkey had transported him, Charlie and Tonks to an expansive, lush green lawn bordered by a white, ornamental marble balustrade and filled with varied and exotic plant-life, including yew, silver maple, cypress and mulberry trees and hundreds of different varieties of roses, all bright and bloomed, and a large, oval fountain of white stone, water-lilies and cascading water that seemed to shine with silvery light under the moon.

And that was just the outside.

It only got better (worse?) inside, where golden ribbons of light marked the path through winding corridors to the extravagant hall that was the ballroom, which was brightly lit (surprisingly so, considering Magical Britain's medieval tendencies of using candles instead of electricity) and filled to the utmost with well-dressed witches and wizards draped in silk, satin, velvet, and glittering jewels. An area of the ballroom had been reserved for dancing couples, cordoned off with more ribbons of golden light, with a small, live orchestra positioned on a floating platform to provide the music, and small, elaborate round tables dotted the large hall to allow the attendees to sit and rest, with vases of roses decorating the golden tabletops.

"Harry!" He heard an unmistakable voice call out as he, Tonks and Charlie started to make their way inside the grand hall, and he spun towards the sound of it, to where Hermione was approaching him, a beaming smile curving her dusky pink lips.

She looked breathtaking, he thought, blown away by the sight of her. Hermione's ballgown was the same exact shade of emerald green as his shirt, and it was beautiful. It had a heart-shaped neckline, a tight bodice decorated with silver thread, and tiers of skirts that gathered and swept. Her eyelids were dusted bright silver and her eyes were lined with kohl, her rich brown curls were half pinned up and half flowing free, and around her neck she wore a Victorian-style choker made from plush black velvet centered by a large emerald bordered by rows of glittering clear diamonds.

He caught her when she got close enough, carefully crushing her to his chest in a way that didn't wrinkle her dress. "I've missed you," he told her, his voice going embarrassingly thick. "I know it hasn't even been a week, but—"
"—being separated is fucking shit," Hermione completed his sentence for him, her arms tightening even further. "And you're stuck with fucking Dumbledore and Moody and the Weasleys."

"It's the worst," Harry agreed glumly. "Er, no offense, Charlie."

"None taken," an amused Charlie assured him, and Hermione turned in his arms to take in his companions.

"Wow," she said, sounding surprised. "I already knew Tonks was hot, but you clean up shockingly well, Weasley."

"Cheers," Charlie said with a grin, "though I'm pretty sure I've already invited you to just call me Charlie."

"I might just have to after this," Hermione said, sweeping her eyes up and down his figure approvingly, "I can actually see what Barty's been going on about now."

Charlie looked like he didn't know whether to laugh or groan, settling for an emphatic; "What the fuck?!"

"Don't you know, Charlie? Only gentlemen don't kiss and tell," Hermione told him, amused. "And Barty is not a gentleman."

"Believe me, I know," Charlie said with feeling, which told Harry so much more about Barty's—and Charlie's, for that matter—sex life then he'd ever wanted to know. "Is he going to be here tonight?"

"Under polyjuice, of course, but yes," Hermione confirmed, before smirking. "Don't worry, I'm sure he'll find you."

"What a shame I'm here on business, not pleasure," Charlie said, looking torn between honest relief to be able to avoid Barty and disappointment.

"Oh? Are you two Harry's bodyguards for the night, then?" Hermione asked, with curiosity Harry knew was fake, as he'd already told her through the journals who his 'chaperones' for the evening were.

"I hope exhibition is a kink of yours, cutie, because the orders are that our eyes aren't to leave your boy for the entire evening," Tonks told Hermione with a saucy wink and a smirk.

"Well poor Fleur's going to be so disappointed to learn that," Hermione said with a faux-sigh, before smirking right back at Tonks as she added, "a pity, of course, but looking like she does tonight, she's got more than enough suitors to pick from if you're not available."

Tonks's smirk sharpened dangerously hearing that, her teeth gleaming bone-white in the lighting of the hall. "I can see why you and Fleur get along so well," she said, her voice lowering to a near-purr, "you both like to play with fire."

"And here I thought that was Charlie's thing," Hermione replied sweetly, which went right over Harry's head, but Charlie rolled his eyes while Tonks let out a bark of laughter, losing her sharp edge.

"So Barty really can't keep his mouth shut," Charlie commented, sounding equal parts amused and exasperated.
"Only when ordered," Hermione corrected, and Charlie arched an eyebrow, an unmistakably dirty smile curling at his mouth.

"Oh? Interesting."

"Is Tom here?" Harry hastily asked Hermione, not at all interested in knowing anything about Barty's sex life— the man was like an eager-to-please puppy most of the time, it was just wrong thinking about him and sex in the same sentence.

"No, but dear Basileus is," Hermione said, with a roll of her eyes as she turned back so she was facing him. It took Harry a moment to remember Basileus Sfor and he snickered at the name.

"How is Basil?" he asked, and Hermione leaned forwards slightly to press her lips against his ear.

"Confusing as fuck," she murmured.

'Confusing as fuck' was an interesting way for her to describe Tom— usually, she'd use something more along the lines of "smug bastard" or "arrogant wanker" or "complete and utter tosser". When it came to Hermione and Tom, insults were how she declared her love, but 'confusing as fuck' wasn't her usual style.

"Come on," Hermione said, finally stepping out of the hug and linking her arm comfortably through his, "time to do the rounds."

Harry didn't mind doing a lap of the ballroom and greeting everyone Hermione paused in front of. There were a few unfamiliar faces, who Hermione whispered to him that Voldemort had instructed they introduce themselves to, but most of their friends from Hogwarts and their families were there, including Lord Talryn, Lady Sabine, Daphne, and Astoria Greengrass; Lord Edmund, Lady Dinah and Theodore Nott; Tracey and her parents, Brigham and Violette Davis; Blaise and the Marchioness, and of course the Malfoys.

Flora and Hestia Carrow's mother and uncle were also there, and Harry's skin crawled after he was forced to touch Alecto and Amycus in polite greeting. Flora and Hestia were kindred spirits to him and Hermione, of that Harry had no doubt, and he wished the elder Carrow twins weren't Death Eaters— Voldemort would be pissed if they somehow died horribly for laying their hands on the twin girls in violence.

Narcissa noticed Tonks's accessory immediately, Harry could tell by the way her eyes went straight to it, before snapping over to him with a burning intensity. "Harry, darling, let's talk a moment," she said sweetly, and in a way that told him it wasn't actually a request at all, pausing to kiss Hermione's cheek before slipping her arm through his and leading him firmly over to the side of the hall, away from listening ears.

Narcissa looked lovely, of course— Harry didn't think he'd ever seen her not looking lovely. She was dressed in a sapphire blue ballgown with a floor-sweeping silhouette and elegant, pristine white stilettos balanced on pin-thin heels. Diamonds and sapphires glittered at her ears, throat, fingers, and wrists, and her hair was swept up high.

"Walburga told me to give Tonks the choker to wear," Harry immediately blurted out before Narcissa could say anything. "Well, the portrait of her did." He quickly corrected himself. Narcissa arched an elegant eyebrow.

"Aunt Walburga said that? She must have mellowed in her death," she commented, an audible hint of disbelief in her voice. Harry winced.
"God, she really, really hasn't," he said mournfully, and Narcissa looked slightly amused.

"My aunt was a particular sort of woman," she said, "which is why I find it so surprising to hear that she allowed a halfblood to wear a Black family heirloom. And a Weasley to wear something she had made for her son."

"She's pretty horrified that Sirius died without an heir, and now there's no Earl Black," Harry explained, and the edges of Narcissa's mouth turned down slightly.

"As am I," she murmured, a flicker of grief evident in her blue eyes. "Though I suppose that does explain why the young Miss Tonks was granted such a privilege."

"It does?" he asked and Narcissa looked slightly amused again, which was a much better look than the grief.

"She mustn't have gotten to that part of your lessons, yet," the elegant witch commented.

"How do you know she's teaching me?" Harry wondered, impressed.

"Because I know my Aunt," Narcissa replied, with a quiet laugh, before she glanced contemplatively in Tonks's direction. The young Auror wasn't too far away, having followed after them, but not close enough to overhear. "When a family has only female heirs, not male, it's tradition for the eldest daughter to keep the family name when she marries, and for her husband to change his," Narcissa began to quietly explain. "Your friend Daphne is an example of that; she will be the next Lady Greengrass, and her betrothed will be the next Lord Greengrass, but her younger sister, Astoria, will take the name of her husband."

"I don't understand how this is relevant to Tonks," Harry said, frowning.

"It's an unusual case," Narcissa admitted with a sigh. "Aunt Walburga and Uncle Orion had two sons, so even though my own parents only had daughters, there was no doubt that the Black line would continue. Only, both Regulus and Sirius died without any heirs, and with the patrilineal line ended, the family must turn to the matrilineal line. As the eldest, Andromeda would be the one expected to keep the Black name— particularly as both Bellatrix and I were betrothed, and then married to heads of families. Except she'd already married by the time Regulus and Sirius died, and had taken her husband's name— and was disowned, though only within the family, not legally, so Aunt Walburga seems to be ignoring that little technicality. Pureblood tradition of line inheritance dictates that as Andromeda's eldest child, Miss Tonks has a right to petition to legally claim the Black name, inherit the title and continue the line. Draco's second son would have the same right, though Miss Tonks has a stronger claim."

"So... you think Walburga wants Tonks to claim the name?" Harry asked, confused. "Why wouldn't she have just said that?"

"She's probably hoping Bellatrix has children," Narcissa said dryly. "At least two, to be exact, as her first child will be the Lestrange heir. As a pureblood, Bellatrix's hypothetical second child would have a stronger claim then a halfblood— though if Miss Tonks married a pureblood, all children produced by the union would have the stronger claim."

"This is confusing," Harry muttered, shoulders slumping. "Why are purebloods so confusing?"

Narcissa laughed, the sound lovely. "Don't fret, darling, by the end of summer holidays Aunt Walburga will have whipped you into shape."

"Literally," Harry commented with a shudder. "When she was teaching me formal dining etiquette,
she got Kreacher—the family house elf—to hit me with a wooden spoon every time I messed up.”

Narcissa laughed again, sounding genuinely amused. "That does sound just like her," she said, "she truly was a truly formidable woman."

"She is," Harry agreed, shuddering again.

"Hmm," Narcissa mused, her eyes flicking over to Tonks again. "If Aunt Walburga has accepted Miss Tonks, perhaps I should take her under my wing. I can't imagine Andi neglected her education; for all her faults, my eldest sister never lacked pride in our family name and history, but Andi's been quite removed from the social scene since she married her mudb— Edward Tonks. And I admit, I may be a Malfoy now, but I'll always be a daughter of House Black at heart and the current lack of an Earl and Countess of House Black is horrifying to me."

"I think Walburga would appreciate that," Harry told Narcissa, "well, she'd appreciate it in her own way. And I definitely really appreciate it."

And between us, darling," Narcissa said warmly, "your appreciation means far more to me than Aunt Walburga's—dead or alive. Now, let's return to dear Hermione, so you can both enjoy the time you have before that awful old man takes you away from us again."

Hermione gave him a curious look when he re-joined her and the others. "What was that about?"

She murmured.

"Pureblood bullshit," Harry whispered back, and her mouth quirked up in amusement before her eyes brightened as she spotted something— someone— over his shoulder.

"Snape's finally here!" She said, delighted. "And—wait, is that Lupin with him?"

"He's here as Snape's guest," Harry told her and Hermione looked surprised, before grinning and waggling her eyebrows.

"Oh, really?"

Harry's eyes widened dramatically as he realised what she was implying. "What the—!? Snape and Remus!? They hate each other!" he exclaimed, horrified.

"I hear hate sex is amazing," Hermione said slyly and Harry actually blanched. A moment later, Hermione appeared to have thought through what she'd just said because she blanched too. "Urgh, 'Snape' and 'sex' do not go together." She muttered.

"I'm not going to be able to look him in the eyes for weeks!" Harry hissed back at her, mortified.

"My bad?" Hermione offered with a wince. "Oh fucking shit, they're coming this way."

"I hate you a little bit right now," Harry glared at her, before using his moderately acceptable Occlumency to clear his mind the best he could before turning to greet his head of house and... they were definitely not dating; Snape and Remus barely seemed to tolerate each other for his and Hermione's sake, he refused to believe their attending this together was anything other than Dumbledore's orders. Obviously.

"Hi again," he greeted them both with a mostly-genuine smile.

"Hello Harry, hello Hermione," Remus replied warmly, while Snape nodded a greeting.
"Are you both having fun?" Hermione asked, far too sweetly.

"This entire event is a ridiculous ego trip," Snape muttered, quiet enough that it wouldn't be overheard— which, considering just whose ego trip it was, was a smart move.

"Agreed," Hermione muttered back, with a roll of her eyes. "Honestly, it's ridiculous— I've been living here a few days now and the entire place is so over-the-top it's actually painful. Except for the library, of course— the library is amazing. It's very focused on history, of course, particularly British history, but it's still amazing— and the Minister of Magic's private library is even better!"

Snape's eyes widened slightly. "There's a private library for the Minister of Magic?" he repeated, which to Harry really showed that underneath his terrifyingly intimidating exterior, his head of house was secretly as much of a bookworm as Hermione.

"It's quite brilliant," Hermione said with a dreamy sigh.

"I imagine it would be," Snape agreed, looking wistful that he wouldn't be able to witness it for himself.

"Ah, Hermione, may I have a private word? It will only take a moment," Remus requested politely.

"If it's about our sessions, I don't mind Harry or Professor Snape being here," Hermione said, and Remus nodded.

"I was just wondering if you wished to continue meeting over the summer holidays," he explained.

"Maybe every second week?" Hermione suggested. "I can write to you with a list of dates and times that I'm free."

"That sounds perfect," Remus smiled at her, and Hermione sort of smiled back at him.

"Do you think the sessions are genuinely helping you?" Harry asked after they'd said goodbye to Remus and Snape and moved over to the area of the ballroom reserved for dancing, which gave them a measure of privacy even though Charlie and Tonks were dancing together nearby. Dumbledore had also arrived by this point, but his lack of a partner kept him off the dance floor and away from them.

"Yes," Hermione admitted, "they really are. It's a shock, I know."

"Maybe Vol-Thaddeus, as the new Minister of Magic, should introduce the idea of therapists to the magical world," he mused aloud and Hermione looked amused.

"I think damaged people are far more useful to Him," she said, "but you've got money, remember; perhaps one day you could fund a program supporting Healers getting trained as therapists?"

"That's a brilliant idea!" Harry said enthusiastically. "Though speaking of, uh, Thaddeus, what's it like living with Him again?"

"Nice transition," Hermione said dryly. "Very smooth. How long have you been wanting to ask that?"

"I do remember our summer at Riddle Manor," Harry pointed out with a wince. Hermione winced slightly too.

"Well, it's quite different to last summer," she told him, "dear old Uncle Thaddeus has been busy
working, so there are no 'extra guests' around and there's no dungeon— believe me, Tom and I checked."

"Of course you two would," Harry snorted, amused. "And how's Tom? You mentioned he was being 'confusing' before?"

Hermione immediately frowned, pulling herself much closer to him then the dance really required them to be so she could lower her voice and he could still hear. "He said something the other day that's stuck with me." She murmured.

Harry frowned too. "What did he say?"

"Well, we were talking about fucking in the Minister of Magic's office," Hermione told him, speaking even quieter, "when he said that maybe one day it could be mine."

Harry's eyes immediately widened. "What the actual fuck?" he hissed incredulously.

"That was my reaction precisely," Hermione said grimly.

"Vol- Thaddeus must have done something to really piss him off," Harry said, feeling a sharp, crawling anxiety stir to life.

"Yes," Hermione agreed, her lips thinning. "He must have. And to say that I find that concerning would be an understatement."

"Damn it," he muttered angrily, regretting more than ever the fact that he was separated from Hermione and Tom. He didn't have the mind for politics either of them had, but he was Slytherin enough to recognise the danger in Tom's words, the treacherous hints of mutiny within them— and to know what Voldemort's probable reaction to ever hearing them would be.

It was going to be a very long summer.

Hermione's POV:

Hermione enjoyed dancing with Harry, enjoyed being in his arms and trusting him to guide her each spin, to catch her each dip and be in the right place each step, it was almost as intimate as sex, but she wanted a chance to talk without an audience, to hug him without any eyes on them and to just bask in the fact he was with her. She'd missed him, with a sharp-edged desperation that shredded her insides to a painful, bloody mess and tonight just hadn't come quickly enough.

Part of her desperation to be with Harry was her fear of him being so out of reach, always surrounded by enemies, and part of it was also the sobering knowledge that she doubted she'd see him again before the return to Hogwarts, but most of it was the fact they'd spent so long barely being apart that not having Harry somewhere in her vicinity hurt.

Lupin would probably have some careful and concerned but ultimately kind words to say about the fact it had only been one week and she was already ready to tell Voldemort to go fuck himself with his stupid plans and just take off with Harry, away from Wizarding Britain and all its plotting and politicking. Not back to muggle London, she wasn't ready to go back there yet; she'd said goodbye to that part of her life and she'd meant it, but the muggle world wasn't hard to disappear in and she'd never explored her home-country before, never gone out to see all the tourist spots. Maybe she
should. Maybe they, her and Harry both, should— she did know, after all, that he hadn't seen them either.

Unlike Lupin, Snape wouldn't be at all careful, or kind either, really, about commenting on the unhealthiness of their co-dependency. He'd say it wasn't healthy, and he wasn't wrong, but Harry was hers, she loved him more than anything or anyone, and she'd already experienced the loss of everyone she loved once before, not to mention all the individual losses over the years, and the sort of scars that had left behind on her psyche left her deathly afraid to sometimes even just let Harry out of her sight. She had the self-awareness to know that her attitude wasn't a healthy one, but honestly didn't care (Tom's possessiveness was a terrible enabler, feeding into and justifying her own issues and neurosis the way it did).

With Harry under the watchful eyes of Dumbledore and two guards, she'd known that slipping away from the ball would require a plan, it wasn't something that could just be done on a whim— but planning was what Hermione did best.

It didn't take much effort to find Fleur through the crowd of dancers, then make eye-contact and wink at the part-veela, a previously agreed upon signal and her purpose for actually inviting Fleur. Harry had told her, through the journals, that Tonks was his official escort, and Charlie his unofficial one, and she'd planned accordingly. Dumbledore had no partner to dance with, so wouldn't enter the cordoned off area for dancers, and losing Charlie into the constantly moving crowd wouldn't be too difficult; clever as the man was, and she had to admit that Charlie Weasley was not a complete dunderhead like the rest of his mustelid family, he wasn't a trained Auror. Tonks was, but Hermione had a different way to deal with her, one of the oldest cons in the book—a beautiful distraction.

Fleur swept over in their direction after bidding her current dance partner a farewell, catching the attention of everyone she glided past, none of them able to resist being drawn helplessly into the orbit of her presence.

The part-veela looked as delicious and edible as a bowl of strawberries and cream in the crimson red silk gown that clung to her every curve and exposed enough of her creamy skin to be tantalizing but not scandalous— well, not too scandalous. Her silvery hair was twisted intricately on both sides of her face then into a high chignon, and a gold-plated choker strung with three rows of lustrous pearls and set with columns of sparkling diamonds added drama and decadence to her look. The stunning gown was designed to give the illusion of being held up solely by a glittering golden pin, with the wickedly enticing impression that if someone should remove the pin, simply sliding it out of place, then the shimmering fabric would unravel, exposing all that creamy, luminous, perfect skin—

Fleur was a very effective distraction, almost distracting Hermione from remembering that she was a distraction.

"Wow," breathed Harry beside her, wide-eyed as he noticed Fleur's approach. "You weren't kidding, she looks incredible!"

"Now watch her work her magic," Hermione whispered to him, biting back a grin as Fleur greeted Tonks with a sensual, drawn-out kiss that pulled the attention of half the dancers— and, more importantly, briefly consumed the attention of Tonks herself. Hermione waited until Charlie's eyes had turned towards the spectacle too before disillusioning Harry and then herself with two quick taps of her wand, easily retrieved through the hidden slit in the tiered skirts of her dress, from where it was strapped to her thigh.

"Quick," she urged Harry, who didn't hesitate to follow her, both of them weaving through the
distracted dancers until they were out of the cordoned off dancing area. Glancing over her shoulder, she grinned triumphantly as she saw the exasperated look on Charlie's face as he noticed they'd vanished.

"This isn't a plot to keep me from going back to Order headquarters, is it?" Harry asked, and she couldn't see his face but she could hear the anxiety in his voice. "Because I made a, uh, promise that I wouldn't run away that I don't want to break."

"Sadly, no, this is just so we can get some to ourselves tonight," she told him, pulling Harry through the exit of the ballroom, careful to avoid the ball attendees milling about. "Now let me show you my favourite part of this monstrosity."

They hurried through the corridors together, Hermione leading, and she took off the disillusionment charms after they'd gone up two floors, confident that they hadn't been followed. Their destination, her favourite place in Gamp Hall, was on the third floor—and, shockingly, was located in one of the libraries.

"Why am I not surprised?" Harry teased her as they entered the large room filled with books, and Hermione just laughed again, feeling almost giddy at having whisked Harry away from the Order, right under the headmaster's crooked nose.

The main library of the house was opulent, as was the theme of Gamp Hall; it was a massive, stately room with high ceilings and neatly stacked shelves that towered almost unreasonably high (but only almost, because it was a library and there was no such thing as unreasonably high bookshelves, so long as they were all filled up).

She half dragged Harry through the stacks, pulling him along to her very favourite part of the library, the open corner furthest from the main entrance (most of the rooms in Gamp Hall had at least two methods of entry and egress for safety reasons) with its sinfully comfortable plush, velvet upholstered mahogany armchairs, beautifully carved side-tables of matching wood, and Victorian-era woven silk rug, all overlooked by a stunning large stained glass window that gave its surroundings what Hermione felt was the appropriate sacred, religious air of sanctity and worship that a library deserved.

Only, as she pulled Harry around the last corner of the last bookshelf before what had become her sanctuary, it was to see that it wasn't empty, as it should be—instead, with his longs legs draped over the arm of one of the armchairs and his arrogant, handsome smirk aimed in their direction, was a familiar figure, one who was limber and tall with sharp, angled features, porcelain-pale skin, perfectly styled dark hair, and oh, so devastatingly attractive that it sometimes took her breath away (not that she'd ever admit that, Tom's head was big enough).

"I thought you were supposed to be under Polyjuice!" Harry said breathlessly, at her side, his green eyes wide and shining.

Tom's smirk widened as he stood, his movements lazy and deliberate, and as borderline predatory as always. He was dressed formally for the evening in a well-tailored dress-suit with an open-front robe over the top. Both were black, of course, but the heavy, rich silk of the robe had intensely detailed black damask embroidery, as did the hems of the dress suit, and the black on black detail was striking, formal and decorative without being gaudy. It suited Tom perfectly, of course—and it had suited the older but still attractive Basileus Sfor, with his slate blue-grey eyes, tousled dark brown hair, strong jaw, smooth, light skin, broader build, and polished, elegant manner.

Tom wore 'Basileus' just as well as he wore his dress robes; flawlessly. Basileus Sfor was intense, attractive, a smooth talker, and moved like a scholar, not a predator. He wasn't as imposing or eye-
catching as Tom, hiding that capacity for infinite darkness in a way Tom usually didn't bother to, and it was a much more permanent disguise, the same way that 'Thaddeus' was, with a solid identity and backstory of its own.

Despite knowing Voldemort would be pissed if he found out, Hermione was relieved that Tom was greeting Harry in his natural form; she didn't think she'd react well to the sight of an older man's hands on Harry (and she really liked watching her boys together, a voyeuristic streak she'd discovered within herself and felt no shame over)— she knew that she certainly didn't like touching Tom when he was wearing it, didn't like the way the larger, thicker hands felt on her. The comparison had really brought home just how comfortable she was with Tom, and just how perfectly they fit together.

“I’ve missed you,” Harry told Tom earnestly, not appearing self-conscious at all about stepping into Tom’s embrace, and Hermione smiled as she watched her boys kiss, a sense of rightness settling in her bones. This was how it was supposed to be, the three of them together.

“Not getting into too much trouble, I hope?” Tom murmured against Harry’s lips, one of his hands on the back of Harry’s head, the other on his hip, pulling him close.

“I’m mostly just keeping to myself,” Harry admitted, “I sometimes talk to Charlie and Tonks when they’re not at work, or to Walburga Black’s portrait, and I talk to Marvolo most nights.”

Hermione instantly spotted the way Tom went still.

“Oh?” Tom’s voice was much too light. “Most nights?”

“Are you jealous?” Harry asked, sounding entertained by the prospect, and Hermione knew immediately this was either going to end in a vicious argument or really good sex.

“I don’t mind sharing you, Harry,” Tom said; softly, dangerously, “but only with those I choose.” And before Harry could say anything to that, Tom spun them around and shoved him roughly so Harry stumbled backwards, right into the armchair Tom had just recently vacated. “Hermione,” Tom gestured for her to come over, without even turning away from the younger boy. Hermione wasn’t sure what sort of expression Tom was wearing, as his back was to her, but it seemed to be pinning Harry firmly in place, the younger boy staring up at Tom with wide, green eyes.

She walked over to her boys, anticipation building up inside her. Tom continued to not look away from Harry as his hand briefly closed over the back of her neck, pressing forwards in silent instruction to join Harry on the chair. Hermione went along with it, more than happy to climb up and straddle Harry’s lap, tugging the ribbon out of his hair so she could thread her fingers through the messy, dark strands and pull him into a kiss; hot, wet, and slow, with just hints of teeth. Harry responded immediately, tangling his hands in her hair too, their kiss deepening as she pressed herself down against where he was getting hard.

She was peripherally aware of Tom watching them together with something darkly covetous in his eyes, and the thrill of that heavy gaze just built up her excitement and anticipation higher; Tonks had been messing with them when she joked about exhibitionist kinks, but Hermione liked to be watched just as much as she liked watching, and she got off on the risk of being overseen. There was something so heady about it, and the way Tom’s eyes looked like they were dissecting her always hit her buttons right.

Tom was the first one to take it further, because of course he was; Hermione wouldn’t ever call Harry submissive, but he let her lead, he liked to let her lead, and he wouldn’t step things up from heavy kissing until she did. Tom, however, had no compunctions about stepping closer and
carelessly bunching the expensive silk of her dress up and around her hips, and before she could think much about it, his hand was between her legs, one of his fingers sliding into her body. She moaned at how good it felt, her hips twitching slightly and eyelids fluttering at the sensation of his clever thumb sweeping over her clit, and beneath her, Harry let out a low moan of his own.

Unlacing the front of Harry’s robes was a bit of a pain considering their position, especially with how distracting Tom was being as he added a second, and then a third finger, and she definitely didn’t have the patience to do anything but just vanish his underpants. Saliva made a poor lubricant, but both Tom and Harry seemed to appreciate the visual of her licking her palm, slicking up the skin before reaching between her and Harry’s bodies.

A few brief tugs later, she was spreading her thighs, Tom’s fingers gone but her hand still wrapped around Harry to guide him in until he was pushing, pushing, pushing and she could feel her muscles stretching, the faint ache in her lower abdomen burning a little brighter and a little more urgently. Harry exhaled messily, noisily, desperately, looking at her with lust-blown eyes as he started to roll his hips up, and her answering moan slipped easily from her lips, the shivering coil of her orgasm teasing at the base of her spine from the combination of Tom’s previous actions and the sudden, arousing sensation of fullness. Ultimately, Tom’s lips brushing against the back of her neck followed by a hard punch of teeth over her pulse point was enough, and she cried out as she tipped over.

That was apparently what Tom had been waiting for, and both she and Harry let out sounds of complaint, Harry’s edged with a great deal more desperation then hers, as he dragged her off Harry. She stumbled slightly, not quite able to get her balance on legs still shaky from orgasm, but that seemed to be what Tom wanted as he pressed her down to the ground on her back, murmuring a brief cushioning charm which would do nothing for the inevitable rug burn but at least spare her back fresh bruises.

Tom tugged Harry off the chair too, pushed him down after her and Hermione raised her hips in invitation, letting out a pleased moan that Harry matched as he sunk back into her, drawing her feet up and linking them behind his slender hips, then sliding them up higher still as he pushed in until he was flush against her.

She had a good idea of what Tom had planned now, as he moved behind the kneeling Harry, bunching Harry’s outer-robe up to his hips the way he had her gown, then tugging Harry’s already undone suit-trousers down over his hips, all the way to his knees.

“This would be easier in one of the bedrooms,” Harry muttered and Hermione just laughed breathlessly.

“Don’t worry,” she told him, “we’re plenty resourceful.”

Tom didn’t take much time to prepare Harry, though she could guess when he used the cleansing spell because Harry made a gasping sound, his hips stuttering slightly out of rhythm.

“Witches and wizards are rather ingenious,” Tom murmured, as he kneeled down behind Harry and pressed himself up against the younger boy’s back. “They’ve created spells for cleansing, for lubrication, even for stretching… but I don’t think I’m going to use that one. I want you to feel every inch of me, not just today, but for the week to come… I want you to remember with each step you take, just who it is you belong to. Not Voldemort, not Dumbledore, not the consciousness in the Ring—me.”

Tom punctuated the last word with a sharp drive of his hips that had Harry crying out in pain, going shock-still, his green eyes widening enough to show the whites. Hermione reached up to
tangle her fingers in his hair again, pulling his face down to hers so she could kiss him, rocking her hips slightly even as he stayed still and tense, relaxing him as he managed the pain.

Harry’s skin was slick with sweat and his body trembled minutely as he adjusted to Tom’s sudden, forceful presence. He’d softened inside her, but there was something bright and wild in his eyes, something that made Hermione think Tom’s rough claiming wasn’t entirely unwelcome (after all, there was little in the world more attractive to an unwanted orphan then someone wanting them—she’d know).

Tom leaned forwards to press soft, nibbling kisses against the back of Harry’s neck and Hermione felt as the younger boy finally started to relax, as he started to harden inside her again. Tom clearly felt it too, as his lips slid from Harry’s neck to his ear, nipping on the shell before murmuring, “are you ready, darling?”

“Y-Yes,” Harry whimpered, his hips twitching slightly in response to what was apparently a sensitive area—ears, Hermione would have to remember that, and she slid one of her hands from his hair down his body to his hip, where Tom’s hand was gripping him tightly and she could lace her fingers with his.

Tom moved surprisingly gently at first, slowly pulling out before thrusting back in, adjusting his angle with each careful thrust until Harry let out a sudden yelp of pleasure, his hips jerking involuntarily, and Hermione knew Tom had found Harry’s prostate. Tom did too, judging by the satisfied smirk on his lips and he began to speed up his movements, thrusting harder and harder into Harry.

Despite how good it felt, Tom’s movements driving Harry even deeper and harder into her than before, and Harry once again fully hard, Hermione wasn’t expecting either boy to last long enough to make her come again—her previous orgasm had taken off the desperate edge of desire to reach climax, though, so wasn’t disappointed when Harry shuddered violently, half-collapsing onto her and accidentally knocking the breath out of her.

Tom didn’t take much longer, and the older boy was the one to clean the stickiness away with a wave of his hand, followed by a second murmur of a contraceptive spell—Hermione firmly (and bitterly) believed that women saw more blood in a month than most men saw in a lifetime. She’d begun her menstruation cycles late, and half wished she’d never begun it at all, despite the negative effects on her health its absence would cause.

“’Mione,” Harry said hoarsely, and Hermione forgave him the shortening of her name because he looked so exhausted (such an adorable cliché), “the—the chair, sit on the chair,” he urged her, and Hermione wasn’t sure why, but she did as he bid, her legs only trembling slightly as she stood with Tom’s help and mimicked Harry in half-collapsing onto the plush armchair.

Harry shuffled over to her on his knees and Hermione realised with a burst of pleasure what he intended as he pushed her legs apart. He kissed her inner thigh, nipping it slightly, enough to make her moan and arch forwards involuntarily in a bid for more contact, and Harry obligingly dipped his tongue into her, the tip of his tongue plunging deep as his nose brushed teasingly against her clitoris.

He spent what felt like a small, perfect eternity lavishing her most intimate parts with attention, and Hermione lost track of just how long he pleasured her, slowly bringing her to a climax that washed over her in shuddering ripples that built to a tidal wave.

She felt almost dizzy when she finally had to push him away, his warm mouth and tongue continuing to send jolts of electricity through her veins in the aftershocks of her orgasm, and she
smiled slowly in appreciation as she watched Tom pull Harry upright and clean the younger boy’s wet face with his lips and tongue. *Delicious.*

Her body felt like it was humming, her veins still sparking and her mind floating slightly. She knew Harry liked giving head, and he was getting to be fucking fantastic at it too—a warm, wet, willing mouth always felt good, but it felt even better when that mouth knew what it was doing.

“As much as I hate to say it, and believe me, I do hate to say it, we should return to the ballroom soon,” Tom murmured, letting Harry pant into the crook of his neck, the younger boy leaning against him.

“Mmm, I imagine Basil, Hermione and Harry will all be missed,” Hermione sighed, pouting slightly as it was just the three of them present to see her. Her pout deepened, however, to something much more real and unhappy as she quietly added, “Dumbledore will probably take you back, Harry, the moment he spots you.”

“At least I’ll have tonight to remember, to tide me over until we see each other again next,” Harry said, with more optimism than she was expecting—it was probably all the endorphins talking.

“*We’ll always have Paris*,” Hermione quoted, smiling when both Harry and Tom just looked confused.

They didn’t rush to re-dress; most of the pins in Hermione’s hair had fallen out or come loose and her skirt was wrinkled, but ten minutes and a transfigured mirror had her hair looking mostly like it did before, and her make-up had been charmed against smudging, so her face was still perfectly made up. She didn’t know any household charms to magically iron her skirt, but Daphne was an expert in household charms, so she’d make sure to quickly find the blonde in the ballroom.

Finally, with a great deal of reluctance, Harry kissed Tom a final time before they left the older boy, Tom needing to replace his Basileus disguise and make sure to enter separately from Harry and Hermione—the two of them sneaking away for a rendezvous wouldn’t be a surprise to anyone, as they were obviously ‘sweethearts’, but Tom was posing as an older friend of the Dagworth family and Voldemort had given explicit instructions regarding the need for a lack of scandal.

She and Harry had just stepped out of the main library when she spotted Tonks and Charlie both leaning against the wall, apparently waiting for them. “Those were some strong wards, keeping us out,” Tonks said lightly, looking more impressed than angry, and Hermione silently thanked Tom’s apparent foresight—exhibitionism was her kink, not Harry’s, and she didn’t like the thought of him being uncomfortable. “You’re looking thoroughly ravished,” Tonks added, her wand appearing in her hand with a brief flick of her wrist. “Want me to fix the dress-robes?”

“That would be great, thanks,” Harry said before Hermione could refuse, not particularly wanting Tonks casting magic on her. The metamorphmagus swished her wand at them both, murmuring something Hermione couldn’t catch, and the wrinkles in their clothes smoothed out flat, as if they were never there.

“Dumbledore’s pissed, just so you know,” Tonks told them with no small amount of sadistic glee in her voice—apparently the Auror was sore about her using Fleur as a distraction so they could get away.

“We assured him we had our eyes on you,” Charlie added, still looking more exasperated than anything, “but that interrupting your activities would involve a great deal of discomfort for everyone involved.”
“Well, Charlie very politely offered that Dumbledore was free to go separate you both if he was really intent on dragging Harry back to the ballroom, or to headquarters, but he turned awkward as a Victorian maiden and hastily agreed that we’d fetch you after your activities were complete.” Tonks clarified with a wicked grin, and Hermione snickered at the thought of Dumbledore’s discomfort, while Harry just looked mortified, poor boy.

Dumbledore spotted the four of them the moment they entered the ballroom once more, the old bastard apparently having been waiting impatiently for Harry’s return. He was on them in seconds, his face carefully neutral even as his blue eyes burned cold with repressed anger behind his half-moon spectacles.

“Clearly, Harry, you cannot be trusted to keep your word,” the headmaster said tightly. “I am very disappointed with you, and there will be consequences for this. I had hoped we were beyond this childishness, but apparently I was wrong. We’re leaving at once.”

“Goodbye, love,” Hermione murmured to Harry, ignoring the headmaster as she pulled her lover into a deep, passionate, filthy kiss, right in the view of all the ball attendees, making an undeniably clear statement as she basically fucked his mouth with her tongue. Harry kissed her back, just as enthusiastically, until they eventually had to break apart to breathe.

“I love you,” he murmured to her.

“I love you too,” she murmured back, reluctantly stepping back from him, turning her attention to Dumbledore. The headmaster was pale with repressed anger and Hermione didn’t even try to stop her mocking, triumphant smile— she'd won this round, and they both knew it. “I’ll see you at the start of term, professor.” She told him, saccharine-sweet. Dumbledore didn’t reply, just narrowed his eyes at her before grasping onto Harry’s shoulder with a wrinkled hand.

“We’re leaving,” he repeated tightly, and Hermione watched with a dark, building anger as Dumbledore practically dragged Harry away. She caught one last glimpse of bright, warm green eyes as Harry looked over his shoulder, back at her, and then her best friend was gone from her, for what was likely the rest of the summer holidays.

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Rita’s POV:

The invitation to the inauguration ball of new Minister of Magic Thaddeus Dagworth was a surprise, though considering the expose she was writing, perhaps less so than it otherwise would have been. She'd been keeping her very generous benefactors updated on its progress and a tentative date had been set for its publication, mere months away now. She was keenly anticipating the upcoming chaos it would bring— it was going to shake the entire wizarding world to its very foundations, not just Britain; Grindelwald had been quite informative (and considering the rather exclusive invitation, the Dagworths were apparently very appreciative of her efforts).

She'd spent the first hour of the ball mingling, enjoying rubbing elbows with the rich, famous and influential, at least half of which she had some form of blackmail on. She was treated well, much better than a non-Sacred Twenty-Eight witch or foreign representative would have been treated if all those present weren't aware of the power of her quill. It was a heady rush, to be sure, knowing she made so many of the wealthy, powerful witches and wizards present nervous. The power of public opinion was a formidable one, and it was a power everyone knew she wielded masterfully.
After the enjoyable conversation and canapes, Rita was delighted (though she hid it from all who may be looking on) when Adrienne Zabini approached her, the beautiful woman looking like something out of an old, forgotten fairy-tale; mysterious, sensual and easily as breathtaking as the part-veela Champion in a crushed velvet gown as black as her soul, the lacquered-ebony spill of her hair unbound, her lips a glistening dark-red, and her bright eyes glittering like jewels.

"You're looking resplendent tonight, tesoro," the Marchioness greeted her warmly.

"And yet I pale next to your beauty," Rita replied, just as warmly, pleased to see her oldest friend.

"Dance with me?" Addie asked, holding out her arm with a dazzling (dangerous) smile that hinted a promise of unimaginable satisfaction, and Rita immediately accepted the invitation, placing her hand over Addie's and letting the other woman led her to the area of the ballroom reserved for the witches and wizards present to dance.

Their choice to dance together did earn them a few raised eyebrows, but the majority of the ball attendees were the type to follow more traditional wizarding values— which was the most diplomatic way she could think to say they at least sympathised with pureblood dogma, if not actively followed and promoted it, and had no issue with witches laying with witches, so long as an heir was still produced, a duty Addie had already fulfilled.

"So," her lover asked, as they moved together across the floor in an easy, sensual rhythm. "How was your recent journey? Successful, I hope?"

Rita felt her smile sharpen into something viciously pleased, a look which clearly both delighted and aroused Addie if her darkening eyes and increasingly predatory air was anything to go by. "It was very successful," she said, letting Addie twirl her, the other witch's hand trailing over her lower abdomen, sharp fingernails briefly digging into the vulnerable flesh underneath her dress-robes in a silent promise. "Even more so than I could have hoped, in fact— I'm going to bury him."

"You simply must send me an advanced copy of this upcoming masterpiece— the anticipation is torturous!" Addie declared dramatically and Rita laughed.

"If it were up to me, of course I would," she told her dearest (and only true) friend, "but those that commissioned me to write the book own certain rights, I'm afraid, and you'd have to request an advanced copy from them."

"And you still cannot reveal who commissioned you," Addie said mournfully, with an exaggerated pout. "So cruel, tesoro!"

"Like you can't guess," Rita teased back, and Addie's pout curved into a knowing smile, her eyes flicking over to where Harry Potter and Hermione Dagworth-Granger were dancing, entirely absorbed with each other in the way only those deeply in love were capable.

"My darling Blaise has invited his precious, clever friend, dearest Hermione, to come spend time with us at Čachtice Castle this summer," Addie commented idly. Rita raised an eyebrow.

"And your great-grandmother allowed it? She didn't seem like the kind of woman who would enjoy having children running around her castle."

"She most certainly is not," Addie agreed with a dainty wince, "but Hermione, she is not that type. She is, I believe, the sort of child who has never really been a child."

"She has an interesting history," Rita murmured, "according to my research, she never knew her parents— the story is that her mother was a squib, Minister Dagworth's sister, who left the magical
world for the muggle one at age sixteen. It's unclear where Hermione stayed in the years before Hogwarts, and before Minister Dagworth found and adopted her."

"The story?" Addie asked, arching a perfectly sculpted eyebrow. "You have your doubts?"

"Not doubts, precisely," Rita said, shaking her head slightly, "just little curiosities that I can't quite find the answers to... and if I'm honest, I haven't wanted to dig too hard. I like scandal and secrets, but I like gold much, much more, and I'd definitely prefer to keep the galleons flowing."

"I could not agree more," Addie said, with a throaty laugh, before movement caught her attention, and Rita followed her lover's gaze to the part-veela Champion now kissing Nymphadora Tonks, an Auror trained by the fugitive Alastor "Mad Eye" Moody and who Rita's sources had informed her was Harry Potter's official guard for the evening.

The realisation struck her at the same time as it seemed to strike Addie, and they both swiftly turned to where they'd last seen Harry Potter and Hermione Dagworth-Granger— neither of whom were where they'd been dancing, just moments before.

"Masterfully done, as always," Addie said, with amused approval. "I do quite adore those two— my darling boy chose his friends well."

"He certainly chose dangerous friends," Rita observed, and Addie's answering smile was positively haunting; dark, bloody and horrifying, far too brief for anyone but Rita to catch, yet positively ensnaring.

"Oh, my tesoro," she purred, "you know quite as well as I that dangerous friends? Why, those are the best sort of friends of all."

And considering who her own best friend was, Rita couldn't argue that point at all.

"I have spoken to Sabine, this evening," Addie added, twirling them both, "the esteemed Lady Greengrass, she tells me she has been selected for the position of Senior Undersecretary of the Minister."

"Really?" Rita asked, honestly surprised— not only was it not often that witches from the upper-crust Pureblood circles went into politics (it wasn't frowned upon, but it certainly wasn't common), but the Greengrass family were notoriously neutral, much like Addie, and Rita had her doubts as to Minister Dagworth's neutrality considering just who his main support in the Wizengamot were, as well as the fact he was paying her to destroy Dumbledore.

"Yes, and I find I quite approve— she will provide a sense of balance, I feel, that our new Minister... will not instinctively look to." Addie explained, clearly picking her words carefully. "He chose well."

"Smart of him," Rita murmured, her eyes flicking over to where Minister Dagworth was basically holding court, surrounded by well-wishers and 'wannabe' advisors.

"He is a very smart man," Addie said, her smile sharp and red and knowing, "but to continue our previous line of conversation, I had a little discussion with dear Sabine earlier and she informed me that there is talk of dear Hermione being elected as the British Youth Representative to the Wizengamot."

Rita... stilled. The position of British Youth Representative to the Wizengamot was a title given to underage witches and wizards appointed to represent the wizarding youth of Britain in Wizengamot proceedings. It was quite an extraordinary appointment, and a rare one—maybe once
a decade a young witch or wizard stood out enough to be considered for the position. Dumbledore had actually held the position for two years—it had been his introduction to politics, the moment when Britain had let the fox into the henhouse, had allowed the hidden wolf to creep amongst the sheep.

That one opening had been enough for Dumbledore to begin consolidating power, power he'd used to taint their government going back decades upon decades. Rita found herself very apprehensive about just what Hermione Dagworth-Granger, who already held such a position of influence within society, would be capable of achieving when given official power in government.

"Dangerous friends are the best sort of friends, tesoro," Addie repeated, her murmured words very nearly a purr for all their intensity, "so let us ensure that the lovely Hermione is indeed our friend."

Chapter End Notes

* "We'll always have Paris", quote from Casablanca ultimately meaning they'll always be together in their memories
Part Five: The Order of the Phoenix- Chapter LXXX

Chapter Notes

Hi, sorry for the hiatus everyone, I've been dealing with some shit. I'll be going back over the comments people posted for the last chapter and replying, so please don't think I've been ignoring you out of rudeness, I appreciate each and every bit of support, advice, feedback, etc. that people leave <3

This isn't the longest update ever, but I hope you enjoy it nevertheless!

~CCxxx

CHAPTER LXXX:

Harry’s POV:

To say that Dumbledore had been pissed in the aftermath of the inauguration ball would be an understatement, like saying Voldemort was ‘a little bit naughty’. The first thing Dumbledore had done upon their return to Grimmauld Place was confiscate Harry’s holly wand, ranting about how if he couldn’t trust Harry’s word that he’d obey him, then he going to require insurance that he did. Harry had, in a surprisingly steady tone, pointed out that he’d kept the Vow (obviously, seeing as he still had his magic and his life), so technically it was Dumbledore’s fault for not being more specific.

That, of course, had prompted a nearly half an hour-long lecture about respect, and more specifically Harry’s lack of it, and a heated reminder of the condition of his attendance to the ball that he remained with Tonks and Charlie the entire evening. Harry, in return, argued the logistics of how was he supposed to now they weren’t following after him when he and Hermione left the large hall where the ball was being held. They’d been following him before that without him having to tell them every time he did something, why should then have been any different?

It was a huge heap of steaming hippogriff dung, of course— he and Hermione had very deliberately lost Harry’s escort, but Harry was fully prepared to argue all night if he had to. That turned out to be unnecessary when the furious Dumbledore banished him to his/Regulus’s bedroom, which certainly brought back memories— wand confiscated, abundant shouting, banishment to his room… how very Dursleyof Dumbledore (though at least he got the satisfaction and amusement of hearing Dumbledore trip down half a flight of stairs when Cory, clever, cunning cat that she was, had slyly tangled herself with the old bastard’s feet while he was storming down the stairs, tripping him and sending him toppling. It was a true pity Dumbledore’s reflexes were quick enough for him to cushion the landing at the foot of the stairs and save himself).

Harry was of the firm, unchangeable opinion that the time he got to spend with Hermione and Tom was worth whatever the consequences ended up being, and his conviction didn’t waver even when the next morning, a few hours after Kreacher brought him up breakfast, he was summoned down to the dining room where Snape was waiting to Talk.
That didn’t mean he wasn’t nervous, of course.

“Am I in trouble?” he asked warily as he sat across from his head of house.

“Not precisely,” Snape said, his voice smooth and failing to reveal his current emotions any better than his expression or posture, “but,” his professor added, “we do need to have a conversation.”

“That sounds vaguely ominous,” Harry noted, still wary, and Snape grimaced slightly, drawing his wand from his pocket, flicking it and muttering;

“Muffliato!”

Before Harry could ask the purpose of the spell, Snape bluntly stated, “the Dark Lord does not tolerate failure.”

Harry’s eyes widened in surprise, and Snape leaned forwards, an intent look in his dark eyes. “Harry, you must realise that you’ve been... stationed here at the Order of the Phoenix headquarters for a reason,” his head of house said, voice quiet but intent. “You are intended to integrate yourself with the members of the Order, yet so far there’s been nothing but conflict. You cannot continue opposing Dumbledore and the Weasley matriarch the way you have been, not when they’re such venerated, sympathetic figures in the eyes of the Order. I’m not saying you have to become best friends with either of them, but as someone who has worked as a spy for almost as long as you’ve been alive, I can tell you right now that sometimes, to do this job, swallowing your pride is unavoidable. You must do better, Harry— the potential consequences if you fail here demand it. Do you understand?”

Shame tasted thick and toxic at the back of his throat, and Harry had to fight the urge to duck his head and avoid Snape’s eyes as he replied, “I understand.”

Snape was right. Of course he was right. Harry had done little else but argue with and oppose Dumbledore and Molly Weasley since arriving, and it was doing absolutely nothing to ‘endear’ him to the rest of the Order, like he was intended. Snape was also right that Voldemort did not tolerate failure, and while Harry himself would escape any punishment...

“you're not lone wolves anymore”

…not everyone he knew and cared for had the same protections against the Dark Lord that he did.

“I understand,” he repeated, “and you’re right. I’ll do better.”

Snape sighed, his shoulders hunching slightly as a tired look settled over his face. “I wish you didn’t have to.” He said quietly. “I wish you were as far removed from this situation as possible, but we do not live in a fairy-tale, and nothing is ever gained from life through mere wishing. This is the situation we’ve found ourselves in, and that isn’t going to change any time soon. We’re just going to have to make the best of it.”

That was a horribly bleak way of looking at things, but… Snape wasn’t wrong. Harry was stuck in this situation, stuck living at the headquarters of Dumbledore’s precious Order, and it was time for him to stop bemoaning everything which sucked about the situation and focus on both what he was getting out of it, such as the lessons from Walburga Black and access to all sorts of Black family heirlooms that were now technically his, and on what he’d actually been tasked to get out of the situation. No, the situation wasn’t an ideal one, but it was time to stop acting like a sulking child and to accept responsibility as Voldemort’s cuckoo in the phoenix nest.

It was with this newfound determination that, after his tea with Snape, Harry swallowed his pride
and for the first time ever actually sought out Mrs Weasley. He didn’t like the woman at all, in fact he loathed her and her hypocritical entitlement and her wretched offspring (aside from Charlie, he’d grudgingly admit), but she was a figure of intense sympathy within the ranks of the Order due to her losses, both of her brothers during the war and of her two youngest children. If he wanted to get anywhere with the rest of the Order, first he needed to end the… ‘tension’ between them.

He found her in the drawing room, a big basket of colourful wool at her side, one pair of knitting needles hovering beside her and a second pair in her hands, and he had to take a moment to steel himself before approaching her. “Mrs Weasley?” he asked softly, ducking his head slightly and visibly fidgeting with his hands. “Could I please talk to you for a moment?”

How to project humility through body language was something Marvolo had mentioned while discussing projecting confidence without arrogance—according to him, people were drawn to confidence, particularly the true, deeply felt kind that had the capability of inspiring the masses to follow great leaders to the ends of the earth if necessary, but they were repulsed by arrogance. Considering Voldemort had managed to rise to such heights of power as a leader, Harry was inclined to defer to Marvolo’s wisdom in such matters and had paid close attention as Marvolo started to teach him basic body language to purposefully portray.

Mrs Weasley’s eyes narrowed and Harry carefully assumed his meekest look, one well-practiced throughout his Dursley years.

“I just… I wanted to apologise, ma’am,” he said, in as earnest a voice as he could manage.

“Apologise?” she repeated sharply and he nodded, all wide-eyed and ‘sincere’.

“I– it’s no excuse,” he said, voice hitching slightly as he ducked his head again, “how I’ve behaved towards you, it was wrong of me, and I’m so sorry. Even though I have my… differences with the twins, I shouldn’t have let that influence how I treated you… and I am sorry. If there’s anything I can do to try and make it up to you…” he let his voice trail off, as his gaze drifted down to his still-fidgeting hands.

Apologizing to Mrs Weasley felt like gargling acid, or chewing up broken glass, or swallowing lit matches. He was pretty sure being held under the Cruciatus would hurt less, or at least not make his stomach twist quite so violently in disgust.

“How acknowledging you’ve behaved appallingly is a start,” Mrs Weasley finally said with a sniff (Harry had to bite back the snarl that wanted to escape him at this), before nodding slightly and gesturing at the open doorway. “I’ve heard your apology, Harry, and I will think about what you’ve told me.” She said, before turning her full attention back to her knitting and Harry gratefully took the opportunity to leave.

Remus was waiting outside the still-open doorway to the drawing room, clearly having overheard the ‘apology’ if the look of what Harry could almost call pride on his face was anything to go by. “That couldn’t have been an easy thing you just did back there,” his ex-professor observed quietly and Harry shrugged, a touch awkward.

“Snape reminded me that considering I’ll be spending three whole months here, a less openly hostile atmosphere would be better for everyone. And I’ll never get along with Mrs Weasley considering I don’t like her, her husband, or most of her children, but that doesn’t mean there aren’t other people here I could make friends with. I’m never going to get anywhere with any of the Order, though, while they see her as a victim I’m harassing further. So…” he wiggled his fingers slightly in the direction of the now closed, locked and silenced drawing room door, “an apology was required.”
Remus looked almost unbearably fond as he reached over to gently tousle Harry’s head, but there was also something more in those weary blue eyes, something sharper and more thoughtful. “I’m proud of you, Harry,” his ex-professor said suddenly, jolting Harry from his thoughts, and that… that was probably the worst thing he could have ever said to him. Harry abruptly felt sick knowing just how badly he was planning on betraying the older man, but through sheer willpower alone, he managed to smile back at Remus anyway, and it was worth it all when that night, as those in the Order currently present gathered for dinner, Mrs Weasley served up a plate for Harry and patted his head.

It was a step into the right direction, and Harry ignored Charlie’s raised eyebrows, Remus’s quietly approving smile, and the twin dark glares from Fred and George.

He had a mission to complete, and he wasn’t going to fail.

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_Hermione’s POV:_

For all their boasted superiority from muggles, Hermione felt it said something that the Wizengamot chambers, the chambers of wizarding Britain’s high court of law and parliament, resembled a dungeon from the Middle Ages more than a courtroom. The design was morbid, dramatic and arguably biased; the dungeon-like setting undoubtedly predisposed anyone presiding over or witnessing a trial held there to assume the defendant was guilty— for Circe’s sake, there were chains covering the defendant’s seat!

It was her first time sitting in on a Wizengamot session since she’d been selected for the position of Junior Representative to the Wizengamot. She’d met with Amelia Bones, the previous head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and newly-appointed Chief Warlock, before the session opened and found the older woman to be exceedingly capable and certainly dedicated to her new role considering she’d had to give up her position as head of the DMLE to assume the post— it was a new policy introduced with the beginning of Dumbledore’s fall from grace, when he’d been stripped of his various national and international titles, barring that of Headmaster of Hogwarts.

It had been decided that to take on too many roles was not only irresponsible but it meant that the full and complete effort each post deserved could not be appropriately dedicated when time and attention was split. When Bones was offered the new position, it was under the condition that she resign as head of the DMLE so she could dedicate herself fully to the new role— and she’d accepted.

The newly-opened position of head of the DMLE had been a convenient opportunity for Voldemort too, one he’d been quick to take advantage of. If Moody wasn’t currently on the run then Hermione guessed that he’d have been the preferred candidate for the position, but considering he was a fugitive it hadn’t been difficult for one of Voldemort’s people to fill the position, taking charge of the department most likely to cause trouble for him.

Hermione had no doubt that as the year went on there would be many subtle changes within the department, certain promotions and reshuffling of assignments as Voldemort expanded his influence within the department while diminishing Dumbledore’s. With Veritaserum having been approved in the interrogation of the Aurors to uncover who had aided Moody’s escape from custody and who was aware of the plan and hadn’t made any move to stop it, Voldemort would have a very good idea of exactly who to trust and exactly who needed to be given a dangerous assignment with information not quite up to date, or perhaps with targets who were just a touch too
Hermione wondered, and with a great deal of vicious anticipation, just how long it would take for Dumbledore to realise that Voldemort had already taken control of wizarding Britain’s government from right under his crooked nose. The Dark Lord was already beginning to reshape wizarding Britain according to his vision and ideals, and at this point he was emerging the clear victor of the shadow-war between them, and Dumbledore didn’t even know it. Wizarding Britain had no idea just how much everything was about to change, and like the frog placed in a pot of water, they wouldn’t even realise until it was too late and the water was already boiling.

Unsurprisingly, the plans Hermione was most interested in currently were those regarding muggleborns. Historically, Voldemort’s plans for muggleborns were… ‘bad’ was an understatement; ‘genocide’, ‘massacre’ and ‘annihilation’ were far more accurate descriptors of Voldemort’s previous plans, ones much akin to World War II’s Final Solution. Now that he wasn’t waging open war against the Ministry of Magic, however, Voldemort’s plans weren’t even nearly so extreme, they couldn’t be if he didn’t want to tip his hand to the wizarding public, and Hermione found herself very nearly proud of her own influence over the new plans.

When reduced down to the bare bones, the goals of Voldemort and his most devout, hardcore followers was the ‘muggle’ influence being removed entirely from magical Britain, which was one big reason why muggleborns were such an issue to them.

Hermione didn’t exactly blame witches and wizards for not liking muggles, not when the witch hunts had left such a mark on magical history, but not all purebloods, and halfbloods for that matter, disliked muggleborns because of blood purity issues, some disliked them because of their attitude, their failure to adapt to a new culture while complaining about not being respected and treated equally.

A lot of that friction, particularly in more recent times, was Dumbledore’s influence— how could muggleborns properly respect magical culture and traditions when they weren’t even taught it?— but Hermione believed that her fellow muggleborns also needed to make an effort to not only assimilate into the new world they’d found themselves in, but to understand just why they weren’t always offered the same opportunities as purebloods and halfbloods who’d been raised in the magical world, such as being employed in the Ministry.

The magical world had their own traditions, ideals, culture and laws; turning the Ministry of Magic into a copy of the muggle world wouldn’t work, magic made witches and wizards different to muggles and the magical government was necessarily different because of that— once muggleborns understood that, once they’d adapted to the magical world and a balance had been found between introducing new ideas and concepts without destroying old traditions and culture to do so, Hermione had no doubt muggleborns could flourish in the magical government. After all, she was a prime example of just that, was she not? And Voldemort’s new ‘solution’ to the ‘muggleborn problem’ (or rather, her carefully worded proposal to the Dark Lord and Tom, for she did still feel a certain amount of obligation to protect her fellow muggleborns, though not enough to actually reveal to anyone currently unaware that she was one) would allow them to do just that, to “rise above their muggle roots” as full members of the magical world.

In the clear majority of cases, the very latest accidental magic occurred was around ages three to four— Neville was a definite outlier, not displaying overt signs of accidental magic until ten— and Voldemort’s solution proposed that as soon as a muggleborn was detected through their accidental magic, they were to be removed from their muggle families and placed with magical ones.

The issues witches and wizards had with fertility was an observed fact in the magical world,
though not one often brought up. The idea was that muggleborn children could be placed with appropriate pureblood families as wards, of a sort. The family would be responsible for the care and education of the child, feeding them, clothing them, and teaching them the proper ways before they attend Hogwarts, and in return the achievements of the child would reflect on the family. It would need to be a voluntary process on the part of the family taking in the child, but Hermione considered it an investment likely to pay off, as the children were likely to feel indebted to the families for taking them in and strive to excel in an effort to repay them.

It would require laws and regulations and likely an entire new department at the Ministry to manage and monitor it all— Hermione had no intention of accidentally creating a subset of second-class citizens— but considering Voldemort’s original solution had been to kill all muggleborns and their families, Hermione considered it a progressive step forward.

The complete segregation of the magical and non-magical world was Voldemort’s ultimate aim, and Hermione wasn’t sure she disagreed with it. She’d loved her parents, but those memories were old now, faded and coloured in the rosy hues of nostalgia. Ultimately, she didn’t know how they’d have reacted to her accidental magic, couldn’t know if they’d have treated her any better than the nuns had. Only her fellow street rats had ever had anything positive to say about her ‘special talent’, and that was only because it had benefited them in a way that accidental magic didn’t tend to benefit anyone but the young witch or wizard it belonged to— she could have just as easily been turned against by the homeless population and with as weak as she’d been at the time, it wouldn’t have been a leap for her to have ended up just another unclaimed body, a forgotten case-file labelled ‘Jane Doe’ that would never have been solved.

She liked to believe her parents would have accepted her as a witch, but Hermione knew for a fact that the Malfoys, who had practically taken her in along with Harry, had provided her with a home when she didn’t have one, who had educated her and Harry in pureblood traditions and had protected them, had unquestionably accepted her as a witch. They had accepted her, because she belonged to their world, to her world, and she pitied the muggleborns who found themselves torn between two worlds, unable to let go of either of them— which was another reason they tended to be disliked.

It had been a surprise to her, and likely would be to other muggleborns, that not all those who disliked muggleborns did so because they were blood purists or, to quote Narcissa, because they resented muggleborns’ “nasty habit of destroying the Old Ways by imposing their muggle celebrations on our millennia-old traditions– and the Ministry just buckling under their demands, not wishing to upset them with our ‘outdated’ ways in fear of their retaliation!”. No, there were many who disliked them because of threat they posed to the secrecy of the magical world, the threat of the exposure of magic to muggles, due to their mixed loyalties to both worlds. Removing muggleborns from the muggle world, including all their ties to the muggle world, helped to address that specific issue.

Of course, Dumbledore would be highly opposed to a proposed law mandating the compulsory removal of muggleborns from their parents, as would the ‘Light’, but Hermione knew that Voldemort already had plans in the works to create the sort of environment inclined to ease such drastic law reformation forwards. People who were afraid were much easier to manipulate, and Voldemort was extraordinarily skilled at manipulating the masses, panicked or otherwise. After the expose on Dumbledore was published, and the old bastard’s reputation was in tatters with his political standing at the absolute lowest, he’d move in for the kill.

Hermione’s ideas for the magical world didn’t end with the ‘muggleborn solution’, for lack of a better name; not even close. Just to start, she thought that there needed to be more integration between all magical beings, and she personally believed that reaching out to so-called “halfbreeds”
such as Madam Maxime, a half-giantess who happened to be the headmistress of a prestigious magical school, and Fleur, a part-veela who was chosen as Triwizard Champion, was the perfect way to breach that gap between different magical beings and species and witches and wizards, almost like the marriage contracts between the warring kingdoms of old.

She could recognise that she had big ideas and ideals and her own vision of the future of the magical world as she believed it would best thrive, and that her point of view wouldn’t be a popular one amongst many. She couldn’t help but wonder what Voldemort’s vision of the future of the magical world looked like, and just how compatible it was to hers.

It was certainly something to discuss with Tom— and something to definitely keep away from Voldemort.

The Wizengamot session wasn’t a long one, though there was still a lot of dawdling and pomp and circumstance. Only the formalities were being covered as everyone adjusted to the new Chief Warlock, Minister of Magic and Senior Undersecretary– the three recent appointments of such important positions had the side-effect of reducing Hermione’s presence as the first British Youth Representative selected in over a decade into a mere footnote, instead of a spectacle, and Hermione wasn’t sure whether to be grateful for that or not. She wasn’t particularly fond of people fawning at her, but she also suspected that the timing may very well have been intentional on Voldemort’s part, to limit her potential influence... or perhaps she was seeing plots and conspiracies where there were none, overreacting to how the circumstances had ended up lining up.

Or maybe she really should be listening to her instincts; she’d trusted them to keep her alive for over a decade, why would she choose now to stop listening to them, when she was arguably in just as much danger as she had been while living on the streets, merely a different flavour of it?

It was those troubling thoughts that managed to distract her as the gathering of the Wizengamot finally reached its conclusion, and as she was exiting the chambers she failed to pay enough attention to her surroundings— and as such, failed to avoid Dowager Viscountess Augusta Longbottom, one of those members of Wizarding nobility who had inherited a seat on the Wizengamot through their family’s title. Or at least, she was the regent of the Longbottom family seat until Neville came of age and assumed the title of Viscount Longbottom, or ‘Lord Longbottom’, as the proper address would be.

And holy humping Hecate, sometimes it still felt as if she was dreaming, like this was all a year-long coma, because a street rat like her, mingling with actual nobility? It was too bizarre for words and felt more like a fairy-tale at times to her than even actual magic did.

If it was all a fairy-tale, then Augusta Longbottom was definitely the evil old hag of the fable. Her skin was shrivelled, her eyes, the same shape and colour as Neville’s but lacking all traces of the implicit warmth and innate kindness of her grandson, glinted unpleasantly, and her mouth was a tight, unhappy line. She was still dressed in the official Wizengamot robes, plum-covered with the elaborate silver initial of a ‘W’, and her grey hair was fixed in a braided bun so tight that Hermione’s own scalp ached just looking at it. The headache she had to have could explain why the old lady looked like she was in such a bad mood, except from what Neville had shared of the hag, ‘bad mood’ was Augusta Longbottom’s usual state of being. Hermione had nothing but contempt for her, but was careful not to let it show on her face as she ever-so-politely greeted the older woman.

“Oh, Lady Longbottom! What a welcome surprise!” She said sweetly, smiling prettily at the old lady while thinking of how she wouldn’t mind introducing her favourite switchblade to the hag’s eye-socket. There was a special place in Hell for those who mistreated children, and she’d love to
give Augusta Longbottom an advanced ticket there.

“Ms Dagworth-Granger,” Augusta Longbottom said tightly, not hiding her own dislike. “Neville’s talked about you.”

Her face clearly showed this wasn’t something she was happy about. Hermione couldn’t help but wonder, though, if there existed anything that Augusta Longbottom actually was happy about. Still, she felt her smile widen at the flicker of vindictive pleasure she experienced in the face of Augusta Longbottom’s annoyance.

“Oh, Neville’s such a good friend of mine,” she said sweetly. “I do so enjoy his company.”

“He’s naive,” Augusta Longbottom said bluntly, those mean, narrowed eyes clearly judging Hermione and finding her wanting. “And foolish too, at that. I may be old, but I’m not blind—there’s a great change approaching our world... change, and chaos. I’ve been serving in these chambers longer then you’ve been alive, girl; the masses may all look to Harry Potter, but you’re the one my grandson follows, and you’re the one who the Boy-Who-Lived follows. You’re the true lynchpin, and I’m not the only one who’s noticed. Wizards have killed and been killed for less.”

Hermione... didn’t quite know what to say to a statement as bold as that. Bitter dislike raged for its freedom within her, venomous accusations numbed her lips as she stopped herself from hissing them at the child-abusing hag, but she said nothing. Augusta Longbottom may be able to afford to be blunt with her words, but Hermione couldn’t.

Still— was the Longbottom Regent threatening her? Was she warning her? (Was Voldemort’s bid to reduce the impact of her appointment to the Wizengamot actually intended to protect her?) Hermione wasn’t sure which prospect was more irritating to consider, or what it was she should say in response to the beady-eyed shrew, but thankfully before she had to make up her mind the Lady Sabine Greengrass, Daphne and Astoria’s mother and the new Senior Undersecretary to the Ministry, swooped in to rescue her.

“Hermione, dear,” Sabine gracefully swanned into the very one-sided ‘conversation’, one delicate arm draping around Hermione’s waist as she dipped her head smoothly in Augusta Longbottom’s direction. “My apologies, Lady Longbottom, but I’m afraid we’re going to be late if we dawdle here any longer.” Sabine didn’t wait for a reply from the hag, and Hermione followed with easy relief as Sabine turned and left the old woman, moving with the older witch so Sabine’s arm was never dislodged from its position.

“Thank you,” she said quietly, and Sabine’s eyes flicked down briefly, the corner of her mouth curving up.

“The Dowager Countess Longbottom is an interesting woman.” She said lightly. “She believes in the preservation of certain old traditions, yet rejects entirely anything that even so much as hints at the Dark.”

“In less politically correct terms, she’s a hypocritical bitch.” Hermione translated with a smile as sharp as her eyes, and Sabine’s eyes, the same shade of blue as both her daughters, gleamed in amusement.

“Precisely,” she agreed. “However, she is not unintelligent. I would not immediately cast aside anything she may have said out of dislike— but I would avoid getting yourself cornered by her again, were I you.”

“I’ve learned my lesson there,” Hermione agreed, with a slight wince. “Definitely not happening
again.” Sabine’s smile grew slightly, and Hermione took the time to glance around, realising that
the woman was leading them towards the Floo Room.

“Daphne and Tracey are both eagerly awaiting to hear how your first session went,” Sabine
explained before Hermione had to ask.

“They’re going to be disappointed,” Hermione noted dryly and Sabine smiled again.

“Yes, I did warn them it was far less interesting then they seemed to consider it. Still, if you are
free this afternoon, they would both very much like to see you still.”

Hermione didn’t have any problems with that, happy to follow Sabine through the Floo to the
Greengrass Estate. A house elf immediately appeared to attend them, and Hermione was grateful
for the opportunity to get changed out of the pompous plum-purple Wizengamot robes before
following the big-eared, bulbous-eyed creature to the Estate’s gardens, where Tracey and Daphne
were having a late afternoon tea, along with Astoria, Flora, Hestia, and Luna.

“Hermione!” Little Luna was the first to notice her arrival and the girl’s big silvery eyes lit up with
delight as she darted to her feet and rushed over, throwing her thin arms around Hermione’s waist.
Hermione would punch, stab or curse anyone other than Harry or Tom who attempted something
similar, but Luna was… Luna. There really weren’t any other words that could describe the absent-
minded, away-with-the-nargles wisp of a girl, and Hermione found herself allowing the tiny witch
to take liberties that would leave anyone else laid out bloody and twitching on the ground.

The other girls present were more restrained in their greetings, and Hermione’s sharp eyes didn’t
miss the slight tremble in Flora’s hands that hinted at curse exposure, or how stiffly Hestia was
holding herself, but she didn’t comment, just smiled as she plotted Amycus and Alecto Carrow’s
inevitable, approaching deaths.

Tracey and Daphne pulled her slightly away from the younger girls after she’d given Luna one last
hug and kissed the top of her pale-blonde head before shooing her off, back to her friends, and
Hermione didn’t hesitate to flick up a silencing charm to give them some privacy.

“What’s Luna doing here?” she asked before Daphne could speak any of the questions no doubt
bubbling up within her about the boring Wizengamot session. The golden-haired girl’s face
immediately soured, and she and Tracey traded dark looks.

“Xenophilius Lovegood, that useless, moronic, waste of a wizard, went snorckack hunting in
Switzerland, forgetting that it was the Hogwarts summer holidays,” Tracey explained, a muted
anger simmering in her voice. “Luna’s been living by herself since she managed to make her way
home from King’s Cross.”

“We only found out two days ago when Astoria sent one of our house elves to her with an invitation
to tea,” Daphne added, her own voice tight with anger. “Luna’s been staying here since, and she
will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.” Hermione wondered if the Daphne’s ‘foreseeable
future’ included after Xenophilus’s return. She wouldn’t be surprised; from what she’d witnessed
herself, Xenophilus actually being present did nothing to improve his parenting capabilities.

“Blaise invited me to stay with him next week, for a week or two,” she mused. “I don’t think he’ll
be against Luna joining us.”

Daphne and Tracey both smirked at that, Tracey even giggling slightly with wicked mischief
sparkling in her eyes as she playfully drawled, “oh no, I don’t think he’d mind Luna being there at
all.”
“It’s a good idea,” Daphne agreed, “now, no more avoidance— tell us, what’s it like being part of the Wizengamot?” she demanded, her pretty face shining and eager.

“Annoying,” Hermione admitted, not wanting to disillusion or disappoint her friends, but still wanting to be honest. “Boring. And very, very formal. I understand the need for tradition, don’t get me wrong, but there’s respecting tradition, and then there’s been so far stuck in the past that you’re rendering the entire system obsolete, and the way the Wizengamot seems to be set up is basically medieval— I’m not even exaggerating, the chambers were practically a dungeon! And speaking of dungeons,” she added, turning the topic back around again, not really interested in re-hashing the Wizengamot session so soon after just sitting through it, “going by how the twins are looking, I can think of two people I wouldn’t mind locking in a dungeon and leaving there to starve.”

The distraction worked; Daphne’s face immediately darkened, thoughts of her future Wizengamot dreams momentarily forgotten. “Amycus and Alecto Carrow are filth,” she spat.

“And I’d love to see them rotting in it, where they belong,” Hermione said, with a dark glare.

Tracey’s moss-green eyes flicked over them both, a considering look on her pretty face. “You know,” she said slowly, “the restrictions we had at Hogwarts won’t apply here.”

“Restrictions?” Daphne asked, appearing confused, but Hermione understood immediately what her friend was talking about.

“Blood magic,” she said, with a slowly growing smirk, “you’re talking about blood magic.”

“We don’t have any of Amycus or Alecto’s blood,” Daphne pointed out.

“But we have access to the blood of Alecto’s get— the twins wouldn’t say no,” Tracey pointed out. “It wouldn’t be as strong, but we could still cast a decent enough curse.”

“Let’s do it,” Hermione decided immediately, a thrill coursing through her at the idea. “What do we need?”

“Generally? Magic, blood, and a sacrifice,” Tracey said, with a sweet smile that was so at odds with her words. “I borrowed one of Mother’s grimoires, the first week we were back. There were some really powerful blood curses in them, and they’re definitely complicated, but between us I think we could cast one.”

“We wouldn’t be able to perform it on these grounds,” Daphne warned, not agreeing but refusing either. “My Mother’s family has a bad history with blood magic, she wouldn’t react well to it and our wards would certainly pick up that sort of Dark magic.”

“We can do it at my house,” Hermione offered up the country manor-home without really thinking about it. “Not Gamp Hall,” she added, in case her friends thought she was an idiot, and Tracey nodded. Daphne looked between them both with wide eyes.

“Are we really going to do this?” she asked, sounding a little bit disbelieving, but Hermione could hear the excitement in her voice too, and she grinned back at the blonde, knowing from the slight intake of breath just how vicious it must look.

“After my visit with Blaise,” she decided. “That gives us time to get the, uh, ingredients we need after Tracey picks a curse she thinks we’ll be capable of.”

“Are there any restrictions, for the type curse?” Tracey asked, excitement clear on her face.
Hermione glanced back over at Flora and Hestia Carrow, over at Flora’s uncontrollably twitching hands, at Hestia’s face which tightened with concealed pain every time she moved in place, at the two kindred spirits she’d unconsciously brought under the banner of her protection without even really realising it, before turning back to Daphne and Tracey.

“No.” She said, “not a single fucking limit.”
Part Five: The Order of the Phoenix- Chapter LXXXI

Chapter Notes

Happy International Fanworks Day!

CHAPTER LXXXI:

Harry's POV:

"Harry Potter," the older wizard greeted him in the kitchen of Grimmauld Place with what was almost a smile, eyes just a touch too narrowed for his expression to be considered friendly. "Sturgis Podmore," he said, holding out his hand– with his palm facing down. Harry bit back an exasperated sigh and managed to refrain from rolling his eyes. Just.

Marvolo had been an odd combination of pleased and pissed off about Harry apologising to Mrs Weasley. Both of them could understand the reasoning behind it, and Marvolo certainly appreciated the strategy, but he'd also been furious at Harry having to 'debase' himself, and had become determined that Harry maintain either an equal or preferably upper hand in any further interactions within the Order– it was, Harry thought, Marvolo's possessiveness showing; the only one he'd ever accept Harry debasing himself for in any way would be him, and possibly Tom and Voldemort– it depended on the day and Marvolo's mood.

Handshakes had been one of the first strategies Marvolo had talked him through– and considering the number of people in the Order he'd been introduced to over the past two weeks since he'd apologised to Mrs Weasley, it had been a good place to start. Handshakes were intended to be a greeting gesture symbolising two parties on equal grounds, but apparently, if Harry allowed his palm to face upwards while the person he was shaking hands with had their palm facing downwards, everything devolved into some kind of domination game of who had the upper-hand– and not the sexy kind of domination game either. It set the tone of the following interacting, establishing the atmosphere and vibe, setting a stage where Harry would be left with the lower-hand for the remainder of the conversation.

Honestly, it all just made Harry feel paranoid and he'd gone back over all the handshakes he could remember, trying to figure out if they'd been equal, or if he'd been failing at power-plays without even realising. While he couldn't really conclusively remember anything one way or the other, he had a sinking, morose feeling it was more of the latter. Not anymore, though– and Harry smiled back at Podmore, the latest member of the Order who'd seen fit to introduce himself, a friendly flash of teeth as he stepped forwards.

Marvolo had taught him different tactics for getting out of such handshakes, but Harry's favourite, a decision he'd admit was fuelled mostly by spite, was the method that didn't just evade but actually turned the situation around back on the other person. The Step-to-the-Right Technique let him either simply straighten the handshake, hands clasping equally, or turn the tables by reversing the submissive position onto the other person while also allowing him to take control by invading the other's personal space.
Slightly vindictive, maybe, but the moment they tried to put Harry beneath them, to treat him as lesser, that was the moment Harry stopped feeling any real sympathy for them.

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Podmore," he said, still smiling as he moved into the older wizard's space, much to Podmore's apparent discomfort. Harry quite enjoyed the look on his face, particularly when he reversed the handshake with the skill Marvolo had had him practice about five hundred times before declaring it merely acceptable with a dismissive sneer– Marvolo wasn't big on positive reinforcement. "So, you work at the Ministry?" He asked, hiding his amusement as Podmore immediately stepped backwards after Harry released his hand, a slight grimace on his face that he couldn't quite hide.

Podmore was dressed in official Ministry robes, though his dragonhide boots weren't exactly standard regulation issue, plus they were scuffed like they'd seen plenty of action– he was probably an Auror, Harry guessed. Dress code standards seemed more relaxed for them, from what he'd seen so far. Harry wondered if he should send mention of Podmore to Hermione to pass on to Voldemort, then figured that Voldemort would already know of his true allegiance through Snape.

Podmore's face pinched at Harry's question, going sour as he glared down at him with very real dislike, his wand hand twitching slightly. Startled by the reaction his simple question had set off, Harry was seriously considering if he needed to retreat for his safety when the witch who'd walked in with Podmore, also dressed in official Ministry robes, laid a gentle restraining hand on the wizard's wand arm. "Sturgis," she said firmly, in a voice that was deeper then Harry had anticipated, "it's not his fault."

Podmore's scowl darkened. "It's his fault that Alastor was even arrested, so it's his fault I'm 'suspended while under official investigation'– what a load of minotaur shit!"

Harry's eyes immediately narrowed as understanding dawned– Podmore must have been the Auror, or one of the Aurors, responsible for helping Moody escape custody after he'd been arrested for assaulting him and Hermione. An acidic retort to spit in Podmore's direction was at the top of his tongue, but the quick look the witch shot him, startlingly kind and apologetic and entirely unexpected, had Harry hesitating, biting back his sharp response and staying quiet, letting the witch handle the irate Podmore.

It didn't take her long to send him off, out to the garden to 'take a few deep breaths', and then she turned to him and smiled, bright and warm and undeniably genuine. "Hullo Harry-- is it alright if I call you Harry? I'm Hestia Jones, it's such an honour to meet you!" She said enthusiastically, and Harry found himself honestly surprised by the first member of the Order who actually seemed delighted by his presence.

Hestia Jones was young-looking, maybe in her mid-thirties, with black hair and pink cheeks. Harry was reminded of a Hufflepuff in the year below him that he'd seen around Hogwarts– they looked similar enough that he thought they had to either be sisters or mother and daughter.

"I'd be happy for you to call me Harry," he told her, and she smiled even brighter at him.

"I've heard so much about you," she told him and Harry winced exaggeratedly.

"Oh dear," he said, only half-joking, before giving her his best bashful smile. "Well, maybe we can be friends anyway?"

Hestia laughed. "Don't worry, it's mostly good things," she assured him.

"I somehow doubt that," he said but Hestia shook her head.
"Remus has nothing but lovely things to say about you, my sister too." She told him firmly.

"Your sister wouldn't happen to be a Hufflepuff fourth year, would she?" Harry asked, and Hestia's whole face impossibly brightened further.

"Yes! Yes, she is, that's her– Meg, Meghan Jones, my sister. Well, half-sister, actually." Hestia's face lost some of its brightness. "My mother died during the first war, you see," she said quietly, "I was fifteen at the time. My father married again within a year, and Meg was born not long after that. Meg was seven months old when you defeated Voldemort."

Harry blinked, startled by her use of Voldemort's name, and Hestia smiled again, sadder but no less genuine for it. "Harry, I don't care what some of the others say, about you being in Slytherin and what that all means– I remember being fifteen and losing my mother, I remember dreading my approaching graduation, because it would mean I'd no longer have access to the relative safety being a student at Hogwarts afforded me, and I remember barely sleeping the first seven months of Meg's life, because she was so small and so fragile and my mother had been an Auror and the Death Eaters cut down like she was nothing, so what chance did Meg have?

"Harry, the place you hold in the hearts of the anti-Voldemort movement... the war was hell, and you ended the war! You didn't mean to, I know, you were a baby, just a year older than Meg, but you still saved us and my generation in particular, we remember. We haven't forgotten your family's sacrifice– or your sacrifice."

Harry's eyes were damp and he hastily blinked away the threatening tears. Guilt and gratitude warred for prominence within him, and the wobbly smile he gave Hestia wasn't faked at all.

"Thank you," he told her softly, and her returning smile was as warm and comforting as a crackling fireplace in winter.

"No, Harry," she said, "thank you."

Before either of them could say anything else, they were interrupted by Remus hurrying into the room, looking tense and concerned. He visibly relaxed upon seeing them, his shoulders slumping as he exhaled.

"Oh thank Merlin," he said, voice tinged with exhaustion. "Alastor's just heard about Sturgis, he's on the warpath and he's riled Sturgis up again with him– Harry, it's best that we make sure you're scarce until Dumbledore arrives and calms them both down."

Hestia scowled, her hands planted on her hips. "Alastor's abysmal control of his temper is what got everyone into this situation to start with!" She said sharply, and with clear annoyance. "Sturgis is suspended and under investigation because Alastor cursed a child, one technically under his care as Harry was his student at the time, which just makes things even worse!"

"I know, I know," Remus said exhaustedly. "But further conflict will only make Harry's stay here even more tenuous, and I honestly don't trust Alastor with his safety."

"Considering how many ribs he broke last time he lost his temper with me, I don't either," Harry muttered, and he wasn't even saying that just for Hestia's benefit– he'd really prefer to avoid an even more foul-tempered then usual Moody, especially since neither Madam Pomfrey or Snape were there to make sure he didn't drown in his own blood.

Hestia's eyes widened slightly, and Harry wondered if the news of just how badly injured he'd been after Moody's attack had been kept from the press because she certainly looked surprised by the
details he'd just shared. Maybe he should write to Hermione and Tom to share his medical records with Miss Rita; a nice smear campaign directed at Moody would certainly cheer him up.

"Right," Hestia declared, a new resolve in her voice, "let's go have a walk. Maybe we can get a cuppa from somewhere—muggle cafes are quite brilliant, aren't they?"

It was now Harry's turn to be surprised, and after staring wide-eyed at Hestia for a moment, he jumped at the opportunity to leave the house for the first time since the ball—nearly two full weeks now. "I know a great place in Charing Cross," he quickly suggested.

"Great," Hestia said brightly. "Remus, you in?"

Remus hesitated, glancing over at Harry who sighed. "I'm not going to run off," he said dryly. "I promise."

"Well, er, I suppose." His ex-professor agreed nervously, and Hestia immediately held out her hands.

"No time like the present," she declared, and the moment Harry grabbed her hand, she twisted on the spot, apparating them to Charing Cross. The sudden crowd was enough to make him gasp in surprise after the last two weeks locked away in Grimmauld Place. He immediately didn't care about the consequences this little trip would probably have, it was just a relief to be able to get out of that place for an hour or two.

"I love London," Hestia said happily as she looked around them with a fond gaze. "It's such a busy place. Everyone's always doing something, or going somewhere, with some task or destination in mind."

"Spoken like a true Hufflepuff," Remus told her, looking a bit queasy from the Side-Along—Harry had heard it was worse to Side-Along once you knew how to apparate yourself. Hestia just laughed, before turning to Harry.

"Lead the way," she said, and Harry did. During his time living with Hermione on the streets, he'd visited or passed through Charing Cross more than a few times, so he had enough of a familiarity with the area to guide them to a muggle cafe that didn't look half bad.

"I hope one of you has muggle money," he warned, and Hestia nodded.

"The Ministry supplies us with some," she explained. "In case we ever need it while on assignment. Dark wizards don't expect us to use a muggle motel for an emergency safe house."

"That's actually pretty clever," Harry observed and Hestia laughed.

"Such a tone of surprise," she teased, but Harry just shrugged.

"I can't say the Ministry has ever done much to give me a good impression of its intelligence," he said as they sat down on one of the empty tables outside the muggle cafe. "Quite the opposite, actually."

Hestia winced. "Okay, that's fair," she admitted. "But for every idiot in power, there's at least five of us lower down on the totem pole actually doing our best to help make the magical world a better, safer place."

"Spoken like a true Hufflepuff," Harry mimicked Remus's earlier words because it made her laugh again, like he'd guessed it would, and also because he wasn't sure what else to say, not when he..."
already felt like he was betraying her— and he was betraying her, both her as a person, and the image she had of him as a saviour.

It was easier to hate the Light when all he saw when he thought of them was Dumbledore, Moody and the Weasleys. Now there was Remus and Hestia and even McGonagall; all of them hurt by the Dark, by Voldemort and his followers, all of them so determined to oppose it, all of them who believed in him.

All of them who he was going to betray, who he was already betraying.

Watching Hestia laugh as Remus tipped four extra packs sachets of sugar into his double strength hot chocolate with chocolate sauce, chocolate sprinkles, and whipped cream, Harry wondered if it would get any easier. He doubted it, and for a moment he was furious with Snape for not preparing him for this, for not warning him how much it would hurt when he was inevitably faced with just how unbearably human the other side was, but the anger burned through him like a flash-fire, intense while it lasted but vanishing quickly, leaving just a layer of dark, miserable soot behind.

Even if Snape had warned him, it wouldn't have mattered— he'd still have decided to go along with Voldemort's plan, so determined to prove himself, to prove his worth beyond the horcrux in his head, beyond being Hermione's best friend and Tom's partner. And in the end, the pain... it was a good wake up call. His second one this summer, actually. It was a reminder that this wasn't a game, that it was real-life and it would have very dangerous real-life consequences for everyone involved.

And it was a reminder too that not every member of the Light was his enemy, that the Light's widely-proclaimed leader might have wronged him, and grievously at that, but that not every member of the Light should suffer for Dumbledore's choices.

It was a reminder that he couldn't ever turn into Dumbledore, or Marvolo, Tom, and Voldemort, seeing people as chess pieces, not individuals, and he would heed the reminder he'd been given. When the titans moved, when they clashed, someone would have to watch out for the individuals who'd be hurt as collateral— and with a foot in the door of both sides, there was no better person to do so then him.

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Fleur’s POV:

Fleur hadn’t been exaggerating or making it up for the sake of smooth conversation when she’d told Neville at the Yule Ball that the gardens of Beauxbatons were the most magnificent in all of France, particularly during the months of Spring and Summer when everything was in bloom. Surrounded by the palace's lawns of velvet green and beautiful, bright splashes of colour as far as her eye could see, Fleur was finally able to let the tension ease from her bones, the gentle hum of peace taking its place.

Today she’d sat her final examination, Advanced Arithmancy, and her head was still spinning. While despite technically being exempt from her final examinations as the chosen Triwizard Champion of Beauxbatons, they were necessary for her future— perhaps if she’d won, she wouldn’t have needed the results, but she hadn’t won and therefore she’d spent the first fortnight of the summer holidays revising, then the third week actually sitting all her final examinations. The French Ministry had agreed to let her sit them at Beauxbatons, after Madam Maxime had offered, and Fleur was thankful to have not only had access to the school’s resources while revising, but to have been able to sit her examinations in such familiar surroundings.
She knew she’d have to return home soon, leaving behind the enchanting Palace of Beauxbatons she’d been blessed to call her school for the final time as an official graduate, but Fleur was in no rush. The past three weeks had been nothing but frantic, it was a relief to finally have the chance to just be still and breathe the fresh air of the surrounding Pyrenees mountains.

“Fleur?” A familiar voice calling out her name had her eyelashes fluttering open—when had she closed her eyes again? Merciful Dea Matrona, she must be even more tired then she’d thought—as she turned automatically towards the speaker, dipping into an elegant curtesy as she did so.

Madam Maxime was approaching at an unhurried pace. There was no haste to her flowing movements, no rush, only the simple yet elegant grace that all the Beauxbatons students envied. Fleur had seen full-blooded Veela with less poise than her headmistress. Madam Maxime was clever, elegant, and undeniably awe-inspiring—and the fact she was a half-giantess who’d managed to not only attain but hold such a prestigious position within French society despite her hidden heritage only increased Fleur’s respect for her tenfold. It truly had been an honour to learn under her, as a student at the school she led.

Madam Maxime was wearing robes of dusky rose charmeuse and her long, thick hair spooled like fine, dark silk over her large shoulders. Her lips matched her robes and her smile was warm. “I am glad to have caught you before you left,” she said, in her rich, steady voice. “I wished to congratulate you. You truly are one of the brightest students to ever pass through these hallowed halls during my time as headmistress... and perhaps I should not admit it, but you were certainly one of my favourite students.”

Fleur could feel her cheeks flood with warmth, no doubt flushing a pretty pink. “M-Madam,” she said, only stumbling over her words slightly in her shock at the headmistress’s words, “thank you, for such high praise, I—thank you. It truly means a lot, to hear you say such wonderful things.”

“You should be very proud of yourself, Fleur,” Madam Maxime told her warmly. “I do not give praise lightly, as you well know. And considering we are no longer teacher and student, I invite you to address me by my first name.”

When Fleur could only share, shocked momentarily into silence, Madam Maxime... Olympe laughed, a rich, throaty sound. “I sense that that will take some adjusting,” she said, clearly amused, and Fleur could only nod mutely. Mada—Olympe’s face lost its amusement quickly, however, turning serious as she reached down to gently clasp Fleur’s much smaller hands in her own. “That which impresses me most about you, however, and has done so since you were brand new to these halls, is the way you’ve never let your heritage be anything but a strength. Even when society insists being a half-breed is something one must be ashamed of, something that should be hidden or at least never brought up in polite company, viewed as some dirty little secret, you’ve always treated your bloodline as a strength. You’ve also never been satisfied with accepting the status quo as it is—and that is why I have decided to accept your family’s newly-adopted ward, Felicienne Delacour, as a student here at Beauxbatons, alongside little Gabrielle when she is due to start her first year.”

Fleur was once more struck silent in sheer shock. Like Goblins, pureblooded Veela had enough innate magic to be capable of using a wand, but it had been forbidden of them—wizards refused to share the secrets of wandlore with other magical beings, denying them the possibility of extending their powers. Out of fear, no doubt, as well as discrimination and prejudice. Fleur, with her witch blood, was granted the right to carry a wand and to receive an education at a magical school of renown. Felicienne, the little Veela girl she’d rescued from the brothel, had no witch blood in her veins—for her to carry a wand alone would be illegal, let alone actually being taught at a school.
“I do not know how you became… acquainted with the young Felicienne, and I suspect I’m better not to, but the young lady looks up to you a great deal.” Olympe said with a knowing look. “She wrote to me, demanding a spot within these halls— oh she was diplomatic enough about it, but there was a great deal of fire beneath the flowery words that reminded me of you. If given the opportunity, I believe she could go a long way in life, accomplishing a great deal along the way.”

“And you’re giving her that chance,” Fleur said, her heart so full it felt like it was about to burst. She had to blink back tears. “Thank you,” she choked, heartfelt, “thank you.”

“Oh, I am going to miss you, sweet girl,” Olympe sighed with a fond smile before her large, dark eyes turned serious. “Speaking of which, Fleur… there was another reason why I wanted to talk to you today. I heard that you were returning to Britain, that you have been offered a job within its Ministry, and I could not forgive myself if I didn’t ask if you truly know and understand what you are getting yourself into.” Fleur’s headmistress said, a grave urgency in her deep voice. “Our time there may have been focused inside the borders of Hogwarts, but even within the school walls the growing political unrest and instability was impossible to miss.”

Fleur felt apprehension stir within her, and Olympe’s troubled eyes met her own. She knew just how intelligent her headmistress was, and she wondered just how much Olympe knew– or had guessed.

“And now,” her headmistress said quietly, “there are rumours, persistent and growing rumours, that the most powerful and terrifying Dark Lord since Grindelwald has returned. And if he has... Fleur, none of us will admit it, but the International magical community is acutely aware of just how lucky we were, that Britain’s Dark Lord did not decide to extend his reign of terror beyond the borders of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The damage Grindelwald caused, the tens of thousands of witches and wizards he and his followers murdered or who died fighting him... he split our community in half, divided us and turned us against each other, friend against friend, sibling against sibling, in a way we’d never been before... he left such terrible wounds behind in the hearts and minds of us all, very nearly destroying us. I do not know if the magical world could survive a second Grindelwald.”

Maybe the magical world doesn’t deserve to, was Fleur’s immediate response, though she was smart enough not to speak it aloud. Still, Olympe must have been able to read the lack of sympathy on her face, for she gained a look of sad understanding.

“I know the magical world has done very little to endear itself to you and your people,” she said quietly. “It has certainly done very little to endear itself to me and mine. But prejudice is taught, and what is taught can be unlearned. As a teacher, I can personally attest to that,” she added, the dry comment startling a smile out of Fleur. “Death, however… death cannot be undone,” Olympe continued, and Fleur’s smile faded as the levity once more disappeared from the conversation, “and all Dark Lords bring with them death.”

Fleur took a moment to acknowledge what Olympe had just said, before replying. “We didn’t choose to be treated as we are,” she said, speaking just as quietly as Olympe, but there was a burning, fiery resolve in her words that they could both hear. “We didn’t choose their hatred and prejudice and discrimination and abuse. But we don’t have to choose to accept it. And if we do decide to do something about it... any lives lost in the process, they would not be on our hands, not when all that we are doing is responding to an injustice that has hung over us long enough.

“I appreciate your words and your warning,” she told her headmistress, for she truly did, “but I will do whatever it takes to create a brighter future for my people and others like us, and I could not live with myself if I did anything less. I’m not operating under any delusions or misconceptions, I
understand the potential, even probable, consequences of the choices I’m making, and I’m walking into this with my eyes wide open. We all are. None of us are happy, Mada– Olympe, and we no longer see why we must just accept our unhappiness. Even if things do not work out... at least then we can say we have tried. And it’s better to have tried and failed, then to just roll onto our backs and submit.”

Olympe winced, likely at the image Fleur’s purposefully chosen words conveyed; the headmistress of Beauxbatons was not ignorant to the treatment of young, stolen veela, very few people were; just nobody bothered to actually do anything about it, and Fleur knew in that moment and by her reaction that she had Olympe right where she wanted. The half-giantess wouldn’t move against her on this, not when she’d experienced so much of the same discrimination and prejudice firsthand, not when she would be unable to help but relate so strongly to how the Veela had suffered at the hands of the French Ministry, and in fact all the magical ministries, and to move against Fleur would be a betrayal of that suffering.

Olympe was silent for a long moment, before she closed her eyes briefly in resignation. “Very well,” she murmured softly. “Very well. In the end, we must all reap what we sow.” She released a quiet sigh, then lifted her large hands to cradle Fleur’s face, bending to kiss each of her cheeks. “Goodbye, Fleur,” she said, “the halls of Beauxbatons will miss your presence, but I wish you the very best of luck on your future endeavours... whatever it is they may be. And if you are ever in trouble, or if you ever find yourself in need of a relatively impartial party, I will always be here for you.”

“Thank you,” Fleur said, deeply touched by the declaration, once more blinking away welling tears that briefly obscured her vision.

“You truly are the pride of these halls,” Olympe told her solemnly. “I only wish that more people could look past all the ugliness of discrimination and see it.”

“Maybe one day they will be able to,” Fleur said.

And in the meantime, she refused to just do nothing while waiting for something that may never happen. She wasn’t ignorant to the monster hiding underneath Thaddeus Dagworth’s skin, she wasn’t ignorant to the danger of Lord Voldemort, but she just didn’t care. As Olympe had said— people reaped what they sowed, and the Veela weren’t obligated to just sit back and accept the government-mandated discrimination, nor were the werewolves, giants, vampires, hags, goblins, centaurs and so many of the other beings and creatures out there, including their mixed-heritage offspring.

Lord Voldemort had offered them something better, something fairer– why wouldn’t they accept it? Why shouldn’t they? The so-called ‘Light’ never acted to aid them, so why in the name of Magic would they not choose to aid themselves?

After bidding Olympe farewell, Fleur cast one last look over the magnificent gardens of Beauxbatons before making her way to the grand gates that marked the end of the palace’s grounds and apparating away, leaving both Beauxbatons and the final remnants of her childhood behind.

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Charlie’s POV:

The old bar was dirty, dimly lit and crowded, but that was to be expected of this specific type of
establishment. Not unlike the Hog’s Head, it was the type of place where a certain type of witch or wizard might find special employment to be available, or naughty little whispers of interest present to overhear.

Charlie had found himself frequenting out of the way places like these more and more often over the years, though they weren’t somewhere he tended to seek out of his own volition. Tonks liked them though, mostly for their random violence and promiscuous patrons, and his contacts, like the one he was meeting here tonight, liked them for the discretion and general anonymity they offered.

He couldn’t deny, however, that the familiarity of the den of iniquity was almost soothing after the last three weeks. The Hogwarts summer holidays so far had been less than ideal, and he wasn’t just talking about the tension that came with being a double agent currently living in the headquarters of the enemy, acting as if he was one of them. No, there was something deeply, tragically wrong with his family, or what remained of it, and it took everything he had not to just abandon Britain and run. He’d left once because he couldn’t deal with them, and after the past three weeks he was more than ready to just leave again.

He couldn’t, of course; running wasn’t an option anymore, not for him or for Tonks. Not now that they’d sold their loyalty to the sort of monster that made other monsters cower and grovel before it. He didn’t regret his choice, he generally made an effort not to waste his time with regrets, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t bothered by some aspects of his new role as a Death Eater and a spy– and spying on the broken remnants of his family was definitely bothersome, to say the least. He wasn’t sure what disturbed him most, either– the increasingly often absence of his father, the way his mother seemed to have suffered some sort of mental breakdown, or the Fîrtat-damned twins.

Probably the twins. There was something significantly wrong with Fred and George, just horribly, wretchedly wrong. He’d known them since they were born, and maybe he hadn’t been heavily involved in their lives the last few years, and yes, Fred’s potion’s accident would definitely have caused an upheaval in their lives, in their relationship with each other and in their personalities, but there was just something so deeply concerning about the pair of them and their attitudes recently, something that made the hair on the back of his neck stand up as his instincts hissed in warning.

And speaking of both ‘hissing’ and ‘problems’, there was also his charge to consider– Harry fucking Potter; Boy Who Lived, Saviour of the Light, and Double Agent for the Dark. Dumbledore had not been pleased with either Tonks or himself in the aftermath of the ball celebrating fucking Voldemort becoming the Fîrtat-damned Minister of Magic... not that Dumbledore was aware of that little detail, of course. Charlie had hoped that Dumbledore’s unhappiness with their ‘inadequate’ job of keeping an eye on the kid would have led to them being reassigned from guarding him, but no, they weren’t that lucky. At least the cold war between Harry and his mum had finally ended, though Charlie didn’t trust for a single second that Harry’s motives behind the cessation of hostilities were anything but purely strategic on his behalf.

People tended to blame Hermione Granger for being the violent, dangerous one between the two of them, but Harry was plenty dangerous on his own– he was constantly overlooked, and that was a costly mistake. The kid had already proved he was capable of murder, he’d actually managed to win the Triwizard Tournament while competing against three seventeen-year-olds, his school marks were third highest in his year level, and Charlie had seen him at the ball– maybe the kid didn’t like to play politics or played it often, but he’d been very capable and confident during all the ‘meet and greet’ with the various high ranking guests, and he certainly wasn’t lacking in charisma or connections.

He was also apparently capable of playing games, if the Black family ancestral necklace he’d gifted to Tonks for the ball was anything to go by, and the vambraces too. Harry, he thought, and
with no small amount of wariness and resignation both, was much smarter than people realised,
terrifyingly charismatic when he wanted to be, and his kindness was as much a weapon as it was a
virtue—the kid was dangerous, and not enough people realised that. Snape did, he was pretty sure,
Tonks too, and Dumbledore at least had an inkling, but Harry was considered the nice Slytherin,
and more than that, he was still the Boy Who Lived. The world was blind to him, because they’d
already formed an image of who they expected him to be, and someone was teaching Harry how to
ruthlessly take advantage of that. A terrifying concept, truly.

...at least the kid was likeable. It would be so much worse if Harry was a brat. And thank the gods
and goddesses above that he still had his ‘day’ job, though only going by the loosest definition of
the word ‘day’. Despite the daylight hours having long since passed on by, the meeting at this bar
tonight was for business, not pleasure, though Tonks’s hedonistic impulses had rubbed off on him
enough over the years that he didn’t hesitate to mix a bit of pleasure in with his business.

Or maybe it wasn’t Tonks, maybe it was just who he was and she was a convenient scapegoat
when he couldn’t bring himself to confront his own psyche with the truth. That sort of heavy
thinking required more whiskey then he was comfortable consuming in a shit-hole like this, though,
if he wanted to keep on breathing, or at least keep his gold. And he was technically working, and
on the behalf of the government too, so he’d worry over that later. Or never. Never worked.

Officially, he’d been assigned on the behalf of the Department for the Regulation and Control of
Magical Creatures to infiltrate an upcoming auction of magical creatures that word on the streets
suggested was to be held on British soil—it was invitation only, but the rumours going around
certain circles were that there was a seller who would be auctioning off a litter of nundu kits, which
were basically the wizarding equivalent of a dirty bomb. Understandably, the Ministry were very
concerned and wanted him to infiltrate the auction to find out the names and faces of those selling
the nundu kits and those buying them.

His unofficial mission, once he’d gotten access to the auction, was to get in touch with the sort of
low lives and bottom-feeding scum that tended to congregate in such places that Lord Voldemort
had expressed an interest in acquiring for cannon fodder, as well as the more intelligent criminals
that the Dark Lord was actually interested in recruiting for their magic and brains, not as mere meat
shields.

His meeting today was with a well-known (in the underground) breeder with links to traffickers.
Charlie was confident his contact would be able to get him into the auction; illegal activities aside,
though, the bloke wasn’t too bad, not really the Dark Lord’s type when it came to recruitment, so
he wasn’t looking to offer him a pitch. Well, not a recruitment pitch.

“Another round of whatever he’s having!” The familiar voice of his newly-arrived contact called
out to the barkeep, who grunted in acknowledgment, and Charlie looked up from his tumbler of
cheap whiskey to grin at the man he knew only as “Typhon”, an alias that came from a monster in
Greek mythology; Typhon was the mate of the Echidna, the Mother of Monsters, and the
progenitor of many famous monsters from Greek mythology. It was a fitting alias.

“Bad choice there, mate, it tastes like shit,” he said cheerfully, ducking to avoid the retaliatory shot
glass the barkeep chucked in his direction. It shattered against the wall behind him, where it was
promptly ignored by everyone.

“So, how’s business?” Typhon asked as he seated himself opposite Charlie, and Charlie shrugged.

“Can’t complain much. Had to move back to England for the family, but I got a job at the
Ministry’s Magical Creatures Department that basically pays me to spy on everything they know
about us.”
“That’s my man!” Typhon laughed, leaning forwards to heartily clap Charlie’s shoulder before holding up a hand to snag the tumbler of whiskey the barkeep had just sent floating his way out of the air. “Urgh, this is shit,” he muttered, after taking a large swig, before looking back over at Charlie. “For real, though, I know some people who’d be very interested to hear what information the Ministry’s got on their private operations, if you’re ever looking for a bit of extra gold,” he offered, and Charlie grinned.

“Why do you think I invited you out for drinks tonight?”

“Ouch,” Typhon said dramatically, pressing a hand over his heart, “and here I thought you just missed my sorry arse.”

“Can’t say you’re wrong there, mate,” Charlie winked playfully, and Typhon laughed again.

“Well I’ll send out word,” he promised. “Want them to get in touch through me, or fancy organising a round of face-to-face meetings?”

“Face-to-face, I think,” Charlie said, after pretending to think about it a moment. “Nothing against you, mate, I know you’re the picture of discretion, but I have a feeling some of these people will have a foot in the big leagues, and I know you prefer to stay out of the nastier sides of the business.”

“You’re not wrong,” Typhon agreed, a look of gratitude on his face that Charlie had no problem making the most of while it lasted.

“Speaking of big leagues, I’ve been hearing a few whispers about an auction that’s coming up,” he said casually, and Typhon smirked, seeing right through him, just the way Charlie wanted him to.

“Looking for an invitation, Charlie-boy?”

“Fuck yes,” he replied, “I’ve heard some interesting things.”

“I’ll get you in,” Typhon promised. “I still owe you one from that time in Ischia, anyway, and I could use someone to guard my back— I’ll be selling some of my own work on the night.”

“Oh?” Charlie said, actually interested. Typhon was very skilled at experimental breeding, one of the best in the business— his alias was well-deserved.

“Oh yeah, I got my hands on a couple of garuda a year back when I was travelling India and I’ve been working to breed an amphiptere with garuda wings,” Typhon explained, and Charlie whistled, impressed.

“And you succeeded?” he asked.

“I got my first stable batch of amphiptere with king cobra bodies and garuda wings a month ago,” Typhon said smugly. “Most of them will go to India, the market will be better for them there, but I’ll see what sort of price I can get at the auction too.”

Charlie whistled again, even more impressed. Amphiptere were winged serpents; basically, snakes with feathery, avian wings. They tended to vary in appearance depending on the snake breed that their bodies took after, as well as the bird species that their wings took after. Some resembled cobras with falcon wings, or anacondas with condor wings, or black mambas with hawk wings, or asps with hummingbird wings. In some cases of special breeding, an amphiptere could even have feathers on more places on its body than just its wings, or have bat-like wings or draconic wings in place of bird wings.
Typhon breeding amphipteres with the combination of the wings of a gardua and the body of a king cobra was an extremely impressive, extremely illegal achievement. On top of being endangered and protected, the garuda, an Indian magical species of bird named after the legendary mount of the Hindu god Vishnu, were considered sacred species by Indian witches and wizards. The legendary Garuda was the "king of the birds", and when pairing the wings of a garuda with the body of a *king* cobra... well, it made quite a statement, and Typhon’s amphipteres would be massively popular, particularly in India, like he’d said, where snakes (and Parseltongue, for that matter) were admired by the magical community in a way they definitely weren’t by the British.

…actually, Charlie knew someone in Britain who definitely would admire an amphiptere 'king' in the way it deserved. Someone who just might be very interested in buying one.

“I have a potential buyer who would be very interested in, and very willing to pay big money for, one of your amphipteres,” he told Typhon. “I’d have to get into contact with him first, but I’m confident in his interest.”

“We’ve done good business in the past,” Typhon told him, “the auction isn’t for another week, if your bloke is interested, get into touch with me before then and we’ll work something out.”

“Cheers, man,” Charlie grinned, before waving to get the attention of the barkeep. “A round of Odgen’s finest,” he called out, which earned him an appreciative look from Typhon.

“Now I’m feeling all wined and dined,” he purred, and Charlie smirked.

“Plenty of wine, not much dining— yet. There’s a place down the street that rents by the hour, gives us plenty of time to feast.” He’d accomplished everything he’d been looking to and more, it was time to set aside the business portion of the evening for pleasure before he had to return to Grimmauld Place.
Part Five: The Order of the Phoenix- Chapter LXXXII

Chapter Notes

I lost a lot of inspiration for writing in general over these past six months, thanks to real world problems going on, including for this story. However! Things are starting to get better, and I've regained my inspiration. Forgive me for not updating in a small eternity and I hope you enjoy the chapter. XO

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER LXXXII:

Harry's POV:

There was a popular joke amongst the Slytherins, particularly in their year, about the "golden rule" that Hermione was always right. In reality, Harry knew that Hermione didn't actually believe that. She had no more issues than anyone else with acknowledging she was just as fallible as any other human being, and Harry was pretty sure that this was one of those times where she hadn't been 'right' at all. Instead, she'd made a horrible miscalculation, one that nobody else had managed to pick up on before it was too late, and now he had the sinking feeling the consequences were going to haunt them all.

Any time he was forced to spend in unfortunately close proximity with Fred and George Weasley as the days in Grimmauld Place dragged by managed to trigger every single primal instinct for recognising danger that Harry had. There was something just so deeply off about the twins these days. Something far more than just the aftermath of Fred's disfigurement and the complications that had come along with it. They were... he wasn't quite sure how to describe it, that unsettling sense of 'wrongness' about them. Charlie had commented on it, a frown on his face as he did so, and Tonks had started eyeing them both in that predatory way of hers. He recognised it from when Tonks spotted someone who set off her "danger" radar– it was the same look she gave Voldemort, Snape, Remus, Fleur, Moody, Dumbledore, Tom and Hermione. They were just wrong– eerily so. And Harry had a sinking feeling as to why.

Unicorn blood had seemed like such a bloody fantastic idea at the time. A cursed half-life was something he'd had no hesitation in sentencing the twins to, not after they'd nearly killed Hermione by sending her tumbling down those stairs. But giving the twins something that drained their emotions from them, that turned their lives dull and grey, when they'd already proven they were capable of such violence and disregard for human life? Well, Harry was growing more and more certain that they had made a terrible mistake.

The effects of the unicorn blood was detaching the twins from the anchors of their family, the people they loved and the daily activities they took pleasure in doing; it was stripping the humanity from them, more and more each day, and Harry was genuinely afraid of what they'd be capable of without it– their hatred of him and Hermione certainly hadn't faded even slightly. He really had a terrible, terrible feeling that he and Hermione had turned the twins into a pair of psychopaths who hated them and wanted them dead. Understandably, he'd been going out of his way to avoid them– Moody too. Grimmauld Place was filled with rooms that he could hide away in, thankfully, plus
having Kreacher's loyalty meant having access to the fascinating treasures hidden away by the Blacks that the invading Order didn't know existed.

Along with the assigned reading materials from Walburga's lessons as the Black Matriarch dragged him up to her standards and held him to them by the throat, Kreacher had been bringing him a variety of books that the elf had hidden away from the Order when Dumbledore's flock first invaded Grimmauld Place. Apparently, these rare and dangerous books had been in the possession of the Black family for hundreds upon hundreds of years, some of them ancient and in languages indecipherable to him, others translated copies, all of them foul in a way that made his skin crawl even as he eagerly absorbed the words, looking for the answers he was seeking.

It was in a grimoire written on what he suspected was human skin, probably muggle, with blood that he suspected was human too, that Harry finally found the answers he'd been looking for; an explanation of what a Horcrux was, beyond all the vague, not-actually-an-explanation explanations he'd gotten from Tom and Marvolo and Voldemort, and the handful of brief mentions he'd found in various other Dark Arts books.

A Horcrux, it turned out, was a piece of torn human soul. A piece of torn human soul that had been ripped from the main soul through a ritualistic use of murder– and in the case of the Horcrux inside him, ripped from Voldemort's soul through the ritualistic use of Harry's mother's murder.

He honestly wanted to throw up.

It was actually impressive, in an incredibly morbid sort of way, that in all the books filled with ritualistic murder, torture, cannibalism, rape and other such horrors, Horcruxes still managed to stand out– and yet, they managed to do just that. The witches and wizards of old had placed a sort of religious reverence on souls, and even amongst these Darkest of Dark books, Horcruxes were not viewed kindly. It wasn't that the ritual to create them stood out in its foulness– one of the rituals in the same grimoire he'd found out about Horcruxes had a ritual that called for the consumption of a still-beating infant's heart– but the fact it tore apart the caster's soul had been sickening to the Dark ancients, and it was sickening to Harry now.

He could easily believe that Voldemort had created a Horcrux. Voldemort was an evil bastard who didn't just push boundaries, he obliterated them then set the rubble on fire with a casual flick of his wrist. Creating a Horcrux, a taboo even to those witches and wizards who didn't bat an eyelid at the idea of murdering a child to harvest its organs, was exactly the sort of boundary-obliteration he'd expect from the Dark Lord. But Voldemort hadn't just created one– and that was honestly horrifying.

Thankfully for Harry's somewhat shell-shocked state, he didn't run into the twins or Moody or even Podmore in the immediate aftermath of his discovery as he drifted around the London townhouse, trying to process what he'd just learned while fighting the urge to crack open his own skull to claw the piece of mutilated soul irreversibly tainted by his mother's murder out. Instead, he ran into Hestia Jones.

It hadn't taken Harry long to decide that Hestia was an absolute delight, a sparkling diamond amongst all the battered coal that made up the majority of the Order. Dumbledore had never said anything to him about their trip to London which led him to suspect Hestia 'forgot' to tell the old bastard about it, and anyone who defied Dumbledore, and therefore likely didn't believe the sun shone out of his arse, he was automatically predisposed to liking. Not to mention, Hestia was bright and kind and secretly kick-arse, if Tonks's comment when he'd mentioned her to the other Auror about Hestia being a 'panda' was anything to go by– pandas were adorably cute creatures, but, underneath all their fluffy adorableness, a panda was still a bear, with all the wild, ferocious
instincts that being a bear entailed. Hestia was a bright, bubbly witch, but she was also a full-fledged Auror— and they didn't just make people Aurors on a whim.

"Hey Harry," Hestia greeted him brightly and Harry, despite still feeling nauseated and like he wanted to split his head open on the nearest sharp-edged surface, felt his mood begin to lighten.

"Hi Ms Jones," he said with a smile.

Hestia immediately mock-frowned at him, planting her hands on her hips.

"Harry!" she scolded him playfully. "What have I told you about that?"

"Hi Hestia," he corrected himself, his smile widening.

"Cheeky bugger," Hestia grumbled, but she was smiling again too. "You're wandering about looking like a niffler who's just had a galleon pinched from under its nose," she said. "What's got you so bothered?"

"Loads of things," he answered her honestly. "Though currently topping the list are the Weasley twins, Moody, Dumbledore, Mrs Weasley, and Podmore— no offence, sorry," he added, remembering that Podmore had been Hestia's Auror partner before he was suspended for his part in helping Moody escape, though Hestia waved his apology off, not looking bothered. "Plus I miss my friends, and I know they're Slytherins and I know that Dumbledore's worried about their loyalties, but how can they change if they're not given a chance? Who can they turn to if the Light just turns its back on them? What other options are we giving them, except to go to Voldemort?"

Even if he was mostly saying that to manipulate Hestia, it wasn't as if Harry didn't believe what he'd just told her, or that it wasn't true— anyone who took half a second to actually think about the whole fucked up situation would realise that. Dumbledore was backing the Slytherins into a corner, so what else could they do? He didn't want them, so who else did?

There was a dawning realisation evident in the slight widening of Hestia's eyes that Harry found gratifying, another shade of rose stripped away from the glasses all the population of Magical Britain seemed to wear, and with it the last of Hestia's reservations. After all, it only made sense that a 'saviour' would want to save his classmates, right? Being so close to his fellow Slytherins didn't have to mean he was Dark, it could mean he wanted to save his Housemates from ending up Dark.

Harry knew he'd managed to win Hestia over completely when she suggested without any prompting from him, her face now fierce with determination, "How would you like to get out of here for a bit?"

"I would absolutely love that," he told her fervently, letting his relief show plainly.

"Let me go get Remus," Hestia said determinedly, before flashing him a bright smile. "We'll make an afternoon of it."

Harry didn't know if Remus had been hard to convince, or if his ex-professor been just as eager to get out of Grimmauld Place as Harry had been, but either way, Hestia had kept her word and two hours later found the three of them were wandering idly around in one of the quieter parts of muggle London that he was familiar with, away from all the tourists, after having enjoyed a cup of tea and a large chocolate muffin at a lovely little corner café. Hestia was honestly a hilarious person to spend time with, and watching her tease an increasingly flustered Remus, trying to get him to break the polite front the werewolf liked to put up between himself and the world, made for
quite the afternoon entertainment.

It was purely by chance that he caught sight of her out of the corner of his eye, his body stopping
before his brain had even caught up with recognition. Glitter looked nearly exactly as Harry
remembered, from the glittery eye-shadow framing restless, sad eyes set in a too-thin face, to the
expression she wore, the one that looked like she was drowning. She was dressed in jeans and a
worn jacket that drowned her thin frame, and her clouds of pale hair were currently streaked with
faded lilac-coloured dye. She looked tired, her left cheek was swollen in a murky green-brown
bruise and the corner of her mouth was scabbed over.

"Glitter!" He called out without really thinking, already moving towards her. Glitter's head snapped
up, the kindly prostitute's expression pale and frightened before she recognised who he was and the
strained lines smoothed to something far more relaxed.

"Jamie," she greeted him warmly, opening her arms automatically for a hug, like no time had
passed and he hadn't been barely twelve years old the last he'd seen her. He didn't hesitate to accept
the comfort offered by her embrace, trying not to think about how small and frail the woman felt in
his arms, instead focusing on how he'd been enveloped in her scent. Glitter smelled exactly how he
remembered; strong wafts of lavender, mixed with hints of gasoline fumes.

"Look at you," Glitter said fondly as they finally stepped apart. Her thin hands rested on his
shoulders as she looked him up and down, her sad eyes sharp and assessing as she took in his clean,
tidy, well-fed appearance. Harry assessed her appearance right back, something uncomfortably like
pity curling within his chest, though he knew better then to let it show on his face, understanding
implicitly just how little Glitter would be interested in it. There was just something infinitely tragic
about Glitter, in the old, aching grief carved deep into her pretty, bruised face, the pale press of her
sharp bones against paper-thin skin, and that drowning look in her eyes. There was a softness in her
face and bearing, though, as she looked at him.

"Oh, Jamie," she murmured, "ya look real good, honey. I'm always happy ta see when one o' you
kids make somethin' of yourselves. You an' Jane both."

"Thanks, Glitter," Harry told her, tempted to pull her into another hug as his eyes felt hot and wet.

"She's okay, yeah?" Glitter asked, a little hesitantly. "I figured she'd a bin gone long enough, but... I
still worried. 'N you two ain't usually apart."

"She's fine," Harry promised, a bit confused by Glitter's concern for Hermione. "We've been
separated for the summer because we're in different school clubs and the club I belong to is doing a
compulsory camp over the holiday, but Herm-Jane's fine."

"'S damn good ter hear," Glitter sighed, shifting slightly like a weight had been lifted from her
shoulders. "That fire... it was a bad one, Jamie, hun, real, real bad."

The fire... Harry swallowed around the sudden lump in his throat, feeling as if he'd just been doused
in icy water. His face was cold and frozen as he stared at Glitter, because it wasn't that he'd
forgotten Tom's comments about what he'd done in the wake of Hermione getting drugged and
attacked over Eostre, it was just that his worry for Hermione had outweighed everything else at the
time...

...and then, he'd sort of just pushed it all away, to the back of his head with all the other thoughts he
didn't want to think about. And, thanks to Occlumency, he hadn't thought about it at all.

Glitter, thankfully, read his expression as shock or fear, rather than the guilt and horror it actually
was, and her face fell. "Ya din't know," she realised. Harry didn't correct her. Not when the truth was much, much, much worse.

"Who died?" he asked hoarsely instead, needing to know. It would be his penance, to carry the names that everyone else had forgotten, the ones nobody else in this cruel, hard world seemed to give a fuck about (...apparently himself included).

"Oh babe," Glitter said quietly, and there was a quiet and profound sort of grief in the look she gave him as she reached out to grasp both his hands in her own thin ones. And then, she started with a list of names. It didn't take Harry long to realise that their entire crowd had died, either at Tom's hands directly or in the flames he'd set to destroy the evidence of magic being used against muggles: Pike, Sledge, Cat, Jackie, Jill, and even little Hornet, along with a handful of other names he didn't recognise.

He took a deep breath, then another, exhaling slowly each time as he fought for calm. He felt ill, remembering each face that went with the names. Remembering how vivid and alive they'd been, the last he'd seen them. Remembering how goddamn kind they'd been to him, when there had been no reason for kindness at all.

Glitter tugged him forward into another hug, and he hid his face against her shoulder as he worked to compose himself.

"M so sorry, honey," Glitter whispered to him, and he nodded, knowing she'd feel the movement, even if she wouldn't see it. They stood like that for a long, long time, and when he finally pulled back, Glitter smiled softly at him, reaching forward to tuck a bit of his hair behind his ear. "I'll give you th' same advice I gave Janie, yeah?" she told him, her voice hushed enough that Remus and Hestia would have to strain to hear it. "No lookin' back. Got it? Jamie, you got outta here, so stay outta here. This ain't no place fer a kid. Even a mostly grown one like you."

"I got it," Harry promised her, almost managing a smile for her, or at least an approximation of one. Checking his pockets, he pulled out all his change—three galleons and a handful of sickles. Turning back over to the conspicuously silent Hestia and Remus, he cleared his throat a bit awkwardly.

"Can I swap this for any, er, paper money you've got?" he asked, not wanting to use the word 'muggle' in front of Glitter. "I'll pay you back any difference." He added.

"Of course," Remus was first to respond, pulling a rather beat-up looking muggle wallet from his pocket and quickly pulling out the notes. A still-silent Hestia did the same, handing over the emergency muggle funds the Aurors had supplied her with, and Harry turned to force it into Glitter's hands.

"Jamie!" Glitter hissed, biting her swollen, bruised lip and then immediately wincing. "I can't take this!"

"Yes you can!" he told her fiercely. "It's, uh, payment for letting us use your bathroom that time, and lending us the hair-dye and make-up and stuff. With, uh, interest."

"You an' Jane, yer both ridiculous!" Glitter exclaimed, exasperated, but she did take the money. "Go," she ordered, her voice thick.

And Harry, after one last hug, left.

It was Remus who approached him afterwards, once they'd returned to Grimmauld Place. Considering he was the one who helped Hermione with her emotional... issues, Harry wasn't surprised he'd either volunteered or been volunteered to check on him.
Remus seemed uncomfortable to be in Regulus Black's bedroom, where Harry had retreated after their return. Harry almost wanted to tell his old professor the truth about Regulus, that despite all the articles about Voldemort and the Slytherin colours bedecking the walls, in the end Regulus Black had demonstrated the sort of rash, idiotic behaviour that any Gryffindor would find heroic.

"Do you want to talk about today?" Remus offered gently, after Harry had let him into the room and he'd carefully sat at the foot of the bed. Harry shrugged slightly.

"I didn't know the kids who died that well, really," he admitted. "Only for a couple of months. But... it's not a kind world out there, Remus. It's really, really shitty, in fact. But Pike, Sledge, Cat, Jackie, Jill, and Hornet... they were kinder then they could have been. Kinder then they should have been, really. It's everyone for themselves in their world, it's smarter that way, but they all helped me at some point in their own way. And now... now they're dead."

_and it's Tom's fault_, he added silently. Someone he loved had killed them, and he wasn't going to say a word about it. There would be no justice for the dead, and that? That was all on him.

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_Hermione's POV:_

Harry had gone quiet. Too quiet. His entries in the diaries they were using to communicate were too brief, too polite, too lacking in personal detail, and Hermione was growing steadily more unhappy and concerned, her agitated temper like poison in her veins, leaving her restless and twitching to just _do_ something about it. It only made her even more unhappy to know that there was nothing she could do, and it was a struggle not to blame Voldemort for these circumstances, considering that Harry being trapped away with the Order was _his_ fault, and she'd started avoiding him, not wanting to set off his temper at her when she inevitably lost hers at him. She knew who would come out on top of that clash, and it wasn't her.

In tried and true Hermione fashion, one from way back years ago when she was often cold and always hungry and so, so desperate to escape her dismal reality in any way she could, she turned to a library to distract herself. Gamp Hall had an enviable collection of rare, valuable books, no doubt purchased in order to impress visitors, though Hermione did hope that not all of Wizarding Britain's Ministers of Magic had been complete, blithering idiots like Fudge and had actually got some use out of the expansive (and expensive) library. She certainly had.

Her latest interest, one she was taking care not to advertise, was unsurprisingly the fey. They were considered a rather esoteric topic and she was finding it difficult to locate accurate information about them. It took time and multiple dead ends for her to finally identify a book that proved promising enough. Book now in hand, she settled down to read in the nice, quiet corner of the library under the stained glass window, trying not to think about the time during the ball where Harry had been with her and Tom and they'd all thoroughly ravished each other in this very spot, instead focusing on the pages of the book and the information it revealed.

'To those with little knowledge of the true nature of the fey, a reference to 'fairies' brings to mind tiny, glowing humanoid creatures with wings in possession of strange yet wonderful magical powers. This modern understanding could not be further from the truth.

The word 'fairy' comes from the Old French word 'faerie' and is most overused when it comes to describing a supernatural being. Magical scholars lean more towards the Greek word 'daimon/daemon', meaning 'spirit', to describe the beings, for the fey are not divinity, but nor are
they mortal; 'minor divinity' would be an apt descriptor. It is no mistake that the word 'demon' is
derived from the older form 'daimon/daemon'; a daimon may have no particular bias towards
good or evil, but they are capable of acting on either extreme with little compunction and no
restraint.

Ancient and modern descriptions of the fey vary, though records of their existence have existed for
as long as we have kept our histories. There are the nymphs, satyrs, and sileni of Ancient Greece,
the penates, lares, and genii of Ancient Rome, and the elves, dísir, and valkyrja of the Ancient
Norse. Then less well known for the truth of their nature, but fey nonetheless, are the pantheons of
the ancient religions, such as the Celtic deities worshipped in Gaul, Hispania, and Britannia.

The emergence of Christianity is said by muggle scholars to have 'reduced' these deities to mere
fairies in mythology and folklore. This is only half-true, for they were fey before the Christian
conversion, and fey after the Christian conversion, and in no way 'reduced' as they continued to
retain possession of the powers that granted them amongst their once-worshippers the status of
gods and goddesses—'

"And just what is it that has you so fascinated there?" The possessive touch of Tom's fingers to the
back of her neck paired with his question tugged Hermione's attention from where it was engrossed
in the pages of the book, instead turning it to the red-eyed young Dark Lord standing behind her.

"The fey," she admitted easily enough, though she and Harry had yet to be honest with their lover
about the encounter in the maze. "For someone who grew up in the muggle world, it's fascinating
to read about the differences between how they're depicted in literature and what they really are."

She wasn't actually lying, even if she was omitting that her main interest came from the fact that
one of the elusive race had decided to make contact with Harry. The idea that the gods and
goddesses in ancient religions were, in actual fact, fey... was... not at all comforting, in light of their
interest in her best friend— the capriciousness, greed, and power of the gods was well-recorded in
history, magical and muggle both.

"Urgh," Tom made a disgusted sound, his upper lip curling back, and Hermione wasn't at all
surprised by the visceral dislike— to Tom, the idea of beings potentially more powerful then him
existing must be particularly grating, especially considering their rumoured immortality. "Why are
you so interested in them?" He asked her, still grimacing. "They stay out of our realm, we stay out
of theirs, and all of us are better for it."

"I agree," Hermione told him, because she did, vehemently so at that, "but Blaise says that Luna
probably has some fey blood in her ancestry, which made me curious."

Tom's expression immediately turned even more sour at her mention of Blaise's name. He wasn't at
all pleased about her upcoming trip to Čachtice Castle to visit Blaise's great-great-grandmother,
and he'd made that very clear in the arguments they'd been having over the matter. Blaise had
promised, though, that his great-grandmother's knowledge of the fey far exceeded his own, and
knowledge was power— if the fey had decided to involve themselves with Harry, then Hermione
needed every single advantage, every possible ounce of power, over them that she could get.

Tom clearly read the look on her face for the decisiveness it was, because his mouth twisted into a
near-snarl, his words then usual volatility a reminder that he was just as agitated by Harry's recent
mood as she was. "You're leaving me again!" he hissed, his blazing red eyes slicing into her like a
blade, just as sharp and punishing. "Months away, and you've barely been back a handful of weeks
and you're leaving!"

"We've already had this conversation," Hermione snapped back at him, her temper rising to meet
his, eager for a fight, to battle and draw blood to combat the restless anxiety. "You continuing to throw tantrums is not going to make me change my mind!"

Alright, she admitted to herself as an uncontrolled blast of raw, furious magic sent her tumbling backwards out of the chair and across the library floor, maybe she shouldn't have called Tom's fits of temper 'tantrums' (even if they were), but honestly, patience only went so far.

(And just maybe she wanted the fight just as much as he did, maybe she wanted something to do with the restless agitation burning under her skin, hungering for an outlet)

Tom glared down at her, his eyes near-glowing with barely suppressed rage, and Hermione didn't waste a moment in kicking his legs out from under him, bringing him tumbling down to join her on the ground. She took advantage of his momentary stunned state to tackle him, attempting to pin him before he could think to fight back, knowing it was unlikely she would win a physical fight determined by strength, not unless she pulled out her blades or brought magic into the fight, and that wasn't what she was craving.

The knee to her stomach took her off guard, winding her, and though she attempted to roll away and out of reach, it was Tom's turn to tackle her, pinning her under his weight with his knees at each side of her waist and one of his hands gripping her throat to stop her from fighting back. She could have fought back anyway, she knew at least three moves to get out of his pin and only acquire moderate damage in the process, but she pushed her hips up into his instead, still chasing that itch under her skin, but rendering it into something else, something better.

She could see the moment that realisation dawned over Tom, could feel it in how his grip on her throat loosened slightly, still cutting off the oxygen but no longer a threat to hold her in place. "And you accuse me of being bad at 'using my words'," he mocked her, his red eyes boring into her watering ones until the world had turned blurry and her body slack from more than just surrender before he released her neck. While she gasped for air, she was vaguely aware of him pushing the useless excess material of her robes up past her hips and vanishing her knickers before manoeuvring his knee so he could spread open her thighs.

She wasn't wet enough, and the friction when he pushed his fingers into her bordered on painful, a dry, ugly burn that wasn't the fun type of hurting at all, but magic was a wondrous thing and all it took was a murmured word for Tom's fingers to turn slick and gliding. He did get three fingers inside her before replacing the digits, but it was a rushed job, just barely doing the work of opening and stretching before he was pushing into her with a groan that she echoed.

They didn't last long, there on the floor of the Minister of Magic's library, anger and frustration translating to frantic movement, their lips pressing together in an approximation of a kiss that was closer in truth to just panting in each other's mouths with a hint of teeth, enough to sting, to make cheeks and tongue bleed. Tom came first, shuddering as he spilled inside her, before reaching down between their bodies to help finish her off with a low cry of her own, leaving her loose-limbed and relaxed under him. The anxiety was muted under her skin; not gone, she knew it wouldn't go until she had Harry back safe in her arms, but it was settled, no longer so wild and restless.

"Listen, Tom," she murmured, quiet and tired, "I know you're worried about Harry and it's making you clingy--" she ignored his look of outrage at that, because the young Dark Lord was even more emotionally illiterate then she was-- "but if you don't stop being so controlling, I swear to Salazar I'm going to hex off your bollocks. I will be gone two weeks tops, and then I'm yours for the rest of the holidays. Now you can either keep sulking, or just get over it already."

"Infuriating witch," Tom muttered darkly, but he still pulled her into his arms when he rolled off
her, onto the floor beside her, so she took it that he'd stop his sulking for now.

The portkey Adrienne Zabini had provided her son and his two friends with brought their party of three directly to the entrance hall of Blaise's great-great-grandmother's property, Čachtice Castle. The castle was eerily silent in the way of old, ancient echoes of times long past, of monuments steeped in centuries of violence and death. Hermione could feel the icy wind that crept between the cracks in the stone like the cold breath of the dead on the back of her neck, their icy fingers tracing down her spine. The darkness was practically tangible in the air, old magic and old blood having sunk deep into the old stone she stood upon, into the walls that surrounded her and the ceiling over her head.

Luna was wide-eyed and silent beside her, staring at something Hermione couldn't see with an expression torn between horror and a morbid sort of fascination. Hermione decided not to ask; she was uncomfortably aware that any explanation would be unsettling, to say the least, but she actually found herself liking Čachtice Castle. It was undoubtedly dark and, as she'd immediately observed, extraordinarily eerie, but it was raw, honest and powerful in a wild, untamed, haunting way that appealed to her far more than the unnecessarily ostentatious Gamp Hall.

She was so distracted by the old, wild magic of her surroundings that it took her a moment to register the movement of a new arrival to the hall.

"Ükanya,*" Blaise greeted his great-great-grandmother respectfully, immediately crossing the stone hall to take her hand in his and kiss it. Hermione took the opportunity to observe the Lady Zsófia Somlyó, silently fascinated by the witch who looked as ancient as the castle they all stood in, yet also oddly... timeless.

Her immediate impression was of coldness; Lady Somlyó was unquestionably beautiful, but it was a frozen, wintry sort of beauty, like the ancient witch had been carved from ice. She was pale all over, from her fine white silks and matching sleek furs, to her pale skin and even paler hair, age having leeched it of any colour it may once have held and leaving it white as bone stripped of flesh and left exposed to the elements. Her expression was just as frozen, just as wintry; there was no warmth to this cold, hardened witch, just an icy indifference and a smile as sharp and cold as the biting chill of frost.

Looking at her, Hermione felt a pervading sense of wariness, which was no wonder. Unlike the majority of her family, Lady Somlyó had survived over a hundred and fifty years of magical and muggle conflict that included wars, revolts, and uprisings, including both the muggle World Wars and Grindelwald's revolution. She was unquestionably a survivor, and that was a quality Hermione admired above any other— but it was also a quality she knew to be wary of, as she knew firsthand just how dangerous survivors were, especially if they felt backed into a corner.

"Ükanya, these are my classmates and close friends," Blaise introduced them, once he'd straightened up from his bow. "This is Miss Hermione Dagworth-Granger, the niece of the British Minister of Magic and current British Youth Representative in the Wizengamot, and Miss Luna Lovegood, the daughter of the owner of a well-known British publication."

Lady Somlyó spoke before either Hermione or Luna could. "You both resonate vell vith the Old Magic here," she said, her English surprisingly clear despite her thick accent, if somewhat disjointed. Her voice was silvery in a way that hinted of something unnatural and was as cold as her pale eyes. "Good. It vood have been pity had you not."

Well that was... disquieting.
"Your home is breathtaking," Hermione said politely, despite her unease, and Lady Somlyó smiled, an expression as unsettling as the sound of cracking ice.

"I see now." She murmured, before inclining her head once and leaving in a pale sweep of silk. Hermione blinked.

"That was mildly disturbing," she told Blaise, who shrugged slightly.

"The fey-blood is more concentrated in her," he said, as if that was explanation enough. Hermione supposed it was and she had to hold back a shiver as she looked around again, this time with the awareness now at the front of her mind that the Bloody Countess Erzsébet Báthory— or rather, the infamous Changeling who'd written her page in muggle history with blood and torture—had once lived, breathed, tortured, and murdered within the walls of this very castle. It was a thought that should have terrified her, and it did unsettle her, but Hermione couldn't help but be drawn, still, to the surroundings.

"Fancy a tour?" Blaise offered, his sharp eyes no doubt picking up the wide array of emotions she was experiencing, including the intrigue that had eventually won out.

"Yes," Hermione immediately agreed, not bothering to hide her eagerness. Blaise laughed as he reached for Luna's hand, which the little blonde accepted happily, still looking around at the unseen with her wide silvery eyes, before offering Hermione his second, which she accepted, letting him lead them both deeper inside.

Čachtice Castle was truly magnificent; the castle itself was dark and rugged and beautiful, sprawled out over a hill of greenery. It overlooked the muggle village of Čachtice, which was visible from the tower, and Blaise explained how magic hid the castle from the muggles as an old, decayed ruin. A masterful combination of Romanesque and Gothic architecture, with even a touch of Renaissance renovation, the pale stone castle was smaller than Hogwarts but larger than Gamp Hall, furnished in a minimalistic, traditional style from the Ages past. Most of the furniture, paintings, ornaments and tapestries were likely hundreds of years old, to Hermione's eye, though magic had kept them in perfect, pristine condition.

The tour took up the afternoon, with a house elf appearing as the sun started its gradual descent in the sky to notify them that dinner was due to be served. As the three of them, led by Blaise, made their way to the formal dining hall for dinner, Hermione trailed her fingertips over the stone walls, feeling the responsive hum of the ancient magic beneath her touch. "If I wasn't already with Harry and Tom, I would marry you just to inherit this place," she informed Blaise, who grinned at her, a flash of white teeth in the growing dim as the setting sun cast darkening shadows through the ancient corridors.

"Mi casa es su casa," he told her, "well, when it eventually becomes mi casa. Ükanya is probably going to outlive us all at this point."

Hermione laughed, though she half-agreed; Lady Somlyó had a timeless presence to her that was as ancient and ever-lasting as winter itself. "How much do you trust her?" she asked Blaise, genuinely curious.

"Enough that she won't spread the word about Babd, if you decide to tell her," he replied. "But I wouldn't put my life in her hands, not if I had any other option."

"Hmm," Hermione murmured.

The formal dining hall Blaise led them to boasted an enormous table carved from dark wood, large
enough to seat around forty to fifty guests, if she had to guess. The dining sets were clearly handcrafted, an individual effort dedicated to each piece, and the bone-handled cutlery was heavy and ornate in design, with the handles especially creepy in a morbidly fascinating sort of way.

The dinner itself was... interesting. The deep red colour of the thick soup had Hermione initially drawing very different conclusions, but it turned out to have a very distinct flavour of fish, not blood, much to her quiet relief. Conversation was stilted, the silence in the room filled mostly by the clink of the soup spoons against the sides of their bowls then later the scrape of knives and forks against plates when the second course and then dessert was brought out, a thick vegetable stew followed by a rich cake filled with chocolate crème and glazed with caramel.

When the last plate vanished, Hermione glanced over at Blaise, who looked back at her, just as clearly torn about whether to confide in Lady Somlyó, or raid Čachtice Castle's library looking for answers instead. Apparently, their indecision was a lot less subtle then she'd realised, because Lady Somlyó let out an impatient sound.

"If you vant to ask me something, then ask," she said sharply, her eyes like crushed ice as they swept across the room, sharp and silent and utterly dispassionate. "I am too old to vait around for you to decide vun vay or another."

Taking a breath, and remembering how Harry's skin had been leached of all warmth, left cold as death in the wake of Babd's visit, Hermione made her choice. Without risk there was little chance of reward, and she had come here to learn about the fey.

"I'm not sure how aware you are of the political climate in Britain right now," she started, and Lady Somlyó tilted her head forwards slightly in acknowledgment, still dispassionate.

"I am aware." Was all she said, and Hermione resisted her rapidly increasing urge to fidgit, instead holding herself still and tall, like a daughter of a proud Pureblood family would be trained to.

"I'm guessing you've heard of the Boy Who Lived, then," she said, and Lady Somlyó smiled, thin and sharp.

"There is not a vitch or vizard alive in this vorld who has not heard of Harry Potter," she said, and Hermione only barely managed to stop herself flinching. "He survived the Killing Curse. A feat impossible even by magical standards. It killed so many, during the vars, yet an infant survived."

"He's special, ükanya," Blaise said quietly, Luna nodding beside him. "It's hard to describe, but Harry's special. And... and we're not the only ones to notice it."

"He was approached by one of the fey, during the Final Task of the Triwizard Tournament," Hermione admitted, her knuckles white where her hands were clenched over her thighs, hidden from view by the table. Sick anxiety clawed up her throat at the revelation of Babd's appearance to a near-stranger, one who Blaise couldn't even trust when she was his family, his blood, but she forged on anyway. "The fey gave him a warning. It also told him about a choice he had to make; the fey called the choice a precipice for potential."

"Ükanya," Blaise added, "it wasn't just any fey, it was one of the Named of the Winter Court."

The Named fey, as far as Hermione was aware from her research, were set apart from the rest of the fey by the fact their Names were remembered, and for their kind, Names had power. The Named had had enough of an impact on history that scholars, magical and muggle both, still studied and researched the mythos surrounding them even now, and that was... it was terrifying, if she really sat and considered what it meant, about the potential power at their fingertips and their
lack of constraint in the form of human morals, due to the fact they were decidedly not human. Voldemort was a monster, but he was still human and that meant she could understand him and his motives– to an extent, anyway. She could make an educated guess at how his mind worked, because a human mind, even that of a psychopath, was knowable. The inhuman mind of another species was not, and the very thought had her break out in a cold sweat.

Before them, Lady Somlyó looked the most invested in the conversation then she had since their initial introduction, her pale eyes bright and glittering, something disturbingly close to hunger visible over her wintry features. "Vun of the Vild Vuns leaving their realm," she murmured, "I vood not have thought it vood happen again in my lifetime."

Hermione guessed that 'Wild Ones' was another term to describe the fey, though she hadn't heard it before. Still, it fit, and she was more interested in Lady Somlyó's use of the word 'again' then she was in the history behind the description, fascinating as she was sure it was.

"Again?" She asked, leaning forwards in her seat.

"Again," Lady Somlyó confirmed, her voice barely a murmur as her pale, pale eyes stared off behind Hermione, just unfocused enough for Hermione to be sure that whatever it was the ancient witch was seeing, it existed only in her mind, in her memories. "Our world... it has a long history with the fey," she said, finally, "not that ve like to admit it. Ve prefer to hide it away, like it is shameful. But the old muggle mythos, they remember vot we refuse to. They call Merlin by vot he is– cambion."

"Cambion..." Hermione frowned; she knew that word. It took her a moment to recall. "In mythology, 'cambion; is the word used for the offspring of a human and demon, right? And..." her eyes abruptly widened as she recalled the book from Gamp Hall's library, the one she'd been reading when Tom had interrupted her. "The word 'demon' is derived from 'daimon'– which is the word magical scholars prefer to use for the fey!"

Lady Somlyó's smile was almost approving, if it hadn't looked so vicious, pale lips parted just enough to reveal glistening, bone-white teeth. "Myrddin Vyllt, the Velsh called him– Merlin the Vild. And Morgan le Fay..." She arched a fine, pale brow, not unlike a professor prompting her students.

"Le Fay translates to 'fairy'," Hermione answered her, ever the star pupil. "Lady Somlyó, are you– are you saying...?" She couldn't even say it out loud.

"That Merlin and Morgan had the blood of fey? Yes. I am." Lady Somlyó confirmed. "Vizard history, it forgets. It does not want to remember. But that vos not always so. When I vos still a little girl, ve knew our old ties and ve honoured the Vild Vuns. The Old Families, ve had rituals, passed down through our bloodlines," she explained, the look in her eyes very far away before her attention returned to the present. "Ve did not worship them, they are not gods, but ve honoured them, and our loyalty vos repaid in turn."

Hermione looked almost helplessly over at Blaise and Luna, her head spinning as she desperately tried to process what had just been revealed. Blaise had her back– he always did– and immediately spoke up, offering her a chance to process what they'd just learnt without the scrutiny of his great-great-grandmother.

"Have you ever spoken to one of the fey, ükanya?" He asked, and Lady Somlyó's expression lost all emotion.

"Tvice." She said, so quiet it was barely a murmur. "Just twice. The first time I joined my family in
ritual, when I vos very little. The second... I do not speak of, but I vill not ever forget."

That... didn't sound good, but Hermione knew better then to waste sympathy on someone who wasn't looking for it, who would be more offended then anything if it was offered. Instead, she focused on getting answers for the most prevalent of all the questions currently clawing at her mind.

"Why did witches and wizards stop performing the rituals?" she asked. "And what do you think it means, that the fey are showing interest in us again?"

"The rituals vere lost, in the same vay of much Old Magic," Lady Somlyó said, lines of disgust carved sharply through her pale face. "Through fear. Fear of demons and Hell and a God that vood surely seek to punish our heathen vays. Fear not our own, not the vay of our kind, but imposed over us nevertheless."

Hermione winced, realising what she meant– it was the magical governments pandering to Muggleborns out of fear of exposure, eliminating 'archaic' and 'barbaric' traditions that the cultures Muggleborns had come from viewed poorly, thanks in large part to the Christian religion that dominated the muggle world, and instead of Muggleborns adapting to the new world they'd found themselves in, the fearful magical world was forced instead to adapt to them.

She understood being torn between two worlds, two vastly different ways of life; there were times when she couldn't help but find herself automatically judging the magical world for their lack of progress (one word: quills), finding it far inferior to the more progressive muggle world she'd been born into and raised herself in. Then she remembered that magical America had had a black female President of MACUSA while its muggle counterpart had yet to have a black or a female president, let alone a black female president**, and she wondered which world was really the progressive one, and which was outdated and backward.

She'd never be ashamed of her parents; this Hermione knew, with an unshakeable, ironclad resolve that would never falter. She would never be ashamed of her parents or where she'd come from, but she still couldn't help but find herself ashamed to be a Muggleborn. She tried to channel that shame into anger against Dumbledore for the way he'd taken advantage of the entire situation, such as imposing the muggle holidays over the traditional practices at Hogwarts to gain the Muggleborn support while alienating the Purebloods. He was making the whole messy situation worse, manipulating the unease of the magicals and muggleborns in order to pit them against each other and using the resulting hostility as a tool to gain more power. And so, the ignorant prejudice of muggleborns, the cowardice of magicals, and the greed of Dumbledore all ended up culminating in centuries, and even millennia, old traditions being forbidden and forgotten, the knowledge lost.

As if she'd read her mind, Lady Somlyó let out a quiet, mournful sigh. "So much has been lost," she murmured, more to herself than to her attentive audience of three, before an unmistakable resolve settled over her fine, pale features. "You asked vot I think it means, that the Vild Vuns are showing interest again, and I cannot say. I do not know. But," she added, "I do know who vill."

"Who?" Hermione asked urgently, leaning forward in her seat again.

Across the table from her, Lady Somlyó's eyes glittered with some emotion Hermione couldn't name, something bright and sharp, cold and amused. Looking into those pale, eerie eyes, Hermione knew she wasn't going to like the answer the ancient witch had for her.

She was right.

"If you are looking for answers about the fey," Lady Somlyó said, "then it is the fey who you
should ask."

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Chapter End Notes

*Ükanya = great-great-grandmother

** this is set before Barack Obama was President, obviously, and the MACUSA President being referred to is Madam President Seraphina Picquery, from the Fantastic Beasts movies
CHAPTER LXXXIII:

Hermione's POV:

"On a scale of all the stupid things that we– and by we, I mostly mean you– have done over the years, just how high up do you think tonight rates?" Blaise mused. His voice was light and seemingly careless, but Hermione could hear the undertones of strain and understood the question for how serious as it was.

The three of them, her, Blaise and Luna, were making their way along one of the ancient stone corridors of Čachtice Castle that by appearance alone resembled that of Hogwarts, yet felt entire worlds removed from their school castle. Čachtice Castle was eerily silent; event at night, Hogwarts was never quiet– there was always an owl screeching, the odd ghosts chattering, snoring portraits, the clinking of the empty suits of armour shifting on their plinths, even Argus mumbling to Mrs Norris– but Čachtice Castle was dead silent, the only sounds those of their footsteps scraping against the stone, and the soft puffs of their breathing.

"It's not the stupidest decision I've ever made," Hermione answered Blaise's faux-casual question, "maybe the third stupidest, though."

The previous evening, Lady Somlyó had suggested they perform one of the old rituals of the noble family of Bathóry, and make an offering to the fey in return for a boon. In this instance, the boon would be answers to the questions they had, about the interest the fey had in Harry's life. Hermione was far from confident of the wisdom of Lady Somlyó's idea, but the old witch wasn't wrong that the ones who'd know the most about the fey and their interest in Harry were the fey themselves. And Blaise and Luna had both refused to let her undergo the ritual alone, something which filled Hermione's chest with warmth and apprehension both.

"I'd like to be shocked that you believe you've made stupider decisions then to willingly involve yourself with the fey, but somehow I'm just... not." Blaise muttered. He looked more resigned then anything and Luna patted his arm in comfort.

"The flittering flutteroos spring sprightly," she told him, which was apparently some kind of consolation because Blaise smiled warmly at her, his teeth very white in the dim light of the corridor.

"Thanks, Lu," he said, reaching out to gently grasp her hand with his own. Hermione turned away slightly to hide her smile.

"Where did you say you thought the secret passage might be?" she asked, reminding them both of their original purpose for being there. Blaise had mentioned that Čachtice Castle's most infamous owner, Erzsébet Bathóry, the Changeling daughter of the fey Szépasszony of the Winter Court*, had a secret chamber in the castle that was hidden by magic from the muggles who'd searched for it. His mother and great-great-grandmother had always refused to tell him where it was, but by process of elimination he'd determined the most likely places in the castle. Or at least, that's what he'd told them that morning and they'd decided to go try find it as a means of distraction from the trepidation and hunger they were all feeling– fasting was the first step required for the ritual Lady Somlyó had described to them.
Trailing her fingers along the castle's stone walls, Hermione felt the magic within the walls hum in response, eager and greedy; it reminded her of a starving animal, sharp-toothed and hungry, ready to rip and tear her to pieces if she showed her vulnerable throat or belly, but still desperate for any scrap of affection she showed it. She thought Blaise was probably right in his guess about Erzsébet Bathory's secret chamber, because the further down he led them, the hungrier and more predatory the magic felt.

"Stop," she said suddenly, feeling a shift in the magic, dark and heavy, like a funeral shroud. Blaise sucked in a breath, and Luna shuddered, wrapping her arms around herself.

"Ooh, yeah, I can feel that," Blaise said, looking excited, even as Luna pressed herself back against him, her eyes looking very large in her small face.

"Death," she whispered, "so much death, and pain, and suffering."

Blaise hesitated, looking over at down at Luna and wrapping his arms protectively around the small witch. "We don't actually have to go in," he said, but both girls shook their heads.

"We've spent hours searching, we can't give up now," Luna said bravely.

"You told us you've been trying to find this place since you first discovered it existed," Hermione added. "you can't give up now."

"Right," Blaise said, looking excited again, before pausing. "How do you think we actually get in?"

"Honestly," Hermione sighed, trading knowing looks with Luna, who hid her smile behind her hand, "she's known as the Blood Countess, Blaise– how do you think we get in?"


"Blood, blood, blood," Luna said dreamily, swaying in Blaise's arms. "Soaking her hands, drenching her face, copper on her tongue, gloves of wet crimson..." she trailed off, her eyes staring off into the distance, before abruptly shuddering.

"...you back with us, Lu?" Blaise asked gently, and Luna nodded, pointing to one of the stones on the wall, at about the height of Hermione's hip, seemingly identical to all the ones.

"That's the one you need to bleed on," she said softly, before leaning further back into Blaise's arms.

"Thanks Luna," Hermione said warmly, before turning to the stone that Luna had pointed out. She couldn't sense anything different about the magic, but she trusted Luna's strange sixth-sense. Pulling out her switchblade, she sliced a quick, shallow line down her thumb and smeared her blood across the stone. There was an immediate responding surge of magic in the air; Hermione could feel her hair crackling as the Dark magic rose and fell like the swell of an orchestra. With a loud grinding that was almost deafening in the dead-silence of the castle, the stones started to fold outward, forming an archway, not unlike the entrance to Diagon Alley. Only, the chamber this archway opened into was the furthest thing from Diagon Alley.

"Holy fuck," Blaise breathed. Hermione could only nod in agreement, while Luna let out a small whimper, cringing.

Iron brackets held torches that had burst to life as the archway opened, the flickering flames illuminating the chamber in eerie light, glinting off the chains dangled from the ceiling, iron rings
attached to the walls, and casting shadows off the various instruments scattered about the room with only one clear purpose to them—causing *pain*.

In the centre of the Erzsébet Bathóry's secret chamber a ritual pentagram was painted in blood, still impossibly wet and fresh-looking. At each point of the pentagram sat unlit black candles set atop grinning skulls that stared sightlessly from empty sockets, and in the dead-centre of the pentagram, on a raised dais, was an ivory, claw-foot bath, absolutely pristine, almost glowing it was so white.

The whole chamber appeared untouched by time, as if Erzsébet Bathóry might walk back in at any moment, smiling, hands dripping red up to her elbows, a trail of young corpses in her wake.

"It would have been less creepy still covered in blood stains," Hermione managed to say, proud that her voice stayed steady, and her friends both nodded.

Luna looked like a ghost, she was so pale. "They did not go gentle into the good night," she whispered, trembling.

"I wouldn't think so, no." Blaise said, ashen. "Let's get the fuck out of here."

Neither Hermione nor Luna argued with him.

Nowhere in Čachtice Castle felt far away enough from the Erzsébet Bathóry's looming, wicked presence, not in the aftermath of what they'd seen, so they decided to go out and get some fresh air. It was Hermione who suggested they go explore the nearby muggle village of Čachtice; it was a small village, overlooked by Čachtice Castle. Unsurprisingly, considering his Pureblood background, Blaise had never actually visited it before, but he seemed eager to see what it was like.

There was a bite to the wind that nipped at Hermione's nose and fingertips as they started their trek down from Čachtice Castle to the village, but the pale sun was shining above them and the skies were clear and blue.

It was Blaise who broke the peaceful silence that had settled over them as they walked.

"I know we're Dark, but Dark doesn't need to mean evil," he said quietly. "I don't want to be evil, Hermione. I'm not a good person, I know that; if someone isn't one of mine, I don't really care what happens to them, and I'm fine with that, but I don't want to be evil, not like Erzsébet Bathóry, and Szépasszony. Not like... like V-Voldemort." He only stumbled over the name slightly, and Hermione was impressed, even as his words struck at her, right to her core.

*Evil.*

It wasn't a something she'd given a lot of thought in her life; she hadn't had time for exploring seemingly-frivolous philosophical concepts, not when she was a child just trying to survive each day. And she'd always been the pragmatic sort, even when she was young; she'd accepted that survival meant living in the shades of grey when it came to morality. She'd tortured, she'd killed, and she'd looked the other way while people were tortured and killed— and she didn't regret it. Those weren't the actions of a good person.

So was she evil? Dumbledore and his lot would call her evil without even hesitating. Most people would.

Did she even care if she was evil?

"Do you think I'm evil?" She asked, suddenly needing to know what Blaise and Luna thought, but
"I think we're all evil in war," Luna was the one to answer her, speaking softly, and blinking up at her with her big, silvery eyes, "we have to be. It's how we act in peace that really shows the type of person we are." Luna then reached over to pat Hermione's hand. "One day we'll know peace." She said solemnly.

"Oh," Hermione said, suddenly having to blink away the tears that had come to her eyes, not sure why she felt so much relief at Luna's answer. Blaise looked relieved too.

"Thanks Lu," he said, sounding a bit hoarse, and Hermione quickly wiped her eyes, appreciating how they both pretended not to see.

"Thank you, Luna," she echoed Blaise, and Luna smiled shyly at them both, pleased.

Exploring Čachtice turned out to be nice enough, despite the village's small size. Blaise and Luna both liked the village's public library, and Hermione found herself feeling not nostalgic, not exactly, but oddly reminiscent of her past as she walked amongst the stacks, trailing her fingers over the spines of the books. And not necessarily in a good way, considering that with the slight gnawing hunger from fasting, the harsher, rawer memories were closer to the surface then she'd like. She was reminded that it had been some time since she'd lowered her Occlumency shields, but she sternly pushed that thought away; she had enough to deal with now without adding new worries and fears.

They began making their way back from Čachtice to the castle as afternoon turned to dusk, their pace unhurried. The setting sun had dyed the sky a deep crimson red, and Blaise, upon noticing, had muttered, "well that's not ominous at all."

Hermione couldn't find it within herself to disagree with him.

Lady Somlyó met them in the Entrance Hall of Čachtice Castle. She said nothing about their early morning adventure with Erzsébet Bathóry's secret chamber, though Hermione was half-expecting her to, and instead simply told them, "it is time."

Hermione, shepherded into one of the bathrooms by a pushy elf, was immediately assaulted by a wave of steam; the house elves had prepared the castle baths with hot water, then along the edges of the bath they'd placed bowls of incense, turning the already steamy air thick and choking. As Hermione slid gingerly into the hot water, the elf then proceeded to pour different oils and herbs into the bath, all of them heavily scented and sharp to her nose. It was all supposed to be cleansing her in preparation for the ritual, but Hermione felt like her nasal passageways and throat were being burned.

She was blatantly relieved when the elf deemed her sufficiently cleansed, coughing hoarsely as she stumbled out of the water, only to have more oils rubbed into her hair and skin by the elf before she was allowed, now cold and shivering from her wet hair, into the next room. The elf prodded her over to the dresser, making her sit before dragging a brush painfully through her hair and twisting the curls into tight braids, pinning them in place with heavy combs.

Next, was the undergarments, including– much to Hermione's horror– a corset. The elf pulled the corset so tight she could barely breathe, before dragging a wispy, floaty white dress over her head, pulling the white laces of the dress almost as tight as the corset. Gasping for air, Hermione barely recognised the wide-eyed, flush-cheeked girl looking back at her from the dresser-mirror, far too innocent in white.
She hadn't been given any shoes and her feet were already cold and numb against the stone floors of the castle, but the elf had only shaken its head when she'd asked for a pair, so she supposed the ritual was meant to be barefoot. There wasn't really anywhere for her to put her wand either, so she ended up keeping it in her hand. She was nervous enough that she thought she preferred it like that anyway.

The elf led her down to the front hall, where Lady Somlyó was already waiting with Blaise and Luna. The old witch had changed out of her pale silks and furs and was dressed from head to toe in a heavy, burgundy velvet gown, holding in one hand a flickering lantern, and in the other a golden jewelled goblet. Next to her, Blaise and Luna were barefoot and dressed in white, just as Hermione was, Blaise in a tunic and beeches, and Luna in the same style of floaty, lacey dress.

Lady Somlyó swept her cool gaze up and down Hermione, coldly assessing, before nodding. "Ve are ready," she said, her pale eyes almost glowing in the dim light, shadows dancing on the wall behind her.

She took them out to the woods for the ritual, because of course the creepy ritual would be out in the woods. It made sense, Hermione admitted, even as the bare soles of her feet ended up bruised and torn from sharp stones and broken sticks on the ground. After all, if one wished to contact the wild ones, they ought to surround themselves with wildness. And the forest around Čachtice Castle was certainly wild, with its huge, creaking trees, topped by overgrown, impenetrable foliage, and dark, looming shadows stretching across the ground of thick, tangled roots. Thick mist crept between the thick trunks, running its cold fingers down the back of her neck, causing Hermione to shiver.

Lady Somlyó led them with unnerving accuracy directly to a clearing, about fifty feet wide, where the foliage overhead had parted enough that the thin curve of a crescent of moon was visible, like the sky was laughing at the foolish mortals down below. In the centre of the clearing there stood a large tree stump, ancient and dark, with gnarled roots as thick as a grown man's torso. Bound to the stump with ropes of shining golden light, flank heaving with panic and exhaustion, was a magnificent stag with a gleaming pale pelt and large set of antlers.

"Which vun of you vill do the honours?" Lady Somlyó asked with cruel amusement as she gestured at the stag, which had renewed its desperate struggles as it spotted them enter the clearing.

"I will," Blaise said, stepping forward before Hermione could volunteer to save her friends from having to.

"And I will collect the blood," Luna said softly, stepping forwards to accept the jewelled goblet from Lady Somlyó. The old witch then drew from her robes a matching jewel-encrusted dagger, which she offered to Blaise, handle first. Like Luna, he stepped forwards to gingerly accept it.

"You know vot to do," Lady Somlyó said, nodding gracefully over at the stag. "Go."

Taking a deep breath, Blaise tightened his grip on the dagger and began to walk towards the stag. Luna and Hermione joined him, flanking him on either side.

"I feel like a virgin sacrifice in this dress," Hermione whispered, once they were out of earshot of Lady Somlyó, and Blaise coughed out a laugh.

"At least you're not going to maybe die a virgin tonight," he whispered back, and Luna giggled nervously.

"You don't have to do this, you know," Hermione told them both, and Blaise rolled his eyes.
"Yes, we know," he started, exasperated.

"And yes, we do," Luna finished sweetly.

"But... thanks," Blaise said, giving her a swift smile. "For caring."

"It really is something," Luna added softly, "to be under the banner of Hermione Granger's protection."

Hermione, her face flushed, fell silent as they continued to approach the struggling stag.

"...is anyone else wondering how your great-great-grandmother managed to catch this and bind it to the stump?" she asked as the three of them stopped a foot away from a stag, just out of reach of the antlers it was now desperately trying to gouge them with.

"I don't even want to know, honestly," Blaise admitted, and Luna giggled again. "So... how do we doing this?"

"Immobulus," Hermione murmured, and the stag's struggles stilled. Closing the distance, she lightly climbed up on to the stump and, grasping onto the antlers, pulled the beast's head back, baring its tender throat to the increasingly squeamish but determined-looking Blaise, and still remarkably serene Luna. Keeping the heavy head held in place with one hand, Hermione ran her other hand up and down the inner curve of its neck. "Along here, and press hard. There's going to be resistance, more then you're expecting– just keep pushing," she told him, and Blaise took a deep breath.

"Here goes," he muttered, before stepped forwards and pressing the point of the dagger against the stag's neck. He mouthed something Hermione couldn't hear, and then he pushed.

It was messy. It was disgusting, even, as Blaise sawed through the thick fur to get to the flesh, and then had to saw through fleshy tissue and fat to reach the artery. Once he managed to hit a blood vessel, either an artery or vein, Hermione wasn't sure, and blood finally started to really spurt out, Blaise shoved the dagger in deeper, dragging the blade lengthways to make the cut wider.

Blaise looked like he was going to be sick, but Luna's face was remarkably serene still as she climbed up on to the stump, kneeling beside the stag's head, and holding the goblet under the gushing wound with one hand. She let the goblet fill to the brim with the stag's life-blood while stroking the stag's head with the other hand, before using her fingers to gently close its eyes.

Once Luna pulled the goblet away, the life-blood continued to flow from the stag, soaking into the tree-stump, and Hermione could feel magic beginning to stir in the air, could feel the heady swell of it in her veins. Lady Somlyó swept forward, dark skirts rustling, as Hermione and Luna climbed down from the tree-stump, Luna brushing her hand against Blaise's and smiling softly up at him. The old witch held out her hand towards Luna, and the small girl handed her the goblet, careful not to spill the dark liquid within.

"On your knees," Lady Somlyó ordered them, and Hermione met her cold gaze calmly.

"No," she said, because there were only two people in this world she kneeled for, and this woman wasn't one of them. The old witch smiled, amused.

"Very vell," she said, dipping her fingers into the goblet, swirling them around widdershins seven times before removing them, the long, thin digits dripping wet crimson. "Vunce," she said, her voice almost conversational as she closed the gap between them with one last step, "my family gathered on the night of the vinter solstice, whereupon our family matriarch, my grandmother, vood
do as I am now, and we would honour Szépasszony, our family's patron, and in return, she would grant our family boons."

Hermione couldn't help but shudder as Lady Somlyó reached forwards, dragging her wet fingertips over Hermione's face, painting something across her face. Despite being fresh from the kill, the sacrifice, the blood felt cold as ice, creeping like frost over her skin, and seeping deeper, under her skin, down to her bones.

She barely even noticed the old witch painting the same runes on Luna and Blaise, too focused on the growing cold, how numbed her face, how it made her breath come out in visible puffs of growing mist, that steadily grew, and grew, until the mist was so rapidly growing, that she knew something was wrong. She looked around to see if Luna and Blaise were having the same problem, only to let out a startled hiss when she realised that they were gone, that they had somehow disappeared, and she hadn't even noticed. Spinning around, she tried to spot where they'd gone to, searching the clearing for her friends, even searching for Lady Somlyó, but it was empty.

Empty, except for the figure standing on the tree-stump where the stag had been sacrificed, only the stag was gone too, and only the figure remained.

The being standing on the tree-stump was so far from human, Hermione could never make the mistake of assuming them to be so. Harry had described to her how disturbing Babd had looked, how her physical form was unnatural in so many tiny, twisted ways that the grinning, cackling crow-fae had defied reality. This fey was the same.

The fey had long, tangled white hair that caught and whipped about in non-existent wind, skin tinted blue as death and lips the rusty-red of dried blood. Its (her? Their?) eyes were pale and cold as Arctic glaciers, the frosty, wispy white dress clung over the too-thin body like a layer of snow on a marble statue, and they wore a crown of twisted ice.

"Who are you?" Hermione whispered, before she could stop herself.

"I have been known by many names," the fey said, voice soft as snowfall and haunting as frozen, winter winds. "But you would know me as Cailleach Bheur."

"Faery Queen of Winter," Hermione breathed and the winter queen, Cailleach, smiled, revealing sharp, pointed teeth, long, thin and needle-sharp.

"You want for answers, Hermione Granger. There were others who were interested, who thought to come answer your curiosities, but I decided to come myself," she said, the softness of her voice almost gentle-sounding but no less dangerous for it.

"I appreciate you taking the time," Hermione said carefully, and the fey's smile widened further, much further then should have been physically possible, and a shudder crawled down Hermione's spine, horror clawing at her in the face of that awful, impossible smile.

"You should not. It is not a kindness."

Hermione nodded jerkily, choosing to take the words as a warning, not a threat. "Will you give me my answers?" she asked, cutting straight to the heart of the matter, not at all inclined to play word games with one of the fey.

"We have not involved ourselves in the affairs of your kind for many centuries," Cailleach murmured, "not in any ways that matter. Yet your mate was visited, by one of my Court, and you wish to understand why."
It was a statement, not a question, but Hermione nodded again anyway. She didn't dare voice her affirmation, the scant information she had found on the fey forewarning of the deals and debts unwitting humans so easily trapped themselves in, when talking to these silver-tongued creatures.

"There are those among our kind capable of foresight. You would not be unfamiliar with it, there are those among your own kind similarly cursed," Cailleach said softly. "Some catch glimpses of possible outcomes, some speak prophecies, riddles gleaned from inevitabilities stitched by the Fates into the fabric of this universe, and some see the lynchpins; objects, people or events who represent turning points, the moments or decisions that lead the future."

"Harry is a lynchpin," Hermione realised, and Cailleach laughed, a haunting sound that rattled around the clearing.

"You sell yourself short, little one. The Prophecy Child is not the only lynchpin we have seen. But you and he cling so tightly, like two stars pulled together, trapped in each other's pull and endlessly orbiting."

"I wouldn't call it 'trapped'," Hermione frowned, and Cailleach laughed again.

"No, no you would not, little star. But that matters not. The possibility was foreseen, but many possibilities are foreseen. Only one ever comes to pass. And against all the odds, this one has."

"You're speaking in riddles," Hermione had to force her voice to stay even. Cailleach looked amused, staring down at her as if she was a small prey animal who'd just done something clever.

"Of course I am. It is the tongue of my people. But just this once, I will be clear. My kin and yours once had between us a relationship that served us both well. Now your kin have forbidden the rituals we shared, and most have forgotten the old ways. Some of my kin believe it to be for the best; humankind have progressed quickly, particularly this past century, with their growing numbers and their cities of iron. They represent a danger, where once they were only an amusement. It is feared by many that the day they discover magic will be the day the extinction of magic will begin."

Hermione shuddered at that, at the terrifying prediction validating her darker thoughts, the ones that whispered to her at night during the darkest hours of night, when she feared that Voldemort was risking plunging the magical world into a war it wasn't prepared for, and yet was inevitable.

"Many of my kind fear this, and they believe the separation of our kind from yours and your world serves to protect us," Cailleach murmured, soft as snowfall. "They believe humans are inherently self-destructive, that if we remain hidden in our realms long enough they will follow their base nature and destruct. But there are others who believe them to be fools. Those who believe we were strongest as we once were, not cowering away as we are now."

"And those fey want there to be a return to the old ways," Hermione said quietly, and Cailleach dipped her head.

"Yes."

"And... and they think Harry and I are the lynchpins to make this possible."

"Yes. If the old ways, the forgotten rites, are to be restored between our people, it will be because of you."

Hermione could only shake her head.
"I don't see how it's possible," she argued, "even if we spoke to Voldemort or I argued in the Wizengamot, I can't see those laws being repealed. Sure, Voldemort's planning to eventually have most of the laws forbidding old magic and customs being repealed, but he'd never agree to the restoration of the old relationship between fey and witches and wizards, never. He's the god of his own world, and the magical world is his world now; he'd never agree for his people to 'worship' anything but himself."

"Little star," Cailleach said, that wretched, twisted amusement having made a return to her face, "did I say 'Voldemort' would be the one to restore the relationship between our people? Did I call him the lynchpin?"

And Hermione... went still.

"No," she said, quietly, stomach sinking. "No, you didn't."

"No, I did not." Cailleach agreed, and her smile was cruel. "And now you understand why this is no kindness, little star."

Hermione took a step back, away from the fey queen. "I'll never betray Tom!" she hissed, and Cailleach looked amused.

"So you say," she said, "but what does your lover know of your twin star's meeting with Babd? What will he know of your meeting with me? Do you plan to enlighten him, little star?"

And Hermione... couldn't answer. Because she might love Tom, she might trust him with her life, fierce and absolute, but the one thing she couldn't trust was that, if it truly came down to it, he would pick Harry over Voldemort. And until she could trust that, she would always doubt. And while she doubted... while she doubted, she couldn't say for a fact that she would never betray him, if it truly came down to it.

Cailleach's smile widened as Hermione stayed silent. "As I said, little star," she purred, "my kind are not known for our kindness." She moved then, gliding forwards to close the distance between them before Hermione could step back, and she seized Hermione's chin. Her fingers felt colder then ice, and instead of fingernails, her fingers ended in long claws, like a cat's, which pricked Hermione's skin, drawing small droplets of blood. Hermione automatically jerked her back, but Cailleach's grip was like iron, and the fey Queen bent forwards, brushing her red lips against Hermione's own.

Her lips tasted like ice; they were so cold they burned, and Hermione hissed at the searing pain. Before she could struggle, however, Cailleach was gone, leaving nothing but mist behind. Mist, and more questions, questions without answers.

As Hermione stood there, her lips tingling as they slowly regained feeling, the mist began to thin, revealing as it did the clearing with the dead sacrificial stag, as well as, much to her relief, Blaise, Luna, and Lady Somlyó. Blaise looked as shaken as Hermione felt, while Luna had a thoughtful look on her thin face. Lady Somlyó looked pleased.

"You have all done vell," she said. "Come. Eat. You must be hungry."

Hermione abruptly realised that the old witch was right– she was starving, and Blaise and Luna appeared the same. As soon as they were back in Čachtice Castle, seated at the table, they tucked into the warm soup the elves served them, with thick pieces of buttered bread, each having second, then third helpings, before Lady Somlyó sent them off to bed. Exhausted as they were, however, the three of them gathered first in Blaise's quarters, to share and discuss their experiences. Luna
"I met the fey my parents are descended from," she said, looking uncharacteristically awake, her perpetually dreamy look replaced by bright-eyed excitement as she spoke eagerly to them. "Mama's patron, Apollo, and Papa's patron, Artemis, were both so lovely," she beamed, and Hermione blinked.

"Aren't they..." she trailed off, glancing over at Blaise who nodded.

"Yep. They are." He said, and Hermione nodded too, mostly to herself.

"Okay. Wow." She breathed, trying to remember that despite her automatic instinct to think of Apollo and Artemis as 'gods', they were as much gods as Cailleach was— and Cailleach was as much one of the fey as they were. "Did they, uh, did they say anything to you?" She asked Luna, who nodded eagerly, her smile bright and beaming.

"They were both so very nice! Lady Artemis likes how you protected me from that bad man during the Quidditch World Cup, and Lord Apollo likes how Harry is a Child of Prophecy. They both say I've picked good friends."

"I met Szépasszony," Blaise offered up, still looking a bit pale from his encounter with his ancestor, the reason for his own fey blood, "she also... approved of and supported my friendship with you and Harry. She then tasked me with aiding you in your endeavours." He said.

Hermione felt a hot rush of rage then, a rage that she barely understood, her hackles rising up. "That was presumptuous of her," she said coldly.

Blaise smiled back. His smile was cold. "And redundant." He said. "I don't answer to her, or her queen. And I told her she could pass that on. There's only two people in this world I'd ever bow to, and the fey aren't included in that."

"I agree," Luna added softly, and Hermione... Hermione didn't know what to think. Because she could guess who those two people were, and Voldemort and Tom weren't it.

*You and he cling so tightly, like two stars pulled together, trapped in each other's pull...*

*...did I say 'Voldemort' would be the one to restore the relationship between our people?*

*I'll never betray Tom!*

*What does your lover know of your twin star's meeting with Babd?*

*...this is no kindness, little star.*

Cailleach had been right. Her 'boon' hadn't been a kindness at all. And while Hermione had the answers she wanted, she wasn't sure if they'd been worth the price.

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*Tom's POV:*

Tom's lip curled in disgust as he surveyed the room around him. The filthy, peeling walls and ceiling were liberally splattered with blood, the old coach was reduced to splinters, ripped fabric and ancient stuffing, also soaked red, and the bodies were strewn in pieces across the flooring, the
once-grey carpet now dyed dark crimson.

Five dead and he wasn't even out of breath. How... disappointing.

With a quiet huff, Tom flicked his wand, setting the remains of the couch on fire, leaving it to spread. He didn't even bother to transfigure the bodies. The dead werewolves had been squatting in a part of the muggle neighbourhood known for its drug-addicts; the muggle police wouldn't question the deaths, and he'd made sure to make the deaths look like knives had been used, not magic.

Over all, it had been dull. But that had been the norm, as of late. Without Harry and Hermione's presence, it was as if all the colour had bled out of his world. Even tracking down and killing the traitors didn't bring back that splash of colour.

He hated and despised such dependence on other human beings; it enraged him, it made him want to rip his lovers to shreds, to tear their still-beating hearts from their chests and crush the organs to pulp between his fingers. It made him want to crush their bones under his heels, to squeeze his fingers around their fragile throats until their eyes bulged, blood vessels bursting as their lips turned bruised-blue.

And yet, even the thought of their deaths, of their absence from his world, was unthinkable to him. Life without their presence was greyed out, worthless, flat; what was the point of ruling, he couldn't help but think, if he couldn't rule with Harry and Hermione by his side?

He despaired of himself; he was an unacceptable risk, a hazard to everything he and Voldemort had created and planned for. If his counterpart knew just how attached he was, the main soul wouldn't hesitate a moment to reabsorb him. He should admit to it. He should. He should admit to it and remove the risk that he was. But he wouldn't. He couldn't. He was too attached. Hermione and Harry had broken him, twisted him around with their bright eyes and pretty, sharp-toothed smiles, until he didn't even know which way was up or down.

Frustrated, mostly with himself, Tom twisted on the spot, apparating back to Gamp Hall, uneasy and restless. The last person he felt like seeing while in this mood was Voldemort, but the main soul was expecting to hear his report and he didn't want to foster any suspicion from someone who expected betrayal from everyone; even, Tom suspected, from himself.

When had it come to this, he wondered, darkly amused, that he was hiding secrets from what was essentially an extension of his own being? Only, Tom hadn't thought of Voldemort like that for a long time now, and he suspected Voldemort thought the same. They existed as individuals; as separate wholes, not pieces of one. He didn't see Voldemort as superior to him, for all that he followed the main soul's instructions (orders).

He had defied Voldemort for Harry and Hermione before, after all.

And should he be put in such a position again?

Well, he doubted his decision would be any different. Because for all that he owed his allegiance to Voldemort, Voldemort didn't light his world up in brilliant colour, not like they did. He'd burn the world for Voldemort, but for Harry and Hermione? For them, he would stay his hand. For them, he would leave the world whole; and for someone who more often then not wished nothing more than to see the world burn, that was the greatest sacrifice he could make.

He found Voldemort in the Minister of Magic's study. There was a stack of unfinished paperwork on the desk, but Voldemort was sitting before the fire, watching the flames dance merrily within
the grate. There was a contemplative look on his face, and Tom paused, unsure what to make of the
scene– leaving paperwork unfinished wasn't characteristic for him, not of any age; he'd never been
the type to put off until tomorrow what could be done that day.

"Am I interrupting?" he asked, and Voldemort waved a hand absently, conjuring a second chair.
Cautiously, Tom crossed the room and joined Voldemort in front of the fireplace. They sat together
in silence for several minutes before Voldemort spoke.

"I had a visitor today," he said slowly. "They had... unusual news for me."

"Oh?" Tom asked, scanning his memory, trying to think of anything that could have unsettled
Voldemort this much. Because something had rattled Voldemort, that much was clear to him.

"Yes." Voldemort said quietly, still looking into the flames, as if searching for answers within
them. "Tell me, have you ever considered procreation?"

"Procreation?" Tom frowned.

"Reproducing with Hermione?" Voldemort expanded, and Tom couldn't help his automatic
reaction of disgust at the thought of an infant. He hated small children, a consequence from his
time spent at the orphanage, and infants even more so. They were useless, filthy, squalling little
living, breathing bags of organs and neediness, in his opinion. The ease in which his older self was
able to cast the Killing Curse on a fifteen-month-old, he felt, was a good indicator of his lack of
parental instinct.

Voldemort's expression was a mirror of the one he suspected he wore on his own face; disgust,
mixed with detestation. Still— "No, I most certainly have not," he answered Voldemort's question,
who nodded, before telling him;

"Bellatrix is with child."

Tom stilled. "Is it Rodolphus's?" he asked, very carefully not asking the question he really wanted
to.

_Is it yours?_

"No," Voldemort said shortly, and Tom let a breath escape through his teeth in a long, drawn-out
hiss. He didn't know what to think, what to feel. Procreation had never been part of their plans. It
had never been something they'd wanted or needed. Why would they need a child to carry on the
great line of Salazar Slytherin, when they would live forever, to carry on his greatness?

"What will you do?" He asked shortly, and Voldemort tapped a long, pale finger thoughtfully
against his mouth.

"I've been thinking on it," he admitted. "I wasn't expecting it. I didn't even consider it possible. My
automatic instinct is to remove the problem altogether."

Tom nodded, not seeing a problem with what was clearly the most sensible plan.

"But the child, he or she is part of me," Voldemort continued. "They are of my blood, descended of
Slytherin's line. It feels as if destroying that would be so... wasteful. And troublesome as they can
be, Harry and Hermione have proven to be such useful little tools. A child raised directly under my
influence would prove even more useful."

"So... you're going to get her to keep it," Tom said slowly, barely able to comprehend what he was
"Bella is delighted to carry my child," Voldemort said dismissively, "it is no chore to her, to be chosen to bear her Lord's heir or heiress."

An heir or heiress. Voldemort's heir or heiress. It was incomprehensible. It was unbelievable. It was dangerous.

As Voldemort seemed to finally remember that Tom had a reason to be in his study, Tom quickly gave his report on the werewolf traitors, mostly on autopilot. All he could really think about was Bellatrix's pregnancy, the child in her womb, and what it could all mean; for him, for Harry and Hermione, and for the future.

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*for those who've been around since the beginning, originally in this story Erzsébet Bathóry was Szépasszony; I've changed it so she's now Szépasszony's changeling daughter. As a reminder, Szépasszony is a pre-Christian Hungarian love goddess who was demoted to a beautiful but dangerous witch spirit.

A/N: Yes, I'm including parts of the Cursed Child storyline in this. Yes, there's a good reason why, I didn't just do it on a whim :)

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