

Peremo

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Peremo

by [virennia](#)

Summary

When Hermione gets stuck in the 1950's, she has no choice but to live her life.

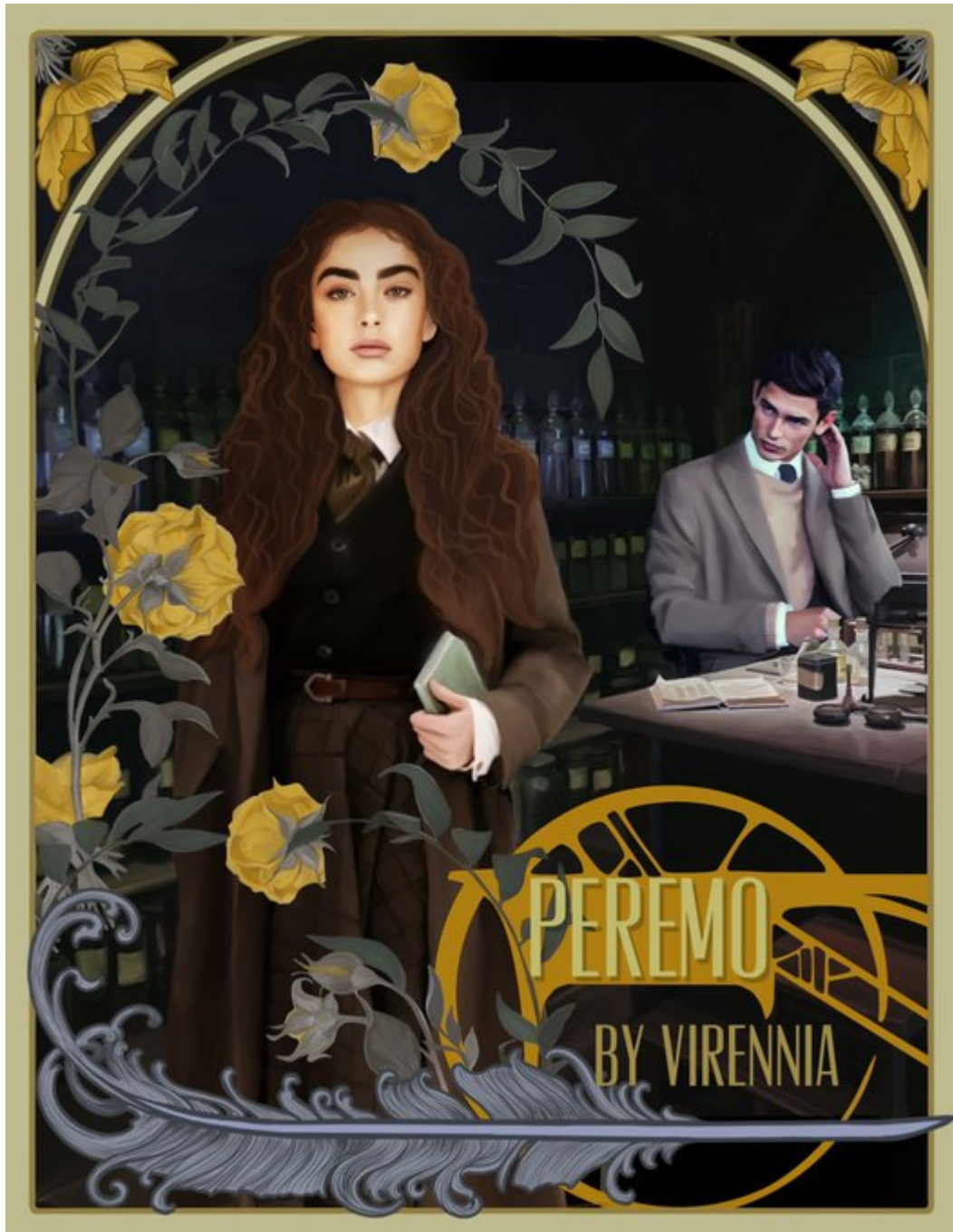
And then, she meets Tom.

completed

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

Welcome to my story. Please enjoy the ride and feast your eyes upon this incredible digital painting drawn by the real MVP of the fandom, NiniJune <3 <3



It was *supposed* to be nineteen-forty.

He was supposed to be a thirteen year-old boy with no friends or family, not a twenty-three year-old man leading a small army. He was supposed to be alone, uneducated, and horcrux-less, and removing Tom Riddle from the picture was supposed to be an *easy task*.

But Dumbledore had miscalculated. He had gravely miscalculated, by a *decade*, and now, it was her who was paying the price.

Hermione wasn't so deluded to believe she would be any match for a young, up and coming Voldemort. By the age of twenty-three, he would already have a band of loyal followers, numerous hidden horcruxes, he'd be far more magically adept than her.

In nineteen fifty, she wouldn't be able to stop him. He was too far gone, and the wheels of history were already in motion.

But... that wasn't to say she would be *useless*. While her predicament was far from ideal, she would still do what she could. When the first wizarding war struck, she could help the Order. She could arm them with the knowledge that would prevent a second war, could save countless lives, could save Harry's parents, could save *Harry*.

It wasn't much, not nearly as much as she'd initially planned with Dumbledore, but it was the best she could do given her circumstances.

And while it was a plan B that Hermione could make her peace with, Voldemort wouldn't be making any overt movements until the seventies. There were *twenty years* until then, and she was stuck. She and Dumbledore had never planned a return trip to her own time, and as far as they knew, such a thing was impossible. To the past, she'd been given a one way ticket.

Which meant, the nineteen fifties were her new home.

And so, in the meantime, Hermione did the only thing she could. She settled in for the long haul. She got a job. She made some money, did some research, she published her first article, started to make a bit of a name for herself.

She lived.

Chapter 2

Hermione sighed into her hands.

"—honestly Miss, Black started it, all I did was defend myself."

"Tripe, Miss."

"It's *true*, I was sitting under the willow tree with Judith minding my own business, and the next thing I know, there's a curse flying towards us!"

"Imagining things again, are you Eddie?"

There was a brief pause, and then, "*You cursed me and you know it, you pompous twa—*"

"*Stop.*" Hermione interrupted sternly, stepping between the two boys. "I don't care who started what. Edward, throwing rocks at your classmates is against the rules, you know that. And Cygnus, I have seen you here three times this week, and to be frank, I believe you just as much as I believe that the giant squid has grown itself a pair of wings." She sighed again, though this time it was more of a huff. "Edward, you'll have detention on Friday with Professor Jigger—"

"Aw, but *Miss—*"

"*No.* Friday detention with Professor Jigger, and that's final," she snapped. "And Cygnus, that'll be a month's detention—"

"What? That's not *fair—*"

"No," Hermione snapped over him, "what's not fair is the amount of time I've had to spend caring for the other students who you've decided to practice your offensive charms with." She huffed. "A month's detentions, *and* you'll be serving them with Professor Kettleburn."

"Oh, *come on* Miss! You wouldn't give a *dog* detention with Kettle—"

"Ten points from Slytherin for speaking ill of your professors, and if you keep arguing with me Cygnus, it'll be another five."

Cygnus' lips puckered, contorting as if he was trying very hard to keep himself quiet.

A moment passed.

"All right," said Hermione when it seemed Cygnus was in fact capable of containing himself.

"Now Edward, unless you want the swelling to come back, make sure you don't forget to take the second potion I gave you at this time tomorrow."

"Yes, Miss."

"This *exact* time. Late by so much as half an hour, and you'll be redder than Professor Slughorn after one too many firewhiskys."

"*Yes*, Miss."

"Good. Now, other than in the case of an absolute emergency, I don't want to see you—*either of you—*back here again. Understood?"

"Yes, Miss," Edward grumbled.

Cygnus glared before he too uttered to his shoes, "'s Miss."

Hermione gave them one last unimpressed glare before she said, "all right. Off with you." She made a shooing motion with her hands, and with their heads down, the boys scurried off back to their classes.

Once they were out of sight and the echo of their footsteps had faded, Hermione lowered herself down to sit on the edge of one of the spare infirmary beds.

She exhaled through her nose. It'd been a long day, and it was only four o'clock.

Cygnus, she knew from the conversations she'd overheard in the staff's chambers, was a right pain in all of the professor's backsides. He didn't put any effort into his studies, talked back at every opportunity, and was constantly terrorising the other students.

He was an entitled bully, and while she hated seeing it, Hermione couldn't actually do much about it other than assign him detentions. As Bellatrix's father, Cygnus might very well be, unfortunately, too important to the timeline. Anything more severe than a detention might be enough to throw him off his course, and so, Hermione had to let him be.

And then there was Edward—*bless him*. Lanky and pigeon-toed, he frequented the infirmary more than any other student in the entire school. Something about him must've screamed 'easy target' to the other students. She suspected it had something to do with his second-hand robes.

Now that they'd left, Hermione was left, for all intents and purposes, alone. The other inhabitant of the infirmary, Clarence Biggins, had been unconscious for two days now, thanks to quite a severe miscalculation in third-year potions. Meanwhile, the matron, Madam Spindle, had an awful habit of drifting off to sleep in the infirmary office for hours at a time, leaving Hermione to hold down the fort.

But that wasn't to say Hermione didn't *like* working in the infirmary. In fact, she quite liked helping the young students back to full health, and she liked the freedom she had in the position. No one was ever breathing down her neck. But still, it was... sometimes quite... boring. Tedious.

Yet, Hermione craved the security of the castle, and she was too young to teach, Dippet and Dumbledore had both told her so. The only thing they'd been able to offer was an assisting job to Madam Spindle, and she hadn't been in any position to reject it.

And so, she'd enthusiastically taken up their offer.

...that had been two years ago.

For two years now she'd been living in the fifties, and if she was honest, she hated it. Here, decades away from her own time, she had no friends, no social life. As an assistant without formal qualifications, her prospects for a career were slim to none, and as a single young woman, she was restricted in what she was allowed to do, what she wore, what she owned, how she carried herself.

It was suffocating, and it would easily be enough to wear down the spirits of even the most content of people, and so, seeing Madam Spindle's elderly form starting to stir in the office, Hermione got up off the bed, and grabbed her bag. Then, without a word of goodbye, she hurried out and headed off to where she went every Friday afternoon.

To go and get a drink.

Hermione swirled her glass, watching as the alcohol in the wine formed distinct patterns as it pooled back to the bottom after each swish.

She glanced up, briefly catching the eyes of an elderly man down the other end of the bar. He gave her a subtle nod.

Hermione sighed. Being recognised by the Hog's Head's regulars was surely a sign she was drinking too much.

Oh well.

She took another sip.

It was then, as she swallowed her wine and put down her glass, that she heard a loud round of laughter and noticed a small group of men over toward the back corner of the pub. All robed in black, they were rowdily surrounding a small round table, steadily making their way through their three jugs of butterbeer.

They sounded like they were having a good time.

Hermione watched them as subtly as she could, feeling a wave of jealousy. She hadn't had anyone to have a good time with in more than two years.

It was her own fault—well. That wasn't *exactly* true. Yes, she'd volunteered to make the journey back through time, and *yes*, she'd isolated herself once it was clear she'd reached the wrong decade, but a large part of the fault was, undoubtedly, Dumbledore's. *He* was the one who sent her into the wrong time. *He* was the one who'd convinced her to go on such a foolhardy journey with no way back in the first place.

She took another sip and watched as one of the men from the group left the others and approached the bar, resting his foot on one of the empty stools.

He was tall. Nice looking. Warm features, sandy hair, lanky limbs. He reminded her of Ron.

The bartender was busy chatting with the old man she'd caught looking at her earlier at the other end of the bar. The man from the group would surely be waiting for a while before he was served.

Hermione bit into her lip.

She shouldn't.

She knew she shouldn't, but—

Hermione stood up before she could properly think about it. She didn't know what had gotten into her, but she was going to it. This was her life now. She was allowed a bit of fun. She was allowed to make friends. As long as she didn't stop anyone she knew from being born... all was fair, wasn't it?

She brushed her hair behind her ear and smoothed her dress as she approached the man from the group, before she took up a place leaning on the bar next to him. "Hi."

The man turned to her, his eyebrows showing his surprise, and looked her down and up. Her dress was grey and dull, and her hair wasn't brushed, but she couldn't have looked too bad, because he still smiled sideways and drawled, "hey there."

Hermione returned his smile. "Are you having a bit of a party over there?" She gestured with her chin toward the table of his friends.

"Something like that."

"Could I—" she hesitated, but forced herself through it, "um, I'm sorry if it's a bit forward, but would you mind if... could I join you?"

The man blinked. He glanced over his shoulder toward his friends and then back at her.

Hermione cleared her throat. "Of course, I understand if it's a private get together and you don't want—"

"No, no," he interrupted quickly. "No, um, it's fine. Yes. I mean—yes—you should join us. I'm sure they won't mind."

"Great," she beamed, relieved. "I'm Hermione."

"I'm Avery," he said. The barman was heading in their direction now, and Avery gestured toward him with a nod of his head. "Can I get you a drink?"

Hermione *really* didn't know what had gotten into her, but she pressed her lips together and said, far too boldly, "I'll have whatever you're having."

"You got it." He winked.

A bit of a thrill coursed through her. The only wink she'd been on the receiving end of in the last two years had been from a younger Dumbledore.

While Avery ordered another two jugs of butterbeer and an extra glass, Hermione finished off her wine and again smoothed her hair down.

Once the barman had spelled the jugs back at the table full, Avery turned to give her his full attention and handed her the glass.

"Um. My friends can be a bit—if they're too—if you need me to tell them to shove it, at any time, feel free to—"

A laugh escaped her. "I'll keep that in mind."

"Okay. Okay, good," he said. He seemed nervous. "I'll, um—this way."

Avery led the way over to the others, glancing back at her several times in the process as if he thought she might change her mind.

She didn't, though.

"Hey," Avery greeted when they reached the others, and though she *saw* his hand reach back behind her, she didn't feel him actually touch her. "This is my new friend, Hermione." Her *new friend* turned to her. "And Hermione, this is Percy, Evander, and Felix."

Evander, the blond in the middle, smiled and nodded of his head. Percy and Felix, on the other

hand, gave her tight smiles. They didn't seem as friendly as they had from across the pub.

Hermione cleared her throat. "Pleasure," she said somewhat awkwardly, gratefully accepting when Avery offered to fill her glass. "Um. So, what brings you all out?"

"Our—uh—another friend of ours just got a job up at Hogwarts. We're helping him celebrate," Avery explained. "He's just stepped out though."

"Oh!" At the prospect of meeting a new staff member at Hogwarts, one her own age, Hermione felt her spirits lifting. Maybe her recklessness actually *would* lead her to a friend. Surely *one* friend wouldn't hurt the timeline too much. "I'm up at Hogwarts, too."

"Yeah?" Evander asked, and Hermione suddenly felt herself flushing with them all looking at her at once. "What do you do?"

"I'm just assisting in the infirmary," she said.

"Spindle still there, the old bat?" Percy asked.

"She certainly is."

Percy snorted. "Miracle she's still hanging on. Gotta be in her hundreds, surely."

"She was at Hogwarts when my father was there," Felix provided.

"See? Ancient," Percy declared, and the men all laughed.

Hermione laughed with them as though she understood the joke and sipped at her butterbeer.

It was then that she noticed another man heading over toward them—he must've been the other friend Avery'd mentioned. He was tall; taller than Avery, but not quite as tall as Felix. He had slender, fitting robes that looked nice enough to be described as formal, and his hair was neatly brushed back. He looked as if he might've come straight from his interview.

Of all of the men, he was probably the most attractive.

When he looked in her direction, Hermione quickly glanced away, not wishing to be caught staring.

"All sorted then?" Avery asked the newcomer, handing him a glass of butterbeer.

"Yes. Just a... misunderstanding."

Again, all of the men around the table laughed. Hermione didn't get that joke either, so she took another sip of her drink.

"I don't believe we've met?"

Hermione glanced up. The newcomer was looking at her. Now that he was closer, she felt a little uncomfortable. She wasn't sure why.

"Oh, this is Hermione. She works up at Hogwarts, too," Avery chimed in from beside her.

"Hermione, this is our friend we were telling you about, Tom."

Hermione blinked.

Tom.

Over her last two years in the fifties, Hermione had met precisely *three* other Toms. And each time, she'd panicked, wondering if she were meeting the future Dark Lord.

This Tom, seemed, outwardly at least, like a pretty solid candidate. Tall, pale, handsome, posse of friends gathered at the Hog's Head. By her math, he even seemed to be about the right age.

Could he be—

No.

No, couldn't be.

Just like her meetings with the other Toms, Hermione quickly brushed her budding panic aside. Tom *Riddle* never managed to get a position at Hogwarts. Dippet had already rejected him, Dumbledore never allowed it, and at this point of the fifties, she knew him to be happily working at Borgin and Burke's.

No, this Tom must've just been another standard, everyday Tom.

He certainly didn't *seem* like anything special.

"Oh, um, Avery mentioned you've just gotten a job up at the castle? What will you be doing?"

"Teaching. History of Magic."

Ah.

Ah, *yes*.

One of the very few changes to the timeline she *had* allowed herself to make. Allowing a ghost to teach at Hogwarts in the original timeline had been careless, and irresponsible, and it was just something she simply couldn't allow Dippet or Dumbledore to do to this new one. By convincing Dumbledore to take on a new, *live* teacher, she would save hundreds of students from suffering in classes the way she had.

It was simply a necessary change, and future Harry and Ron would surely thank her for it.

"That's wonderful!" Hermione gushed, and she meant it. He looked young. Her age. A young face would bring a whole new feel to History of Magic. "Congratulations! It was such a shame about Cuthbert, but I'm sure you'll bring a whole new... life to history at Hogwarts."

Tom smiled and politely said, "thank you." He didn't seem to get her joke—not that she expected him to. "And yourself? What do you teach?"

"Oh, no, no, I don't teach," she corrected him. "I'm just an assistant in the infirmary. It's not much, but it's—"

Tom tilted his head. There was recognition in his eyes. "Hermione Granger," he said, pointing a finger.

"—really quite—oh. Um. Yes. Yeah, that's me, how did you—"

"I read your article. The piece in the prophet the other month, 'Modern Day Oppression of Centaur Rights'."

Hermione's skin heated by several degrees.

Oh.

Oh dear.

Someone had actually *read* her article. And he remembered her name! She must've made a good impression, then.

"Oh! Wow, I haven't—" she cleared her throat and tried to stifle her grin. She didn't want to seem *too* enthused. "I, uh, thank you! I didn't think there would be much interest."

Tom laughed lightly. It sounded nice. "Yes, well. It's just, it's all a bit ridiculous, don't you think?"

Hermione's smile slowly fell. "Pardon?"

"Centaurs aren't at all oppressed," he stated. "You can't honestly believe that they are. They're free to do as they wish, and if what they wish is to seclude themselves in herds and gallop around in forests, then who are we to deny them?"

Hermione blinked, affronted. "That's not what—my article was—to this day, they're still classified as *beasts*."

"Yes. They are," Tom agreed, "by their own choosing."

"But that doesn't mean it's right!"

"It's what they want. Surely true oppression would be through not allowing them free will to choose how they live and are classified."

"That's rubbish," Hermione snapped, her brows settling into a glare. "Their classification with the Ministry as beasts prevents them from owning land, prevents them the right to work, prevents the right to *vote*."

"They don't want those things."

"Oh, pardon me, I didn't realise you'd asked them," she snapped, unable to help herself.

To that, Tom didn't immediately reply, and it was then, in the moment of quiet, that Hermione noticed that the rest of their party had gone silent.

She glanced around the table. Avery had his goblet to his face and seemed to be taking a rather long swig. Evander looked to be holding in a laugh, Percy almost looked *scared*, and Felix was staring rather intensely down at the table.

...perhaps her tone had been a bit harsh.

Hermione cleared her throat. "What I'm trying to say, is that that sort of backward thinking is what's keeping us in the nineteenth century while the rest of the world is preparing itself for the twenty-first. Only with true unity and equality of magical beings, can we as a community progress."

"Equality of magical beings," Tom parroted, the amusement plain in his voice. "I suppose you'd next have a seat on the Wizengamot for the giants, too? And then perhaps a tank for a mermaid, and a raised seat for a house elf?"

Tom and his friends laughed at that, and Hermione felt her cheeks heating. It wasn't from the alcohol.

"Laugh as much as you like, but they know magic that we couldn't even begin to understand—"

"How to remove even the most stubborn of stains from one's clothing?"

The men snorted around their drinks, and Hermione felt her eyelid twitching.

"All right then," she stated, trying her hardest for the words to sound even. "Explain to me, how is it that house elves are able to apparate in and out of Hogwarts as they please? Or how centaurs are able to predict significant events years and years ahead of their occurrence, far exceeding any human form of divination? How the bodies of vampires are immune from the effects of age?"

He laughed, but there was an edge of a scoff to it. "Please. You speak of them as though you *admire* them."

Hermione lifted her chin. "I admire all who have something valuable to teach me."

Tom watched her then, his mouth shut and eyes scrutinising. As if he didn't believe her, and he was analysing her, looking for some sort of confirmation.

"Bet I could teach you a thing or two," Felix laughed from the other side of the table, his words slightly slurred.

While Evander and Percy snorted with laughter at Felix's comment, Avery nudged him and said, "shut the hell up."

Felix shoved Avery off. "Come back to my room after this, and I'll show you," Felix went on, and then, he winked at her.

"Ugh." Hermione raised her glass and downed what was left of her drink. "I'm sorry. Excuse me," she said, and then she got up and left.

Between Felix and Tom, she'd seen enough.

Outside the safety of the Hog's Head, the wind in the main street was harsh against her skin, but Hermione didn't mind it. It was sobering.

What had she been thinking? Approaching a random group of men—they could've been anybody! Even the slightest of missteps on her part could have irreversibly swayed the timeline, and not for the better!

So really, she told herself, it was lucky they'd been awful. Approaching them had been a selfish and short-sighted thing to do, and it wasn't as if she needed any friends anyway.

Who needed friends? Certainly not her, she was doing just *fine* on her own—

"Hey! Wait up!"

Hermione jumped slightly and turned back to the way she'd come. Avery's lanky form was easy to make out, even in the dark, jogging in her direction. The bouncing of his hair looked ridiculous in the lamplight.

"Sorry," Avery panted once he reached her, resting his hands against his knees. Clearly cardio wasn't his strong suit. "Sorry a-about them. Felix is an arse, and Tom can be... a bit difficult

sometimes."

"Oh really?" Hermione crossed her arms, raised her chin. "Hadn't noticed."

Avery winced. "What he said about your article was really rude. I'm sure it was a really well written piece, and I'm sure you made a very valid argument."

"Stop it," she mumbled. She didn't need his pity.

But Avery wasn't one to be deterred. "What issue was it in?" he pressed. "I'll go back and find it at the library, and take a look at it."

Hermione scoffed. "That's sweet of you, but you don't have to."

"No, I know. I want to, though." Avery smiled. It was warm and unlike the ones his friends had given her, it seemed genuine. "Hermione Granger, that's your full name, right?"

Hermione rolled her eyes, but she was having a hard time fighting off a smile of her own. There was something *about* him. He was like a puppy. "Look, I... I know you're just trying to be polite, and I appreciate that. But I know that neither you nor your friends could give a toss about centaurs or their rights," she said. "Thanks for giving me some company, but it's getting late, and I really should be going." She glanced up the hill toward the silhouette of the castle. "It was nice meeting you though, even though you have shitty friends."

Avery laughed. It was an awkward sort of laugh, the sort where a snort creeps in.

"They're not normally—" Avery paused, before he scratched the back of his head. "Yeah, okay, they're a bit shit, aren't they?"

Hermione nodded with vigour. "Have a good night," she said.

Then, Hermione turned and walked back in the direction of the castle.

"You have a good night too, Hermione!" he called after her.

Hermione glanced back, just quickly enough to see him waving after her.

"I know where you live! I'll write to you!"

She laughed at that, but she didn't turn back again, even though there was a small part of her that wanted it.

Because it felt like the first time in two years that she'd properly laughed.

Chapter 3

That weekend marked the first weekend of quidditch season.

Hermione *hated* quidditch season.

In the fifties, the safety regulations were, somehow, even more lacking than they'd been in her own time, and that Saturday, she'd had two students with broken legs, one with a broken nose, three with concussions, and one with punctured lung. That wasn't counting the others with cuts and bruises.

And to top it all off, Gryffindor had *lost*. To *Slytherin*.

Which meant, that Hermione's weekend was so busy, that by the time Monday morning came, and her bedside clock chimed six am, she was in a horrific mood. She felt as though she hadn't had a rest at all.

However, she reminded herself, at least there was always coffee.

Her personal quarters, like the infirmary, were on the first floor, just around the corridor from the Charm's classroom. It meant that she didn't have much of a view from her window, and she had a lot of noise during the day. But, she was conveniently close to the Great Hall, which made for a blissfully short journey down to breakfast.

On her trip between her room and the grand staircase that morning, Hermione must've yawned at least three times. She'd just opened her mouth for her fourth, when she abruptly halted on the bottom stair.

He was there.

Ugh.

The rude Tom she'd met at the Hog's Head the other night was hovering by the Great Hall entryway, in conversation with Dippet and Slughorn.

Really, it shouldn't have come at a surprise. Cuthbert had *died*. Of course they would need an immediate start.

He looked... well. She wasn't blind. He looked *good*. A great deal better than her, who hadn't even brushed her hair. But despite how good he looked in his dark, fitted robes, on top of what looked to be a perfectly ironed undershirt, he also looked a little bit pretentious. Like he had an air of superiority around him.

Hermione snorted, and then, she weighed up her options. She didn't want him to see her. She didn't want him to start off his time at Hogwarts thinking he had a friend in her, because he most certainly did *not*. It wasn't very nice of her, but what he'd said about her article wasn't very nice either, so she didn't really care.

But Hermione also really wanted her coffee, and rude Tom was currently between her and the full kettles she knew were waiting for her in the Great Hall.

And so, Hermione did the only thing that she could. She put her head down, scurried forward as quickly as she possible, and pretended not to see them.

Aside from Slughorn and Dippet, the rest of the professors of Hogwarts didn't pay her much in the way of attention. She was an unqualified assistant, why would they? Not to mention, she was young and not very tall. When she had her robes on, she could often pass as a student from a distance.

And it suited her just fine. The less attention she received, the less likely it would be that she'd sway the timeline.

This time, thankfully, Dippet and Slughorn didn't notice her—well. By the way Slughorn's body shifted as she passed, he might've, but if he did, he didn't say anything.

Perfect.

Crisis successfully averted, Hermione made it though into the Great Hall, and up to the staff table without needing to speak a word to anyone.

Even better.

When she reached her usual seat, she murmured her perfunctory hellos to Madam Spindle on her right and Professor Kettleburn on her left, and then, poured herself a generous serve of the coffee.

Ahh.

By the time Slughorn, Dippet and Tom made their way through the Great Hall, Hermione had finished off half of her mug and was in a decidedly better mood. So much so, that she watched them as they moved down the centre of the Hall.

Tom's eyes met hers.

Hermione, emboldened by the combination of tiredness and caffeine, scowled.

He smiled back.

Instinctively, her scowl deepened, but then she started to feel a little bit embarrassed. She hadn't had a good staring match since she was a student with Malfoy. It was quite immature, really.

Deciding to be the bigger person, Hermione lifted her chin and helped herself to some toast.

Shortly after they were seated, Dippet began his usual morning spill.

He started off with his usual greeting, his update on the house cup, daily updates on the work to remove the curse that'd been plaguing the fourth floor for a few months now.

Only halfway paying attention, Hermione finished off her slice of toast and sipped at her pumpkin juice.

"And now finally, if we could all give a warm welcome to our new Professor of History of Magic, Mr. Tom Riddle."

Her juice, which had not yet been swallowed, shot right up the back of her throat, and up and out of her nostrils.

There was a laugh from the students toward the front of the hall—laughing at her spraying her juice all over the staff table, surely—but Hermione was only vaguely aware of it. Because some of her juice had gone down the wrong way, and suddenly, she was fighting to stop herself from drowning.

She hacked and spluttered, until Kettleburn graciously offered her a napkin. She snatched it up and coughed into it, trying to muffle the sound.

"Are you all right, dear?" Madam Spindle asked from beside her, patting her gently on the back.

Hermione waved her off, coughing some more into the napkin.

"Do you need some—"

"No, no," Hermione managed to croak in between her coughs, pushing her chair back out from the table. "I'm just—need to—air."

Aware that Dippet had paused and she was starting to make quite a bit of a scene, Hermione rose and quickly ducked out of the hall out of the side entrance.

Once she was out of the hall, she forcefully coughed without restraint to get the last of the juice out of her lungs. She slowly made her way down the corridor and found a secluded nook between a pillar and a suit of armour by the end that she ducked herself into. She bent over and rested her hands on her knees, taking in deep breaths through her mouth.

Her head was spinning.

It wasn't from the coughing.

Tom Riddle. He *was* Tom Riddle.

And she'd bloody well stood there in a bar and bickered with him about the rights of magical creatures like a complete *idiot!*

And he was—

She'd—

She brought her palms over her eyes and pressed down.

Oh sweet Merlin.

It was her fault. Tom Riddle—*Voldemort* was at *Hogwarts*, and *it was all her fault!*

Of all the changes that she could've possibly made to the timeline, Tom Riddle teaching at Hogwarts was worse-case scenario. Dumbledore had always been worried about him recruiting from the students, and now—with Dippet still the useless Headmaster that he was—he had the perfect opportunity to do it!

And it was because of her!

But all she'd done was had an offhanded chat with Dippet at dinner after the news had broken that Professor Binns had passed! How could that've been enough to sway him? He'd been adamant about Riddle being too young, hadn't he?

So why would he have chosen to hire him now?

Hermione pondered on it, biting down anxiously into her lip, and then she nearly smacked herself in the head as she realised, that—

Of course Dippet had hired him. Now that she was thinking about it, it all made sense!

Because Dippet was *useless*! Replacing just Merrythought must've been hard enough for him, but finding a *second* new professor so soon... that must've been why in her timeline, Binns had been allowed to stay on as a ghost. Laziness, and desperation, and poor management.

In this time, with her added suggestion of a new professor, and with Dumbledore's support, clearly it was enough to sway Dippet. And of course, what was he to do? He had an eager volunteer! Tom had already applied, years earlier. It must've been only too easy to write an owl to Riddle.

It was exactly Dippet's style, and knowing what she did about Riddle, it wasn't a surprise that he said yes, even if it was History of Magic rather than Defence.

Voldemort had always been an opportunist.

Hermione stood motionlessly, and tipped her head back until she was resting on the stone wall.

She could hear her pulse thumping between her ears.

She needed to be calm.

Panicking would not help.

She needed—

What she needed, was a *plan*.

She pushed off from the wall, and very slowly began to pace.

What did she know, what did she know, think, think, *think, think, think*.

In nineteen-fifty two, Tom would be twenty-six.

At twenty-six, he wouldn't have yet murdered Hepzibah, and that meant, he would have two horcruxes to his name.

His ring, and his diary.

His ring, he would, presumably, have with him, either on his person, or in his belongings. If it came to it, that would at least give her a target.

But the diary...

Hermione squeezed her eyes closed. The diary could be anywhere. In his belongings here at Hogwarts would be the first place to start, but it could be *anywhere*.

And then, other than those two, if she didn't move fast enough, he'd make two more, and—

Hermione gasped aloud, bringing her hands to cover her mouth as her thoughts reached yet another terrifying conclusion.

If Tom wasn't at Borgin and Burke's, perhaps he hadn't yet found the locket and cup. Perhaps now that he wouldn't be working with Hepzibah, he wouldn't find them, not for many, many years to come.

And that would mean... the trail might very well be lost.

Without him collecting the items at the right time, without him turning them into horcruxes at the

right time, then the surety she had in where he would hide them was lost.

Which meant that the advantage she would be able to give the Order when the war began... was also lost. Plan B was done for.

Sheer dread settled in, deep down to her bones.

With just a few offhanded words to Dippet, and a brief closed door conversation with Dumbledore... she hadn't just bugged the timeline.

She'd fucking slaughtered it.

Later on, when Hermione had recovered from her existential crisis just enough to form words, she informed Madam Spindle that she wasn't feeling well and wouldn't be able to help in the infirmary for the rest of the day.

To that, Spindle had cooed unsympathetically, and then insisted that if she wasn't up to physical duties, then she could surely help out on office duties.

That cow.

And so, hours later when the sun was just about to set, there Hermione sat, shut in the infirmary office starting down at the letters that she was supposed to be finishing off for sending to the parents of the injured students.

She hadn't finished a single one. She hadn't been able to focus all day.

Because every time she closed her eyes, she pictured Tom Riddle's smug face when he'd mocked her in the pub. She kept seeing his features, imagining how they would twist and morph into those that belonged to Lord Voldemort. Kept thinking of his fingers, the ones that wrapped around his glass of butterbeer, the same ones that would hold the yew wand that would end countless lives.

When she'd first arrived in the fifties, she imagined it in countless scenarios, her meeting Tom Riddle. In each of them, she'd imagined herself immediately recognising him, for how could she not? He'd terrorised her, and her friends, and everyone she'd ever cared about. He'd murdered too many of them to count. She always thought she'd just know it in her gut, because how could she not know him?

She just hadn't expected him to be so... ordinary. So *human*.

Harry had spoken of the Tom Riddle he'd seen in Dumbledore's collected memories on countless occasions, but not once had he mentioned how... normal he seemed.

But that was the danger, she supposed. That was why so many believed the facade, that's why so many were swayed to his side, that's why—

"Madam Granger?"

At the sudden, quiet voice, Hermione's soul just about left her body. As she jumped, her quill went soaring, landing with a clatter on the other side of the desk.

Despite the seized up state of the muscles in her neck, Hermione managed to turn around.

There he was. Not even six feet away from her, Tom Riddle, the one she'd intentionally been hoping to avoid, stood waiting patiently in the doorway. As that very morning, he looked impeccable. She hadn't heard him come in.

Hermione's skin crawled.

His lips were twisted upwards in amusement, but he didn't mention her fright. Instead, he explained, "Professor Slughorn informed me that I might find you here. He said you often work late."

She blinked, tried not to focus on the thudding of her pulse.

"Um," she managed to say. She cleared her throat, licked her lips. "Yes. Yes, I like to keep busy."

He glanced at the letters before her pointedly. "I see that."

Hermione bit her lip. While she was seated, he was not. She had to crane her neck to look up at him. Like this, feeling like she was beneath him, was uncomfortable.

"Um. I'll just—" she gestured to the other side of the desk, before she got up and stepped around it to collect her quill.

She was relieved once their heights were a bit more matched, and once there was a desk in between them. Not that a desk provided much in the way of safety, but all the same.

"I don't mean to distract you," Tom said, his voice meek and perfectly polite. "It's only, I've been meaning to catch you all day, and you didn't make it to dinner, and you left breakfast quite early. I've been wanting to apologise for the other night, at the Hog's Head."

Hermione crossed her arms without thinking about it, her eyes naturally narrowing. "Oh."

"I also wanted to tell you that although we might be of differing opinions, your article truly was exceptionally well written. You made an excellent argument."

Hermione watched him for a moment, and then glanced away.

He was perfect. His peace offering seemed completely genuine, and there wasn't a single thing that made him seem anything but.

But Hermione knew better. The only reason he'd sought her out, was because he'd made a bad first impression and he knew it. Now, he was just trying to fix it, trying to butter her up, trying to maintain his perfect image. That's all this was.

She wanted to tell him to shove his apology right back up his arse. She wanted to yell and scream at him that she knew who he was, knew what he was doing, and knew that he would fail.

But even though she would have loved to do those things, to do them would be reckless. They were the sort of things that Harry would do, had he been the one in her situation.

What she needed, was to be calm and collected. Above all, she needed him to leave her alone. She couldn't allow herself to forget that. She needed him to not spare her a second glance, she needed to *blend in*. To do that... well. Best to let him have his way, she decided. Best he think her an uninteresting, boring girl who ate up his facade like all the others.

"Thank you," she eventually murmured, forcing her lips into the shape of a smile. "I appreciate that. And... I shouldn't have snapped at you the way I did."

Tom's lips tugged upward. *Satisfied*. "That's quite all right. I dare say I deserved it."

"Well," she said, not disagreeing, but not agreeing either.

Tom nodded, and before the quiet had the chance to become awkward, he said, "all right. Well I should leave you to it. Enjoy the rest of your evening, Madam Granger."

He smiled politely and stepped back, went to leave.

And then at once, Hermione saw it. An opportunity. It was one she didn't want to take, but there was only a split second. She had to make a decision.

Oh, she didn't want to do it. She didn't want to talk to him, didn't want to look at him, didn't want *anything* to do with him, but—

"Wait," she called after him, choosing the wrong thing. For a moment, she thought she'd been too late and perhaps he hadn't heard her. But then, Tom stopped and turned back, and met her eyes. She felt sick doing it, but then, she did her best to look at him from under her lashes, the way Ginny would when she looked at Harry. She licked her lips. She hated this. "Please. Call me Hermione."

Tom's posture straightened, and then, his features formed an uneven smile. It was a charming one, a *flirtatious* one.

It was entirely disarming and it was repulsive.

"Enjoy your evening," he repeated with a slight tip of his head, this time adding, "Hermione."

Chapter 4

"Not that one!"

"Ah—sorry!"

"I told you three times, you daft girl," Kettleburn growled. "Don't pick the ones less than a foot tall!"

"Sorry!" Hermione gushed, quickly moving her sights onto the next plant. "Sorry. It looked taller from over there."

"Taller from over there," Kettleburn grumbled under his breath, scoffing as he carried on with his own picking.

Hermione sighed. That morning, she'd volunteered her time to assist Kettleburn out on the grounds collecting asphodel roots for Slughorn's potion classes.

Volunteering with Kettleburn was something she'd been doing quite often over the past year. It was a good way to pass the time. Usually, they'd work quietly together, only exchanging pleasantries and bits and pieces of gossip about Madam Spindle. Really, she quite liked spending time with Kettleburn. Of all of the professors in the fifties, he was easily her favourite. He was rough on the outside, but he had a calm air about him. He reminded her of Hagrid.

This particular occasion wasn't as pleasant as usual. She'd been snapped at four times. Not that she blamed Kettleburn. She wasn't doing a good job, and she knew it.

But she just couldn't focus! Her mind was elsewhere, and that elsewhere was, presumably, sitting up in the History classroom.

It'd been two days since Tom had approached her in the infirmary, and for the entirety of that time, she hadn't been able to stop umm-ing and ahh-ing over her options, planning her path forward.

The way she saw it, was that with Tom at Hogwarts and with any hope of maintaining the timeline that she knew in shatters, she had three pressing priorities.

The first, was obviously to prevent Tom from recruiting new followers to his cause from the student body. Limiting his number of followers was vital, as was preventing innocent and impressionable students from getting caught up in dark magic.

The second priority was to ensure he didn't decide to set the basilisk on the school once more and harm any other muggleborns. This was important for obvious reasons.

And then, the third, was to keep track of his horcruxes. Again, self-explanatory.

They were three not so easy tasks, and as far as Hermione was concerned, they all required the same impossible thing: she had to get close to Riddle.

No matter which angle she came at it from, it was the only solution she could come up with. If she could weasel her way into Tom Riddle's pocket, she could keep track of him. If she could reach his inner circle, she would be in the loop about his coming and goings. It was simple.

The only thing was, she had absolutely no idea how to actually *do* it. Being polite, being flirty,

seeming interested in him—they were great tactics for getting him to leave her *alone*. But to do the opposite... aside from telling him outright that she was from the future, and that she knew about his murders and horcruxes, she didn't have the foggiest of the best path forward.

And it was driving her *mad*.

"No, no, stop!"

Hermione's head snapped up, her hand pausing around the stem an asphodel plant.

"That one's all shriveled, are you blind?!" Kettleburn snapped. "What's wrong with you today?"

Hermione released the plant she'd been about to unroot. "Oh. Um. Sorry. I'm just a bit—"

"Give me your gloves," Kettleburn instructed, reaching his hand out expectantly. "Pass me those roots, and then you go head off to the kitchens. Go get a cup of tea and sort out whatever's wrong with you."

"That's really not—"

"You're not helping. You're only making my job harder than it needs to be. Go sort yourself out, and then you can come back another time."

"I—" she went to argue, but quickly realised there was little point. He was right. She wasn't helping, and harvesting the asphodel wasn't distracting enough. "Okay, fine," she eventually accepted, passing him her gloves.

He grunted. "And don't you come back until you've got your head screwed on."

"Thanks," she said jokingly, but Kettleburn wasn't watching. He was already back to unrooting the asphodel.

Even though he wasn't looking, Hermione gave him a wave anyway, and added, "don't put your back out while I'm gone."

He still didn't look up, but he did grunt.

A smile on her lips, Hermione started her trek back up to the castle and left him to it.

She sighed as she slowly made her way up the steep slope, her thoughts quickly circling back to what to do about Riddle.

It wouldn't be so hard, if she weren't on her own. If she had Harry, or Ron, or even Ginny to support her, to confide in, maybe she'd feel more up to the task. But here, in the fifties... she had no one.

Not even Dumbledore.

While she had a little bit of faith that Dumbledore would help to keep Tom in check while he was at Hogwarts... she just didn't trust him. While she might've trusted the older Dumbledore from her own time... she didn't know this younger version from a bar of soap.

But what she did know, was that he was manipulative, and highly interested in the Hallows. Adding the knowledge of time travel onto that... well. Her time's Dumbledore had said it himself.

Too dangerous, the Dumbledore of the nineties had warned her when they were still in the

planning process of her journey to the past. *You absolutely mustn't confide in me, no matter how tempting a familiar face may seem. I cannot guarantee how my younger self will react to such news.*

His instruction of not to alert past Dumbledore of her time travel been strict, and Hermione didn't want to disobey.

The irony of it didn't go unnoticed. She didn't trust Dumbledore, because she trusted Dumbledore.

And so, that left Hermione on her own to sort out the shambles she'd created.

Merlin.

It was a shame it was only Wednesday. She could really go for her weekly drink already.

When she reached the main entry of the castle, she almost skipped down the stairs towards the basements, intending on heading straight for the kitchens as Kettleburn had suggested. The thought of a cup of tea was quite enticing.

Aside from the portrait inhabitants, the stairs were deserted. Classes were currently in session, so the journey was quick and smooth.

That was, until she reached the Hufflepuff basement corridor. She'd barely stepped foot into it when she heard soft voices drifting her way. Feeling reminiscent of sneaking around the castle with Harry and Ron, Hermione tiptoed along the wall, and peered around the corner.

The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end.

Tom was there.

But he wasn't alone. He was with two students. They were small, mousy. They must've been first years.

Hermione's heart immediately lurched. That *bastard* had been back in the school for a measly *three days* and he was already targeting the children!

She instinctively stepped forward to intervene—

"—and we didn't mean to, but the painting just came down," the shorter boy was saying, pointing toward a large painting which was propped up on the ground, leaning against the stone wall.

"And we tried to find somebody!" the taller of the boys insisted. "But everyone was in class and there weren't any professors around, so we just..."

"Thought you'd run off?" Tom provided.

The taller of the boys looked down at his shoes. The shorter coughed.

She heard Tom sigh, and then, in the same polite tone he'd given her in the infirmary, he said, "it's all right. Accidents happen, and nobody was hurt. Here, let me show you how the paintings are fixed to the walls. Get your wand out."

Hermione ducked back a bit, behind the safety of the corner, watching the scene before her, transfixed.

The two boys drew their wands, while Tom drew his.

"Now," said Tom, facing the fallen painting, "you hold your wand like this—no, no, your grip is too tight. Just relax, be gentle. Good. All right, then, you need to direct it toward your target, give a slight flick, and— *wingardium leviosa*."

Hermione's brows drew together at the same time that her mouth popped open. He was... he was *helping* them.

Tom gently lowered the painting back to the ground. "All right, now you have a try."

The smaller of the boys scrunched his face in concentration.

"*Wingardium leviosa*."

The painting remained where it was, and Tom laughed as he stepped closer to the boys to correct their wand movements.

It was a smooth, and it sounded like caramel. Hermione scowled.

And then she turned and left, giving up on her tea. She didn't need to see any more.

With a heavy sense of dread in her stomach, it was then that Hermione realised—he was perfect.

He was perfect, and that was why he would be far more dangerous inside of Hogwarts than he would be out of it.

The students would just *love* him. He would be kind and polite and helpful, and he might even be their best teacher. They'd *flock* toward him.

And the other professors—it was clear that Slughorn and Dippet loved him. Spindle had been raving about him since Monday, as had Beery and Jigger and Poppyworth.

They would love him, and when it came time for them to either side with him or oppose him, it was clear what they would choose.

There was a good chance that Tom Riddle, helpful, and handsome, and brilliant, and charming, would be far more dangerous than a monstrous Voldemort had been.

She had to do something.

She had to.

She just... needed more time to figure out *what*.

But little did she know, the answer would come flying right into her hands.

The letter arrived for her at dinner.

She'd only just picked up her fork and started to pick at her lasagne when one of the Hogwarts owls landed neatly on the back of her chair.

Hermione gently stroked the owl's chest and took the letter from its beak. "What's this?"

She never got any letters. Usually, the only mail she ever received was her subscription to the Daily Prophet, and that always came at precisely seven-thirty in the morning.

But this one must've been right. The letter was neatly addressed to her.

*Miss Hermione Granger,
Hogwarts School of Wizardry and Witchcraft*

The owl hooted and took off from her chair, and with the blade of her knife, Hermione sliced her letter open.

*Dear Hermione,
I bet you didn't think I would, but I found your article! It wasn't easy (you didn't mention it was hidden away on page thirty-three by the daily comics), but the Librarian was up to the task! I have thoughts on what you wrote—I thought we could discuss them over coffee?
Let me know.
Yours,
M. Avery*

When she reached the end of the parchment, Hermione pressed her lips together and covered her mouth with her hand to hide her bubbling excitement.

This was it.

This short slip of parchment was quite *literally* her ticket.

Because Avery had been at the Hog's Head with Tom. That meant, he must've been one of Tom's Knights. Which then meant, that if she could get in with Avery... she could use him to work her way in with Tom.

It was perfect.

Clutching the letter safely to her chest and leaving her dinner uneaten, Hermione politely excused herself and hurried off back to her quarters. She practically ran.

Once there, she wasted absolutely no time in fishing out her best parchment and her favourite quill, and hurriedly scrawled,

*Avery,
I was starting to think your claims of writing to me were false.
I would love to get a coffee with you. I will be in Hogsmeade at midday next Wednesday if that suits you. Meet me by the Hog's Head, and we can go from there.
Yours,
Hermione.*

Hermione stared at the finished product.

Hmm.

Then, she grabbed her wand and erased the last two lines, before she altered her signature to,

*Best,
Hermione.*

That was better.

Hermione got up—and then stopped. Perhaps she shouldn't send it so soon. He might think her desperate. Did women of the fifties worry about coming across as desperate? She didn't know.

She knew the Avery family to be one of the sacred twenty-eight, but that was about all she knew about them. She didn't know if he'd be the sort to be actually interested in her. Talk of her background hadn't come up, but she was going by the surname 'Granger'. Surely it was obvious enough that she'd be half-blood at best.

Perhaps he was the sort who was looking for a quick shag. If that was the case, then maybe Avery wouldn't be her best way in, after all. Maybe it would be better to play the slow game, to tease him a little bit.

...

But then she pondered on it a little more, and decided it was too urgent. This was her best chance, and she couldn't wait. Tom would work fast. Who knew how many students he could sway in just a year? If he woke the basilisk once more, who knew how many muggleborns they could target?

And so, Hermione collected the letter and then hurried off to the owlery to send it straight off, consequences be damned.

Chapter 5

Hermione sat perched on the stone half-wall that lined the main courtyard, absentmindedly watching the students slowly trickle in.

That Wednesday was the scheduled Hogsmeade trip for the sixth years. The professors were always happy to have an extra set of adult eyes tagging along for the excursion, and so, Hermione often jumped at the opportunity to get out of the castle. But this time, with her upcoming coffee date with Avery, Hermione had absolutely no intention of helping watch the students.

She was so nervous that she barely noticed them.

Would Avery be as friendly as he'd been the night they met? What if the conversation stalled and he decided not to see her again? This was her chance at getting into Tom's circle, she couldn't mess this up.

What if he stood her up? Or, what if she got to the café, and couldn't recognise him? They'd only met briefly, what if he didn't recognise her?

And then, on top of it all—*had he truly read her article*? What did he think? Would he have found it logical, easy to read? Had he found her tone appropriate? Or—as Professor Snape had told her many-a-time—had he found it grating and overbearing? Would he want to—

"Mornin'," a voice said to her right.

Hermione almost jumped. It was Professor Beery—Herbology. He must've been one of the trip's chaperones.

"Good morning," she murmured back, giving him a quick smile before she looked away as if she'd seen something interesting off in the distance. She hoped he wouldn't stay and chat. Beery was nice enough, but he could be a bit too loud and a bit too sleazy for her tastes.

Mercifully, Beery struck up a conversation with one of the students, and Hermione was spared.

Now that she'd been brought out of her distraction, Hermione craned her neck to look further around the courtyard and scanned for the other chaperones. She found them easily enough, and as soon as she did, her stomach twisted.

Professor Shrew—Charms—was down past Beery and getting herself ready to give the mandatory 'good behaviour' spill to the students. While Beery left a bit to be desired, Shrew was an excellent choice for a chaperone. She was strict and had a voice that could carry great distances. Ideal.

But then, who really spoiled the line-up—

Riddle.

Realistically, she supposed his tagging along would probably be a good thing. It would provide a perfect opportunity to keep an eye on him. It might even give her a chance to speak with him, to plant the early seeds on getting into his circle, to skip the middleman that was Avery.

But while she knew she needed to be close to him to keep tabs on him and to get to his horcruxes, when it came down to it... she didn't actually *want* to be close to him. All of her instincts told her to keep her distance and ignoring them felt... wrong. Even being around him... it made her skin

prickle.

Hermione adjusted her weight and got herself comfortable as Professor Shrew started her lecture. As she droned on, Hermione used the time to warily peek up over at Riddle again.

He looked... he looked extremely bored.

The whole situation—*Lord Voldemort*, being lectured to about proper public behaviour by an old woman—was just so bizarre that a laugh slipped out before she could stop it.

She must've laughed too loudly though, for his eyes quickly shot across the courtyard and met hers. She hastily looked down at her shoes, but—*bugger*—the damage was done. He'd seen her laughing. At him.

Just what she needed.

Hermione was sure to focus intently on her toes for the rest of Shrew's lecture.

When it came to an end and the group assembled, she intentionally gravitated toward the back, and when they filed out, beginning the trek down to the school gates, she fell behind.

For the whole walk, Hermione dawdled, intentionally trailing behind most of the students so she could watch Riddle's movements without worry of him catching her looking again.

He was walking with a group of Slytherins. They were all girls.

Instinctively, she wondered if he needed saving.

Hermione shook that thought off as quickly as it had appeared. She didn't want to go over there. She wanted him to suffer in as many ways as possible, and if one of those ways happened to be by having to withstand the prattle of a flock of underaged girls, then so be it.

And yet... she still hadn't decided on the best course of action when it came to interacting with Tom himself.

Should she try to keep her distance, remain mysterious? Give him subtle tastes of her intellect, try to draw him to her?

Or would he respond better to overt friendliness?

Knowing what she knew of him, she'd planned to go with the former. Hint at Avery that she was interested in the founders' objects. Hint that she was having trouble with the trail of the cup, and needed some help from someone who knew a thing or two about historical objects... with any luck, Avery would set her up with Tom, and Hermione would be *in*.

But...

An irritating, nagging voice in the back of head told her not to let the opportunity go. Thousands of lives were depending on her managing to build a... *connection* with him, in one way or another, and there he was. Right there. Why did she need Avery? It was a perfect opportunity.

Ugh.

...

Ugh.

Leaving her reservations behind, for the greater good, she went over there.

"—true there will be a band, sir? Renwick said that last year there was a band."

"And Hewitt said that Professor Slughorn provided a flute of champagne for all guests upon arrival. Will he be doing that aga—"

"Excuse me, girls?" Hermione interrupted as she weaved herself between Tom and the students. "The third years are falling behind the group. Could you go back and make sure they don't get left behind in the forest?"

"But, Miss—"

"Now, please."

The girls groaned and rolled their eyes, but reluctantly fell behind, leaving her and Riddle walking by themselves.

Success.

It had never tasted so bitter.

"Riddle," she greeted, her voice sounding far more timid than she'd intended.

"Don't be ridiculous," he said quickly. "Tom."

Hermione cleared her throat and tried not to pay any mind to the smile Tom was giving her. She hadn't spoken with him since he'd found her in the infirmary office the week before. She'd almost forgotten how... nice it looked. "Right. I, uh, thought you might be in need of saving," Hermione said, peering up at him as she fell into step with him.

From this close up, she could see the beginnings of age on his skin, a neat mole high on his cheekbone, the brown of his dark eyes. He looked entirely... human. Not at all monstrous.

The hairs on the back of her neck stood up, regardless.

"Very astute," he murmured, glancing back over his shoulder to make sure the girls were out of ear shot. "If I had to hear another word about Horace's Christmas party, I might just lose what's left of my mind."

He grinned down at her.

Hermione didn't immediately understand, but then—

A joke, she realised. God, Tom Riddle... was making a *joke*.

Hermione laughed feebly.

"A good thing I was here then."

"Oh yes," he agreed, still smiling. It was flawless. Hermione felt... an irritating mix of emotions. Uncomfortable. "Do you accompany the students to Hogsmeade often?" Tom asked politely.

"Yes, actually," she replied, and not wanting their walk to fall into an awkward lull, she went on, "I like to get out of the castle. It can feel a bit claustrophobic sometimes. And it of course helps that I'm not actually a professor. All of the perks with none of the responsibility."

"You are most fortunate. They can be— oh, for goodness' sake— excuse me, one moment... *Hollis*, this is the last time; get your hands off your classmates!" Tom suddenly snapped over at a group of boys over to their right. One of them was on another's back, seemingly trying to wrestle them down to the ground.

At Tom's instruction, the boy quickly dismounted.

"Sorry," said Tom, clearing his throat.

This time when Hermione laughed, it was genuine. *Hollis* was a right little shit to all of the professors, and it seemed he was giving Riddle a hard time, too.

Good.

"That's quite all right," she said. "How are you finding it? Teaching?"

"It's..." Tom paused, a slight frown between his brows, "not all I expected."

"Oh?"

"Well, you've seen them." He gestured to the students.

Over to their left, there were a group of girls walking behind Professor Shrew. They were giggling profusely; one of them had evidently spelled Shrew's hair blue. Meanwhile, Beery was up ahead yelling at a group of Hufflepuff boys who'd spelled some sticks to charge at each other.

Hermione found herself laughing again. "I take your meaning," she said. "But surely you can't blame them. *Edwina*'s hair is much improved that way."

Tom laughed at that, and it sounded even silkier than it had the other day in the Hufflepuff basement.

She didn't like it.

She did *not*.

Slowly, as their small talk died off and they continued on following the cobbled path, they passed an old house. It was the first one between Hogwarts and Hogsmeade, which meant they were very near to the town and that their walk would be over shortly.

Thank *Merlin*. It was odd in his company. Chilling. Exhilarating. She was ready for some distance.

"Would you care to get a coffee while we're in town?"

Hermione's head snapped up. Beside her, Tom was watching her expectantly.

She blinked.

He...

Had he really just...?

"Pardon?" she squeaked.

"There's a cafe on the corner of the main street. *Elsbeth*, the owner, makes the best brew in the street."

Hermione stared.

Oh dear. She *had* heard him correctly.

A flood of panic washed over her. She didn't know the best answer.

Would it be best to say yes, stand Avery up? Or would telling Tom about Avery be best? Or, another option, should she invite Tom along with her and Avery? A *group* coffee? Or should she lie and simply tell him she's busy?

She didn't know. But what made it harder, was that she didn't know *why* Tom had asked her. She knew he didn't actually want a coffee with her. Certainly not.

So then why? She was essentially a stranger to him; he couldn't have been attempting to recruit her. But maybe he was just putting on a friendly face, working up a good reputation?

Oh Merlin, she didn't know, she didn't know, *she didn't*—

"Please, don't feel any pressure to—"

"No, no," she interrupted quickly, "um, no, that's all right, I just— ah..."

Tom continued to wait patiently.

Oh, *God*.

"Don't you have, ah, students to be watching?" she said, a feeble attempt to deflect.

He laughed and gestured over to the group of girls who were now being berated by Professor Shrew, who's hair had now been returned to its normal shade of grey. "I think Shrew can manage them, don't you?"

"Yeah, um... I guess she can. But, ah... you know what, I'm sorry," she finally said, wincing slightly. "I'm actually... I have plans to meet your friend Avery in town. By the Hog's Head."

An odd look passed over his face. She couldn't put a finger on it, but it was clear that that hadn't been the answer he was expecting. "Oh."

"Um. Yes, he wrote to me, so we're catching up," she explained. "But of course, you're more than welcome to—"

"No, no," Tom interrupted, already stepping away. "No, I'll leave you to it."

"If—if you're sure..."

He nodded. "You have a good time, Hermione. Say hello to Avery for me."

"Yes, of course I will," she said, but Tom was already walking away, re-joining the students.

Hermione's shoulders fell.

Bugger, bugger, *bugger*.

Why did she suddenly feel like she'd made the wrong choice?

Though she'd been worried she might not be able to recognise him, she needn't have worried. Avery, lanky and energetic, stuck out on the footpath like a sore thumb. He jumped when he saw her, too, waving his long arms so she could see him from the other side of the road.

"You can stop jumping now," she told him when she reached him, a little bit embarrassed by the attention his jumping was getting from the passing students.

"Sorry," he said, grinning. It was clear that he wasn't sorry at all. "Shall we then? I saw a table by the window."

"We shall."

Hermione followed him into the crowded café and sat at the table before the students could pinch it from them, while Avery ordered for them.

And despite her lowered spirits from her walk down with Tom, coffee was... good. Avery made for cheerful company, and though it very quickly became clear he hadn't understood the point of her article at *all*, she was still incredibly flattered that he'd gone to the effort to try.

It was the sort of thing Ron would've done.

He was lively, and funny, and he spoke with his hands. He had a tuft of hair toward his forehead that would bob up and down with each nod of his head, and it was charming. Endearing.

And though she decided early on in their chat that she *liked* him, she was having a hard time of focussing on their conversation.

Because Riddle was being inexplicably... *strange*.

She knew he'd have a way with people, Harry, Ginny had each told her so. But even knowing that, even still, he was going above and beyond anything she'd expected.

First, he'd apologised, which was strange enough on its own, but then, he'd gone and invited her out for coffee! It was almost as if... as odd as it seemed... that he was trying to treat her like... a *friend*.

Weird, is what it was.

"Are you all right?"

Hermione snapped back to attention. "Pardon? Oh. Oh, yes, yes fine," she said. "Sorry. Just a bit distracted."

"Oh yeah?" Avery prompted.

Hermione mentally slapped herself. She had to focus. She'd already ruined one chance. She couldn't let the start of the day ruin this meeting, too. Yes, she'd lost a chance to get in with Tom. But maybe it would be better this way. What was it they said? You always want what you can't have? Maybe her rejection would work in her favour.

"It's, uh, this article I'm working on," she said quickly, easing in to veer the conversation just the way she'd rehearsed. "I'm afraid I might've bitten off a bit more than I can chew."

When Hermione didn't add any more, Avery sipped his coffee and said, "well, go on then, don't leave me hanging."

"Um. Well... it's a historical piece, about... the Hogwarts founders," she said, watching him carefully for any reaction. "The establishment of Hogwarts, the secrets of the castle that remain to this day. Their... their lineages. You know, all of that kind of thing."

Avery raised a brow. "Sounds fascinating enough. What's keeping you up?"

"It's mostly straightforward, but it's just... each of the founders had a... well, I suppose you could say they had an *object*. One of great magical significance. There are trails on them, some that've lasted centuries, but now, they've each gone cold."

"Oh," Avery said brightly, "well then... maybe you should speak to Tom."

Hook, line, and *sinker*.

"Really?"

"Yeah, he's mad for that sort of thing." Avery waved a hand dismissively. "Worked for a few years in an antique shop, you know, Borgin and Burke's? If there's anyone with any insight... I'm sure it'd be him."

"He worked in a shop, you say?" she asked innocently. "The professors at Hogwarts speak remarkably high of him. I'd just assumed he'd come from the Ministry..."

"Yeah," said Avery. "Well, we all *thought* he'd get straight into the Ministry, and go into politics... but he's always been adamant about wanting to teach, so..." Avery shrugged.

"Fascinating." Hermione ran her fingers along the handle of her mug. "So. Tom's the one to ask, then. How long have you known him? Do you think he'd mind if I asked him a thing or two?"

"Oh, yeah, of course. Tom can be a bit... prickly at times, I suppose, but really, he's a very helpful sort of person. He really goes out of his way for someone who needs it. We went to school together, and he used to help me with my arithmancy. I absolutely would've failed without him," said Avery. "So... I suppose that makes it... thirteen years? Huh, that's gone fast."

"Wow," said Hermione as if she hadn't already known the answer. "The two of you are close then?"

"Oh, well... I don't know if I'd say that." Avery leaned back in his chair. "Tom's always been a bit of loner, you know? More interested in books, and... his knick knacks, and that sort of stuff. How did it go after, uh... after the other night? At the Hog's Head? Is he still giving you a hard time? Need me to step in?"

Hermione snorted. "Oh, no. He, um... he apologised actually. For what he said about my article."

Avery's eyebrows shot up.

"What?"

He laughed. "Nothing, I just... I would've liked to have seen that."

"Is that not like him? To apologise?"

"Riddle?" He shook his head. "Nah, I think he'd rather chuck himself off the astronomy tower than admit being wrong about something," he laughed. "But I suppose I don't blame him. I'd apologise to you too, if I'd put my foot in it."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Hermione asked, a slight frown on her brow, and it wasn't because of his flirting. No, she was frowning because of how casually Avery spoke of Tom. It was light-hearted, almost teasing. It was the way she would have expected someone to speak of a childhood friend of thirteen years.

It made her think that either Avery didn't actually know Tom nearly as well as he thought he did... or just like Tom, he was a very good actor.

She didn't yet know which she thought to be the truth, but she supposed it made the most sense that Tom wouldn't have shared a lot with his Knights. That was, assuming Avery was a Knight.

"Just that I wouldn't want to be on the wrong side of a sharp, beautiful woman, either."

"Mr. Avery," she said coyly, and though she knew she was using him and that it meant nothing, at the compliment, she was blushing. She hadn't been flirted with so boldly in years. "That's enough from you."

"I'm only being honest," he said, stacking up their cups now that they were done with their coffees and giving her a shrug. "Keep writing to me, won't you? Let me know how you go with Tom, and if you need a hand getting him to come around."

"I very well might," she said. "That's very kind of you."

"That's just the sort of man I am," he winked. "Oh, and let me know when Sluggy has another of his gatherings, yes?"

She looked at him questioningly. "I suppose I can do that."

Avery nodded. "Can't have you attending on your own, can we?"

Hermione smiled. It might've been a bit smug. "No, I don't suppose we can."

Later that day, after she'd parted ways with Avery and when the group collectively trailed their way back up to the castle, Tom didn't approach her again. He walked with the leaders of the pack, seeming to make light-hearted conversation with the students all the way up the hill.

Hermione watched him from a distance the whole way, almost mesmerised. It was plain that the students liked him already. The girls, the boys... he had a way with them, a way that wasn't like the other professors. He laughed with them, joked with them, actively engaged with them.

Seeing it gave Hermione a pressing sense of urgency. He'd only been teaching less than two weeks, and he already was getting along with the students better than she had after two years. It wouldn't take long for him to work out the brightest of the lot, the pure bloods, the pliable ones he could mould into his perfect Death Eaters.

He would work fast.

She needed to be faster.

She reminded herself that her meeting with Avery had gone well. The seeds were planted.

She would approach Riddle again, after an appropriate amount of time. She'd intrigue him with hints of knowledge of the founders' objects.

And then, as soon as she suggested that she had a lead for the cup, she'd have him right where she needed him.

Chapter 6

"Oh." Hermione stopped in her tracks, surprised. "Hello Edward. What are you doing tucked away in here?"

It was a gorgeous day. It might even be the last nice one of autumn. Not the sort of day for a fourth year to be cooped up by himself under the stairs in the Entrance Hall.

"Um. Hullo, Miss," he greeted timidly, before he went on to explain, "I've got three tests coming up this week, you see, and Mum said if I don't start improving, then I can't come home for the Christmas break." He gestured to his open textbook.

Hermione frowned.

"Potions is my worst class, too, so if I don't go over this now..." he trailed off. "And no offence, Miss, but I don't really fancy spending my Christmas with you and the rest of the professors."

"Right," said Hermione, features softening. "Well, if you need a hand with your studies, feel free to pop by the infirmary after your classes. Providing I'm free, I'd be happy to help you out."

"...Are you good at potions?"

"Good at potions?" she parroted, hands on her hips. "Please, who do you think brewed your potion the other week?"

"Oh. Well then... you'd really help me?" Edward straightened. "Thanks, Miss!"

"Of course," she said. "And if you ever would like to sit somewhere else other than under the stairs, there's a free desk in the infirmary office you could use."

Edward looked unsure.

Hermione checked to make sure there wasn't anyone else in earshot. "Cygnus would never think to look for you there," she added, finding the coast clear.

That seemed to do it. Edward nodded and smiled tightly. "Well, if you're insisting, Miss..."

"I am."

"If you and Madam Spindle really wouldn't mind..."

"Of course not, we'd love to have you."

"...Thanks."

"That's quite all right," Hermione said. "Now enjoy the rest of your lunch before the sun goes away."

"Yes, Miss."

Good deed done for the day, Hermione left Edward under the stairs and carried on circling around the castle.

She was on a mission.

It was lunch time. The weather was fine, her workload in the infirmary was good, and it had been a few days since her meeting with Avery. She knew Riddle would be free, and she had decided, that this would be the day she would strike. It was a good a time as any.

All she needed, was to find where he was hiding.

He hadn't been in the History classroom, hadn't been in the library, hadn't been in the Great Hall. She'd tried both the owlery and the astronomy tower, and now, out of other options, she was on her way out to the grounds.

He had to be *somewhere*.

She considered that he might've gone to the chamber, but dismissed that idea speedily. Surely he wouldn't risk opening it again and waking the basilisk, not so soon.

...

Hopefully not so soon, anyway.

No, he must've just been tucked away in a corner of the castle she hadn't checked yet. She'd find him.

Hermione headed out the through the side entrance of the Entrance Hall, around the winding hallway that led out into the main courtyard.

It was packed, being this time of day. Students were congregated all over, and it was a task to scan them all. Riddle often wore black, and though he was tall, so were many of the sixth- and seventh-year boys. He'd be hard to spot amongst them all.

But Hermione was up to the task. She was no quitter. She weaved between the clumps of students, eyes roaming over them all, giving quick 'hellos' to those who greeted her.

She finally made it through into the courtyard. Still no sign of Riddle. Hmm.

In the centre of the grass, she noticed a group of fifth-year girls. They were giggling amongst each other, plainly gossiping. She then noticed that that group of girls wasn't the *only* group out in the courtyard. There were two, three other clusters, all seeming to be deep in their own discussions.

Hermione continued around the grass a bit further, and—

Ah. Bingo. There, under the shade of the large tree by the well, Tom was sitting at a lone, clearly transfigured desk, with his lunch and multiple books spread out in front of him. He looked deep in his reading, seemingly oblivious to the students around the yard.

He looked a little comical, really. But that didn't calm her nerves.

All right.

All right.

She could do this, she told herself. It's just a conversation.

He wouldn't kill her in the middle of the day, in the middle of the courtyard, in the middle of all of these students. That would be ridiculous.

There was nothing to be scared of.

She forced herself forward.

"Good afternoon, Tom," Hermione said brightly when she reached him, intruding in his piece of shade. "Would you mind if I sat with you?"

He looked up, and though at first, he looked a little bit surprised she was speaking with him, his features quickly formed a warm smile. He didn't say anything, simply picked up his wand and transfigured a twig into another chair across from him.

"By all means," he said, gesturing to the new chair, and leaning one elbow onto the desk. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Oh, psssh," she sounded, taking up chair. It was sturdy underneath her weight. Solid transfiguration work. "What makes you think I want something?"

He raised his eyebrows.

There was a pause.

"Fine, you see right through me," she admitted with a nervous laugh. "I was actually... hoping I might be able to pick your brain, a little bit."

"Is that right?"

"Yes. I've received another invitation for contributing an article in the Prophet, you see, and Avery mentioned you might be able to provide some valuable insight."

He took a slow bite of his sandwich. "I'm listening."

"It's about Hogwarts, actually, and the founders. I'm sure you know—you are the History professor, after all—that each of the founders had... well, how should I put it? A special object, you could say."

She was specifically watching for it, a tell-tale sign of interest. The slight stiffening of his muscles, dilation of pupils, aversion of eye contact, but—

No. Not a single sign of any sort of increased interest. Nothing. Just an open, polite expression that one would give to show that they're listening.

He was just *brilliant*, wasn't he?

"And what, exactly, did our good friend Avery say that makes you think that I could be of use you?" Tom asked when it became clear that Hermione wasn't going to go on, a slight, maybe even playful curve to his lips.

Her heart rate pricked.

"Well... he might've mentioned that you'd spent a few years working at Borgin and Burke's near Diagon Alley, handling rare and valuable objects. That you might have some expertise on such items."

"Ah," Tom sounded, leaning slightly in on the table toward her. "And is that all Avery mentioned of me?"

Hermione frowned, a little uncertain by the question. "He... um... might've also mentioned that you have an exceptional hand at arithmancy?"

"Oh?"

"He owed his passing of the class to you."

Tom's smile widened. "By my memory, it wasn't limited to that particular class."

Hermione laughed. "You can't very well expect him to admit to all of his short fallings."

"No, I don't suppose I can," Tom conceded. "So, you spoke of me quite a bit throughout your time together?"

"Um... just... a little bit," she said, perhaps a bit too honestly. But she was quite thrown off now, and didn't know how else to answer him other than honestly. "But you *are* our mutual friend, and this was our first meeting. You're one of our commonalities. It's only natural that we spoke of you."

"A mutual friend'," he mused, a strange, vague smile on his lips. "Are we friends, Hermione?"

"I..." Hermione couldn't pinpoint his smile. She was becoming rather confused, and she was starting to suspect it was a trick question. "I would think so. Yes."

She hoped it was the right answer.

"Hmm. Well then," he said rather suddenly, breaking her eye contact to close up his books. "If you would care to come with me, then I think I might have something that could help you. You know, between friends."

"Oh." Hermione straightened, growing more uncertain by the moment. "Um. All right."

When she got up from the seat, Tom flicked his wand again, and the table and chairs returned once more to their initial state of being as twigs.

"This way," he said, putting the rest of his sandwich in his mouth as he picked up his bag. He started to lead the way back through the courtyard, back toward the entrance hall.

It was remarkably easier to get through the clusters of students with Tom with her, though Hermione had to hurry along to keep pace with his long legs.

"How was the rest of your date with Marvin?" Tom asked when they'd passed most of the students and reached the Entrance Hall.

Hermione frowned. "Pardon?"

"Our mutual friend," Tom said, and when she didn't immediately reply, he laughed. "He didn't tell you his name?"

"I..." Hermione trailed off as she realised. *M. Avery*. Of course. "It wasn't a date."

Tom looked down at her questioningly. "That's not how he describes it."

"You... now, hold on. Does that mean *you* spoke of *me*?" Hermione asked, referencing their discussion out in the courtyard.

"Ah, Hermione, you're one of our commonalities," he said, laughing loud enough that the silken tone echoed in the empty hall. "It's only natural that we spoke of you."

She blinked. He was smirking down at her. His eyes were bright.

He was—

He was teasing her. He was *teasing* her.

Tom Riddle was... *who was he?* Light, easy, carefree... was this truly what he'd been like? Is this the Tom Riddle that Dumbledore and Slughorn had known before he'd become Voldemort?

She thought she was beginning to understand it now. Why so many had loved Tom Riddle, why so many had fallen for his façade, why no one, not even Dumbledore, had truly seen Voldemort coming. If he had *her* wondering—someone who *knew* what he was, that he'd already murdered, that he'd already destroyed his soul—then what hope was there for those that didn't?

"You're quite clever, aren't you?" she said as they reached the stairs.

"Others have described me as scintillating."

Hermione gave him an eyeroll. Tom laughed again. It sounded like honey and whiskey.

As they began their ascent, Hermione took notice of the direction they were heading in, and her stomach constricted.

Was he taking her to the second floor?

No, no, surely not. *Surely* not. She hadn't done anything, hadn't made any missteps. He didn't know who she was, didn't know what she knew.

...Did he?

Oh, good, bloody Merlin, maybe he *was* taking her to the second floor. Maybe he was leading them to the girl's bathroom, and he'd lock her in there while he opened up the chamber, before tossing her down the chute to the basilisk.

Her pulse sped up. Her palms were sweaty. She should turn and run now while she still had the chance. If she took him by surprise, she could outrun him. She might even be able to get to the headmaster's office before he stopped her.

Yes. Yes, that's what she would do. She would just turn, and run, and—

But then, Tom turned again, and Hermione suddenly could breathe once more, as he continued to lead them up the next flight of stairs, up to the next floor.

She suddenly felt rather foolish.

They kept going until they reached the fourth floor corridor, and made it down to the history classroom.

He led her inside. Her nerves were bubbling again, now that they were alone in a secluded classroom. She tried not to think about it.

"Wait here," he said, quickly ducking back into the back office, leaving her by the front desk. *His* desk.

It was much tidier than Binns had kept it in his time. An unused mug was perched on the corner of the desk, holding multiple white quills. There were some spare parchments piled up nicely. His chair was lined with a velvet, soft-looking green fabric. It looked comfortable.

The desk was also conspicuously absent of personal effects.

"Here," Tom said, reappearing from the office. He offered her a small, ragged book.

Hermione glanced uncertainly between him and the book.

Tom raised his eyebrows.

Hesitantly, she plucked it from his fingers. The book didn't look like much. There wasn't a title on the worn cover, so she flicked through the first few pages, finding the initials R.R., and the year 933 scrawled on the inner page.

"Is..." Hermione gasped. "Was this... surely this didn't... did this belong to *Ravenclaw*?"

"Supposedly," said Tom. He was watching her intently, but Hermione didn't notice.

"How... how on *earth* did you get this?" Hermione asked in a daze, transfixed by the book.

"It was given to me, by one of my past clients," Tom explained.

Stolen, more like, but even knowing that, Hermione was mesmerised. She hadn't even known such a diary existed. "This is... *incredible*."

"There are handwritten notes in there, about her diadem," Tom said quietly. "It might help you with your piece. You may borrow it, for a short time, but I'll need it back when you're done."

"Yes, yes, of course," Hermione gushed, but now, she was frowning. She just... didn't understand. "I'll take fantastic care of it, I promise."

Tom watched her and tilted his head. He looked amused. "What's the matter?"

"Oh—it's nothing," she said quickly, but when Tom just raised an eyebrow, she sighed and added, "it's just... this is... *remarkably* kind of you. I didn't expect... I could be anyone, and this—" she gestured with this book, "—is invaluable. Do you really trust me with this?"

Tom gave her a one-shouldered shrug. "What are friends for? And besides, I know where you live."

It was plain in his tone that he meant it as a joke. But she thought there might've been a threat in there, heavily veiled.

"Well... you needn't worry," she said, clutching the precious diary to her chest. "When it comes to books, you can trust me."

"I certainly hope so."

The irony didn't escape her. This diary, one of his, she would protect with her life.

The other... she would give her life to destroy.

Hermione didn't sleep that night.

Not for a single minute.

She thought of Tom instead, the whole night through.

Chapter 7

Dearest Hermione,

I would greatly appreciate it if you didn't call me that.

On another note; that's fantastic, I knew Tom wouldn't let you down! Between him and the Library, I'm sure you'll be set, but do let me know if there's anything in particular you can't find. I would be happy to loan you some more reading from our family's collection.

Yours,

Avery

Dear Marvin,

I don't see why I shouldn't use your given name. You use mine, no? Do you truly expect me to be on a first-name basis with Armando, and not you?

Thank you for your kind offer. You've done enough for me already, but I still might take you up on it yet...

As a token of thanks, attached in this pouch is a small handful of powdered porcupines. I hope you like them. They're my favourites.

Best,

Hermione

Hermione watched out of the owlery balcony as her chosen owl soared gracefully over the forest, her small package to Avery on its way.

That morning was brisk; one of the first few winter mornings for the year. Up at the owlery, the cold was three-fold. Usually, she'd use a charm to keep herself warm. But this morning, Hermione opted to feel the chill.

It was refreshing. It helped her think.

After her conversation with Tom, after he'd given her Rowena's diary, Hermione had scoured the Hogwarts library meticulously, combing through the obituary sections of every issue of the Daily Prophet that'd been published over the past two years.

She'd searched for hours and hours.

Just as she'd suspected, so found no mention of a Hepzibah Smith.

Which meant that Hepzibah was alive and well, hadn't yet shown Tom either the locket or the cup, and Tom wasn't on their trail. Which then begged the question, why hadn't Riddle seemed the slighted bit interested in the founders' objects? And *why* had he given her Rowena's diary?

There had to be a reason. He wouldn't have given it to her out of the goodness of his heart. There *had* to be a reason. She just... wasn't seeing it yet.

Hermione sighed over the balcony fence, her breath forming a neat cloud of condensation. Then, she wished the nesting owls in the owlery a good day and began her descent back down into the castle.

Rowena's diary really was incredible. In it, it held a detailed description of a dream she'd had of a warty hog on a cliff, the dream that had inspired the location and name of Hogwarts. There were first-hand notes of the planning of Hogwarts itself: the changing staircases, the idea and the enchantment of the sorting hat, the argument the founders had had with Slytherin of blood purity and entrance into Hogwarts. She'd devoted a multitude of pages to the diadem alone.

It was a marvel. It should've been in a museum.

But though she judged him for it, she understood Tom wanting to keep it for himself. It was selfish and short-sighted, but she understood the desire to keep it.

What did that say about her?

"Good morning, Hermione."

Hermione jumped a little bit. "Oh. Good morning, Tom," she returned. Where had he come from? "You seem... chipper."

Tom smiled down at her, easily falling into step with her. "I've just said farewell to my sixth-year class for the week, and now, I've a free period."

"Just before lunch, too? That *is* fortunate."

"Indeed. I'm off to the library. Would you care to join me?" he asked. "That is, if you don't already have plans."

Hermione stared. The library.

He was inviting her to the library.

Of course he was.

She really didn't want to go with him. She'd been on her way to the kitchens to swipe herself an early lunch and a whole pot of tea just to herself. Her palate was good and ready.

But when an opportunity came and invited her to dance the tango, who was she to turn it down?

"Certainly," she agreed. "I could always go for a bit of reading."

"Wonderful," Tom said, the whites of his teeth visible in his smile. "How's your article going?"

"It's..." Hermione cleared her throat. She hadn't actually started writing anything at all. "...coming along," she said sheepishly.

"Would you like me to look it over?" Tom offered, ever the gentleman. "Two sets of eyes are surely better than one."

"Uhm. Maybe. Once it's in a better state."

"I won't judge you for your rough thoughts."

"Oh, but you see, I'd have to get them onto parchment first, in order for you to not judge me," she

laughed.

He nodded in understanding. "Ah. I see."

As their trip to the library fell into a lull, Hermione realised, with a pang of guilt, that she was beginning to feel a bit accustomed to his presence. He had a quiet, subtle air about him, and for the first time since meeting him, she didn't feel uncomfortable. It actually felt... normal.

The thought alone made her feel *dirty*.

"So where are you from, Hermione?"

Hermione glanced up at him in surprise. "Hmm?"

"It's occurred to me that I don't actually know the slightest thing about you," Tom said, looking down at her intently. It felt like he could see through her. "You didn't attend Hogwarts, did you?"

"No," she said, heart rate picking up. "No, I didn't. I was home-schooled, actually. My parents didn't wish for us to part during the wars, and we had a safe set up in Owesry."

Over the years, the lie had become easy.

It was less so when Tom was her audience.

But Tom nodded like all the others. It didn't seem like he doubted her. "It must be a very different environment for you here, then."

"Yes. I wonder which house I'd be in quite frequently. Which teacher I'd think the best, which subject I'd enjoy the most."

"Well, to answer two of your questions: History," said Tom, one side of his mouth picking up. "And the other... hmm..." He looked at her in consideration, head tilting slightly. "Hufflepuff?"

Hermione made a sound of indignation.

"Ah, forgive me, I forget that you're a writer. Ravenclaw?"

Hermione scoffed. "Gryffindor, I like to think."

"*Gryffindor*," he repeated, his nose crinkling. "Oh dear. I'm sorry Miss Granger, but I don't know if we can be friends anymore."

"Hey."

"You know, now that I'm thinking about it, I think It would be best if I went to the library on my own."

Before she was consciously aware of what she was doing, she gave him a nudge with her elbow.

Immediately, the very moment there was physical contact, she regretted it. But—*shoot*—it was too late. She'd done it. She'd shoved Lord Voldemort in the ribs with her elbow.

And he—

He laughed.

He *laughed*.

What world was she living in?

As they made it to the first floor and they reached the wide doors of the library, they almost ran into the man coming out of them.

"Oh—hello there, Professor," Tom greeted politely.

Dumbledore stopped in his tracks, glancing between them. "Good morning, Tom, Hermione."

"Do you think you have enough books there, sir?" Hermione asked, looking over the pile of books that was levitating behind Dumbledore.

"There are never enough books, my dear girl," said Dumbledore. Then he gave them a small nod, said, "enjoy your break," and continued his way out of the library. The stack of books followed along obediently.

Hermione glanced up at Tom in bemusement. He must've been in a hurry.

Tom shrugged, and on they went.

Though she'd been at Hogwarts in this time for two years now, Hermione still wasn't used to seeing Dumbledore so young. She hadn't had much to do with the Dumbledore of this time, and she hadn't seen him interact with Tom at all. But she was sure that regardless of Dippet's decision to allow Tom to teach, Dumbledore was still holding onto his suspicions of Tom. He must've been keeping a watchful eye over him.

That thought was comforting.

Hermione continued to follow Tom as he led them to a wide table by the windows.

"This all right?" Tom asked politely.

"It's perfect."

While Tom took out a book he'd brought with him and some writing he'd already started, Hermione pulled out a blank piece of parchment and her favourite quill. She really needed to get started on her article.

But Hermione was still distracted by the sight of Dumbledore. Had he protested to Tom teaching, she wondered? Or had Dippet made the executive decision?

He must've done, she decided. Had Dumbledore known that Dippet was considering Tom, there was no way he would've allowed it quietly.

She wondered how Tom was doing, living in proximity with Dumbledore once more. Was he uncomfortable with him around? He hadn't seemed overly bothered just then when they'd run into him. But then again, of course he didn't. Tom's mask, from what she'd seen, was perfect. Flawless. He'd built up the perfect persona, and—

Hermione straightened in her seat.

Suddenly... she could see it. All the pieces were finally, *finally* clicking into place. It was all finally making *sense*.

Why Tom had apologised to her, why he'd asked her to Hogsmeade, why he'd loaned her Rowena's diary, why he'd asked her to the library now.

She could see it all.

He wasn't interested in being friends with her—she knew that. That went without saying. He didn't care for her at all, but what he did care about... was his *image*.

All of the professors at Hogwarts were—to put it bluntly—*old*. The youngest after Tom must've been Professor Poppyworth, and she must've been in her upper forties at *best*. Which meant that while Tom got along with them, if he were to seem like their *friend*, it would seem a little bit strange.

But what *wouldn't* be strange? A friendship with the young, infirmiry assistant, the only other person residing in the castle who was his own age!

In fact, now that Hermione was thinking about it, under Dumbledore's watchful eye, it would've seemed strange had they *not* established some sort of camaraderie.

He was *using* her.

...not that she hadn't been expecting as much from him. But still, Hermione couldn't help but feel a little bit... well. Offended.

It was nonsensical. She didn't want to be friends with him, either. But she couldn't help it. It was an innate emotion. He was going out of his way to pretend to be her friend. Of course it offended her.

She wondered how far Tom would take it. He'd loaned her Rowena's diary, after all. Such a book wouldn't have had a price, and it contained valuable information on the diadem.

...

Oh.

Oh, oh, *oh*.

It contained valuable information on the diadem, she realised.

Information... that was entirely misleading.

In reality, she knew from Harry that Rowena's daughter had stolen the diadem, lost it. But in the diary, Rowena wrote of it as if she still had it tucked safely away.

And Tom—

Tom knew that already. At this point, he would have already weaselled it out of the Grey Lady. So of course he didn't mind sharing the information with her! If anything, it served him better to share it! She would publish the misdirection for all to see in Daily Prophet, and then any trace of the diadem that led back to him would be well and truly lost.

That... that *sneaky little bastard*, she thought to herself. He really was something.

"Must you do that?"

Hermione's head snapped up. From across the table, Tom was watching her. He looked... a bit annoyed.

She tensed up. "Do... do what?"

"That." He gestured to her quill.

Hermione blinked. "What's wrong with my quill?"

"You're flicking it. You're spraying little flecks of ink all over the place." Tom gestured at his own parchment in front of him. There was a single splotch of black ink in the upper corner.

"Oh. Sorry," she said, a little uncertainly. Ink. It was just ink. "Can't you just vanish it?"

Tom's lips tightened. "That's not the point."

Hermione stared. "Then what is your point?"

"That I don't want spots of ink on my parchment," he said slowly.

She didn't understand. "Then why don't you just—"

"*Because I'll know it's—*" Tom broke himself off. He closed his eyes and ran a hand along the side of his cheek. "Could you please just... not do that?"

"Um. Okay," she squeaked. "No problem. I won't do it anymore."

"Thank you."

As Tom leaned back over into his parchment and it became apparent that she was in the clear, Hermione made sure to hold her quill still, all the while fighting off a smile. She suspected that that small piece of irritation was the very first she'd seen of his true personality. The first glimmer of him that wasn't a farce.

And he was *neurotic*, she thought smugly. An irrational perfectionist.

She almost laughed remembering Avery's description of him. *Prickly*.

Prickly was accurate, all right.

It made sense that he would be. Having had grades that even she hadn't been able to surpass, it should've been obvious.

...she wondered if at some deep, buried level, he suffered from anxiety.

Now that Hermione was looking at his parchment—Tom *had* ended up vanishing the splotch of ink—she couldn't help but have a nose at what he was writing.

"Is that... are you planning your classes?"

"Yes. For my seventh years. With Binns having taught them their whole way through, for the most part, they're woefully prepared for their NEWTs."

She nodded. "Yes, he did rely a bit too heavily on the rote-learning method."

Tom stared.

"Or so I heard," she added. "I always found throughout my own studies that experiential learning was the most effective. Perhaps you could take the class for a trip out south? Let them see the sites

that are still tarnished to this day by Emeric the Evil for themselves?"

Tom brushed the end of his quill in thought. "Perhaps you should be teaching the class."

"Thank you, but no thank you. I was always had a better hand at arithmancy."

"Arithmancy?" He bit his lip thoughtfully. "I would have guessed charms for you."

"Really?"

"The most useful spells for healing are charms, no?"

"That's true," said Hermione. "But not all of us are as lucky as you and have the opportunity to work with our passions."

"You're not passionate about healing?"

"I suppose... that I'm a bit like you," she said boldly. Tom tilted his head. "I'm not passionate about the students and the monotony of the day-to-day cuts and scrapes and paperwork. But I do enjoy the magic behind the spells, the potion work, the myriad of ways there are to unravel the same curses and hexes. It's... the magic, that is... it's beautiful, really."

Tom watched her for a long moment. He ran his thumb over his lip in thought.

"Beautiful... even when you're dealing with blood and pus and broken limbs?"

"Oh, yes," she gushed. "Yes, that's my favourite sort of magic."

Tom features softened in a short laugh. "Perhaps you're right."

This time, it was Hermione who tilted her head.

"Perhaps you are a little bit like me."

Later that evening, at dinner, Hermione helped herself to a second goblet of wine. She filled the goblet to the brim.

"Hard day?" Kettleburn mumbled beside her, reaching out to pour himself a second glass, too.

"They all are, Silvanus," she drawled.

He grumbled in agreement, and they each sipped at their wine.

Over the white noise of the Great Hall bustling at dinner time, there was a low hooting sound, and moments later, a brown owl swooped in from the windows behind them and perched itself on the back of her seat. It lowered its head and offered up a thick letter.

Hermione took it and gave the owl a good stroke before it flew off again.

She then focussed on her letter, and as she pulled it from its envelope, the wax seal burst open, morphing itself into a flower.

It was a single, red rose.

"Ahh, an admirer, I see," Kettleburn teased.

Hermione frowned at him, but the colour of her cheeks gave her away. She leaned back in her chair, trying to have a good look at the letter at an angle that Kettleburn couldn't see it.

Dearest Hermione,

The difference between you and I, is that you've been received a beautiful given name. I've received the name for my grandfather, and had you had the chance to have met him, you would undoubtedly realise why I'm not overly fond of the name.

Thank you for the porcupines. I must confess, that upon receiving your gift, I finished them off before I had the chance to read your letter. They're one of my favourites, too.

I hope you like your gift.

Yours,

Avery

Hermione played with the leaves of the rose absentmindedly as she pondered the letter.

Knowing now that Tom was using her as a beard, of sorts, she realised that she didn't need Avery to get herself in good graces with Tom. She never had. It would be reasonably straightforward to tweak Tom's interest now, if she continued to play her cards right. But...

She smiled fondly at the letter, sniffed the head of the flower.

She quite liked Avery. While Tom's friendship was a farce, Avery's was refreshing. He was sweet. He felt like Ron.

And although it was clear that he was *interested* in her... the timeline was bugged anyway. What was the harm in continuing to write to him? Wasn't she allowed to be a little bit selfish? She'd given up her life for the good of the wizarding world... hadn't she deserved it?

Hermione folded up her letter and sheepishly glanced around. No one was paying her much attention. It seemed like a few of the students had noticed her rose, but she didn't mind them.

She glanced dared a glance down the Professor's table.

Tom was looking at her.

Meeting his brown eyes, Hermione had the sudden, odd feeling as though she'd been caught doing something wrong. She hadn't, she told herself. Nothing wrong at all. So, she defiantly held his eye contact. She wouldn't be the one to look away first. He'd been the one staring.

But once more, Tom didn't do as expected. Instead of staring in some sort of broody, judgemental staring match, he gestured to the rose with his eyes and raised his eyebrows up and down suggestively.

Hermione just about snorted her wine.

Tom looked away first, laughing into his hand.

And though she didn't succeed, Hermione did her best to smother her grin.

She didn't dare to look back.

Chapter 8

"Now, there are three important pieces of information you need from your poison in order to plan its antidote. Those are...?"

Edward's eyebrows screwed up in concentration. "The acidity."

"Yes."

"The... um... boiling point?"

"Yes! And...?"

"The... colour? I don't know, Miss!" he groaned.

"Viscosity, Edward!" She tapped the pages of his textbook impatiently. "Come on, you know this!"

"It's too *hard*, Miss!"

"No, it's not, you're just letting yourself become overly stressed about it!"

"I'm never gonna pass, what's the point..."

"Don't say that, you knew these answers just yesterday. Perhaps you simply need a good rest, you've been doing nothing but study lately."

Edward sighed dejectedly. "I just..."

There was an interrupting knock on the office door frame.

"Bad time to interrupt?"

Tom was at the office door.

Just what she needed.

"Um," Hermione looked back to Edward and sighed. "No, it's fine, I'm just—"

"Ah, Mr. Riddle!" Madam Spindle squawked from the other end of the office, getting up and swooping toward Tom at the door in a remarkably short space of time. "Good of you to come down and pay us a visit at last!"

Would you look at that, Hermione thought. Finally making herself *useful*.

"My apologies, Marigold," Tom said smoothly to Madam Spindle. "Coming to see you has been high on my list, but it's been a very busy transition, you see."

"Oh, *of course* dear, the workload you've been given, so close to Christmas, is just *enormous*. All those students, left in such a bad state after Cuthbert passed." She pointed a feeble, old finger. "I *told* Armando it might be too much, even for you, but did he listen to me? No, of course he didn't!"

"It's been a fair amount of work, but it's quite—"

"You ought to look after yourself, dear, look at how *pale* you're getting," Spindle said, a hand on Tom's arm. "Are you giving yourself enough time for your meals? And your sleep, are you getting

—"

"Now, now, I'm very sorry, but while I would love to stay and chat," Tom interrupted, starting to step out into the infirmary, "I've just got some students for you actually. William here has got some rather nasty boils, but I'm more worried about Garrick, I think his arm might be broken..."

As Spindle followed him out and their voices gradually became too muffled to make sense of, Hermione's attention landed once more on Edward.

He was packing his things. "I'm sorry, Miss," Edward said. "Thank you for your help, but I think I'll just head down and use the rest of my break clear my head. Might try again tomorrow."

"Yes, I think that's a good idea," Hermione agreed. "Breaks are a very important part of the learning process."

Edward looked entirely unconvinced, but nodded, slinging his backpack over his shoulder.

"Thanks, Miss. Have a good afternoon."

She waved him off, feeling a bit sorry for him.

He really was right, though. Potions just wasn't his best class.

Hermione ran her hands through her hair and spared a glance at the paperwork waiting for her on her desk. She scowled at it. But between that and joining Tom and Madam Spindle in the infirmary, it was an easy choice.

She picked up her quill to get started, but needn't have bothered. She'd only just dunked it in her ink when Tom reappeared in the doorway.

"Managed to escaped Spindle already?" Hermione said, impressed. "You absolutely must teach me your ways."

Tom smiled sideways and glanced over his shoulder. "Fortunately for me, but not so fortunately for him, Garrick's ulna is in at least three pieces. Between the bone and the nerve damage, she might very well be with him all afternoon."

Hermione winced. "That's quite an injury for a history lesson," she quipped.

"House rivalry is alive and thriving, so it would seem."

"Ah, of course."

Tom stepped into the office, leaning his tall frame on the door.

"You're tutoring now?" he asked, nodding to where Edward had been sitting moments earlier.

"I'm just helping Edward with his potions work. He's stressing quite a bit about failing his half-year quiz. Poor boy, says his mother won't let him come home unless he passes."

"He came to *you* for help with potions?"

Hermione gaped. "Why is everyone doubting my adeptness at potionmaking all of a sudden?!" she squawked. "I have been told that I'm a very talented potioneer, thank you very much."

Tom grinned and raised his hands in submission. "Didn't mean to hit a nerve. But, ah, Potioneering

would run in your family, yes?"

Hermione bit into her lip. It wasn't the first time that someone assumed her relation to Hector Dagworth-Granger.

And while she didn't exactly want to *lie*... it would be for the best that he assumed she had magical blood.

Her own personal safety, and all that.

"Something like that," she settled with. "Now, forgive me, but why does it seem that you're loitering down here? I'm starting to suspect you're only here talking with me because you're hiding from your class."

Tom's eyes rolled back into his head. "...I might be," he admitted. "My third years. They're monsters, the lot of them."

"Well, they certainly sound terrifying," she said.

His lips tightened. "It's a split Gryffindor and Slytherin class," he explained. "They throw their things across the room, they curse each other behind my back, they can't put a simple sentence together, they don't listen to a word I say—"

"A nightmare, truly."

"Yes," he insisted. "And the few students who *do* care for what I have to say don't listen to me either."

"You're surely not referring to the flock of infatuated girls who follow you around religiously at lunch times?" Hermione said, having a hard time restraining her grin.

"You've noticed?!"

"They're hard to miss."

Tom sighed. "I've had to start taking my lunch locked up in my office. Like a common hermit."

"Oh dear," she said, her giggle breaking free at last. "That truly must be awful."

Tom scowled at her. "It is," he insisted. "But I can see I'll be getting no condolences from you, so I'll leave you to it."

"All right then," she said brightly. "Best of luck with the little monsters. If they become too much, I think Silvanus might have a tin of Ernest's Fantastic Repellent you could borrow."

His scowl deepened. "You're very unpleasant, did you know that?"

Hermione laughed. "Bye, Tom."

He gave her a small wave, and then he was gone.

Finally.

She could breathe normally again.

"Oh and—" Tom's head popped back into the doorway and Hermione jumped. "You might want to

put something underneath your flower, just there," he said, pointing to Hermione's rose from Avery that she'd put in a vase on her desk. "Knowing Marvin's transfiguration skills, it'll be dropping its petals any moment now."

"Would you bugger off?!"

Tom's head disappeared again, and the sound of him laughing gradually grew fainter as he left.

Once it sounded like she was in the clear, Hermione spelled the door closed before she groaned loudly and tipped her head back onto her chair.

Merlin.

She had a problem.

An enormous one, an urgent one, one that was growing bigger by the day, and it wasn't that she was stuck in the 1950s, not that she'd been tasked with stopping a mass-murderer from mass-murdering, not that she'd fucked the timeline and allowed Tom Riddle to teach at Hogwarts.

No. No her problem, was—

She was starting to... not hate Tom.

Against all better judgement, despite everything she knew of him and everything she knew he would become; she was starting to... dare she even *think* it... *enjoy* his company.

Hermione covered her eyes with her hands, a deep sense of shame running down to her bones.

But she knew it wasn't real. She didn't like *him*, not the real him. No, it was his persona that she was starting to like. Fake-Tom.

Fake-Tom was polite, and intelligent, and playful, and witty, and handsome. Fake-Tom held doors open for others, picked up dropped objects, offered to help to anyone in need of it. Fake-Tom was a perfect gentleman, and just like all the others, Hermione felt herself being *sucked in* by him.

She thought she understood it now. Slughorn's shame, the sadness he'd get in his eyes whenever Harry had spoken of Tom. Why Dumbledore hadn't acted to stop him while he was young, despite all of his suspicions.

Slughorn had loved Fake-Tom. Everyone of this time had. Dumbledore, even, had wanted to be wrong, had wanted him to be real.

A small part of her wanted him to be real, too.

Hermione rubbed at her eyes, and tried to nip her own thoughts in the bud. Wishing and overthinking wasn't going to get her anywhere.

And it certainly wouldn't help her paperwork.

Hermione huffed, and went to get back to it.

She reached out for her pile of parchments, but stopped as she snorted.

A single rose petal had drifted down onto the desk, laying on top of the pile.

She felt a headache coming on. What she needed, what would help her to put everything into

perspective, was to remind herself of the importance of what she was doing, of the monster that Tom already was.

And luckily, there was something she'd been meaning to do which would do exactly that.

Hermione skipped dinner that night.

While everyone else in the castle was tucked up in the warmth of the Great Hall enjoying their dinners, Hermione snuck out onto the grounds and down to the main gates.

Her trusty beaded bag slung across her body, she was ready to begin.

Tom would never see it coming.

Hermione apparated from the outside of the gates and reappeared in a dark, spacious patch of an overgrown forest. There were no sources of light other than the moon and stars, and so it took her a moment for her eyes to adjust.

When they did, she was struck by the enormity of her surroundings. It made her grateful she'd left so early in the night. She'd have hours to poke around.

Which was good, because she didn't actually know if what she was looking for would be there. Dumbledore had said that he believed that once Tom turned the ring into a horcrux, he lost the desire to wear it. Since meeting Tom, Hermione had never seen him wearing his ring, so at the very least, it was a sensible idea that he'd already hidden it away in the Gaunt shack.

And there was already a good sign—as Hermione started to trudge up the hill, she couldn't see any shack in any direction. Which meant, that if Tom had already magically concealed it, there was a strong probability that the ring was there. Why would he protect it otherwise?

The shack, she'd been told, should be located in the centre of three main landmarks of reference. One, was an extremely large, dying willow tree out toward the path where it split into a fork, near the foot of the hill. She saw that one easily enough, over to her left.

The next point was a rundown brick wall to the right of the willow tree, in the middle where it had started to fall. She had a bit of trouble spotting it between the bushes that had overgrown, but eventually, she was confident that she found it. And the last...

That was the one she had the hardest time spotting.

Dumbledore had said to look out for a moss-covered, pile of rocks with a fallen log on top.

The problem was that there were plenty of moss-covered rocks. Too many to count. How would she know which were *the* pile of rocks?

But as the night started to wane on, having already found two of the reference points, Hermione

decided to give up on the rocks and try to feel out the space between the other two landmarks.

Surely she'd find a trace of magic eventually.

With her wand in one hand, she closed her eyes and reached out with her free hand.

Then, she went in circles.

She circled and circled, and circled some more. She must've been at it for an hour, maybe two before she thought she might've felt... something.

It wasn't much. She wasn't even sure if it was magic. But her wand seemed to respond to *some* sort of energy, and so, she tried to follow it.

She followed it further up the hill, much closer to the willow tree than she'd previously looked, and

There. She could feel it. It was subtle, though, and had she not been looking for it, she never would've known there was such strong magic hiding right in front of her. But years of experience told her that something was undoubtedly there.

She felt it out some more, side-stepping until she found a spot where the magic felt just a bit more *potent*. Then, she pointed her wand. "*Finite*."

After casting, Hermione opened her eyes.

And there was the shack.

She covered her mouth to stop herself from laughing.

Oh, *Tom*. Such a basic concealment charm. How arrogant. How foolish.

How like him.

Hermione gripped her wand a little bit tighter and took a deep breath, carefully approaching the half-broken front door. Dumbledore of her time had warned her of what protective enchantments to expect... but she held on tightly, just in case he'd missed one or two.

When she reached the door, Hermione didn't try the handle; she already knew it to be useless.

"*Ghe-has she-ha*," she hissed, repeating the term she'd seen Ron use in her memory.

Nothing happened. Hmm. Maybe if she...

She tried the handle. It didn't budge. *Damn it*.

Hermione hissed again.

And again.

Still, nothing happened.

Fuck.

In her own time, she'd practiced the term until she was flawless. Dumbledore had said so himself!

But Dumbledore had also advised that if she had trouble, she could do what he'd done: find a

snake, put it under the Imperius curse, and get it to hiss at the door for her. But it was the middle of the night at the start of winter; how the hell was she to find a snake?

Hermione breathed in and out, and tried to think of Harry. Harry's use of parseltongue had been smoother than Ron's imitation, and though she'd not heard Harry hiss the word 'open' with her own ears, he always seemed to drag out his 'h' sounds.

She gave it a try. "*Ghe-hhhas she-ha.*"

There was a quiet click.

Yes.

Hermione tried the handle. The door opened.

Yes, yes, yes.

Inside the shack was pitch black. Hermione spelled her wand alight, and as soon as she did so, she just about wished she hadn't.

The shack was *littered* with cobwebs, moss, and bone, and it *stunk*. There were bones the size of a rodents, those of a snake, some as big as a sheep or a dog. Gross.

She stepped deeper into the shack and tried not to think about it.

Dumbledore had told her the box was kept underneath the floors in the middle of the main room, under rotting panels.

Hermione wasn't sure which spot to aim for. All the panels looked like they'd started rotting to her, and so, she aimed her wand right in the middle of the room and shielded her eyes. "*Bombarda!*"

A loud bang and shards of rotting wood burst through the air. She'd protected herself well enough, but—*bugger*—the dirt and moss and broken bone that'd been displaced from the spell made a thick, toxic cloud of *ick*.

She coughed and hacked and gagged for a good while before her lungs were clear enough for her to cast a vanishing charm.

And—sweet Merlin—there it was!

Down in her freshly made hole in the floor, right where Dumbledore had said it'd be, sat a small, golden box. It had flipped over in her explosion and it wasn't particularly shiny, but it must've been the one.

Hermione stepped cautiously down into the hole she'd made and crouched by the box. She had a sudden, strong urge to touch it, but knowing better, she squashed it down and unlatched the lid with a flick of her wand. The box itself didn't seem to have any protections on it, but as she opened the lid, she understood why.

The small, dark ring tucked inside the box was practically screaming at her, *touch me, I'm cursed.*

Staring down at it—such a small, innocuous thing—she felt another wave of sadness.

Part of his *soul* was in that.

But she shook the thought away. She wouldn't let it distract her from the task at hand. She had to

get the ring into her belongings, and she had to do it *safely*.

Tom and Dumbledore both—they'd been stupid, really. They'd thought like *wizards*, and it had caused both of their respective demises. But Hermione—no, she was prepared.

From in her beaded bag, she pulled out several things. One, was solid metal container, one which she'd warded with her own charms to contain the curse that Tom had put on the horcrux. The next, were a pair of thick, dragon-hide gloves. And the last item...

Was a long pair of muggle fireplace tongs.

Hermione got the box ready for the ring and slipped her gloves on. Then she picked up the tongs, and took a long, deep breath.

If it didn't work, she was as good as dead.

She really, really hoped that it would work.

Wincing, she reached out with the tongs and picked the ring up.

Nothing seemed to happen. Nothing at all.

A-ha!

Hermione giggled out loud as she successfully pulled the ring from the box with the tongs, completely unimpeded.

Tom, Tom, *Tom*, she thought. Outwitted by a pair of cast-iron tongs!

Not so brilliant now, are you?

With the ring tucked safely in its new box, Hermione warded it closed, and transferred it back into her beaded bag, tucking it safely away.

She let out the breath she'd been holding.

That was one down.

Now it was just the diary. She didn't know where in hell to start searching for the diary, but she'd figure that out, soon enough.

Then, once she had them both, she would have to find a way to destroy them, all *before* Tom had a chance to get to the locket, cup and diadem. Godric's sword wouldn't be embedded with basilisk venom in this time, so she'd have to come up with something else. She had a few ideas, but... she had a bit of time. She'd work on that, too.

In the meanwhile, she would have to cross her fingers and hope that Tom didn't decide to come and check on his ring. She'd done a real number on the shack, and she wasn't about to go fixing it. But, knowing Tom, he would think his defences immaculate, and wouldn't see the need to check on it.

That was what she hoped, anyway.

Hermione left the shack and took the fresh forest air deep into her lungs. Then she turned back to shack and re-cast the concealing charms she'd taken down.

Hermione tried not to think about the hardest part of it all, the part that would come after she found

Tom's diary. Getting to Tom himself.

She didn't know how she would do it. She'd never *killed* before.

But she would think of Harry, and Ron, and Dumbledore, and the Weasleys, and all she'd lost in her own time.

She could do it for them.

She *would* do it for them.

Chapter 9

Hermione sat on her bed, staring down at the wooden panelling of her wall.

She thought she could hear a heartbeat.

Thump thump, thump thump.

She'd taken the idea from Tom himself, hiding the ring away behind the panels. But still, even with it inside of an enchanted metal box, and behind a layer of wall...

Thump thump, thump thump.

Ugh.

She got up. Regardless of whether the sound was in her head or not, she didn't want to be anywhere near the ring anymore.

It was for the best that she got out of her room anyway. She'd been thinking over her next steps for days, and it was well past time for her to *act*. Now that she had the ring, she needed to get somewhere with the diary, and to do that... she needed to get somewhere with Tom.

What she needed to do, was to tweak his genuine interest. Get him not so interested that he started to *suspect* her of anything, but interested enough to try to recruit her to his cause. Her main issue though, was that in order for her to get there, to the sweet spot, she couldn't overplay her hand. She had to be careful and controlled with every bit of information she gave him. There wasn't room for error.

The lives of her friends, her family, the entire wizard of world depended on it.

No pressure at all.

That evening after dinner was when she'd strike. When all of the classes were finished, and she could get him alone.

She'd give him enough to tell him that she wasn't useless. That she had potential, that she could be an asset.

She just hoped that it would be enough.

Hermione paced up and down the fourth-floor corridor nervously for a good five minutes, before she told herself she was being ridiculous, and forced herself forward.

She could do this. She just had to make sure she didn't think about the ring.

She brought her fist up and knocked on the classroom door and then, without waiting for any response, she opened it and—*whoops*.

The classroom was half full of students, and at her intrusion, all eyes turned to her. Tom's eyes

found her as well.

Like a deer caught in headlights, Hermione waved in apology and went to leave, but from behind the front desk, Tom signalled for her to stay.

Hermione cleared her throat and waited awkwardly in the doorway as one by one, the students turned back to their work and Tom made his way over to her.

"Sorry," she whispered sheepishly when he reached her. "I didn't think you'd have a class just now."

"I don't," Tom said, leaning a slender arm on the wall next to her. "This lot's in detention."

Hermione's eyes widened. "*All* of them?"

"Yes," he said firmly, not leaving space for question.

She wondered if they were his monstrous third years he'd told her about.

"Huh," Hermione settled with. She watched them as they worked silently, seeming to be sequentially sifting through boxes. "What are they...?"

Tom looked in the same direction. "Sorting through all of Cuthbert's old files. One by one." He grinned at her. "By hand."

"Merlin, Tom. Ruthless, aren't you?" said Hermione, trying not to laugh. "I think I'd rather be out in the grounds strung up by my thumbs with Pringle."

"Oh, without question," Tom agreed, "any day of the week. Now, what can I help you with?"

"I was actually hoping to speak with you about some of my research for my article. But I can see that you've got your hands full, so I'll just come back another time."

"No need, it's fine. We can talk now," he said.

"Oh. Um..." Hermione glanced uncertainly at the students. They were a good distance away, but still... "I don't know if... I mean... I'd rather that the students didn't... you know."

Tom raised his eyebrows. "Well now you're only further piquing my interest," he said. "Don't worry. They won't hear anything." He winked.

Merlin. He winked.

But regardless of whether they could hear her or not, Hermione didn't much want to speak to him anymore. The students had thrown her off. They weren't meant to be there, and with the distraction, she wasn't sure if she could trust herself to say what she'd planned and deliver it believably.

But Tom was looking at her now, brightly and intently, and she had to sell it to him that she was brave, strong, clever and dependable. Backing off now might very well ruin her chances of doing that.

Hermione swallowed.

"All right then," she said slowly. "If you're sure..." Hermione watched the students while she spoke. She supposed it was best not to hold his eye contact longer than she needed to. Just in case.

Especially now that she had his ring.

"I looked through the records here, from the library, and I couldn't find very much useful information into the founders' genealogy. But then, Avery was kind enough to loan me some of his family's records, and it seems there are only two familial links that remain to the original founders. The Smith family, to Hufflepuff, and... the Gaunt family, to Slytherin."

Tom lifted his chin in a slow, controlled nod. "It seems," he said, "as though you've found a fantastically useful friend in Avery."

He sounded more annoyed than she'd been expecting. Shit. Had she pushed too far already? Was the mere mention of the Gaunts too much?

"Yes, it would seem I have," she agreed, opting to continue carefully. "But the issue now, of course, is that Smith has become a disgustingly common name, and the last of the known Gaunts has recently been locked away in Azkaban for the rest of his life."

Tom was staring down at her. The weight of it was intense and she felt like she was walking on very thin ice. Her palms were getting sweaty.

"Issues, indeed," he murmured, folding his arms over.

"But..." she whispered carefully, testingly, "as I'm sure you know, there is... *one* other descendant of the Gaunt family who might be able to help me."

Tom didn't look away. He didn't even blink.

The classroom full of witnesses didn't do a thing to calm her.

"I was thinking..." she went on, doing her best to ignore her nerves and light up her eyes, "that we should speak to Hagrid."

Tom's stillness broke and he made a scoff-like sound. "Hagrid?"

"Who could give better insight into what's potentially happened to Slytherin's locket, than the heir himself?" she asked, her voice quiet and excited. "Maybe he knows where it is. Maybe he even has it. And—could you imagine, Tom—" she said, a light touch to his upper arm, "if we could get him to talk, we might even find the *chamber*."

Tom looked away. He smiled in amusement, but then bit his lip and suddenly said in a projected tone, "all of you, continue what you're doing. I will be just outside in the corridor. You can trust that should any of you put so much as a finger out of line, I will know about it."

There was a chorus of, "*yes, sir*."

Well, shit.

With a light grip on her forearm, Tom guided her out into the corridor. When the classroom door was closed, he turned on her.

Hermione could feel her heart in her throat.

She wasn't comforted by the presence of the corridor's portraits.

"Find the locket?" he hissed. "Find the *chamber*? Are you hearing yourself? These are things that far better witches and wizards than you have devoted their lives to for centuries. What makes you

think that you could even come close to—"

"Don't you *want* to find them?" she countered. She couldn't back down. She *couldn't*. "I've been thinking about it ever since you loaned me Ravenclaw's diary, and I think I've figured it out. It was a test. Wasn't it?"

Tom blinked, clearly thrown off. "A test?"

"Why would you give it to me? The diary itself is... it's an artefact. It belongs in a museum, where it could be studied by scholars and historians, and used to study the mysteries of Hogwarts and the unique magic that lives here. But instead of turning it in, instead of donating it, you've kept it to yourself, and then you loaned it to me. And I've been thinking about it ever since. Why would you let me, almost a stranger, borrow such a precious thing?" she said. "It was a test of character, wasn't it? You wanted to see what I'd do with it."

He didn't say anything, but she could just about see the wheels turning behind his eyes, so she went on.

"So I've decided: I'm not going to publish anything from the diary, or anything about it. It's best that it remains buried. With you—with *us*, I mean... it's appreciated and it's safe. Not all would appreciate it the same way. And the locket, the cup, the chamber... I don't want to write about them, either. Just like the diary, they wouldn't be appreciated. I just want... I want to *see* them. I want see the magic, I want to walk where they walked, I want to *know*."

As Hermione took a deep breath after her rant, Tom closed his eyes, and then he reached up and held the bridge of his nose.

He sighed. "And I take it, you're not just here because you wanted to talk to me about all of this?"

"Well... not exactly, no. I was actually hoping you might be able to help. I've only spoken with Hagrid once or twice, but you went to school with him. He's known you for years. He might be more open with you."

"I think you'll find that I'm the very last person he would care to speak with," he eventually said. "What about Avery?"

At the unexpected question, a laugh slipped from Hermione's mouth before she could stop it. "What *about* Avery?"

"Why aren't you running off to him for help?"

She frowned, genuinely thrown off. Why was he bringing up Avery? "I—he doesn't appreciate these things the way you seem to," she said. "You've met him. He'd take one look at Slytherin's locket or Rowena's diadem, and think them nice pieces of jewellery, and then continue on with his day!"

"Have you spoken to him about it?"

"Not... not like this," she said uncertainly. Was that the answer he wanted? "He doesn't know I want to speak with Hagrid, or that I want to find the objects."

Tom exhaled in an exasperated sort of way and glanced down the corridor in thought.

"While your passion is... admirable, and while I can see where you're coming from," he eventually murmured, "it's all for naught. If Dippet and Dumbledore and all of the Ministry's Aurors couldn't

get Hagrid to speak of the chamber, then I don't think you'll have much luck."

Tom's features were infallible. Had she not known the truth of Tom's lineage, of what had happened with the basilisk, she never would've suspected anything was amiss.

He was perfect.

"Ah, but Tom, you underestimate me."

"Do I?" he asked in a rather flat, sceptical sort of way.

"Like I said," she elaborated. "I'm an excellent potioneer. I have my ways of making one spill their deepest and darkest secrets."

With that, Tom's sternness finally broke, his lips twisting upward in the corner of his mouth. "Hermione," he drawled. "That's illegal."

She shrugged, biting down into her lip. "Are you going to tell on me? After I've so loyally promised to keep the diary between us?"

He laughed then. It was smooth and silken and loud, and in the quiet of the corridor, with the acoustics of the high ceiling, the sound enveloped her.

It... wasn't entirely unpleasant.

"I admit that your resourcefulness is impressive, but the Ministry would've already tried veritaserum, all those years ago," he said.

Hermione looked toward her shoes. This was it. If her next words didn't hook him... she wasn't sure what would.

She felt as though she could vomit.

"But, if Hagrid's an occlumens... that's not the only thing we could try," she murmured cautiously, glancing up at him through her lashes.

Tom watched her. There was something about his expression. He looked curious. Thoughtful. Hungry, even. Her blood was bubbling beneath her skin.

"The... Imperius curse could be used to get someone to speak."

He licked his lips. "The Imperius curse," he repeated, as though he were making sure he'd heard her correctly.

"Yes." Hermione held her chin high.

Tom twisted, glancing around the corridor as if checking to make sure they wouldn't be overheard. Then he stepped closer, leaning his arm against the wall.

It was the closest Hermione had ever been to him. She could make out the individual hairs of his eyebrows, each his eyelashes.

She had goosebumps.

"You know how to cast the Imperius curse?" he asked in a murmur.

"I grew up in war-torn London," she said, just as quiet as he'd been. "I know my fair share of... questionable curses."

He laughed again, and this time, the sound felt tangible. Like it was running over her skin. Merlin. She couldn't breathe this close to him. Couldn't think. Not when he was smiling like that.

They stood in silence, and the pause dragged.

"All right."

Hermione blinked.

"All right...?"

"I'll help you speak with Hagrid," he murmured. "Like I said, I don't expect he'll want anything to do with me, and I'm sure the Ministry had been thorough all those years ago, but..."

Hermione smiled a smile of relief. She felt like she could breathe again.

Gotcha.

"Thank you. I really appreciate it, and... you can trust me," she whispered. "I think this will work, and with any luck, the locket, the chamber... they'll be within our reach in no time."

His eyes were bright. He looked amused. He probably thought her pushing in Hagrid's direction—in the wrong direction—was hysterical.

But she would be the one laughing though, in the end.

"Optimistic," said Tom, smiling down at her. "I think you're wrong. But you make a compelling case, and I'll try to help you, where I can."

"We will see," she said, trying her best at playfulness. "Well... I'll find you later, when you don't have a class full of students, and we'll... plan."

He gave her a small nod. "I look forward to it."

They were still uncomfortably close. Tom didn't step away. Why wasn't he stepping away?

Hermione cleared her throat and stepped back herself. "Thank you," she repeated. "I'll, um... I suppose I'll leave you to enjoy the rest of your evening with your monsters, then."

Tom still hadn't moved. He was looking at her really... strangely. "I'm starting to think they might not be half as frightening as you."

She bit into her lip, forced herself to laugh. "Maybe you're right."

Tom gave her a wide smile, and her heart skipped a beat. "Good night, Hermione."

Then, he ducked back into the classroom without a look back, and it was only when the door had fallen shut and she was alone again, that Hermione bent over, resting her hands on her knees.

She took in a series of deep breaths.

She'd done it. For a moment there, she thought he wouldn't bite, but... she'd really done it. And while he hadn't given her the truth, and while it wasn't the ideal response she'd hoped she would

get from Tom... it wasn't a rejection. He was allowing her to pursue Hagrid as, most likely, a test of skill and trust. He wanted to see if she could use the Imperius curse, if she truly was the witch she claimed to be, and he wanted to see if she would trust him with her casting of the curse.

She wouldn't let him down, and then, with any luck... he'd see her as the asset that she was, and she'd be in.

Hermione started toward the grand staircase with a grin on her face, intending on venturing down to the kitchens to get herself a well-earned glass of something alcoholic.

The game she was playing with Tom was a slow one, she had to remind herself.

And she was playing to win.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"This way, if you please, Miss Granger," Slughorn called, directing Hermione through the main doors of the Great Hall.

Hermione trotted along obediently, levitating her tree in nicely behind the one Slughorn was managing.

"Now, we want to line them up against the rear wall, one tree between each set of windows."

"No problem, sir."

She levitated it in, turning it and lowering it into place next to Slughorn's.

"A touch more to the right," Slughorn instructed, "a bit more, a *bit* more—yes! Wonderful!"

Slughorn clasped his hands together, admiring the positioning of the trees. "Perfectly festive," he declared, before he turned on the students who had volunteered to help string up the decorations. "Not those ones, Peter, the red ones! It has to be, gold, red, green, gold, red, green..."

Hermione watched as Slughorn shuffled down the hall, barking more orders as he went. She was starting to regret her decision in volunteering to help set up the decorations. Slughorn's perfectionism when it came to party set ups was a sort of stress she just didn't need, but she tried to remind herself that she hadn't volunteered because she's wanted to help.

No, she'd volunteered, because Hagrid was there.

Speaking of which...

"Do you have another tree for me Hagrid?" she asked brightly as Hagrid tugged another two trees into the hall.

"These are the las' of 'em, 'Ermione,"

She was feeling guilty. Young Hagrid of this time had been nothing but kind to her, and there she was, plotting putting him under an unforgivable curse.

But, she told herself, if Hagrid knew why she was doing it and knew what was at stake, he would see it her way. The curse wouldn't hurt him, and when she was done, she'd simply remove his memory of it ever happening. No harm would be done, and in the process, she would be gaining Tom's favour. He would probably have even offered to be cursed.

It was a solid plan, and it was for the greater good.

"Thank you," she said, levitating the last of the trees over to the rest that had been lined up.

Once they were up, Hermione registered that Slughorn wasn't wrong. The Christmas set up of the Great Hall was beginning to look *most* festive.

This year, for the first time since her arrival in the fifties, Hermione was grateful for Christmas. The students would be out of the castle where they would be safe from Tom's manipulations and

his basilisk, and she would have some time to work on worming her way in with him without the interruption of his classes. It'd be perfect.

With all of the trees in their places, Hermione made quick work of placing each of the tree-toppers Slughorn had put aside for them. Meanwhile, the fourth years who'd volunteered to help quickly got to work on hanging the decorations, giving her a good opportunity to sneak back over to where Hagrid was collecting the loose fallen tree branches.

"Hey, Hagrid?" she called out before Slughorn had a chance to redirect him elsewhere.

"Mmm?"

Of all the young versions of the people she used to know, Hagrid was by far the most striking. He was just as tall, but not nearly as wide as his older self. He didn't yet have his signature beard, but his cheeks were full and flushed, and he had the same caring, wide eyes that she remembered. She softened every time she looked at him.

"I was just wondering whether you might be free this evening, by any chance?" she asked, picking up one of the branches for him. "We haven't had much of a chance to catch up lately, so I was thinking it might be nice to have a cup of tea, have a little bit of an end-of-term celebration?"

Immediately, surprise crossed his features, but the look was rapidly replaced with one of joy.

Her heart panged.

"Tha'd be lovely!" he said cheerily. "Yer welcome ter come down ter me hut anytime, but the kitchens migh' have a few more choices."

"Your hut would be just fine!" she said before he could decide any differently. "I'll come down after dinner, before curfew?"

"All righ' then. I'll make sure ter have the fire goin'."

"Great," Hermione said, and seeing Slughorn starting to wave her down from across the hall, she gave him a nod. "I'll see you then."

Hagrid gave her a wave and started to hum happily to himself as he continued working.

And while Hermione's guilt was weighing her down, at Hagrid's acceptance, she also had a budding sense of... excitement.

It was all coming together.

Hermione tried to catch Tom's eye.

She bounced on her toes. She waved a hand. She jumped up and down, but—no. Either he genuinely didn't notice her, or his discussion with Professor Shrew was just more interesting than her.

Hermione sighed and made herself comfortable leaning against the staircase. She would wait. They'd finish chatting eventually, and she would just have to catch him when they did.

She examined her fingernails to pass the time. They were looking stubby lately, and the sides of a few of her fingers were bleeding from where she'd been picking at them out of nervousness. Healing them had become almost a daily chore that she'd gotten rather good at. Her cuts barely left any scarring anymore.

"G'night, Miss," one of the students said as they passed her, heading up the stairs.

"Good night, Florence," she called back.

"Good night, Miss."

"Good night, Eunice."

The girls giggled all the way up the stairs, the high pitch shrill echoing all the way down. Hermione winced. Ugh. She couldn't wait for empty castle that came with the term break.

"See you later, Miss."

"Have a good night, Kevin."

"Bad night?"

"Good ni—oh. Hello."

Tom was smirking at her. She wished he wouldn't do that.

"Were you waiting for me?" he asked, his tone entirely too inviting.

She crossed her arms. "Yes," she said a bit irritably. "We have plans this evening."

"Do we?"

"Yes."

He looked at her blankly.

"We're going to get some *tea*."

"Tea?"

"With *Hagrid*?"

Tom laughed. "Ah. Was that today? You work fast, don't you?" he said, and then started in the direction of the grounds. Hermione scurried along after him. She felt like a puppy.

"Sorry. Do I need to slow down for you?" she asked teasingly, even though she was the one hurrying to keep up with him.

"I didn't say that," Tom murmured, amused. "I've just not had the privilege of coming across a woman quite as... determined as you before."

She scoffed. "You mustn't have met many women then."

"Not like you, no."

Hermione didn't know how to answer that, so she didn't.

Most of the students had headed off to their dormitories for the night already, and the corridors were, for the most part, empty. But despite that, and despite the dim lighting the candles provided, Hermione didn't feel particularly uncomfortable with Tom. It was like walking with a friend.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, she knew that was a problem.

She'd think about that later.

"I've been thinking about you," Tom said as they made a left down the courtyard hallway.

Hermione just about tripped over her own feet then and there. "What?" she squeaked.

"That you must've had an interesting upbringing," he clarified, another hint of amusement in his words.

"Oh." Hermione cleared her throat. "What—um. Whatever do you mean?"

The grounds past the courtyard were pitch black. Stepping out into it, alone with Tom, she finally started to feel the unsettling sensation of *vulnerability* setting in.

There. That was better.

"Wherever did someone like you come to learn a spell like the Imperius curse?" he elaborated as though it was a perfectly regular subject of conversation.

Oh. Oh dear. Why was he asking that? What if revealing that she knew the Imperius curse had been too forward? What if he thought her knowledge of the Gaunts was too much, and he decided she was too big a liability? Or worse, what if he decided to use Legilimency, and her Occlumency wasn't a match for him? It wouldn't be hard once he was in—he'd find out she'd stolen his ring, and then she'd be well and truly bugged.

And alone in the gardens—this would make a perfect opportunity for him to silence her, and there she was, going with him willingly!

But Tom wasn't showing any signs of turning on her. He didn't even have his wand in his hand. He seemed perfectly relaxed, perfectly his Fake-Self.

Hermione cleared her throat. "Someone... like me?"

He smiled down at her, looking her down and up. "Yes. Someone like you."

Hermione, now nervous *and* mildly offended at the idea that he would judge her magical ability by her gender, frowned.

"It was my childhood friend who taught me," she explained. "His name was Harry. We were... how should I put it... backed into a corner. He'd been under the Imperius curse himself, multiple times, and we were out of options, so... he resorted to using it. Later on, once we were safe, he told us about it. How in order to cast it, one must exert their will and overpower that of their victim, how it's easier when it's unexpected."

Tom's eyes were on her. They hadn't left her at all while she'd been speaking, and it was difficult to see his features in the dark.

"I thought you said you grew up in a safe house," he said.

"I did. But like a lot of things, the safe house was only temporary. My mother was a muggle, you

see," she answered honestly. The best lies were honest ones. "And Harry's mother was muggleborn. Our families fled the city when the war really picked up, when I was very young. But my friend Harry was wanted by Grindelwald himself, and our families were followed. We had the fortune of meeting many of Grindelwald's... *associates* over the years."

"Hogwarts was one of the safest places in the country throughout the war," said Tom. "Why didn't you come here?"

"My parents spoke about it often, but... we didn't want to be separated, and I couldn't bear the thought of going to school only to find no family left to come back to. So I never did."

They continued their way down the hill for a moment, until Tom murmured, "I understand."

Against all her better judgement, Hermione found herself softening. She was sure he did understand. Life at the orphanage over the summer in the middle of both wizarding and muggle wars must've been... hard.

They were approaching on Hagrid's hut now. Hermione could make out the firelight flickering in the windows. She wondered if his home was as cosy as she remembered it being.

She had a bit of anxiousness about the logistics cursing Hagrid. As a half-giant, he was a bit more resistant to magical insults than your average human. But she didn't need long, she reasoned. Fifteen minutes under the curse would probably do the trick, and if the spell didn't hold, she could just cast it again. It would all be fine.

"You all right?" Tom asked.

"Yes."

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Absolutely," she said brightly, meeting his eyes. "Are you?"

Tom's eyes were alight, aroused, like a cat about to pounce.

Her stomach twisted. He was beautiful like that.

"Absolutely."

Hagrid's wooden door—looking a great deal newer than she remembered it being—opened with a loud creak. "Hullo, 'Er—" Hagrid stopped speaking the instant his eyes landed upon Tom. "Wha's he doin' here?"

Hermione glanced between them. "I-I thought we might all be able to catch up together? Tom mentioned you hadn't spoken in years, and—"

"Yeh're not welcome here."

From beside her, Tom shrugged in a 'see?' sort of way.

"Can't we just sit down and discuss things? We can get to know each other Hagrid, and especially

as we all work together, I thought you and Tom might be able to work past your differences."

Hagrid didn't immediately speak, but the muscles around his jaw tightened. "Goodnigh', 'Ermione," he eventually said, and went to close the door.

But Hermione shot her foot out, wedging it between the door and the frame. Then, she glanced around them. All around Hagrid's hut was pitch black. There didn't look to be anyone watching.

So she gripped her wand, stood straight and outstretched her arm, her elbow as straight as her spine. Then, without hesitation, she said surely, "*Imperio*."

Hagrid's features relaxed and his shoulders dropped by a good several inches. His eyes became vacant.

Invite us in, she willed.

Hagrid smiled. It didn't meet his eyes. "Cup o' tea?" he offered vacantly, opening the door wide once more.

Hermione gave him a warm smile. "That would be wonderful," she chirped.

She then followed Hagrid into the hut, looking over her shoulder to see Tom trailing close behind.

He was smiling—grinning, really—and it was different to the usual smile he wore. It looked genuine. Uninhibited. It was surprised, impressed, amused and greedy, all rolled into one.

And she'd done that. Hermione swelled with pride.

While Hagrid shuffled around the kitchen corner of his hut, Hermione tip toed through the hut, leading Tom over to his oversized couch. When they sat, they were close enough that she could feel the heat radiating from Tom's body.

She tried not to think about it.

Hagrid prodded at a large black kettle with his umbrella. It whistled loudly.

"You're honestly wanting tea?" Tom asked from beside her, eyeing Hagrid with amusement while he pulled out some mugs.

"Sure," she said brightly. "Don't you?"

He gave her that same look again. She could feel herself blushing.

"What?" she asked innocently.

"I'm just..." He swept a hand back through his hair, "surprised."

She tilted her head.

"You just—and no offence intended, of course—don't seem the sort."

"...The sort to like tea?"

Tom raised a brow. "The sort to play with your food," he clarified.

Hermione blanched. Was that what she was doing? "It-it's not like I'm *enjoying* it," she said. "I'm

just... doing what I have to to get the answers I need. And a cup of tea always helps me think."

"Oh, pardon me," Tom said, laughing now, "that makes it all right then."

"Gosh you're—" she nudged him with her elbow, her frustration overpowering her common sense, "—so annoying sometimes."

But Tom just laughed louder.

When Hagrid finished making the tea, he shuffled around robotically, handing a mug each to Hermione and Tom, before he sat down opposite them, cradling his own oversized mug between his hands.

"Thank you, Hagrid," Hermione said. "Now I'm going to get straight to the point. There's no point in wasting anyone's time. I wanted to come to see you today so that we could talk about the events that occurred over the spring of nineteen-forty three. Do you understand?"

Hagrid stiffly nodded.

"Good. What do you know about the Chamber of Secrets?" she asked, and then she willed, *speak*.

"No' much. It was opened in the spring o' me third year. But it wasn' me," Hagrid said, some emotion spilling past her curse. "I swear it, yeh have the wrong—"

"*Tell the truth.*"

"It wasn' me. It wasn' me. I don' know who it was. Ev'ryone said—Dumbledore, Dippet, Merrythought—all agreed it could on'y be opened by an heir o' Slytherin. I'm no heir, me dad was a half-blood himself."

Hermione frowned as if she were hearing unexpected information. She sipped her tea. "What happened to Myrtle Warren?"

"I don' know," Hagrid gushed. "Summat must've gotten her, but it wasn't Aragog. Not a chance it could've bin Aragog. He was locked up the whole time, he was. Fer his own safety. And if it had bin Aragog, he wouldn't 'ave left her like tha'. He would've... if it were him... well, pardon me for sayin' it, but he would've eaten the poor girl."

There was a pause filled by the crackle of the fire.

"So..." Hermione spoke slowly around her mug. "You don't know what creature came from the chamber?"

"Nah, I don'."

"What about Slytherin's locket? Do you have any idea of where that might be?"

"Slytherin's wha'?"

"Locket," Hermione provided. "A large, gold—oh never mind, you clearly have no idea what I'm talking about," she finished before she looked to Tom.

"I think I'm done," she said, putting her mug down onto the table. "Do you think we're done?"

His features were blank. Unreadable. He gave her a small nod.

"Okay," she said, rising to her feet. "Come on then."

Leaving Hagrid sitting where he was, Hermione cleaned their mugs and put them away with a swish of her wand so that Hagrid would never know they were there. Then, she led Tom out of the hut, turning back to point her wand at Hagrid.

"*Obliviate.*"

There. He wouldn't remember their tea, her Imperius, or her ever asking for a catch up.

"*Stupefy.*"

When he woke, he'd be well rested and it would be the next day, and he'd be none the wiser. No harm done.

And with that, Hermione started the walk back up to the castle, Tom by her side.

They didn't talk on their way up. Hermione was intentionally quiet, leaving the opportunity to speak up to Tom.

Come on, she thought. Tell me. Tell me that it's you, that you're the heir, that you know where the chamber is. *Come on.*

But Tom didn't utter a single word, not even a teasing jab and by the time they reached the courtyard again, Hermione was bordering on a panic.

If this didn't work, if this didn't get her in, she didn't know what else to try. This was all she had.

"Well," Hermione finally said, slowing her steps as they started to circle the courtyard, "I suppose this is where you tell me that I should've listened to you."

Tom smiled down at her. "Yes. You should've."

Come on. *Come on.*

"But you did what you thought you had to, and that in itself, is admirable."

"So you're not going to gloat? Not even a little bit?"

Tom gave a faux look of offence. "Do I look like the sort of person who would find enjoyment in another's misery?"

Yes.

But Hermione didn't say that. She gave him a coy smile and settled with, "maybe."

"I wouldn't enjoy seeing you miserable."

At his words, Hermione burst into laughter. The irony of it was too much. She cracked.

But now that she'd started laughing, she had a hard time stopping. The flood gates had been opened, and it was all running free. Because it was all just so *ridiculous!* What had she been thinking? Thinking that the single use of the Imperius curse would be enough to sway him, pretending she truly believed Hagrid was the heir—it was never going to work. She wasn't one of Tom's old schoolmates, he didn't have anything to prove to her.

He'd lied through and through to Dumbledore, Dippet, the Ministry, to everyone who'd been involved in investigating Myrtle's death. The pressure of her nosing around him must've been nothing compared to them. The only reason for him coming with her tonight was that he probably just thought she was a complete mental case, and he'd been so amused by her that he'd decided to humour her.

He must be so *smug*.

But looking at him now, he didn't seem smug. He almost looked concerned for her well-being. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm—" Hermione wiped a laughter-induced tear from the corner of her eye. She couldn't let her act drop now. "Ah. I'm just—I'm all out of ideas. I have more questions now than I started with. If it's not Hagrid, if he's truly not Slytherin's heir, and he was never responsible for Myrtle's death, then... who was?" And then she added, in a frustrated yell, "and where in bloody fuck are these damned objects?!"

Tom laughed. "You're chasing the impossible. What did you expect?"

"You honestly think finding them is impossible?"

Tom sighed. His eyes were almost convincingly sympathetic. "They've been gone for centuries. Their trails are lost. They're out there somewhere, but... deeply buried. They'll drive you mad before you find them. If you have any sense... you should let them go."

Hermione rubbed at her temples. She had a headache. Of course he would try to talk her into letting them go.

Bloody hell. What a waste of a night. She'd *assaulted* Hagrid, and for what? A cup of tea?

Spirits at rock bottom, Hermione rolled her eyes. "Good night, Tom. Thanks for coming with me," she murmured dejectedly, and started off toward the grand staircase.

He didn't follow after her.

Well, fuck.

Chapter End Notes

I know it's a long build. Bear with me. Tom will lose it™ eventually.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Sorry about being a bit slower this chapter. But it's double the length of my usual updates, so I hope that makes up for it!

Along with the Christmas break, came the mid-season Quidditch break. It made for a quiet last few weeks of term in the infirmary, giving Hermione a surplus of free time in which to mope about her lack of success with Tom.

She circled around it from every angle, and no matter what direction she came at it from, she couldn't think of another way to have herself recruited.

If a friendly approach wasn't good enough, if taunting him about the founders' objects and Slytherin's chamber wasn't good enough, if *proving* herself wasn't good enough...

Then that only left one other option. Her original plan, right from the beginning.

Avery.

That Friday, Hermione didn't step foot into the infirmary. Instead, she spent the entirety of her time preparing for the evening. She took twice as long showering as she usually would, put particular effort into her hair, and she even brushed herself with a light layer of makeup. She ummed and ahed over what to wear—eventually settling on a modest black dress and cardigan—and spent a whole half hour transfiguring her shoes until she was satisfied they were a perfect match.

Usually, Hermione agreed with the sixth years, in that the best thing about Slughorn's gatherings was the free champagne. His parties were flamboyant, obnoxious, and far too *crowded* for her liking. But this year, this time... she was practically buzzing with anticipation.

She hadn't had a proper date in years.

Hermione stared at her reflection. Her eyes were tired, worn, but the rest of her scrubbed up reasonably nicely. The overriding theme of the fifties was *modesty*, and modest, her dress certainly was. Although it was fitted, the lace dress came down to her knees, and paired with her long-sleeved cardigan, she certainly didn't have too much skin on display. She'd fit in perfectly.

Her hair, however... was another story. She didn't try to tame it—Sleekezy's hair potion wouldn't have the strong formula she was used to for another two decades—and instead clipped some of her frizzy strands back in a sort of half-updo. It didn't resemble the waved, loose bun that was currently fashionable, but it was the best she could do.

"You look as fine as a Philippine Eagle," her mirror cooed.

Hermione glared at it. Taking that as a clear sign that she'd been staring at herself for too long, she grabbed her beaded bag and headed out of her room.

As she stepped out into the first-floor corridor, she realised that she hadn't made solid plans with Avery as to where she was supposed to meet him. Shoot.

Making as good a guess as any, Hermione hurried down to the Entrance Hall. To her luck, there was a tall figure waiting at the bottom of the stairs.

"Good evening, Ma'am. I am on a quest to find a Miss Hermione Granger. She is this tall—" The intruding man held a hand to his shoulder, "—and she has hair this big—" He held his arms as wide as they could go. "Have you seen her?"

"Stop that," said Hermione, stepping closer so she could whack him across the arm.

Avery laughed. "You look wonderful."

"You look... nice, too."

He did look nice. His silken robes were a deep black, lined with white, and his usual shoulder length, sandy hair was tied at the nape of his neck. There was a small, golden lapel pin on his left side in the shape of a rose. He looked neat. Proper. It was clear he came from money.

"Thank you," Avery said, offering her his elbow. "How are you?"

"Ready for some champagne," she said honestly, falling into step with him as they veered toward the dungeons.

He laughed at that. "You never replied to my last letter," he said. "I wasn't sure if we were still on."

Hermione winced. Right. She'd been meaning to write back, but then... hadn't. She'd let her slump get to her.

"And yet you showed up anyhow?"

"I'd never stand up a lady."

"That's most upstanding of you," she said. "I meant to write you back. Sorry, things have just been..."

"There's always a rush before Christmas," Avery provided for her. "It's no problem, I get it."

As they reached the bottom of the stairs and turned down the main dungeon corridor, she caught sight of a group of Slytherins heading toward them from the other direction. Tom was at the back of the group.

Great. Just the sight of him was a sharp reminder of her failure.

They slowed down, letting the group of students pass them.

"Good evening, Hermione," Tom greeted when he reached them. "Avery."

If she thought Avery looked nice, then Tom looked... Um. *Quite* nice.

Tom had gone with all black, and from underneath his collar, she could see his jacket was lined with a deep green. He was cleanly shaven, and now that he was with them, she could smell his

cologne.

It was... also nice.

She tried not to think about his ring in her wall.

"Tom," Avery reciprocated.

"Couldn't stay away, could you?" Tom asked with a grin, joining them on their walk in the direction of Slughorn's office.

"And miss a Sluggy party? Not a chance."

With Tom on one side and Avery on the other, Hermione felt quite short.

"How's the family?" Tom asked politely as they walked.

"All well. Clarissa's to be wed in February, and my mother's just short of losing her mind with the arrangements. Not two weeks ago, she ordered fourteen swans for the manor lake. *Fourteen*, can you believe?"

"That doesn't sound at all like Genevieve," Tom quipped.

Avery laughed. "Yes, most unlike her."

The tell-tale cheer of Christmas music caught them before they reached Slughorn's office. It sounded like dancing.

Hermione really wasn't in the mood—the music was *bouncy*—but with any luck, a bit of alcohol and Avery's company would warm her up and worst case scenario, she'd have a nice date.

Veering into the done-up potions classroom, Hermione was impressed. It might've been Slughorn's best work yet. He had—as per usual—had gone all out. A band by the curtains were playing carols as snow gently rained down from the ceiling, holly, ivy, and mistletoe decorated the room, and there were at least five Christmas trees scattered around the room.

In the centre, where his demonstration cauldron usually stood, was a long table with an elegant, glass punch bowl in the centre. A banquet of food surrounded it, filling the full length of the table, with candles levitating over the top. It was beautiful.

And the room was packed! Hermione only recognised about half of the guests, being students and professors. The others must've been Slughorn's ring-ins, past students and acquaintances. Many of them were middle-aged and well dressed. Ministry workers, she assumed.

"I'll get us some drinks," Avery said speedily, and ducked into the crowd.

Suddenly left on her own with Tom, Hermione cleared her throat. Aside from pleasantries, she hadn't had the chance to speak with him since their evening with Hagrid. She dared a glance at him.

He was watching her in bemusement.

"What?" she asked defensively.

"Nothing."

"No, what is it? Is there something on my..." Hermione rubbed at her chin. Had her lipstick

smudged?

"There's nothing on your face. You look lovely."

Hermione laughed nervously. "Oh. Um. Thank you?"

"I was just wondering what Avery told you to convince you to invite him along tonight."

Hermione frowned. She was beginning to get the impression that Tom didn't actually like Avery at all. That... might prove to be quite a problem.

"What do you mean?"

He shrugged.

"No, what do you mean?" When he still didn't elaborate, Hermione gave him a gentle nudge with her elbow. "Why wouldn't I invite him? He's been a good friend to me."

Tom didn't miss a beat. "Has he told you about Sylvia?"

Hermione didn't say anything, but apparently, she didn't need to, because Tom just looked at her and nodded. "I didn't think so," he said.

She suddenly couldn't think fast enough. With just a few words, her stomach was dropping. Sylvia. Who was—

"One champagne for the lady," Avery suddenly said from her right.

Hermione took the offered glass with a tight-lipped "thank you."

"And one firewhisky for you, good sir," he said, handing Tom the short glass.

Tom nodded in thanks, but then raised his eyebrows in a way of greeting one of Slughorn's guests behind them that Hermione didn't recognise. "I'll catch up with you two later. Enjoy your night. If you'll excuse me," said Tom, and with his grenade successfully thrown, he left.

Hermione took a deep swig of her champagne.

"It's bizarre being back here," Avery said conversationally, sipping at the butterbeer he'd gotten for himself.

"Mmm?" Hermione sounded, trying to keep calm.

It was nothing to worry about, she tried to tell herself. Tom was just trying to mess with her. That was exactly the sort of thing he would do. He was just trying to dampen her night.

But her brain was suddenly fixating: *who the fuck was Sylvia?*

She shouldn't let herself get carried away. It was probably nothing. This was the fifties. If Avery were seeing someone else, surely he wouldn't be being so open with her. People talked, and promiscuity was still frowned upon.

...Wasn't it?

"The students're all so little." Avery laughed to himself. "Look at 'em!"

But he was here as her date! She'd informed Slughorn of as much, and he hadn't seemed at all fazed. Surely if Avery were seeing anyone else, Slughorn would know about it? Slughorn knew all the ins and outs of the prominent wizarding families.

"One year, Sluggy had a champagne fountain going, you know, with the glasses stacked onto each other?" Avery was saying. "It was a disaster. Macnair pulled one of the glasses from the bottom, and *whoosh*," he said, gesturing with his hands.

But Hermione barely heard him. *Sylvia. Sylvia.* She couldn't recall meeting a single Sylvia in her entire time here. Maybe she was an ex-girlfriend? That would be fine.

Yes. That must've been it.

"I see he's learned his lesson this time." Avery chuckled.

But what if she—oh, bloody hell. Hermione couldn't take it anymore.

"Get some air with me?" Hermione asked, finishing off her champagne in a large mouthful and taking Avery by the hand.

He smiled in response, and so Hermione pulled him along out of the classroom and down the hall, where the sounds of the party started to muffle.

"We've only just gotten here," Avery said in a feeble protest as the distance between them and the party grew. Hermione ignored him.

She led them further down the corridor, and it wasn't until they'd made it to the dungeon fountain that she finally turned on him.

"Who is Sylvia?" she demanded, doing her best to keep her voice level.

The smile Avery had been wearing slowly fell from his lips. It told her all she needed to know.

Fucking hell.

"Right. Of course." Hermione nodded. "How utterly stupid of me."

Avery reached toward her, but Hermione stepped back. "No—Hermione, it's not like that," he gushed.

Her cheeks felt like they were on fire. "Then tell me, what's it like?"

"She's..." Avery looked pained. "My parents arranged it. But there's nothing there! Not like..."

Hermione rolled her eyes. Her stomach was in knots. She hadn't felt this sort of ache since her bloody sixth year of school.

And—Jesus Christ. Bloody fucking *fuck*. He was supposed to be her way in with Tom. But he—he was *engaged*! And yet he'd been so forward, so openly interested in her. What sort of person *does* that?

"I think it's time you left," she seethed.

"Come on, Hermione, just—hear me out," he said. "I don't see her like that. I never have, and she doesn't see me that way either. We grew up together, but that's it."

"Oh, that's *it*, is it?" she hissed. "Silly me. You're only *engaged to be married*. No problem at all."

"Hermione—"

"No! What is wrong with you?!"

"Hermione, this—you have to understand, it happens all the time," he insisted. "It's been arranged, yes, but it's not set in stone. There's room for negotiation with my family. It's not until my twenty-seventh birthday that I have to marry."

"So, what? You thought you would just string me along until then?!"

"No! It's just—I like you, I want to get to know you. And if it goes well, and you feel the same way about me, then I'll speak to my parents. I'll back out of the arrangement," he said as if it were simple.

"Are you—are you *kidding* me? You're not interested in your fiancée, so instead of calling that off, your plan is to find yourself another girlfriend, all the while remaining engaged to another woman?!"

Avery made a sound of exasperation. "You don't understand because you're not in the circle, but it's really quite a common—"

"Oh," Hermione reared back. "You mean, I wouldn't understand because I'm not a *pureblood*?"

"I—" Avery fumbled, and he didn't look like he knew the right answer. But then, he settled with, "yes."

Hermione snorted. "I think it's best if you leave."

"Hermione—"

"I don't want to hear it."

"Will you at least— can I— who told you?"

"It doesn't matter who told me!" she just about shouted.

"Was it Tom?" Avery pressed.

Hermione huffed. She hadn't been intending on revealing who'd told her, but then, it was obvious, wasn't it? And she didn't owe him anything, so she shrugged and murmured, "he might've mentioned it."

"He might've..." Avery repeated. "Fucking... of course he did," he mumbled to himself.

Hermione crossed her arms across her chest.

"What else did he tell you?" Avery asked, tone sharp.

She scowled. "What else do you *think* he told me?"

Avery shook his head. "This is just—typical *fucking* Riddle. I should've—I *saw* the way he was looking at you."

Hermione actually laughed. Was he—oh, for goodness' sake—was he *jealous*? "Oh, *please*," she

drawled between her chuckles. "Don't you try to turn this back around on me! You know as well as I do that you've absolutely nothing to worry about with Tom."

"Don't I?" Avery countered.

"No!" Now that she'd started laughing, it was difficult to stop. "Please! That's completely ridiculous!"

"Well it wouldn't be the first time!" Avery snapped.

Hermione's laughter grew louder. "What are you talking about?"

Avery huffed and pushed back a loose strand of hair. "Look. I don't like talking about this, but when I was in sixth year, I was going out with Celeste Greengrass. We'd been seeing each other for months. I... I thought I loved her, thought I'd manage to convince my parents to allow me to marry her."

Hermione brought her hand to her mouth to muffle what was left of her giggles.

"And then, one day, I couldn't find her. We were supposed to meet up for lunch, so naturally, with all that had gone on with Warren the year before, when she didn't show, I was worried. So I looked everywhere, everywhere I could think of, and then, I find her down in the boathouse by the lake. With Tom."

"With Tom," she repeated with a lingering snort. "What were they...?"

"Well they certainly weren't having a round of chess, if that's what you're asking!"

Hermione's eyes widened. "Oh. That's—you don't mean...?"

Avery nodded.

"...Oh." Hermione's smile slowly fell. "*Oh.*"

"Yeah," said Avery.

All of a sudden, Hermione was having a hard time staying present in the moment. All of the pieces of the puzzle in her mind were shifting. Because this—it could change everything. She thought she'd prepared for every possible scenario, every single thing, but a young Voldemort with *hormones*, was... absolutely not one of them.

It was completely out of left field. She just didn't think he'd be interested in... in sex. At all.

Jesus.

Hermione suddenly tried to rethink all of the times they'd spoken, when he'd winked, when he'd complimented her, when she'd playfully nudged him, their playful banter, when he'd invited her to the library with him. And all of his snide comments about Avery...

Maybe... maybe she'd been coming at him from the entirely wrong angle.

Her best guess at where he was keeping his diary was in his belongings—in his chambers! And what was the best way to get into a man's chambers?

He was a twenty-six year old man, after all.

Maybe... she'd catch more flies with honey.

Hermione thought she might vomit.

"And he's been like this ever since bloody second year of school!" Avery was saying. "He blatantly stole my books and quills all the way through, he ruined my chances with the Department of Mysteries which he knew was my first choice out of school, he comes to my home and is *completely* inappropriate with my mother and sister at every opportunity even though I've *told* him it bothers me—"

"Avery—"

"But you know what? I'm done! I'm not taking it anymore! You want to know about Slytherin's precious locket?!" Avery asked. "Why don't you go and ask Tom about it," he spat. "You want—"

Hermione's eyes became wide. "Avery, stop—"

"—to know about the chamber, and what really happened to Warren? Go and ask Tom!"

"No, no, you can't tell me this—"

"I'm sure he's just dying to hiss at you, to tell you *all* about—"

"*Stop!*" she yelled.

Avery glared down at her, so worked up that he was just about panting. "What?!"

"We can't talk about this," she hissed slowly, glancing around the corridor to make sure they weren't overheard.

"What do you—" Avery frowned, but then a gradual, surprised look of understanding started to cross his features. "You... but you already know," he murmured. "Don't you?"

Hermione gave a deep sigh, stiffly shook her head. "We can't talk about this," she repeated.

"How do you know?"

"We are *not* talking about this!" she hissed, bordering on a panic. "If he finds out that we even came close to having this conversation, that you said anything at all to me..."

Avery rolled his eyes, gave a bit of a snort.

"I mean it!" she insisted. "He cannot find out. Under *any* circumstances."

Seeing her seriousness, Avery put his hands up. "Okay, okay. I won't say anything."

"*Promise* me," she urged.

He looked unsure, but still, he said, "all right. I promise."

Hermione sighed and covered her eyes with her hands.

Merlin. What an absolute mess. While she was constantly managing her worry of Tom using legilimency on her... now she had to worry about him using it on Avery, too.

"You should just... just go," she said. The more distance between him and Tom, the better.

"Hermione—"

"Just—please," she urged. "I'll... I'll have a think about things. Maybe I'll write you. I don't know, it's a lot to take in, just let me think about it. Please."

Avery's features were pained, but eventually, he nodded. "I'm sorry," he said. "I should've told you. You shouldn't have heard it from him."

"No," she agreed.

"But if—if you forgive me, I'll make it up to you."

Hermione rolled her eyes. She didn't know which way to think, and that nauseous, heavy feeling of betrayal was still in her stomach.

She didn't want to look at him.

But, should all else fail... she might still need him...

"We'll see," she eventually gave him.

His face lit up ever so slightly. And then quickly, before she could step away, Avery leaned in and pressed a light peck onto her cheek. His lips were warm.

And then without another word, he turned and left.

Hermione sat on the edge of the dungeon fountain after Avery had left, elbows on her knees, and her head in her hands.

What a night. And it wasn't even eight yet!

She didn't know how long she sat there for. She thought about going back in and getting some more champagne, try to salvage the evening and make the most of the opportunity to speak with Tom.

But what was the point? She wasn't getting anywhere with him. With the students due to leave the castle the next day, maybe it was time she took a break, recoup her spirits, and all that. Ron had always said she didn't take nearly enough breaks.

But she was just so *annoyed* at Tom. He'd known she was keeping touch with Avery and he'd had all of the time in the world to mention Avery's engagement, and yet he'd chosen to wait to throw it on her then and there, in public, while she was on a *date* with him!

How humiliating.

She was honestly starting to really like Avery, too. When she'd decided to give up her life as she'd known it for the greater good, she knew that it likely meant forfeiting her chances at falling in love, at family, at a normal life. While she hadn't exactly thought she'd have those things with Avery... she couldn't help it. It was still a fleeting thought at the back of her mind.

And then Tom had gone and thrown iced water all over it!

She supposed in the scheme of things, it was a far cry lower on the evil scale than murder, but *honestly*. What an *arse*.

"Marvin's left already?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. His timing was impeccable. "If you've come to gloat, I'm not in the mood," she mumbled.

Tom didn't say anything though. She heard the empty sound of shoes on stone, and then he was sitting next to her.

"You all right?" he asked.

Ugh, what was he doing? Hadn't he done enough?

"Fine," she grumbled, stubbornly focusing on her shoes.

"You don't look it."

Hermione sniffed. He smelled like firewhisky and caramel. "I don't want to talk about it."

As it became quiet between them, she tried to distract her thoughts with inconsequential tidbits, just in case. She couldn't ponder on her conversation with Avery, couldn't risk Tom finding out.

Black space.

Open ocean.

Empty fields.

"I just thought you had a right to know," Tom said after a long pause.

She scoffed. "Yeah. Right, I'm sure that's what it was."

They sat in silence for another few minutes, the sound of the trickling water of the fountain echoing around them.

"I can walk you back to your room, if you'd like to call it a night," Tom went on to say politely.

It was a kind offer. Gentlemanly. But oh, there was just something *about* his tone, that fake, smug, *lathered on* tone that was the final nail and had Hermione's brain hot wiring, had her seeing red.

"Why are you even here?!" she snapped, unable to stop herself.

Tom blinked. "I'm just trying to help you."

"Well I don't want your help!" she just about yelled, rising to her feet. "I'm not some poor, helpless girl you can swoop in and manipulate with a rude word here, and a polite compliment there!"

There was another pause as Tom stood. "I didn't mean to give you the impression—"

"God, I thought you and Avery were friends!" she went on. "And yet, you somehow manage to speak poorly of him at almost every opportunity, and so I've been wondering, why *is* that? Avery said you've known each other for thirteen years. And you know, I actually thought, for a split second, that maybe you were jealous because of *me*. But it's not me at all, is it?" she said, prowling in on him. "It's Avery. It has been this whole time, hasn't it?"

Tom was still, but there was a light furrowing between his brows. "I think it's time you got some sleep."

"You just can't handle someone choosing him over you, can you? I bet it *eats* you up."

Tom nodded. "I understand. Deflecting is a natural reaction in times of emotional stress."

"He's from a well-known, pureblooded family," Hermione went on as if he hadn't spoken. "He's had everything handed to him on a silver platter. He's never had to work for anything in his life, and then... there's *you*."

Tom stared. He didn't say anything, but Hermione was taken over. She didn't care to be careful anymore. She wanted to know how far she could *push*.

"Of course you want to be him, it makes perfect sense! You had to work for everything, didn't you, while he had it so *easy*! You came from nothing, and then you were sorted into the house of snakes with a *muggle* name—"

He struck.

Tom pinned her back into the wall, both of his palms slamming into the wall next to her head, trapping her in.

His eyes bored into hers. They were still brown, but this was the first time she thought she could see something more in them, something warm.

"Go to bed, Hermione," he stated, words low and calm but heavy with restraint, "before you say something you'll regret in the morning."

Her heart rate spiked. The threat was plain.

She knew she was being reckless, stupid, but she could see it now—a fraction of a glimpse at him, the *real* him. Hermione wanted to dig her fingers in and pry it open, wanted to see more, and she was just so *sick* and *tired* of the fifties, of him, of Avery, of her whole damn situation that she couldn't stop herself.

"What's the matter? Have I hit a nerve? Are you *scared* to hear it how it really i—"

She gasped as Tom's hands moved from the wall to her throat. They were wide enough that they circled the entire circumference of her neck, his thumbs digging underneath her jawbone. He pushed down, enough for it to hurt, but not *quite* enough to obstruct her windpipe.

Hermione watched as his mouth twitched. He closed his eyes.

He was hanging by a thread.

"Th-the truth can hurt. Can't it?" she breathed boldly, stupidly, and then although it wasn't at all funny, she *laughed*. "What are you going to do? Do you think this is enough to *scare* me?"

Tom breathed a short laugh, one that wasn't humorous at all. Then, he leaned into her ear.

"Has anyone ever told you, Granger," he murmured slowly, "that you're a *real fucking bitch*."

It was supposed to be an insult, there wasn't any doubt in that. But there was just something *about* the way his breath brushed the shell of her ear, something about his barely-there restraint, and the elation in having finally found a chip in his facade that gave Hermione *chills*.

Not entirely unpleasant ones.

And so, Hermione turned her head towards him, and the action brought them so close that their foreheads touched. She didn't know what had gotten into her. In that moment, she didn't know herself. Her anger, her frustration took over her, and all she wanted was to see perfect, *flawless* Tom come undone, just for a moment. She wanted to *win*. So, without a sliver of a thought for the consequences, she breathed, "But you like that." A smile toyed at her lips. "Don't you?"

Tom's grip around her throat tightened. It *hurt*, but it was only for a moment, and when he relaxed, he made a coarse sort of groan, and then he was kissing her.

But it wasn't a nice kiss, not even close. It was rough and angry and unrestrained. There were teeth and tongue, and it was urgent, his hands releasing her neck to tangle into her hairline, nails dragging into her skin. It was consuming and Hermione clung onto his wrists as though they would save her. All she could think was that she hated him, she *hated him*, and she bit down onto his lip.

He groaned into her mouth and it was obscene, that sound. It had her light-headed, had her fumbling at his tie, pulling him closer, and he had no business making it in a public corridor where anyone could—

Hermione tried to pull back, tried to get some space. She breathed like she were starving. "Someone," she whispered raggedly against him. "Someone might—"

Tom moved fast. He spun them around, backing them down the corridor a few paces and into an empty potions room. He kept kissing her, one hand over her collarbone while the other gripped at her hip, and pushed them deeper into the room until her back hit one of the brewing benches. Hermione groaned into his mouth, feeling him pressing hard against her.

And Merlin, she—she'd never had sex before. Should she—should she tell him? Did it matter? Is that what was going to happen? She didn't *want* to lose her virginity with Tom of all people, but maybe it would be the best way forward, the best way to get to his—

"Ah," she moaned against him as he shifted in *just* the right way, his thigh putting pressure between her legs.

His chest rumbled beneath her hands and he took her lip between his teeth, sharply tugging at it. "Not so talkative now, are you?" he murmured.

Hermione only whimpered, pulling at the collar of his robe.

He pulled her cardigan off and hoisted her up by her thighs, putting her on the edge of the bench. His hands started at the bottom of her dress, pushing it up and up until he'd bundled it around her waist. His hands were hot on her skin and—*oh fuck*—the moment he dropped to his knees, Hermione decided she didn't care. He was on his *knees* for her. The sight of it alone had heat pooling low in her stomach, enveloping her in a way she'd never felt.

His lips pressed into the skin her exposed midsection, down over her bellybutton, over her hipbone over the line of her tights, alternating kisses with scrapes of his teeth.

Tom's hands started at the hem of her tights. He started to pull and, Hermione tipped her head back, and—

He stopped.

Hermione gasped. "What... what's wr—"

"What's this?" Tom's hands gave up on her tights, and instead, he reached out and took her left arm, pulling it closer.

Oh, no, no, *no*—

The instant she realised what he was doing, Hermione tried to yank her now-sleeveless arm back, but Tom's grip was tight.

"Could you— just let me—"

"Stop—"

Tom managed to turn her arm over, and Hermione gave up on her struggling. It was too late.

He'd already seen her scars.

Mudblood.

She swallowed.

"I..." she stammered, still breathing hard, "I don't like to..."

"How did you get this?" he whispered, frowning down at the scars.

"I don't want to talk about it," she said, tugging on her arm again.

"Stop, I'm just trying to—"

"Let me go."

"—look at it, Hermione—"

"Let me *go!*"

Tom released her, and Hermione hurriedly shuffled off the bench, pulling her dress back down over her hips.

Sheer, pure panic started to set in, deep down to her bones. This was—she'd fucked up. She'd *astronomically* fucked up, even moreso than when she'd talked Dippet out of hiring Binns and allowed Tom to teach. But she'd completely forgotten about her scars! It'd been years since her run in with Bellatrix and they'd become a part of her. She didn't even *think* about them anymore.

Fuck, fuck, *fuck*—he'd be furious, irate. Not only was she a muggleborn, but she'd *lied* about it.

But as Hermione mustered the courage to look at Tom, she didn't find what she expected. He didn't look murderous.

He was looking at her almost with—concern?

"You..." Hermione whispered unsurely, "you aren't... mad?"

He blinked, a slight furrowing between his eyebrows. "Mad?"

Hermione scoffed. She didn't want to say it. *I lied to you. I'm a muggleborn.*

"I didn't..." She didn't know what to say. "I didn't mean to lie. I just... with Grindelwald... it's not a good time for someone like me to own up to my... heritage."

"That's..." Tom shook his head as if to say, 'doesn't matter'. Hermione thought she might've been imagining things. "That is... *dark magic*, Hermione," he said.

"Yes, I know, thank you—"

"No, I mean, it's cursed."

"*Yes*, I know. Do you think I keep the scars because I'm fond of them?"

Tom's frown grew deeper. "Who did this to you?"

"I don't like to talk about—"

"Who did this?"

"It was—" Hermione sighed. "It happened years ago. During the war. One of Grindelwald's... I don't know what you'd call her. One of his followers. She's dead now. Not worth thinking about."

Tom looked thoughtful as he stepped back, and he started on adjusting his tie and the collar of his shirt.

Seeing the action, Hermione felt a firm shove right back to reality. She moved quickly, snatching up her discarded cardigan from the floor, pulling it back on, hiding the scars away once more.

"We should probably—"

"Might be best if—"

They both stopped, giving the other the chance to speak. Hermione wiped at her lips. They felt raw.

Her cheeks were hot, the sensation of shame starting to set in. What had she been doing? She'd only been a bee's whisker from... with *Tom*...

"I'm going to go," she mumbled quietly, and with that, she all but ran out of there.

"Hermione—"

Hermione didn't stop, didn't turn back even though he called after her. She hurried through the castle, avoiding eye contact with the students she passed on the staircase, and she didn't stop until she made it back to her room and locked the door behind her.

She beat her head against the wood of the door.

Bloody hell.

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The next morning, while the remainder of the castle's occupants enjoyed their breakfast, Hermione sat hidden away in the infirmary office, angrily staring down at her parchments.

She was really regretting trying to bait Tom with the article about the founders and their objects.

Because now she actually had to write the damn thing!

She hadn't yet decided the best way to handle it. She'd already revealed to Tom that she tracked Slytherin's line down to the Gaunts, so to write about that wouldn't get her very far. She couldn't very well reveal Hepzibah's lineage, but maybe she could misdirect? Write about the Smith line migrating to the US and lead Tom to the entirely wrong continent?

As for the diadem—well. That would be a waste of effort. Tom already knew of it being lost in Albania. And Gryffindor's sometimes-there, sometimes-not sword wasn't of any interest to him.

Ugh. She really shouldn't have committed to four feet. Two would've been manageable, but four—

"Hello, Miss," a meek voice interrupted from the door.

Hermione jumped like a spooked rabbit. "Oh—Hello Edward. What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be heading out to the train?"

Edward shook his head, looking toward his shoes. "My potions test didn't go very well, you see, so I'm here for the break after all," he mumbled.

"Oh," she said, softening. "I'm sorry to hear that. I know how much you wanted to have Christmas with your family," she said. "But you know, those of us stuck in the castle over the break always have a great time here. We'll have a very Happy Christmas together, you'll see."

He didn't look like he believed her. "Yeah... well, I just wanted to thank you for your help over the last few weeks."

"It's no problem at all," she said. "I'm only sorry I couldn't have helped more. And you're of course welcome to continue studying here into next year if you'd like."

"Thanks, Miss," he mumbled before he gave her a small wave. "Have a nice day."

"You too, Edward," she said after him, "and feel free to come by any time!"

He hummed in response, and then he shuffled off.

Poor kid. She'd have to make sure to remember to get him a gift.

Glancing back down on her writing, Hermione just about groaned. But she'd procrastinated far too long already. She really needed to get the piece finished, so she forced herself to write, to get any words she could muster onto the page.

Wit beyond measure, is man's greatest treasure, Rowena Ravenclaw once wrote. Yet despite the carving of these words in the goblin steel of her diadem, the artefact remains lost.

A prominent theory, as with Hufflepuff's cup and Slytherin's locket, is that the artefact has been passed down the familial line. However currently, the ancestral line of Ravenclaw remains unknown. Reports of sightings of the diadem are lacking, and reports that have been followed have all led to the findings of, albeit well-made, replicas.

Will the diadem remain lost? Perhaps the only one with the answer to that, is time—

"You didn't make it to breakfast."

Hermione's hand seized, muscles tensing.

Oh no.

She really should've locked the door after Edward left.

She slowly turned, wincing as she dared to peek at the doorway. And—*God*—she was blushing at the mere sight of him. Especially now in the early hours of the morning, leaning onto the door frame, Tom looked... fresh. His hair was tousled. Like he'd only just rolled out of bed.

"Yes. I-I'm sorry," she managed to stammer around thoughts she shouldn't be having. "I'm just trying to get somewhere with this article, you see, and last night... well, it was all just a bit—"

"Don't worry," Tom interrupted, laughing a little as though he enjoyed seeing her squirm. "I'm not here to give you a hard time."

She raised her brows. "That makes a change."

His smile widened. "I supposed you might have enough on your plate," he said with a single-shouldered shrug. "Here. I thought this might help."

Tom stepped into the office and came over to levitate a cup and saucer down onto her desk, brimming with steaming hot tea. It must've come from the daily breakfast feast in the Great Hall.

Hermione looked down at it. Her mouth watered at the sight of it, yet she frowned.

"That's... really kind of you," she said, starting to feel the slightest bit guilty for trying to avoid him. "Thank you."

Tom placed a hand on her shoulder. His touch was warm. "You're welcome. I hope you're feeling better this morning."

"A bit," she said, offering him a weak smile. She wished he'd go away. It was hard to think with him around. "Though I might need a bit longer for my pride to fully recover."

Tom laughed, and gently squeezed her shoulder before he let her go. "I understand. I won't bother you now, but maybe later, once your pride has had the chance to lick its wounds, we could... talk?"

Hermione bit her lip. She didn't *want* to talk. "We probably should."

Tom nodded. "Find me when you're up to it?"

"I will."

"Wonderful. Well, I'll uh... see you later, Hermione," he said. There was something about his expression. He almost looked sad, as if he were about to deliver her bad news.

But then he left.

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief. She watched the doorway, eyes hovering over the space he'd taken up for several moments.

She rubbed at her temples. Merlin, what was she doing?

With each interaction, he left her more uncertain than he'd found her. Bringing a cup of tea was the sort of thing she expected from a house elf. But Tom? A young *Voldemort*?

And—he'd *touched* her. It'd been tender. There was still a lingering, phantom sensation on her shoulder, and she almost wished he'd come back. Do it again, and then, they could restart from where they'd left off the night before—

No, no. Mustn't think of that. Because no matter how he treated her, she was only using him to get to his diary. Couldn't let herself forget that.

Bloody hell.

Well, at least now she had tea. She went to pick up the cup, but—*ah*—the handle was almost painfully hot. Best to give it a minute to cool down.

While she waited, she tried to focus on her work again. Even the damned article was more appealing to think about than what she was doing with Tom.

She picked up her quill once more and started to absentmindedly flick it, in just the way Tom didn't like.

Her eyes passed over the paragraphs she'd already written. Hmm. Should she add in a bit more about the cup? Add in more of a blur to the link to Hepzibah?

Flick.

Yes, she decided. She could fabricate in another familial line to Canada, and maybe another one to France while she was at it. With links all over the world, surely that would delay him finding the cup by several years at least...

Flick, flick, flick—

"Shoot," she said aloud. A single, long barb of her quill came loose and landed right into her tea. Gross.

She conjured herself a teaspoon to fish it out—

But before she could get it, the barb *disintegrated*.

Hermione blinked. She stared at the tea, right where the barb had been floating. "What the..."

Testingly, Hermione plucked another barb from her quill, dipped it into the tea.

It gently floated around on the surface. It looked completely ordinary—

Until it disintegrated as well.

The fine hairs on Hermione arms and neck stood to attention. Dread started to settle into her stomach.

Something... something was in her tea.

Hermione could hear the dull thud of her heartbeat starting to pound in her ears. She glanced back over to where Tom had been and then back to her cup.

Something was in her tea.

Doing her best to remain calm, Hermione pushed her chair out from under the desk and conjured an empty phial. She uncorked it, and with another swish of her wand, scooped up the contents of her teacup, depositing it in the phial.

She grabbed the filled phial and took her bag, leaving her pitiful start of her article where it was. She quickly made sure the coast was clear, and then hurried out of the infirmary and down the corridor to the potions space that was set up just for medical purposes.

Hermione locked herself in, and then, she got to work.

She worked for hours.

Hermione set up a row of aliquots of the tea Tom had given her, each supplemented with several drops of Rowe's Antidote Indicator. It was a handy little potion—should she add the correct antidote to the mixture, the indicator would cause the liquid to turn clear.

Seeing as the quill barb had *disintegrated*, Hermione's first guess was the Draught of Living Death. But when she administered the antidote to a small aliquot of her tea, there was no effect.

What else would cause disintegration? And what else would Tom want to put in her tea? They'd been getting along lately. Surely it wouldn't have been anything too... *potent*. With that in mind, she next tested for a calming draught. Pepperup potion. Elixir to induce euphoria. Veritaserum. She even tried Amortentia.

But none of them yielded a clear solution.

She then briefly stopped to consider that maybe she was overreacting. The only sign that anything had been added to the tea were some old quill barbs. Maybe the temperature of the tea had simply been high enough to dissolve them.

But she couldn't shake the feeling that something was *wrong*, and so, Hermione persisted.

She tested for stronger potions. Forgetfulness potion. Felix Felicis. Then, she started on some poisons. Belladonna. Weedososors. Hellebore.

And—nothing. Not even the slightest change in colour.

By the time it hit midday, Hermione had tried close to twenty different potions, and was starting to run out of ideas.

What the hell would he have put in it? Why would he try to spike her tea?

They'd been getting along just fine! Better than fine even, she— she'd been about to let him— with his *mouth*—

Then her scars had interrupted them. But he'd seemed fine with her blood status at the time. Hadn't even seemed slightly bothered. What could've changed since then? It didn't make sense—

Oh.

Oh.

Tom wore a brilliant mask. Maybe... maybe he *wasn't* as fine with her blood status as she'd thought. Maybe... *oh hell*, maybe her being a muggleborn was exactly the sort of problem for him that she'd feared it would be, and now he was trying to... fix the problem.

Maybe she wasn't reacting seriously *enough*.

Along that line of thought, another option popped into her head. There was... *one* other poison she could test for. The chances of it being what was in the tea were slim. Minuscule. She was surely—*surely*—being overly paranoid. But... if it *was* what'd been added to the tea... well.

It would be the worst-case scenario.

Hermione stared at the tea she had left. She pressed her lips together.

She had to make sure, she decided. Now that it had crossed her mind as a possibility, however remote, she couldn't not test it.

So, she got to work.

There wasn't an antidote for this particular poison. But there was a diagnostic test.

She had to look up the ingredients in one of Spindle's old books. It was a fiddly little potion; two drops of unicorn blood, ground valerian root, essence of comfrey, topped with a dash of fluxweed. The resulting paste took her another half hour to get to the right consistency. Once it was there, she mixed it together with just a *pinch* of rooster feather ashes, and it made a foul, thick, yellow solution.

It was hard not to gag. It smelled like vomit.

With one hand pinching her nose, Hermione took a deep breath through her mouth and with a very careful flick of her wand, added a single drop of the yellow concoction to the sample of tea.

And—

"No," she breathed, "no, no, no," Hermione whined as the solution started to turn black. "Fuck. Fuck, fuck, *fuck!*"

She threw her wand, digging her nails into her scalp. Her wand bounced from the wall, clattering as it's flight came to a halt.

Hermione held her head in her hands. This was it. If he was onto her... all that she'd gone back in time for... was for nothing.

She'd *lost*.

Because she knew now exactly what Tom had added to her tea.

Basilisk venom.

Hermione paced back and forth in the potions chamber. She clutched the bridge of her nose, couldn't think straight.

Tom tried to—

He tried to *kill* her.

...

He *tried to kill her!*

She hadn't even *done* anything, and he'd— he'd really—

Hermione forced herself to breathe in and out, to try to stay calm, but—

It was no use. There wasn't a ounce of anything remotely close to calm left in her. *He tried to kill her!* And if it hadn't been for dumb luck, for her aged quill, he *would've gotten away with it!*

She was hyperventilating. Hermione stopped her pacing and crouched to her knees. She lowered her head, trying to get it lower to the ground than her knees.

He'd tried to kill her and, oh, it was *genius*. Had she ingested any of the tea, as much as a sip, her symptoms would've started to set in in a matter of seconds. She would've deteriorated so quickly that she wouldn't have had a chance at getting help, and then, once she was dead, it'd look like an unusual, but ordinary case of cardiac arrest. No one would suspect her tea. Even if they thought to test her for poison, she was sure they wouldn't have found anything. Basilisk venom was *rare*. If she hadn't known about the basilisk living in Salazar's chamber, she herself would never have considered it.

The symptoms—they would look natural enough. The students had already cleared out of the castle, so there wouldn't be any posed risk to them and the school wouldn't be closed. It would make for such a drastically different death than Myrtle's that even Dumbledore mightn't expect—

Her head was spinning.

She didn't know what to do. She was stuck in the castle with him. There wasn't anywhere else she could go, but—that didn't matter, she decided. She needed to get out of there, even if it meant living in a tent.

Yes. She'd survived that before.

That's it. She needed to pack her things while she could, and get out of the castle, away from Tom.

She couldn't do anything for the timeline if she were dead.

Hermione straightened herself, got back on her feet, and started packing up the mess she'd made in the potions room.

But he— would Tom have noticed already, that she *wasn't* dead? She'd been in the potions room now for a few hours. Would he have gone back to the infirmary to check, to make sure she'd ingested the tea?

She bit into her lip.

Best that she disillusion herself then, she decided. Running into him in one of the corridors on her way out of the castle would be... something close to catastrophic.

Hermione tucked the remainder of the poisoned tea back into her bag before disillusioning herself. Leaving the potions room, adrenaline pushed her onward through the castle, but it was a relatively simple journey to her chambers. The only others she passed were a couple of Gryffindors loitering by the charms classroom who were there for the break. They were easy enough to slip past, they didn't notice anything.

And once she was back in her room, Hermione immediately got started on packing her things into her beaded bag with a good swish of her wand.

While her personal possessions sequentially packed themselves, Hermione crossed the room and clawed at the panelling of her wall. She snatched out the box that contained Tom's ring and stared down at it. She didn't think she should take it with her.

Think, think, *think*.

She needed to get the ring to somewhere that Tom wouldn't find it if he succeeded in murdering her, but somewhere that Dumbledore, or someone else with the ability to destroy it *could* find it.

...

There was only one place like that in the castle that she could think of.

Quickly, Hermione grabbed a piece of parchment and a quill before they entered the line of packing. She placed it on the bed and started scribbling.

To whoever finds this,

Do not touch the ring inside of this box. It is cursed with murderous magic, and even the slightest brush of skin will be enough to have you in an early grave.

Now that you've found it, I must ask something of you. Destroy this ring. No matter what it takes, it must be done. The curse on the ring is powerful, and only the most extreme, potent type of magic will destroy it. Fiendfyre. The Killing curse.

I failed, but you must not. The fate of the wizarding world depends on it.

-H.G.

There. That was grave enough. That should do it.

Hermione folded the parchment up and placed it on the lid of the box that held the ring, and then fished one of her scarves out of the line of things being packed. She wrapped them both up together, tying the scarf tightly.

And then, while her packing finished, she disillusioned herself once more and then ran to the seventh floor corridor.

The Room of Hidden Things was just as cluttered as it'd been in her own time.

Perfect.

Now she just needed to find somewhere to stash the ring. Somewhere not *too* obvious—one day, Tom would visit the room to store the diadem—but somewhere obvious enough to attract someone like Harry.

Hmm.

Ah—there.

Down the second isle of clutter, Hermione spotted a pile of Quidditch things, all embroidered with the maroon of Gryffindor. It was all outdated gear, but it looked like the exact sort of pile that would interest Harry.

It was as good a spot as any, so, Hermione tucked the wrapped horcrux underneath the uniform.

But as Hermione left the ring, as she thought of Harry and approached the exit, she slowed. Her conscience nagged at her. What was she doing running away and leaving it all up to Harry again?

Tom had tried to murder her, and she couldn't just hang around and wait for him to try again... but...

He hadn't succeeded. She wasn't dead yet. And it... it might not be quite as bad as she first thought. Yes, attempted murder was possibly the worst case scenario for her... but the reason *why* he attempted it was also important.

He didn't know that she had travelled in time. She was sure of that, because knowing Tom, if he knew, surely he'd try to use her for his own gain.

He also mustn't have known she had his horcrux. If he did, he'd surely be so incensed, that he'd try to kill her with his own wand.

Which led her back to her original assumption: had he tried to murder her because of the fact that she was muggleborn? He *had* indirectly used the basilisk...

At first, she'd thought that must've been it, but now... now, she wasn't so sure. There were plenty of muggleborns in the castle. There wasn't a strong reason to target her over anyone else. So then it must've been something else—

Hermione came to a complete halt.

Ah.

It clicked into place. She'd underestimated his human, hormonal ways before. She wouldn't do it again.

He hadn't tried to kill her because she was a muggleborn. He'd tried to kill her, because they'd—because he'd wanted to *fuck* a muggleborn.

That was it. That *must've* been it!

And of course, while it was still a terrible scenario... maybe it wasn't quite over for her after all. If he—against all of his hatred for muggles—still *wanted* her, then that meant that, there was still a chance at changing his mind.

If there was even a remote chance... then she couldn't leave. She couldn't run. If there was still even the slightest chance of getting to his diary... she had to stay.

Hermione didn't know if she could do it. Harry had stared Voldemort in face—had stared *death* in the face—countless times, but she couldn't say the same for herself. She didn't know if she had it in her to try to stop someone who was actively trying to murder her.

But... if she gave up, she'd be letting him win. The timeline was in a worse state now than she found it. If she left it now, who knew what fates would befall everyone she'd known?

She couldn't leave.

A hive of bees buzzed in her stomach as Hermione worked her way down the Grand Staircase. She hadn't disillusioned herself this time; now that she'd decided to stay and stand her ground, she chose to leave herself freely visible.

She had to be careful though. From now on, until the air was cleared between herself and Tom, she had to make sure she only interacted with him where there were witnesses—just in case he tried again.

A difficult task seeing as that most potential witnesses had just returned to their homes for the Christmas break, but not impossible.

And, Hermione reasoned, she always had the option of going to Dumbledore. Having Tom put away for attempted murder wasn't an ideal solution and certainly wasn't a long-term answer, but it was a safety net she could use if she had to.

She would be fine, she told herself. As long as she was cautious and calculated, then everything would be *fine*.

Just as she was starting to relax, she stepped down onto the second floor landing—

"Ah!" Hermione sounded, running into a tall figure coming from the second floor corridor.

Their hands steadied her, an instinctive action to stop her going down the stairs, and—*fuck, fuck*—of course it was Tom.

With her luck lately, who else would it be?

Hermione lurched back to free herself from his touch. Her heart was barely beating, but even still, the sight of him had her fighting a smirk.

Because Tom's brows were furrowed, lips slightly parted. He was surprised to see her.

Take that, she thought viciously. *I know what you did and you did not fool me. Take that, you arrogant, slimy, orphaned, bas—*

In less than a second, his wand was under her jaw, pressing harshly into her skin, and Hermione yelped as her back hit the wall.

"Who—" Tom's words came from behind ground teeth, "*—are you?*"

Who—what? Who was—

Oh.

Oh, oh *shit*.

Had he used legilimency? Did he know she'd thought of him as an orphaned bastard?

She hadn't felt anything, not even a tickle at her head, but— he looked furious, and he had his wand on her in a perfectly public area. That must've been what triggered him. He must've known.

And of course, how could she possibly know that?

Hermione became forceful with her Occlumency efforts, gritting her teeth and raising her chin to lessen the pressure of his wand. "Lower your wand," she ordered as evenly as she could manage.

But Tom didn't budge. "*Who are you?*"

"You wouldn't dare touch me here," she hissed, deflecting. "There are countless witnesses lining these walls. You'd never get away with it."

Tom tilted his head and his dark eyes flicked between her and the portraits along the wall. Out of the corner of her eye, she could make out figures pretending to be sleeping, peeping at them between almost-closed eyes, eager for the slightest inkling of drama they could spread about the school.

While Hermione knew he was a psychotic murderer, she also knew that Tom wasn't stupid.

Tom licked his lips and lowered his wand, cleared his throat. He glanced back at the portraits one more time before he again focussed on her. "Disagreements between staff are only natural, in any workplace," he said, cold smile growing on his lips.

Hermione hurriedly stepped back, her heels hitting the edge of the stair landing. "Yes, I suppose they are," she agreed. "But of course, it would be so *unfortunate* to have such a disagreement in front of all of these portraits. With nothing else to do all day, their occupants pay extremely close attention to the daily comings and goings. They might very well remember even the slightest altercation—even a small one such as the one just past—for years to come."

Tom's smile grew and he flashed his teeth as they bit down into his lip. "Yes, that *would* be unfortunate, wouldn't it?"

"Most," she breathed. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have quite the busy evening ahead of me," she murmured before she started down the stairs.

She held onto the rail as she went, goosepimples lining her skin—*what if he pushed her?*—and although she could feel the prickling stab of his eyes burning into her, she refused to turn back.

Don't, she told herself. *Don't, don't, don't—*

"Hermione?"

The soft, gentle echo of his voice only met her ears when she'd reached the next landing. She stopped, glanced back up the stairs.

Tom hadn't moved, was still right where they'd spoken, and now, being a flight of stairs above her, was looking down at her.

At the angle, his eyes were dark. He looked impossibly tall, and she felt small, insignificant.

Crushable.

And as though he knew exactly that, Tom smiled down at her. It was perfectly warm, perfectly beautiful.

Flawless.

How did he do that?

"No one will believe you."

Hermione's lips twitched. She didn't have anything to say to that, so she turned on her heel and started down the first floor corridor, back down to her chambers.

Because even with the remainder of the poisoned tea in her bag, she knew that he was entirely correct.

Chapter End Notes

Hello, me again. I wanted to touch base here to tell you that the story will get darker from here. This is your warning to heed the tags, and if you don't like dark fics, please imagine that Hermione drank the tea and dropped dead, and that was the end :)

Chapter 13

The night offered Hermione much in the way of clarity.

Though she was hidden safely in her room behind warded doors, she still didn't get much sleep, and so instead, she used the time to ponder the puzzle of the predicament she was in.

Now that Tom had tried to murder her, Avery being engaged to someone else suddenly didn't seem like as much of a problem as it initially had. She would write to him, she decided. She needed to know if he'd spoken to Tom after she'd left Slughorn's party, and if Tom knew that *she* knew about the basilisk. That was important.

And in the meanwhile, even though the urge to run was just as strong as it'd first been, as she tossed and turned in bed, she decided that perhaps Harry had been right the whole time—perhaps the best way of fighting Tom wasn't slow and steady, but was to fight fire with fire.

What she needed, was for Tom to see that she was an asset, and that removing her from the picture had been the wrong decision. To properly do that, she couldn't retreat, couldn't cower. He would never value someone like that. Instead, she had to be proactive, needed face him head on, and needed to remind him of why he'd wanted her in the first place. She had to convince him she was *different*, that she was worth brushing aside his beliefs that muggleborns were beneath him.

It wasn't... *impossible*. She could do that.

She just needed to make sure he didn't kill her before she got there.

Hermione was seeing him everywhere.

While she'd decided against wallowing in her room, Hermione knew that until things had been smoothed over with Tom, she mustn't allow herself to be caught alone. And so, the following day, when she surfaced from the confines of her room—with her trusty hand mirror by her side, of course—she stuck to the other professors like glue.

Her morning was spent with Kettleburn and Hagrid, pruning the shrivelfig trees around the grounds. The work was a good distraction, until she spied a group of lingering Slytherins by the courtyard. Tom was with them. Though the students were playing around in the snow the way that students normally do, Hermione thought she saw Tom looking down in her direction.

She made sure to work on the other side of the trees after that.

Later, around lunch time, she volunteered to help Professor Shrew with refurbishing the charms classrooms—dusting, cleaning down the furniture, removing the graffiti from the tables, and sorting through old essays that'd been abandoned over the years.

Just like the pruning, it made for a fantastic distraction, but when Shrew invited her into the Great Hall for a coffee, Tom was already in there. It was as if he'd been *waiting*.

Having quickly excused herself from coffee, Hermione then spent the remainder of her afternoon

in the potions chamber, helping Slughorn sort through his outdated and rotting ingredients.

She didn't actually see Tom there, but she *thought* she did. With each shadow, every movement, every sound, her war-trained instincts pounced, assuming the worst. But it wasn't him—just her paranoia—and together with Slughorn, she finished the task at hand in peace.

By the time it came to dinner, Hermione remained for the most part unscathed, and made it up to the Great Hall a little bit early. The space was mostly empty, and so was—to her relief—the spot on the professors table that Tom usually occupied.

Hermione headed down the hall, up toward her own usual spot—but then stopped.

Hmm.

Changing her mind mid-course, Hermione veered around toward the Hufflepuff table.

For the Christmas break, the tables had been shortened, making the space cosier. But despite that, there was still only one head sitting at the Hufflepuff table, and it was one that she recognised.

She went over and took up the seat opposite him.

"...wh-what are you doing?" Edward asked hesitantly as she sat down, glancing around them self-consciously.

"Good evening to you too," Hermione quipped.

Edward narrowed his eyes. "I don't need company if that's what you're doing."

"*Excuse* me," she said, a touch offended. "What makes you think I'm sitting here for you? Maybe the lighting is better down here than up there," she added, nodding up to the professor's table.

"Please, Miss," Edward sassed. "I'm the only Hufflepuff you know. Why else would you be here?"

Hermione straightened. "For your information, I know plenty of other Hufflepuffs!"

Edward shook his head and rolled his eyes, and helped himself to some casserole.

Ouch.

Truthfully, Hermione had chosen to take her dinner at the Hufflepuff table because it was directly in front of where Dumbledore sat at the professors table, and there wasn't anywhere that she felt safer. But she certainly wasn't about to go telling Edward as much.

Hermione pulled out her Daily Prophet, started grazing over the headlines.

"Are you... enjoying your break?" she asked politely, helping herself to a serve of shepherd's pie.

Edward slowly looked up from his food, a bit of a scowl on his face. Then, he turned as if to gesture toward the Slytherin's table.

There were a group of loud boys sitting toward the end of the table and—ah. Hermione spotted a familiar head of dark hair. Cygnus.

She frowned. "What's he doing here for the break?"

Edward shrugged. "Says his parents are on holiday this year."

Hermione's lip turned up. But now that she was looking toward the Slytherin table, she noticed that there were actually... quite a few students over there. Usually, Slytherin was the smallest house over the break.

"Edward... if Cygnus is still giving you trouble," she went on to say, "I can teach you a few spells to knock him down a peg or two. If you like."

Edward finished his mouthful. "...Really?"

"Yes," she said. "Technically, I'm not a professor, so it's not my job to stop you from casting spells at one another. I'm simply here to mend your injuries after you already have them."

Edward snorted a laugh, gave a small nod. "Wh-why're you... why are you being so nice to me?"

"There is only one thing in this life that I dislike more than improperly sorted books," she said matter-of-factly, "and that's a bully."

"Thanks a lot, Mi—" Edward broke off mid speech.

Hermione didn't have to ask why he'd stopped, because then, there was a gentle, cold touch upon her shoulder, and she glanced up.

"Oh." Hermione's pulse picked up. She couldn't contain her scowl. "What do you want?" she asked rather rudely.

But Tom pretended not to hear her, stepping around her and dragging his hand along her back as he seated himself on the bench, right next to her.

"Good evening, Hermione," he just about purred, sitting so close that their legs brushed, "Edward."

"Er—good evening, Professor," Edward mumbled, glancing between her and Tom. He added uncertainly, "um, a-am I in trouble?"

"No, no, not at all," Tom said brightly. "I merely wanted to check up on Madam Granger. She wasn't feeling very well yesterday." He turned to her. "Isn't that right?"

Hermione went to say *no*, that most certainly *wasn't* right, but before she could get a word out, she suddenly stiffened.

Because Tom's hand slid onto her upper thigh, gave it a firm squeeze.

If it weren't for where they were, Hermione would've yelled and shoved at him. But not wanting to make a scene in front of the professors, particularly Dumbledore, Hermione settled for stepping on his foot with her heel.

Tom only squeezed harder.

Hermione managed to clear her throat. "Well. As you can see, I'm fine now. So, there's really no need for you to—"

"Don't be ridiculous," Tom murmured gently. "You shouldn't be alone."

Her heartbeat pounded in her neck.

"It's a good thing that I'm not alone, then. I'm actually having quite a lovely dinner with Ed—" Hermione stopped as she glanced back at Edward. He was standing now, mid-way through

packing his bag. "What are you doing?"

"I've, um. I've just forgotten something in the dormitory. I'm just going to..." Edward gestured toward the exit. "Good night, Miss. Professor."

Edward scurried off.

Hermione watched his retreating form pleadingly, and when he was out of sight, she turned to narrow her eyes at Tom.

"Look what you did," she accused, before hissing, "what are you doing?"

"Getting dinner." Tom's features were perfectly innocent.

"Why are you having it *here*?" she pressed.

Tom smiled at her and then finally released her thigh. With his now freed hand, he picked up a napkin, and with his other, he reached out and held her chin between his fingers. His grip was painfully tight, and before she could pull away, he dabbed at her cheek with the napkin.

"I wanted to check on this," he paused as he finished his dabbing, and brushed at the line of her lower lip with his thumb, "*mouth* of yours."

"Don't—" Hermione yanked her head back and slapped his hands away, "touch me."

Tom smiled and glanced at the napkin. Hermione spied a spot of gravy. Ugh.

"Well, you needn't have bothered," she snapped, wiping her face again for good measure. "I'm not going to tell anyone about what happened. Least of all, a *student*."

Tom watched her. The curve of his eyebrow became sharp. "No?"

"You've kept my secret of what happened with Hagrid. It's only fair if I keep yours. And you know what they say," she said, glancing back at her Daily Prophet as if his presence didn't bother her in the slightest. "Even the best of us blunder every now and then, and we are all deserving of a second chance, aren't we? Even you."

Tom didn't immediately speak, but when he did, his voice was dripping with suspicion. "Pardon?"

"What you did, was horribly shortsighted," she stated boldly. "But you're not the first who has tried to be rid of me because of my heritage, and I'm sure you won't be the last. And so, because you seem like a useful sort of person, I've decided to give you a chance—just *one* chance—to see the error in your ways."

Tom was leaning on the table, and he was grinning at her. He looked deeply amused. "You would give me... another chance?"

"I understand, you know," she murmured, not sharing any of his amusement at the situation.

"There are many witches and wizards of muggle descent who don't appreciate the culture they've been born into. Many even, perhaps, pose a threat to our way of life, and there are even more muggles who undoubtedly do.

"But you would be wise to see that I am not the rule. I am the exception, and I will give you this *one* chance to see that."

He shifted beside her, and the next thing she knew, his arm was draping over her shoulders.

The closeness had her blood chilling.

"Oh, that's... quite the pitch," said Tom, voice lower now that he was so close. "Most compelling. But, you see, I'm afraid it's not quite that simple anymore."

Hermione wanted to shove him off, have a go at him with her knife. But now she could see students from across the hall watching them, several of the professors, too. He wouldn't hurt her in front of all of them.

"What do you mean?" she murmured, muscles primed.

Tom's eyes met hers, and they were unwavering. "Why didn't you drink it, Hermione?"

Hermione blinked. "I—because you— it was *poisoned*."

"How did you know?" he asked, and when she didn't immediately answer, he added, "hmm?"

"I... I didn't. It was luck. One of my—" she sighed. "One of my old quills dropped a barb. It landed in the tea, and it reacted."

Tom shrugged and picked up his goblet, sipped at his pumpkin juice. With their proximity, she could hear it as he swallowed, and his features twisted into wince. "Yes, but, that doesn't *quite* explain it though, now does it?"

"Of course it does," she said, but her words weren't certain. When they'd started speaking, she'd felt such control, but now, she was thrown. What was he getting at?

Tom made a clicking sound with his teeth. "You all but shrieked your thoughts at me yesterday, on the staircase," he said, his words barely a murmur. "That you knew what I'd done. And you do know. Don't you?"

Hermione had the distinct feeling that she was becoming woven into a trap. She couldn't see it though.

"Well—yes, that's quite literally what we've just been discussing. What's your point?"

Tom stared at her then, tilting his head. His eye contact was piercing.

White walls.

A blank canvas.

An empty field.

"There's something... off about you," he mused. "Isn't there?"

Hermione broke their eye contact to roll her eyes. She gave an impatient huff, and picked up her Daily Prophet. "Okay. Clearly you're incapable of providing a straight answer, so if you don't mind —"

Tom slammed his free hand down on the table, stopping her from taking her newspaper, and his other tightened around her shoulder, holding her in place.

"You know things you shouldn't. You nose where you shouldn't be nosing." Tom smiled at her, and it seemed a little bit sad. "I don't think I've quite figured out what you're up to, just yet, but has anyone ever told you, Hermione, that curiosity killed the cat?"

There was a slight tremor in her hands. She brought them down onto her lap and clasped them together. She wouldn't let it show.

"Yes. My father, actually," she said primly. "Too many times to count. Hearing it come from you isn't anymore threatening than it was from him."

Tom smiled wide. "No?" he asked, close to a laugh. "Not even a little?"

Hermione swallowed. "No," she said, as surely as she could. "I don't— while I can't say that I am entirely understanding of what you were hoping to gain from this conversation... I don't want to be a threat to you, Tom. We were getting along so well before this. I thought we even—"

As Tom laughed, she broke off. She wasn't going to talk over him.

"You think that I'm threatened by you?" he asked, his laugh incredulous.

"You tried to *kill* me. How else should I interpret that?"

Tom's arm moved, migrating lower down her back, fingers hovering over her spine. He leaned in closer. It was almost intimate. "Is the spider threatened by the fly?"

It was such a smooth, gentle whisper, and yet, Hermione's skin felt hot.

"You know, *Riddle*," she spat, unable to keep it in, "those who believe in pureblood supremacy are all the same. They're all so hellbent on the notion that muggleborns are beneath them, that we could never be their equal, that in the end... they all have one thing in common. *They never see us coming*," she scathed. "Grindelwald *fell*. He too, was reckless and shortsighted, and it led to his downfall. I'm giving you this chance—this *one* chance—to see his mistakes and learn from them. But if you don't let go of this, if you don't back off... you'll see that *I* am the spider in this scenario, and you'll fall too."

And with that, Hermione stood from the bench, brushing off his touch, and went to walk away.

"I can see it now," Tom called after her when she'd made it only a few steps.

Hermione was so flustered, so irate that she couldn't stop herself. She halted and glanced back. "Just what do you *see*?" she snapped.

Tom was leaning on the table with one elbow, a hand under his jaw. He looked entertained, entirely relaxed, and in that moment, she'd never hated anyone more.

"You told me you thought you'd make a fine Gryffindor. I didn't see it before, but now..." He nodded slowly, "I think I do. You have courage in spades, don't you?" He said. "Even when it's entirely unfounded. Gryffindor through and through."

Hermione scowled down at him. She'd had enough. Screw convincing him to recruit her. She'd just have to find his chambers, break into them, and find the diary that way. He wasn't leaving her with a choice. "Go fuck yourself," she spat.

And as she stormed off, over the hustle and bustle of dinner, she heard the sound of his laughter following her all the way out.

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Apologies for my delay in posting. I blame COVID

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*Dear Marvin,
I've been thinking things over. I've decided it would be a good idea if we met up to speak in person.
Soon would be best—in the next few days, before Christmas.
Let me know when suits.
Best,
Hermione.*

On Hermione's journey down from the owlery, she kept to the corridors she knew to be littered with portraits, stopping at each and every corner. At each stop, she slowed against the wall and pulled out her hand mirror. She angled it to see what awaited her around the bends, proceeding on her way only when she found the coast clear.

Her adrenaline spiked each time, anticipating the distinct, large, yellow eyes she remembered from her second year. They frequented her dreams, and now with the knowledge that the basilisk was awake, and with Tom's threats looming over her, she was seeing them in her sleep more often than not.

But—for the time being, anyway—the worry seemed to be for naught. She found every corner she peeked around clear, and she continued uninterrupted on her way down the castle.

Still, she couldn't shake the sensation that she was in the eye of a hurricane.

"What are you doing?"

Hermione jolted at the sudden voice, rapidly turning on the spot. But—oh, *good*—it was only Cygnus.

"Nothing," she chirped, quickly straightening, tucking her mirror into her waist band behind her back.

Cygnus frowned suspiciously. "*Really*, Miss?" he pressed, narrowing his nosy little eyes. "Because it looked to me like you were poking around that corner with a mirror."

Hermione pursed her lips. "Don't you have somewhere else to be, Cygnus?" she said. "Some, poor unsuspecting second year to be terrorising, perhaps?"

He snorted and rested his hands behind his head in a lazy, nonchalant sort of way. "You know Miss, if you're that desperate to find the Professor, you don't need to go nosing around corners,"

said Cygnus. "You could've just asked."

Immediately, she scowled. "*Excuse me?*"

"Riddle's down in the common room."

"I—well what on Earth is he—wait, what makes you think I'm looking for *him*?"

"Please, Miss," Cygnus drawled. "Who else would you be looking for? We all know the two of you are shagging."

Hermione just about gasped. "I— ten points from Slytherin!" she snapped.

"Wha—that's not fair!" Cygnus declared. "Professor Slughorn said you all shouldn't be docking points over the break!"

"You'll find that *shouldn't* and *can't* are two vastly different concepts," she said, hands on her hips. "And not that it's even *remotely* any of your business, but you can rest assured knowing that there is absolutely nothing but professionalism between Professor Riddle and I."

Cygnus scoffed. "Whatever you say, Miss," he mumbled, but it was clear he wasn't buying it.

Sensing another sarcastic comment brewing, Hermione pointed a finger toward him and warned, "so much as another word on the matter, and it'll be another five points."

Cygnus vigorously rolled his eyes before he mimed zipping his mouth shut. Then he crossed his arms and went to step past her.

"Don't know what he sees in you, to be honest," he murmured as he went, quickly disappearing around the corner she had come from.

As the sounds of his footsteps slowly grew softer, Hermione closed her eyes. She grit her teeth, having to take several deep breaths to keep herself from following him to snap at him.

She rubbed at her temples. The apple evidently didn't fall far from the tree.

But while the thought of there being rumours amongst the student body about her and Tom was alarming... Cygnus hadn't been *entirely* wrong.

She *had* been looking for Tom.

And now, she had the exact information she needed. She hadn't even had to ask for it!

Tom was in the Slytherin common room. *What* he was doing in there, she hated to think, but at the very least, it gave her a starting point.

And so, Hermione determinedly dashed off, changing course to take the quickest and most busy path down toward the dungeons.

When she reached the lowest floor, she was quick to find herself a secluded corner, and then, she got to work.

Cold, disillusioned, and frankly, a little bit damp, Hermione waited tucked behind the large serpentine statue that adorned the dungeon corridor where she knew the entrance to the Slytherin common room to be.

Nothing was happening.

She'd been waiting in the humid dungeon corridor watching the patch of stone wall where the common room entrance would appear, and no one had entered or left in the hour she'd been stood there. Her feet were starting to hurt.

Ugh.

Signage for the professor's personal quarters would've been far too simple, wouldn't it?

But she figured that Tom had to surface *eventually*, and when he did, she'd just follow him until he returned to his own rooms, and voilà! She would find his room, forcibly break in sometime when he was busy elsewhere, and the diary—assuming that's where he was keeping it, of course—would be hers.

It would be easy. Simple.

...Except for the fact that nothing was happening.

Time slowly stretched on, and as it did, fatigue started to set in from the effort it took to maintain the disillusionment charm. Hermione rested her head against the statue, her eyelids heavily starting to droop.

But just as her thoughts started to jumble with the early stages of sleep, she was jolted out of her stupor by abrupt, loud yelling. It was the sort of yelling that tended to come from students in heated arguments, and it echoed down the dungeon hall from the direction of the entry hall.

It sounded like it was a decent distance away, and though it sounded like the altercation might've even been violent, Hermione decided to ignore it. She'd leave it for a professor to deal with. She was on a mission.

She kept watch of the common room, trying her best to tune out the muffled yelling, until a few minutes later, something finally happened. A Slytherin student, one who looked to be about a fifth year ran past her hiding spot, quickly barging into the common room.

The door disappeared once more and then all was quiet for another few moments—

And suddenly, there was a flurry of action before her. About ten students all filed out of the common room at the same time, and— oh. There.

Tom was amongst them and— oh, *shoot*. As he made it out of the common room, he pushed past the students to *run*.

The students all hurried after him, and, swearing under her breath, Hermione joined, trailing on behind the group.

With the sudden burst of activity, the dungeon corridor had become rather busy, and following the Slytherins was difficult while disillusioned. She must've barged into multiple baffled first years on her way, but, oh well. With any luck, they'd think nothing of it.

She carried on following the crowd of students down the hall toward the source of the yelling until

they made it to the staircase, just in time for her to overhear Tom loudly barking, "get out of the way."

In the middle, she could just see Tom's form shoving through the students, and Hermione did her best to follow, jumping on the spot to try to get a view of what had happened. There seemed to be a student lying in the centre of the group, and they were *shrieking*. They must've been seriously hurt.

Hermione sighed. This clearly wouldn't be her day, and so, while everyone was focussed on the injured student, she removed her disillusionment charm.

Now fully visible, Hermione started pushing through the students toward the centre. But when she reached the middle, her breath caught.

The injured student, the one shrieking, who was now in the midst of being scooped up into Tom's arms, was *Edward*.

Tom was fast, wasting no time before he started to move them toward the stairs, presumably en route toward the infirmary. Hermione followed, instructing the students who had congregated to clear out as she went.

"What happened?!" Hermione demanded when she caught up with him in the entry hall, just about needing to run to keep up with Tom's pace.

"*Ah, ah, ah, ahhhh*," Edward whined.

"I don't know. Looks like it's his leg," Tom murmured, and then he frowned at her. "Where did you come from?"

Hermione ignored him and fell back to move around to Tom's other side to get a look at Edward's leg. She could tell by the way the fabric was sticking to his leg that it was soaked in blood, and—oh—

There was a sharp bone protruding from his mid-thigh.

"Oh my— *goodness what happened?!"*

"*Ahh, ahh, ahhhhhh.*"

Tom sighed irritably over Edward's sobs. "I *told* you, I don't know—"

"That little rat *bastard!*" Hermione declared, cutting him off. "You can't tell me this wasn't Cygnus!"

"Like I said, I don't know what hap—"

"*Ahhh, ah, ah.*"

"Ooh," Hermione growled over Edward's cries, "when I get my hands on him, I'll wring his little neck myself!"

"Perhaps it would be best—"

"*Ahh, it hurts, it hurts...*"

"—to worry about strangling Mr. Black *after* Edward has received some sort of medical attention?" Tom suggested.

Again, Hermione ignored him. "He can't possibly think he can continue to get away with this sort of behaviour! What if that had been his neck rather than his leg?!"

Edward's howls of pain grew even louder.

"Oh, it's all right, Edward," Hermione tried in a feeble attempt to soothe him. "We're nearly there, we'll get you all taken care of."

They hurried around the last bend to the infirmary, and as they entered, Hermione caught sight of Madam Spindle by the window maintaining one of her succulents. Her neck craned toward them at the sound of their entry.

"Oh, Tom, how good to see— oh my," Spindle said, hardening rapidly. She moved quicker than a woman her age should, gesturing to one of the beds. "Down there. The first on the right."

Tom obediently did as instructed, gently dropping Edward onto the bed. Hermione reached over to take one of his hands.

"Ahhhhh." Edward's whines had become long, quiet howls. He was pale and covered in a layer of sweat.

"Hermione, give him this, would you?" Spindle levitated a small purple phial in her direction.

Hermione untwined one of her hands from Edward's to take it, swiftly uncorking in with her thumb and forefinger.

"Edward," she said over his whines, "Edward, I know it hurts, but please, drink this. It'll make you feel better, and I'll be here the whole time."

Edward looked terrified, but still, he let her lower the phial to his lips, and obediently swallowed the potion down.

Within seconds, Edward was asleep.

"Ah, thank goodness," Madam Spindle murmured. "Impossible to think straight without peace and quiet."

Then, with very little in the way of discussion, Hermione and Spindle began to work. Hermione covered Edward with a sheet while Spindle vanished his pants and started to clear the wound. While Spindle got started chanting over his leg to slow the bleeding and straighten out the bone, Hermione got started on filling in Edward's chart.

It had taken a good year and a half for them to get to that point, the point where they could work without needing to communicate. And while Hermione wasn't particularly fond of Spindle as a person, she could appreciate an expert at work when she saw it.

Over her time in the infirmary, she'd witnessed Spindle heal all sorts of students with all sorts of injuries, including many she herself wouldn't have known where to start with. She'd learned a great deal from the old woman.

It almost made sharing an office with her manageable. Almost.

But this time, as Hermione worked, scribbling down as many observations as she could, she was distracted, acutely aware that Tom was *hovering*. He wasn't going away, but he wasn't helping them either.

Ugh. Maybe if she gave him a prod...

"So I take it, you didn't actually *see* what happened to Edward?" Hermione asked, getting to the description of ailment section of the Edward's chart.

Tom glanced down at her, raising a neat, irritated eyebrow. "Like I said," he drawled, "no. Hawkins came and informed me a student had fallen down the dungeon staircase, and that it looked serious. That's all I was told."

"Hmm." Hermione filled in, 'fall down the stairs'. "All right. Thank you. We'll take it from here," she said dismissively.

That ought to do it.

"Oh, Tom, dear boy," Spindle said then, breaking off from her chanting. "Fetch me that bottle from over there, would you? The grey one?"

"Certainly."

Hermione rolled her eyes as Tom dutifully did as told. And then, as if Spindle had sensed he'd been about to leave, she put him to work. She had him vanish some blood for her, summon a towel over, fetch another couple of potions, tweak the lighting for her.

Hermione ground her teeth together. It looked like he'd be there to stay.

Bloody hell. But... oh well, she supposed. Spindle might've been old and frail, but she was adept with a wand, and Hermione knew Tom wasn't stupid enough to try to harm her in her presence.

Aside from the occasional instruction from Spindle, they all worked quietly. And though being in Tom's presence was just as uncomfortable as ever, and though Hermione would never admit it, they actually... didn't make a bad team.

"That should," Spindle panted a good while later after Edward's skin had been woven back together, visibly spent. "Just about... do it."

"It's very clean, Ma'am. He mightn't even scar," Hermione commented, admiring Edward's skin where just an hour previously, his femur had been protruding from.

"Yes, well," Spindle breathed, "see as many... of these as... I have... and yours will be... neat, too."

Spindle started to trot around the bed to look over Edward's chart, looking a bit wobbly on her feet. And—predictable as ever, really—Tom swooped in, taking hold of Spindle's arm to steady her.

"You look exhausted, Marigold. How about I stay and help Hermione here, and we can clean up and make sure Edward has stabilised," Tom offered helpfully. "You go and get yourself some dinner, have a bit of a rest."

At once, Hermione blanched, but Spindle's features lit up like a Christmas tree. "Oh, you *wonderful* boy, you wouldn't mind, would you?"

"No, no," Hermione chimed in, "that's not at all necess—"

"Of course, Marigold, it's absolutely no trouble at all," Tom said over Hermione, gently taking the chart from Spindle's hands. "It would be my pleasure."

Tom gave Hermione a warm smile. Then, when Spindle wasn't looking, he winked.

Hermione felt sick. Oh no.

"Actually, Marigold, why don't I help you to the Great Hall—" Hermione tried, only to be cut off.

"Oh, nonsense, the infirmary must be tended to," Spindle insisted, starting to hobble toward the exit. "A break in classes doesn't equate... to a break in injuries, as you can very well see."

"Oh. Um. Well—"

"Best to have two sets of hands," Spindle said, almost at the door. "Why don't you show... Tom where everything is."

A lump was forming in Hermione's throat that she couldn't swallow down. There were no portraits in the infirmary. With the dose of sleeping potion Edward had been given, he'd be unconscious for hours. Aside from him, there were no other occupants of the infirmary, which meant that if Spindle left... she would be entirely alone with Tom.

Tom, obviously well aware of that fact, smiled down at her, a smug turn to his lips. "That's a wonderful idea, don't you agree, Hermione? It would be so *terrible* if someone else were to be hurt without anyone here to care for them."

Hermione gripped her wand. She heard the threat in his words. But Spindle didn't, and gave them an over-the-shoulder wave as she gripped the doorknob.

"Such a dear boy," Spindle cooed, stepping out of the door. "I'll be sure to bring you back a cake for your troubles."

"Thank you, Marigold, that would be lovely," Tom said musically.

With that, Spindle vanished out of the door, leaving Hermione entirely on her own with Tom.

The door swung shut with a loud groan.

Their eyes met. Tom licked his lips.

Then, Hermione ran.

Chapter End Notes

I also must apologise for the filler, but it was too long combined with the next part D: !

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

This is your friendly reminder to heed the tags. I have added the following: filth, dub-con, nsfw, gaslighting... hmm. Let me know in the comments if you stumble across any unsavoury themes I've forgotten to tag ☺

Hermione bolted into the infirmary office, turning on her heel when she met the dead end.

She squared her shoulders and directed her wand, and when Tom made it into the doorway, he skidded to a stop at the sight of it.

Hermione raised her chin. "Leave," she ordered. She left no room for question.

"Oh. Now, *now*, Hermione," Tom mocked as he took a measured step toward her, a gentle, condescending tone. "I'm only here to help you."

Her scowl deepened. "Save your breath for someone who believes you," she snapped. "There's the door." She gestured with her wand toward the exit.

Tom looked between her and her wand, and then his smile widened into a grin. Ugh. She wanted to curse his beautiful smile right off his stupid, beautiful face.

He raised his hands in what she was sure was supposed to be a submissive gesture, and gave a hum of amusement. "I only wish to speak with you."

Hermione raised her eyebrows, and then spat, "speak from over there then."

His eyes settled onto the tip of her wand. "You promised me another chance."

"I certainly never once used the word *promise*."

"Hermione—"

"*Stop*," she ordered firmly as he took another step toward her. "If you only wanted to talk, you wouldn't have cornered me alone like this."

Tom's smile was unwavering. "*Au contraitre*," he sung, tiptoeing yet another stop closer, "that's precisely why I've cornered you."

Her heart was thundering. Generally, the infirmary was a cool place, more often than not, uncomfortably cold. But now, Hermione felt hot. Her mouth was dry, her palms were sweating and the collar of her shirt felt constrictive.

"Leave."

But he didn't. Tom only continued to smile, and with it, the urge to curse him became stronger, bordering on impossible to resist, but before she could—

Tom flicked his fingers upward, a quick, subtle 'come here' motion that by the time she noticed it,

had already happened, and with it, her wand shot right up out of her fingers.

Her wand clattered to the ground on the far side of the office, and there was a moment where she stood, wandless, unsure of what to do. It only lasted a moment though, and then, with a sheer sense of self-preservation, she did the only thing she could.

She ran at him.

But the thing was, that in order for her to get out of the office, she had to make it past Tom, and Tom, she knew, had limbs that were far longer than hers. So it wasn't any surprise that he caught her.

What *was* surprising though, was the strength he held onto her with. She thought if she hit him hard enough, she'd be able to wrangle herself free, but despite his thin form, he was deceptively strong, and he managed to shove her back until she hit one of the office desks right on her coccyx.

"Ah, let— let me go," she growled, kicking out at him.

Tom held her arms down, right at her waist height, and pushed himself right into her to stop her kicking.

Bloody, fucking hell, should she—should she scream? Would her voice carry to the corridor? Would there even be anyone there to hear her?

Hermione pushed against him some more, but—hell—it was no use. Tom smiled down at her with satisfaction. She'd been caught.

Hermione scowled.

"A little bird told me something interesting today," Tom murmured, his breathing just a little bit ragged. It sounded the way it had that night in the potions classroom.

Hermione's collar felt tighter. She tugged at his grip. "That you're—*ow* — insane?" she provided for him.

Tom's hold on her remained tight, and he didn't bite at her taunt. "Why have you been wandering the castle corridors with a mirror?" he asked, tone calm and collected, as if he wasn't holding her down.

At once, Hermione ceased her struggling. Her soul just about left her body then and there.

Fuck. Fucking, *fucking* Cygnus.

"What?" she asked innocently, but it was rather feeble. "That's ridiculous. Why would I—"

Tom pressed closer into her, their hands wedged painfully between their bodies. He wasn't smiling anymore. "Don't fuck with me," he uttered.

Tom's words were stern, his eyes dark, and for the first time, she thought she could feel it—slight, needle-like pricks at her mind.

But despite his attempts at intimidation, despite the outward show of his ability to physically overpower her, Hermione was confident in her Occlumency. She had years of practice up her sleeve, and Tom wasn't yet Voldemort. He may have a natural talent with Legillimency, but he wasn't yet the master he would be.

She didn't know for certain if he knew that she knew about the basilisk. But if somehow, against all odds, he didn't, then she desperately needed to keep it that way.

She trusted her skills.

"I—" Hermione forced out a sigh. She had to be convincing. She had to sell it. "Well, why do you *think*? Obviously, I've been trying to avoid *you*, but evidently that's not working out very well for me."

Tom's features remained scrutinising. He looked impatient, annoyed. "With a mirror."

The words themselves posed a question, but the way he'd said them, did not.

Jesus Christ, even when he was assaulting her, he was exhausting, and had she not been disarmed and pinned to the shabby office desk, she would've told him as much.

"Yes."

Tom tilted his head. It was judgemental and condescending, it was as though he thought her *stupid*, and all at once, Hermione's patience burst.

"Oh, well pardon me, is that too *muggle* for you?" she hissed facetiously. "Would you prefer it if were to try searching a crystal ball to predict whether I'll run into you? Or would a foe-glass be better suited, perhaps?" she suggested. "An invisibility cloak, a notice-me-not charm? Hmm? How else should I be doing it?"

Tom licked his lips. "You shouldn't be avoiding me at all."

Hermione snorted. "You tried to kill me, and then after that, you all but told me you'll do it again! So, *do* forgive me if I choose not to take your advice on this particular occasion."

"You shouldn't be avoiding me, because it's waste of your energy. If I want to find you, then it won't matter where you go, or what method you use, because I will find you."

Oh. Another threat. And his words—well, they were terrifying, weren't they?—but for some inexplicable reason, Hermione didn't react the way any sane, logical person would. She didn't recoil, she didn't scowl. She didn't argue, didn't fight back, but instead—

She laughed.

She just couldn't help it! It was just so *ironic* that he would say that, that there wasn't anywhere she could hide from him, when she'd quite literally come from a time when she'd successfully done that exact thing for the better half of a year.

Once she started, she had a hard time stopping. She was vaguely aware of Tom stepping back, letting up ever so slightly, but she was so amused that she didn't consciously acknowledge it.

Tom rolled his eyes, an impatient sort of action, and it made her snort.

"Oh, I'm," Hermione said, pausing to catch her breath, "sure you will. You're a bit of a bad smell aren't you? Hard to get rid of?"

Tom breathed in loudly through his nose, and Hermione pressed her lips together to try to tame her chortles.

"Are you about done?"

Mouth firmly shut, Hermione nodded. "I think so."

Tom stepped back and let her go—well. It was more like half a step, and he was very much still imposing on her personal space, but he wasn't touching her anymore.

Hermione frowned. Wait—what? He was just... letting her go?

"I actually wanted to speak with you, because I've been thinking about what you said, about giving me another chance."

That... wasn't what she expected him to say, either. Her eyes narrowed. "...Have you now?"

"Yes," he said. "I've been thinking that in rejecting your offer, I was perhaps... a bit too rash."

She met his eyes, but as per usual, it didn't get her anywhere. He was as unreadable as ever. "...is that right?" she asked uncertainly.

"Yes," he repeated. "But while I would like to rectify my initial answer, before I do so... I've decided that I would like it if you would prove it."

As was seeming to be the norm when interacting with Tom, Hermione wasn't sure what he was getting at. "...Prove... prove what?"

"You want us to move on?" Tom asked. "You want us to *get along*, to put what I did behind us? If you mean it... if you're genuinely *able* to put it behind us... then, prove it."

Tom licked his lips, and she watched the movement of his tongue.

"And just how do you expect me to—"

"Get on your knees."

Hermione blinked. Her heart skipped a beat. She *thought* she heard him say 'get on your knees', but that couldn't have been what he'd said. "I—sorry, what did—"

The corner of his lip picked up. "You heard me."

Hermione hesitated. He sounded entirely serious, and half stunned, half offended, she didn't have an immediate response. Yes, it was true that she wanted to smooth things over, and she wanted to not have to fear for her life, and most of all, she wanted a chance at finding his diary, a chance to stop him before he truly got started. But...

Get on your knees.

Jesus.

Did she want it that much? Was his diary, was altering the timeline and helping her friends *that* important?

Hermione glanced him down and up.

...

Then, slowly, before she could think herself into deciding otherwise, she slowly lowered herself down onto her knees.

When she hit the stone, Tom breathed a sound of surprise as he grinned down at her, and one of his hands wound itself into her hair. He grabbed a fistful, and although he didn't pull, the pressure of it felt like a warning, a reminder of control.

She glanced ahead, focused on the stitching of his pants. What... what did he want her to do? Just... go in there? Undo his belt then and there, fish him out, and...?

Hermione swallowed. She peeped up at him.

"What should I...?"

"I don't want you to tie my shoes."

Again, he was insinuating as if she were stupid, and her cheeks flushed.

Fucking hell, she... she could do this, she told herself. She could *do* this. She'd agreed to so what she had to. Whatever was necessary. That included...

With quivering fingers, Hermione started to work at his belt, having to pull quite hard on the leather to release the buckle. She tried not to look at him—his face, that was—while she started on the buttons of his pants.

Don't think about it, don't think about it, don't think about it, she told herself, but when she loosened his pants and found the outline of him beneath his underwear long and hard, it was hard not to. And as she lowered his underwear, she noticed her hands had started to shake a little bit.

He looked... bigger than expected. He wouldn't fit in her mouth. How was she supposed to...?

Christ. She'd been in her underwear with Viktor, but that'd been as far as it had gone. Things with Ron had never even gotten that far before the war went to hell. She'd never even seen a man like this, let alone...

"I... I don't..." Hermione sighed. It was hard to bring herself to meet his eyes. "I haven't done this before."

Tom rumbled a laugh, and his hand tightened in her hair, giving a soft pull.

"Don't worry," he murmured, slow and smooth as honey, "I can talk you through it."

While kissing him in the potions classroom had felt organic, exhilarating, natural, even, this felt... degrading. Like a punishment.

She glanced down at her legs, ashamed, even though she knew she shouldn't be. Her arms and legs were truly quivering. Fuck. Why the hell was the threat of him killing her less nerve-wracking than this? He was just a man. Women had sucked cocks to get their way for Millenia. It couldn't be that hard. Surely not.

And if it meant not dying... she could do this. She could *do* this—

As though he knew how far into her head she was spiralling, Tom pulled her hair back, hard enough that she had to tilt her head back. With the angle, she met his eyes. They were dark, his pupils blown. The smile he gave her was merciless.

It was humiliating, and she was sure he meant it to be.

"Stop thinking," he ordered, "and open wide."

He was belittling her. He *wanted* it to be degrading, *wanted* her to be ashamed.

While it shouldn't have been, the knowledge of that was motivating. Hermione wouldn't let him win. She wouldn't. So, she did as he said, tilting her head back to open her mouth invitingly.

He touched her bottom lip then, with just the tip of his cock. The skin of him was hot and smooth.

"If you bite me, I'll kill you," he murmured.

He said it casually. *If you bite me, I'll kill you.* As if it wasn't a real threat, as if it were nothing.

But before she could think too hard on it, he eased forward, just a few inches, intruding into her mouth. He tasted like heat and salt.

Hermione closed her eyes, tried not to think too hard about what she was doing, about what she was letting him do. It was just self-preservation, she reminded herself. Nothing more. She was only doing what she had to.

Keeping his hold on her hair tight, Tom pulled back slowly, considerately, giving her time to acclimatise to the feel of him. He gently started to rock back and forth, sliding his cock inch at a time along the length of her tongue. His skin was soft, fragile almost. Strange how he felt hard and soft, both at the same time.

Using her lips to cover her teeth, the stretch of her mouth very quickly began to ache. It was a cramp-like sort of pain, and she couldn't help it when she whimpered.

It spurred him on. He started to move a bit faster, his cock reaching a bit further back in her mouth with each forward movement, and though the pain in her jaw was unrelenting, it was easier to take him now he was coated with her saliva.

She brought a hand up to grip him at the base, to give her more control, and she squeezed her hand around him in attempt to slow him down. All it seemed to do though was drive a hiss through Tom's teeth. He must've liked it. She squeezed down again, timing it as she took his cock to the back of her mouth.

His next hiss was more like a whine.

He *did* like it.

Satisfaction warmed her belly, and she was reminded that despite who he was, despite the despicable things he'd already done, he was still just a man.

Tom's free hand joined his other on the back of her head, and though he was still being gentle enough, his thrusts forward into her mouth became more forceful.

It hurt—her jaw *really* ached—but it was a good thing, she reminded herself. Surely it meant it'd be over soon.

"Ah, just—relax," he instructed, his voice raspy.

She tried to obey. Tom's hand tightened in her hair, and he filled her mouth. But then, just as she thought he couldn't go any further, he drove further in, and she gagged as his cock dipped into her throat. She went to pull back, to breathe, but Tom's grip on her was tight. He eased back only enough for her to catch her breath, and then he pushed right back in.

Tom hissed roughly as he dipped back into her throat, and it wasn't as sensitive the second time. He thrust forward slowly, pushing in as deeply as he could.

Hermione gagged around him. Her eyes were watering, and—ah, *ah*—it was suffocating. She clawed desperately at his thigh, digging her nails in, and finally, *finally*, Tom pulled back, all the way out.

She gasped for air, moaning as she closed her jaw, her muscles singing with relief. She reached up to wipe her cheek and chin, her raw skin slick with excess saliva.

Tom gripped himself and pushed her head back, clearly intent on fucking her some more, but Hermione—

"No..." she gasped, "I can't..."

Tom groaned, his hand starting to pump down his length. "No?"

"N—" She had to clear her throat. It felt raw. "No."

Another groan. He sounded bothered.

"Then, come here," he rasped, and with his other hand still tangled in her hair, he pulled her close. Hermione winced, her hands on his hips to keep herself steady. He was stroking his cock right against her cheek, smearing the mix of her saliva and the beginnings of his come onto her face.

But if he noticed her discomfort, it wasn't enough to stop him. He kept going, his breathing becoming rough.

Hermione dared to look up, just a peek through her eyelashes, and she found his eyes on her. His eyes were dark, nostrils flaring, lips parted, and his chest was heaving. He was blinking rapidly. It was as if he was having a hard time keeping himself together.

Kneeling on the stone, swollen lips, sticky from him fucking her mouth, she felt smaller than she'd ever been before. But seeing him like that, teetering on the brink, made her stomach hot, her toes curl and her adductors tighten.

She hated it.

Tom smiled darkly, as though he knew exactly what he was doing to her, knew the precise conflict he was instilling.

"Don't worry," he murmured between his soft, silken groans, stroking his cock onto her cheek, "next time you'll take me. Won't you?"

When she didn't answer, he pulled her hair. It *hurt*.

"*Won't you?*"

"Y-yes."

Tom groaned then, loudly, and when his strokes slowed, Hermione closed her eyes, feeling his come spill onto her face in long, hot spurts.

Tom's breathing was loud, and it echoed in the office.

Finally, he released her, and when she pulled away, she felt his come drip down her cheek, down

onto her neck. He was all over her.

Tom hummed lowly, leisurely, and with his fingers under her chin, he tilted head back to face him. Then, with his other hand, he smeared his come across her cheek, dragging his thumb through it, across her skin and into her mouth.

Hermione recoiled, pushing back against him, but—oh, *gross*—she'd already caught a taste of it. Salty. Chemical. Bitter.

He grinned down at her, stepping back to admire his work languidly. "Beautiful."

Hermione scowled, and then spat onto the stone floor. Tom laughed, tucking himself back into his pants.

"You know... I was really quite annoyed at first," he said, doing up his buttons and re-fastening his belt, "that you didn't drink the tea. But... hmm, maybe this arrangement will work out better for the both of us, yes?"

She rose to her feet, non-verbally vanishing the mess he'd made on her cheek.

It took some effort not to tell him she'd rather be dead than have any sort of continued *arrangement* with him, but she somehow managed, instead giving him a tight, "maybe."

Tom laughed a little bit and pulled at her cheek roughly with his fingers. It wasn't affectionate in the slightest. "Oh, cheer up, would you?" he told her. "I could've strangled you."

She swatted his hand away. "No, you couldn't have," she uttered. "Spindle would've known you were here with me, and that would've been too much of a risk for you."

Tom smirked and leaned in. His cheeks were flushed and his eyes were molten. He was beautiful. Hermione thought she might vomit. "I could murder a child in front of that woman, and still, she'd kiss the ground I walk upon."

"Do you do that often?" she snapped impulsively. "Murder children?"

There was a pause.

Oh, for love of all that was holy. She shouldn't have said that. Why in *hell* did she say that?

Tom's features fell. He tilted his head, brows lowering, eyes scrutinising. He wasn't smiling anymore.

Bloody hell, now she'd really gone and put her foot in it. She'd almost made it out relatively unscathed, and then she had to go and open her big, stupid mouth...

But then, just as she thought Tom was about to snap, he glanced out of the office window pointedly, out towards the infirmary, before meeting her eyes once more.

His lip picked up, a gentle sneer. "Do you really think I'd miss twice in a row?" he murmured softly. Then he gave her a quick smile, and without another word, turned on his heel and left.

Hermione didn't dare to move a muscle until she heard the loud groan of the infirmary door and the loud click of it closing.

Satisfied that he was gone, Hermione moved, hurrying over to snatch up her wand. She squeezed the handle tightly, holding the wood to her chest. She would never, *ever* let him disarm her again.

And then, with it clutched firmly in both hands, she glanced through the infirmary office window in the same direction Tom had glanced in.

Edward's bed was out there.

...

She didn't feel like she was winning anymore.

Chapter 16

Hermione spent the night in the infirmary.

It wasn't secure and it didn't feel safe—what if he came back?—but she couldn't bring herself to leave Edward on his own.

Do you really think I'd miss twice in a row?

That meant, that Edward's injury was his own doing. And while Tom mightn't have been the one to physically shove him down the stairs, she was sure then it must've been one of his Slytherins, one of the little *posse* she'd seen loitering around the castle grounds.

Is that how he trained them, she wondered? His new recruits? Had them prove their worth by injuring the muggleborn and half-blood students who couldn't defend themselves?

Or had it simply been a means to get to her? An elaborate, but sure-fire way he was able to corner her completely alone, and pin her down and—

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut. She'd spelled herself clean several times, had brushed her teeth three times over, but it didn't feel like enough. She could still feel the warm sensation of his come on her face, could still taste him.

Like a mantra, she told herself she only did what she had to, but the more she simmered, the more she replayed it, the more the shame continued to build. She should've said no. She should've fought him off. She should've stood her ground and done something, *anything* else, but she hadn't, and—

There was a sudden sound, and Hermione straightened, wiping at the tears that were starting to well up in her eyes.

Pushing off the infirmary bed she'd chosen for herself, she tiptoed over to Edward. He was finally stirring.

She reached out and clasped his twitching hand. "Edward?" she whispered.

He groaned groggily, his eyes cracking open just a bit.

"Wha—ah... goo... good mornin', Miss," he slurred, blinking heavily. "Wha... what happened? Where...?"

"You're in the infirmary, Edward. We think you had a fall, broke your leg. It was quite a bad injury."

Edward sat up quicker than he should've, and pulled back his blanket, exposing his leg to inspect it. It looked remarkably clean.

"You're all mended now," Hermione explained when he frowned. "It'll be extra tender for a few days, and you'll have to go easy for a few weeks, but you'll be right as rain soon enough."

"Oh." Edward wiggled his toes testingly.

"Do you... do you remember what happened?" she asked, not wanting to pry too soon, but unable to help herself. "How you fell?"

Edward frowned and pressed his lips together thoughtfully. "No. I was in the entry hall, and Selwyn was... he had some... um, *opinions* on my jumper. I remember speaking with him, and then it's a bit blurry, and then... here I am."

Hermione nodded. Hmm. "Oh well, I wouldn't worry too much. It might come back to you in the coming days. Or it might not, and that's perfectly normal too. The brain will often shut out incredibly painful or stressful events as a manner of self-protection."

Edward nodded. "How... how long do I have to be here?"

Her features softened. "Madam Spindle would like you stay for a week."

"A week?! But that's...!"

"I know. I'm sorry. The mended bone needs time to rest to ensure it sets strongly. But we'll be sure that the house elves bring the feasts to you, and we'll bring your gifts right to your bed. We can move the tree a bit closer if you like, too," she offered. "We'll make sure you still have a wonderful Christmas."

Edward rolled his eyes and fell back down onto the bed. He covered his eyes with his arm. "This is the worst year of my life," he announced.

Hermione patted him on the shoulder. "Is there anything I can get you?" she asked. "Some tea? Some toast?" Edward didn't answer, so she added, "...some sweets?"

He was quiet for another moment, until—

"...Do you have any chocolate frogs?" he mumbled.

"Coming right up."

While Edward was relatively contented by his chocolate, Hermione resisted the painful rumbling of her own stomach for as long as she could. But by dinner time, more than a full day since she'd last eaten, at the thought of the pudding waiting in the Great Hall, she was ready to call it quits.

Leaving Spindle on infirmary duty, she hesitantly made her way down.

A tightness lingered in her belly, one that steadily grew stronger the closer she got to the hall—it had nothing to do with her hunger.

She didn't want to see Tom again. If she never did, it would be too soon. Just the thought of him had her flooding with embarrassment, shame and fresh fury all over again. But the worst of it, she thought, was the anger she had at herself for feeling those things to begin with, for letting him get to her like that, for letting him have his way.

While the idea of devoting herself wholly to the task of getting his horcruxes hadn't been unbearable in theory, in practice... she didn't know that she had what it took. Using her body to manipulate others wasn't something she had experience with, wasn't something she could learn from a book. It was the sort of thing that'd better suited to Lavender, or Ginny, or Fleur—they were all beautiful and they knew it.

But her? Bookish, bossy, and buck-toothed?

The pressure was overwhelming and the urge to throw in the towel, to curl up and hide, was strong. Stronger than it'd ever been, but...

Despite it all, despite how sick he made her feel... she couldn't let herself back down. The Voldemort she'd known had been responsible for the deaths of thousands and thousands of innocents. Had ripped the wizarding community to tatters, had torn her family and friends apart.

She couldn't be so selfish as to think she was more important than stopping him. To save her friends, she would do whatever she had to. *She would.*

Coming off of the grand staircase, she noticed Dumbledore heading toward her from the direction of the transfiguration classroom. It was a relief to see him. It didn't matter that she didn't know the Dumbledore of this time—just the sight of someone who also wanted Tom stopped was enough to provide a small piece of comfort.

She nodded politely, expecting him to merely be heading in for dinner too, but he slowed as he approached.

"Good evening, Miss Granger."

"Evening, sir," she said politely. "Are you coming in for dinner?"

"Yes," he said, and together, they started to veer toward the Great Hall. "I was, however, hoping for a word with you, and as fate would have it, here we are."

"Oh. Um—of course."

Realistically, she knew there was nothing to worry about. She wasn't a student, he couldn't very well *scold* her. But it was instinctive. When a professor wanted to speak with her—particularly *Dumbledore*—she couldn't help but assume she was in trouble.

"Mr. Wilkins..." Dumbledore eventually said.

That made more sense. "Ah."

"His incident yesterday... Madam Spindle informed me that it was Professor Riddle and yourself who brought him in."

"Yes. It was," she answered a little unsurely. "I, um, ran into them on their way to the infirmary. The incident was quite loud, you see, so I came to see what had happened..."

"Of course," said Dumbledore. "And if you don't mind my asking, what *did* happen?"

"Well... all witness accounts—including Edward's—suggests it was a fall down the dungeon stairs."

Dumbledore paused then, and now that they'd reached the doors of the Great Hall, Dumbledore stopped.

"Might I ask a favour of you, Miss Granger?" he suddenly asked.

"...Certainly, sir."

Dumbledore frowned as if considering his words carefully. "I am becoming increasingly aware

that... a group, of sorts, seems to have formed, consisting of students in Slytherin house who are here for the break," he said softly. "Now, out of an abundance of caution, likely driven by the incident that you may be aware of, of nineteen forty-three, I think it might be best to keep a bit of an eye on that particular group. If you take my meaning."

Ah. Now she understood. Dumbledore had put it together the same way she had.

The increased number of Slytherin's staying for the break. Their loitering in clusters. The injury of a muggleborn on their staircase, following Riddle's return to the school.

He *was* still sniffing around Tom. Not thoroughly enough—but still. It was comforting to know.

"I see," she said quietly. "I will most certainly keep an eye out."

"Thank you, my dear." Dumbledore gave her a tight smile and gestured toward the hall. "My office is open anytime. Enjoy your dinner."

"Thank you, sir."

Hermione led the way into the hall. It was, thankfully, rather empty. Reaching the dinner table, Hermione sighed. The staff table was halfway vacated; while some of the staff, like Spindle, were still in their offices, others had gone home to their families for the break. It made for a nice table. Spacious.

Her usual spot had empty seats on either side, and Hermione smiled as she took her place. It was exactly what she needed. She helped herself to a shameless amount of roast chicken and potatoes and filled a generous glass of wine.

Ahh.

With the crackle of the fireplace, the sparkling Christmas decorations, and the white noise of the hall, it made for a relaxing atmosphere. She'd needed this.

Hermione was halfway through her meal when there was a loud laugh from the Great Hall entrance, and she glanced up in time to see Professors Shrew and Poppyworth laughing with—oh. It was Tom.

She stiffened and pretended not to notice them, forcing herself to continue on with her dinner. Her cheeks heated treacherously.

She peeked up when they approached the staff table, just in time to see Shrew and Poppyworth waving to Tom, heading toward the left of the staff table, while—oh no. Instead of joining them, Tom headed to the right. Towards her.

Oh no.

Oh no, no, no, no—

"Evening," he greeted when he reached her, lowering himself into the seat that was normally reserved for Madam Spindle.

Hermione didn't want to so much as look at him. If she did, she thought she'd have a hard time resisting the urge to tell him to fuck right off.

Not wanting to cause a scene, she settled for greeting him with a mere clearing of her throat.

Despite her snub, Tom asked conversationally, "how is young Mr. Wilkins doing today?"

"He's well," she mumbled, focusing down on her dinner. She didn't let herself add, *no thanks to you*.

"Glad to hear it," said Tom. She could feel his eyes burning into her cheek. Her skin crawled. "And how are you?"

"Fine."

Tom was quiet for an all too short moment.

"Oh," he sounded with interest. "Is that Italian?"

She glanced over just far enough to see him gesturing at the wine.

"That's how I would interpret 'made in Italy'."

There was another pause as he poured himself a glass—

"You're a bit short today, aren't you?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "What do you want?" she said irritably, glancing over to him at last.

He looked incredibly amused at her snap, and with one look at him, his alight eyes and misleading grin, she felt her skin flushing. *Damn it*.

"That's not very polite of you."

Hermione scowled at him.

Tom barked a laugh and plucked a small slice of chicken off of her plate, popping it into his mouth. "What are you doing New Year's Eve?" he asked abruptly.

"Excuse you, *pot*," she snapped, her glare deepening. "...Why?" she asked suspiciously.

He took his time chewing her chicken. "Slughorn has offered to host a... celebration, of sorts."

"For your birth—" Hermione stopped herself midway through, but it was too late. The damage was done.

Oh, for goodness' sake.

"...Pardon?" Tom asked slowly, his brows raising.

"Um." Hermione shook her head and picked up her fork, poking at her food. She felt rather jealous of it. The thought of being swallowed whole suddenly seemed rather appealing. "Nothing."

There was a long pause, and Hermione kept her eyes trained on her plate. *Why did she have to go and say that? Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

In her peripheral vision, she noticed Tom move, a long arm reaching out to pick up a napkin. He wiped at the corner of his mouth.

"This gravy's a bit much, don't you think?" she murmured. "Could do with a bit less salt—"

Tom moved suddenly, his hand gripping her forearm. His fingers were tight, the pressure enough

that it felt as if she might bruise.

"What were you saying?"

"Let me—*ow*." She pried his hand off with her free one, looking him in the eye defiantly. Intimidation might be his favourite ammunition, but she knew that he wasn't very well going to fight her in the middle of the Great Hall. "Calm down, would you? I was just going ask, whether he's hosting it for your birthday."

Tom was usually incredibly hard to read, but in that moment, he was plainly furious.

Bloody hell, what was *wrong* with her? She was slipping up with him more often than not. At this rate she might as well get up onto the table, jump up and down, and sing, *I'm from the future, I'm from the future*.

But—unlike her murdering children comment—this one, she thought, was fixable. She couldn't take the words back, but as long as she ignored the urge to shrink up into a ball and just kept calm, stayed smooth, she could recover the situation.

"How do you know that?" Tom uttered.

"Oh, don't look at me like that," she said as casually as she could. "It's not remotely as sinister as I can see you're thinking. Avery told me."

She desperately hoped Tom's birthday was common knowledge amongst his knights. She wasn't sure that it would be, but then—

Tom glanced away. He took up his wine glass, proceeding to take two consecutive mouthfuls. "Did he?" he said.

"Sorry," she said. She didn't mean it, but when someone was visibly bothered, it was just habit. "He... also said you don't like to talk about it. I shouldn't have mentioned it."

Tom didn't reply. He snatched up a bread roll and started to pick at it.

"So, were you... going to ask me to come? To Slughorn's gathering?" she went on to ask meekly. "Is that why you brought it up?"

She didn't *want* to go. Another evening in the Slytherin dungeons with Tom wasn't anywhere close to her list of things she'd like to do, and while she didn't want a repeat of the previous night... if there was any chance of getting to his chambers, to getting to the diary, then she had to take it.

No matter what it entailed.

Tom chewed his bread slowly. "I don't know if I want to anymore."

"Oh, for goodness' sake, it's a *birthday*," she uttered, and despite herself, she felt a little bit guilty.

Merlin, how did he *do* that? He tried to kill her, forced himself on her, and broke the leg of one of her few friends at Hogwarts—how in all of hell was *she* was the bad guy?

"It's not even a *big* birthday. I'd understand if you were upset about turning thirty, but you've got a few years until then, don't you?"

Tom rolled his eyes and busied himself with his dinner.

Ugh. He was right a piece of work.

But, with the previous night in mind, she supposed he'd brought it up to... smooth the tension between them, to further solidify their *truce*.

...Or to give that impression. So, maybe a different angle would work better...

"Hmm. That's a shame. Had you invited me, I would've suggested that maybe..." she cooed, doing her best to sound *suggestive*, "afterward, we could meet up, and I could give you... a gift. For your birthday."

She bit into her lip, batted her eyelashes. She felt ridiculous. How did women do this?

"But—oh well. If you don't want it, then that's too bad. Maybe Avery will want to spend the evening with me instead."

Tom glanced at her from the corner of his eyes. Bit by bit, he started to smile, as if he'd been trying to fight it, but the smile won out.

"Don't you dare," he murmured.

She shrugged innocently. "Why ever not? It'll be New Year's. I could go for some *fun*."

Tom glanced away, and now he looked like he was having a hard time trying not to laugh.

And—oh hell. Her cheeks grew hot. She wasn't doing *that* bad a job at selling it, was she?

But then Tom leaned in and whispered, "have you ever seen a man beg for his life? And I mean, shamelessly? Pleading, crying, pissing his own pants?"

Yes, actually, more than once, Hermione wanted to say. But that wouldn't do, would it?

"No," she said instead.

Tom ran his fingers along the tablecloth until he reached her, then gently brushed the top of her hand with the tip of his ring finger.

It gave her chills.

They weren't *entirely* unpleasant, but she tried not to think about it.

"Spend your night with Avery, and you will."

Hermione's mouth suddenly felt rather dry. She pulled her hand away and reached for her glass, taking a large mouthful of her wine.

"Does that mean I'm invited, then?" she asked, doing her best to ignore the constricting sensation in her stomach.

Tom tilted his head toward her, staring. He was again his unreadable self... until he glanced down at her lips. She crossed her legs, pressing her thighs together.

"I'll come and get you," he finally murmured. "Same place as last time?"

"Ugh." She scowled. "Charming."

Tom just laughed and went back to his dinner, and Hermione found that rather abruptly, she was no longer hungry.

Two days later, on the day of Christmas Eve, Hermione again left the infirmary in Spindle's capable hands.

She'd been meaning to head down to Hogsmeade for several days now to go and pick up a couple of Christmas gifts, and now, she'd reached her last opportunity.

But there was also another thing she was hoping to find while she was there, and it had become urgent that she did.

She wasn't so foolish as to believe that Tom had invited her to Slughorn's New Year's party because he wanted to spend time with her. After her recent two run-ins with Tom, she was well aware she was on paper thin ice.

Do you murder children often? God, what a stupid thing to say. And the *look* he'd given her... he wasn't stupid, he knew precisely why she said it, precisely what she'd been insinuating. She didn't have a doubt that he knew that she knew about Myrtle.

And her birthday comment on top of that... well. It was a wonder she was still in one piece, and knowing Tom, if he were going to try to strike again, then New Year's would be the time.

Some birthday present, indeed.

She only hoped the prospect of *sex* was enough to delay him. As long as she got to his chambers *before* he tried to kill her again, then she had a chance.

Jesus. What had she become?

Unlike Harry and Ron, Hermione liked to be prepared. She didn't like to wing anything, not if she could help it, and the way she saw it, was that if everything went to plan, if she managed to get into his chambers, get to his diary, and get out before Tom tried again at killing her, then there would only be a short window of opportunity. Once he became aware that she was after his horcruxes, then she would be playing with an entirely different monster than the one she'd seen thus far. That meant, that as soon as she had the diary, she needed to get straight out of Hogwarts.

And the only thing that was therefore left in the equation, the only thing that might stop her from leaving, was her need for a way to destroy the horcruxes.

But luckily, she thought she had just the thing.

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the shorter installments. This is the last one that was a combined chapter. The next few after this should be a bit meatier for you.

Hogsmeade was *freezing*. Even with a warming charm on herself, it was cold enough to be a bother. Snow littered the streets, the pavement was slippery, and the wind had turned the hair that wouldn't fit into her beanie into a bird's nest. But carols were playing in the street, and the shops were cosy and decorated for Christmas, so other than the slight hiccup of nearly breaking her neck on the iced-over stairs, it made for a beautiful shopping trip.

Without the constant pressure of watching out for Tom looming over her, Hermione even managed to enjoy herself. She picked up a wooden wizard's chess set for Edward, some sweets for Kettleburn, and an ornate, self-heating teacup for Spindle. And while he still hadn't replied to her letter and she wasn't sure if she'd see him before Christmas, she even picked up a scarf for Avery—a peace-offering of sorts.

Once she had gift-buying ticked off her list, Hermione spent the remainder of her afternoon venturing deeper into the side streets of the town, seeking the oldest, dodgiest looking antique shop she could find.

She circled four blocks before she found a solid candidate. The dingy little shop was located down a staircase off the street-front, and inside, was a dark and dusty broom cupboard of a main room. Down past a couple of short aisles, was an old man behind the counter, leaning back against the wall looking halfway asleep.

She crept past the dusted shelves, not bothering to distract herself, and cleared her throat. "Er... hello, sir," she greeted when his eyes snapped open. "I'm looking for something rather specific, and I hoped you might be able to help me."

The old man straightened and adjusted his glasses, looking a bit irritated that he'd been woken from his nap.

"I'm after... something goblin-made, something sharp," Hermione went on, ignoring his lack of friendliness. "Something like a dagger, or a knife, a sword... something along those lines?"

The old man's frown grew deeper, and he looked her down and up. His nose wrinkled. "Goblin-made," he repeated gruffly.

Hermione huffed through her nose. "I can afford it, if that's what you're wondering."

His eyes narrowed. "Fifty galleons," he challenged.

It took all of her effort to maintain her poker face.

Fifty galleons. That was completely outrageous. It was about all she had, years' worth of saving, and she didn't exactly have time to shop around. But still, while she didn't know the going rate for goblin-made silver, if he happened to have something that could do the job, she wasn't about to

turn it down.

With grumbles of extortion under her breath, Hermione sifted through her bag and pulled out her coin purse.

"Here," she said, opening it at an angle to show him the shine of the coins in her purse.

The man reached out.

She snatched it back. "No. I'll give it to you when I see what you have and no sooner."

The man pursed his lips, and stared her down. Hermione kept her shoulders straight and raised a brow, and when it became clear she wasn't about to back down, he grumbled, "fine," and disappeared out into the back of the shop.

A good few minutes passed. Hermione was about to go and poke her head into the back room looking for him, but then the man returned, a bulky wad of material in his hand. Reaching the counter, he put it down in front of her and unwrapped it.

Inside of the material, was... a set of cutlery. The set looked to be in need of a good cleaning, and it had obviously once been a decadent set, intricate and ornate. But... it was still just a set of cutlery. A far cry from the sword she'd had in mind.

"Um." Hermione's lips tightened. "Is that... all you have?"

The old man didn't look impressed. "Do you want them or not?"

"Well... I mean, yes. Yes, if they're definitely goblin-made silver, and it's all you have..." she decided. She supposed that while a table knife was smaller than what she'd had in mind, it would probably still do the trick. She might have to put a bit more force into stabbing at the ring, but surely it would still work? It would be fine for the diary, at least.

The man proceeded to point to the bottom of the handles of the pieces, down at what looked to be a small logo between some carved in flowers.

"That there's the signature mark of Kergis of Norway. Artist of the eighteenth century known for his plant-life silverwork."

"Hmm." Hermione bit her lip. It might be as good a solution as she was going to get in such a short time frame. "Will you give me a discount if I only take the knife?"

The man's frown grew deeper. "It's either both, or neither."

Hermione sighed. She supposed her leaving a single fork would be rather annoying to the person who then would have to sell that fork. "Fine," she said. She then dug in her purse and passed over a fistful of galleons. "Here."

"This ain't fifty," he said at once. Hmm. The man knew his coins.

"Are you sure?" she said.

"Don't play with me, girl," he warned.

"Sorry, sorry, just one moment," Hermione said as innocently as she could as she sifted through her bag. Where was it, where was it...? "Maybe you could count it?" she suggested.

Ah, bloody hell, why did she have so much *crap* in her bag? She should've wrapped Avery's scarf, rather than just shoving it in—*ah*. There.

Her hand tightened around the hilt of her wand. Quickly, she drew it from her bag, directing it right at his face. "I'm awfully sorry sir, but that's all they're worth," she said, and then she cast, "*stupefy*."

The man fell down, back against the cupboards behind him, and landed with a solid *whack*. Hermione felt a little bit guilty, but... oh well. It was for the greater good, and he'd be fine in a couple of hours.

Next, she cast, "*obliviate*," before she wrapped up the cutlery set and stashed it away in her bag. Hermione left the twenty-five galleons she'd given him—it was *more* than generous of her, she reasoned, she could have left him with nothing—and hurried back out of the shop, pep in her step.

It was a big step forward. With the goblin-made knife, and the remainder of the basilisk venom-spiked tea still in her bag, she would soon have a more convenient horcrux-destroying tool than Gryffindor's sword in her possession, and Tom's ring would be gone in no time!

And then, if all went to plan, his diary wouldn't be far behind, and once his horcruxes were gone, he'd be perfectly killable and then she would have achieved all she came back for.

She just about laughed. Tom had quite literally *handed* her a means to destroy his horcruxes, and he didn't even know it. It was beautiful, really, a re-telling of him self-actualising the prophecy with Harry.

And see? All was fine. She might've facilitated him coming to Hogwarts, ruined the timeline, and almost been killed in the process, but soon, it would all be fixed. It was fine. She was doing *just fine*.

Hermione trudged her way back up to the main street, the cold not bothering her as much as it had on the way down now that her spirits had been lifted. By the time she got to the cobbled pavement of the main walk, her legs were burning. Slopes were much harder in the snow.

She slowed down when the street levelled out to have a bit of a rest before tackling the track back to Hogwarts. But while she passed, she was distracted by the characteristic yelling from the Hog's Head as someone exited. She slowed down a little more, peering across the street. The man who'd exited had a particularly laid-back posture and sandy blond hair, and he looked... familiar.

Was that...?

Surely not. Hermione took a few more steps up the street, a few steps closer.

But... then, on second glance, maybe it was...

"...Avery?" she called.

From across the street, the blond man turned and squinted at her. "...Hermione?"

"Hey!" She waved. "What are you doing here?"

He stared for a moment. "Um. I'm just—"

"Why haven't you responded to my letter?" Hermione interrupted, remembering that she was a bit annoyed with him. He couldn't respond to her letter, yet he was perfectly capable of showing up to

Hogsmeade? It would've taken him all of thirty seconds to write back and let her know he'd be in town!

"I..." Avery turned behind him and scratched at his head, resembling a child afraid to be caught with his hand in a cookie jar. He looked a bit torn, but then, rather abruptly, he yelled, "go away!"

As he started to make shooing motions, Hermione gaped.

"Excuse me?"

"Go!" He shooed her some more, his actions becoming frantic. "Get out of here!"

"This is a *public* street, thank you very much!"

"No, that's— just— trust me! Get—"

The door to the Hog's Head swung open behind him, interrupting what Avery was about to say. Avery whirled on the spot, and seeing who it was, Hermione rolled her eyes.

She remembered how rude Felix was from their first meeting, and seeing the drunken, sleazy look on his face now, she was sure he'd be just as rude the second time.

"Oi!" She heard him say to Avery. "Where d'ya think you're— oh, *hey*. That the girl? The one from up in the castle?"

Ugh. *The girl*. Hermione couldn't make out Avery's mumbled response, and behind them, the door opened once more, and their other friends, Percy and Evander, came out too.

Behind them was Tom.

Oh.

Fucking hell.

It only took a second for him to notice her, barely long enough for her to consider disillusioning herself. He seemed a bit surprised to see her, but it was only momentary, and at the way his eyes roamed over her, Hermione wished she would melt into the snow.

Avery said something else to them, but he was still too quiet for her to hear. And Tom didn't seem to be listening either. His eyes didn't leave her, and then, when Avery finished speaking, Tom nodded, making a 'come here' motion.

Hermione shifted on the spot, stomach churning. She didn't have to go over there. They were in public and other pedestrians—potential witnesses—were scattered throughout the street. She could just ignore him, continue on her merry way, or apparate out of there. He had no power over her.

But... now that she'd seen him and now that he'd tried to snub her, she really wanted to pin Avery down. And if he wasn't going to reply to her letters, it might be her only chance...

Hermione wasn't the sort to turn and run. She gritted her teeth and went over there.

"Good evening, gentlemen," she greeted, forcing a cheerful tone.

They didn't seem particularly happy to see her, not even Avery. Percy and Evander looked too drunk to notice her, and Avery and Felix looked just about as awkward as she felt. But Tom, on the other hand, was leaning against the lamppost, the perfect picture of smug, not at all hiding his

schadenfreude at the situation.

"You didn't tell me you'd be coming down today," he remarked smoothly, forgoing any pleasantries.

Hermione's eyes narrowed. His slightly crooked smile was possibly doing a better job at heating her skin than her charm was. "I must've forgotten to mention it," she mumbled, as though it were any of his business. "What brings you all down?"

"We catch up every year for Christmas Eve for lunch at the Hog's Head," Tom answered for the group.

Hermione snorted a little bit, couldn't help it. "That's... well forgive me, but that's a bit... cute, isn't it? Old school mates catching up?"

Evander scoffed and Felix rolled his eyes, but Tom did nothing but smile. "And you? What brings you down to Hogsmeade, all by yourself?" he asked musically, an amused curvature to his lips.

Hermione crossed her arms across her torso. *All by yourself.*

"Just finishing off my Christmas shopping," she said as casually as her nerves would allow. "Better late than never, you know."

Felix raised an eyebrow. "Not having much luck?" he asked, eyeing her conspicuously empty hands.

Hermione's lips thinned. "Hm, yes, I suppose that a shrinking charm might seem rather baffling to some," she said, unable to help herself, giving her small, beaded bag a little shake.

While the rest of the men laughed, Felix's lip turned up.

Avery looked rather interested in his shoes.

"Still an uptight little bitch then?" Felix spat.

"Mulciber," Tom said with a tight smile. It was pleasant, the way he said his name, slightly high pitched. To anyone who didn't know better, it would've sounded like a gentle correction.

But Felix looked quickly downward as if he'd been smacked and murmured, "sorry."

Seeing it, how Tom interacted with them, was... uncomfortable. She wondered if he was as unpredictable with them as he was with her. She suspected so. *He can be a bit prickly*, Avery had told her.

"Don't mind him," said Tom, words of silk. "The butterbeer's half-price on Christmas Eve, and it can be a bit too easy to overindulge."

Hermione sniffed. "Yes, I'm sure it can be," she agreed. She turned her attention to Avery, who still wasn't look at her. "Well, while I don't want to intrude on your evening, I was actually wondering whether you would like to go grab a quick coffee? Avery?"

It took Avery a moment to realise she'd been speaking to him, and when he did, he resembled a deer in headlights. "Um. Well... actually, I don't know if—"

"We were just saying our goodbyes now anyway, you two go ahead and catch up," Tom interjected, as though he'd been asked for permission. It was suspicious, the kind way he spoke,

considering the way he'd spoken of Avery the previous evening. But with the opportunity to finally get some information out of Avery dangling in front of her, she wasn't about to question him.

"I'll see you later, Hermione," said Tom, "Happy Christmas, Marvin."

"Yes, you too," Avery returned a bit awkwardly, and then after a wave to the rest of his friends, he gestured down the road. Hermione followed along without a backward glance, happy to be putting some distance between them and Tom and his knights.

Avery's long legs naturally settled into a fast pace, and Hermione immediately had to hurry to keep up. "Hey, are you all right?" she asked. "I know that things didn't end on a fantastic note last time, but you're being—would you *slow down*? You're being really weird."

But Avery didn't answer nor did he slow down, he just shrugged and kept walking.

Hermione continued to follow on, and her features settled into a deep frown. Finally, as they made it well and truly out of the ear shot of the others, Hermione tried again, "has Tom said something to upset—"

"Keep walking," Avery hissed, glancing at her only out of the corner of his eye.

"Wha—"

"*Keep walking*, don't look back."

Hermione just about had to jog. "...Avery—"

"*Not here*," he hissed, giving her elbow a little tug to take a right turn. "Trust me, just... *come on*."

"All right, all right," she said, letting him steer the way.

Once they were around the corner, out of sight of where they'd left the others, Avery stepped in front of her and stopped abruptly. "Take my hand," he instructed, offering it to her.

"Not before you tell me what's going on."

Avery squeezed his eyes shut for only a second. "Just—*trust me*. Please."

His eyes were wide, imploring, and it was strange, the way she felt about him. In practice, she barely knew him. He was one of Tom's knights, and he'd already betrayed her the once. He was the precise sort of person she shouldn't be trusting. But despite that... she did.

She took his hand. His touch was warm and comforting. Not at all like Tom's.

And before she could think too hard on it, she was pulled into the familiar black of apparition.

They'd left paired footprints hollowed out in the snow. Hers were smaller than Avery's, closer together, pointed at the tops from the toes of her boots.

"What do you think?"

Tom thought, that he had a headache.

All was in place for New Year's. All of the pieces, aligned, all of the manoeuvres, made.

Ankou was put out with him enough as it was. To veer from what they'd planned, would only further exacerbate her unrest. She had been promised a hearty meal. Promises were promises.

But a lingering, bothersome thought, one he couldn't be rid of, was that to remove them both simultaneously came with significant risk.

He hadn't factored in her leaving the castle on her own so carelessly, hadn't factored in running into her like this.

Promises were promises... but who was he not to listen when fate sung?

"...My Lord?"

While Evander and Percy stumbled back into the Hog's Head, slurring about their Christmas plans, far too intoxicated for any form of intelligent conversation, Felix hung by his side, a well-trained dog, eagerly anticipating instruction from his master.

Tom exhaled, and the air that left his nostrils condensed, forming a wistful, vaporous cloud.

"Do it."

Ever the obedient, Felix left him without a question.

"Oh, and Mulciber?" Tom called after him.

Felix halted, craning his neck.

"If Avery gets in the way, kill him too."

Felix grinned. "Of course, My Lord."

Tom watched as he stalked off down the street, trailing after the footsteps, remaining until Felix was gone.

The streetlamps had lit themselves now, the flames dancing within their glass houses. In about fifteen minutes, the sun would be down.

Tom gave another glance to the footprints. Such a shame. He'd been looking forward to his birthday this year.

Never mind.

He turned on his heel, starting the long, cold walk back up to the castle.

Chapter 18

Avery didn't apparate them far. Hermione easily recognised their snowy surroundings as the edge of Hogsmeade, the train station over to one side, forest on their other.

She raised a brow. "Why did you take us where we could've walked?"

"So we don't leave tracks," Avery grumbled, gazing at the snow at their feet.

Hermione checked around them for anyone within ear shot of them, a sense of foreboding steadily building. There wasn't a soul she could see.

"You mean in case they follow us? Would you just tell me what's going..." Hermione slowly trailed off at the look Avery was giving her. He looked mad. "...on?"

Avery leaned in, and with a viciousness that she didn't know he had, he hissed, "*what* have you done?"

Her stomach dropped. He sounded really upset—oh God. Had Tom told him about the infirmary, about what they'd—?

"...what do you mean?"

"*What*," he repeated, "*have you done to Tom?!*"

"I... it didn't mean anything," she mumbled uncertainly. "It was just..."

Avery straightened, tilting his head. Deep lines formed on his forehead. "What?"

Hermione blinked. "Wait, what are you talking about?"

"What are *you* talking about?"

"Um." Oh dear. "Nothing. I mean— *what?*"

Avery closed his eyes, his exhale long and tired. "He knows that you know about Myrtle. And did you *tell* him that you know about basilisk, too?" he demanded. "Because he thinks you do!"

Oh. *Oh*. Well. While that was better than him asking about giving Tom a blow job, it was also... worse.

"I... no. But... I did suspect that he might—"

"*How* do you know about Myrtle?" Avery pressed, heavily invading into her personal space. "And don't you brush me aside this time, I mean it! How do you know?"

Avery was insistent, desperate, almost. His urgency had her own nerves alarming—*were they in danger?*

And he was compelling. She wanted to speak to him, wanted to tell him everything, but... he couldn't know about her travel to the past. It was one of the only things she was sure about anymore. No one could know.

"I... I can't tell you," she whispered.

Avery squeezed the bridge of his nose. "He thinks you're working with Dumbledore," he stated accusingly. "Are you?"

"What? No!" she insisted. "I've got nothing to do with Dumbledore!"

"Well Tom's got it in his head that you do! He thinks Dumbledore's gone and sent you to sniff around, to spy for him and find proof that he opened the Chamber."

Hermione stepped back. She had to process what he'd said, and once she did, she laughed, dragging her hands through her hair.

Was that it? Was *that* why he'd turned on her so abruptly, why he'd tried to poison her? Where had he gotten the idea she was working with *Dumbledore*? She'd hardly even spoken to the man of this time!

But then—she supposed that she *had* been sloppy with her knowledge of Myrtle. To Tom, to have someone show up and probe him about the heir, about the founders' objects, about his family—that *would've* been incredibly suspicious. As far as Tom knew, time travel was impossible. It mightn't have even crossed his mind as a possibility, it would be so remote. So how else would she know about Myrtle? Logically, then, someone must've told her. And if it wasn't one of his Knights, then... Dumbledore was the only one left. He was the only one who suspected Tom.

It made sense.

And she supposed, he wasn't exactly *wrong*, was he? She *was* working against him with Dumbledore... just not *this* one.

Bugger.

"Oh my God, this is..." She laughed a bit incredulously, "such a *mess*, honestly," she uttered.

"*This - isn't - funny!*" Avery snapped, bordering on a yell, and Hermione jolted at the suddenness of it. He looked to be at his wits end. "I'm... fucking *hell*, Hermione, I want to help you. I don't *fucking* know *why*, but I'm trying to help you here. But if you don't tell me the truth... how else could you *possibly* know about Myrtle? Hmm?"

"I swear, I want to tell you, I do, but... I'm *sorry*, I— oh." At the cusp of understanding, Hermione's features fell. She could see it in his eyes, and his anger, his desperation, suddenly seemed to click into place. "You think Tom's right. Don't you?"

Avery shook his head. "I don't know *what* to think! You just... you appear out of nowhere, you push yourself into my life, and start using my family's library to dig into his lineage, and it makes sense, and... for fuck's sake, *just tell me how you know!* If you're not with Dumbledore... and if Tom wasn't the one to tell you..."

It fell quiet between them. She didn't know what else she could say that wouldn't be too much, and Avery threw his hands up in exasperation. "Maybe he is right," he muttered.

"Avery." When he didn't look at her, she reached out and took his hand, forcing his attention. "I... okay, okay. I understand how it must look. I do. But... please, just... I *can't* tell you. I'm sorry. It's too big a risk."

"That's not *good* enough, Hermione, I can't stick my neck out like this without—"

"If I tell you how I know, then Tom *will* find out," she interrupted. "And don't bother wasting your

time swearing to me that you won't tell him, because it doesn't matter! If I tell you... if you *know*... then it doesn't matter what your intentions are. He'll force himself inside of your head, and he'll take it from you."

Avery's features shifted into a slow look of understanding.

"Yeah, you know exactly what I mean, don't you? I bet he gropes through your thoughts at every opportunity. Is that what he did after Slughorn's party the other week? Is that where this whole idea of my working with Dumbledore has come from?"

Avery opened his mouth as if he were going to speak, and then closed it again. Hermione nodded. *Damn it.* She should've tweaked Avery's memory when she'd had the chance. *Stupid, stupid.*

"So, yes, while I would love to talk to you, and I would love nothing more than to tell you everything... above all else, I can't have Tom finding out. If you can't protect your mind, then I can't tell you, it's as simple as that. I'm sorry. I just can't risk it."

Avery stepped back, pulling his hand from hers to cover his eyes. He stayed like that for a good long moment.

"But then, you *are* working against him," he concluded, a deep tone of disappointment. "Whether it's with Dumbledore or not, it doesn't matter—"

Hermione almost growled. "He's recruiting, isn't he?" she interrupted, a sense of desperation within her. In that moment, she just wanted him—*needed* him—to see that he was on the wrong side of things, needed him to see *sense*. "Recruiting young and impressionable students from prestigious wizarding families, instilling in them this... *agenda* that they're better than muggleborns, that they're better than half-bloods, that muggles belong under foot. What do you— what do you think is going to happen?! Hmm? That he's going to move into politics, work for change the democratic way? I know you've seen him force his hand. I know you've seen what he's capable of, and that's not even the *start* of it. He's... he's not recruiting them for a *club*, Marvin. He's not recruiting them for the fun of it. He's recruiting them for an *army*."

"And I know you might've grown up with him, I know he's probably been a fantastic friend to you, maybe even one of the best you've ever had... but I also can see that you're a good person. I know you don't want children buying what he's selling. People will lose their *lives* for him. Some already have." Hermione had to stop and take a breath. "Maybe... maybe I am working against Tom. And I know it sounds insane, and I know that at the end of the day, you don't know me from a bar of soap, but... please, just... trust me. There is *so* much at stake here, more than you could ever know."

While she'd been speaking, Avery's features had fallen, washed with what might've been shame. "How do you..."

Hermione just shook her head.

"Is it the Ministry? Have you come to—"

"Avery."

He held his hands up. "Yeah, yeah, you can't say, I know. Sorry."

Avery went on to close his eyes before he sighed, slowly, tiredly. He began to pace, and he looked conflicted, as though he were about to be physically ill. And then, as abruptly as he'd started, he stopped, groaning, and dragging his hands over his face.

And just as she thought that would be that and Avery would call it a day and give up on her—

"He wants you dead," he whispered.

Hermione inhaled sharply. It wasn't *exactly* a surprise... but all the same... if Tom had gone and told his Knights of as much, then that meant that her obedience hadn't bought her as much breathing room as she'd thought it had. "I know."

"You have to leave," Avery insisted. "You won't be safe at Hogwarts, not while he's there too. He's going to—"

A flash of red passed between them, and the burst collided with the wall behind them, splintering the brick of the wall.

Off in the distance, in the direction of where the spell had originated, Hermione could make out Felix's burly form at the other end of the train station. His wand was pointed at them.

Avery stepped in front of her. "Apparate, Hermione."

Hermione heart skipped several beats. "I'm not going to just—"

"Go!"

A quick knock back jinx from Avery shoved her backwards, and she landed awkwardly on her shoulder in the snow by the line of the forest.

The cracks of spells echoed through the dusk, and Hermione picked herself up to see Felix throwing curses down the main walk at Avery, who had ducked behind a large rubbish bin. Felix's curses were all green.

"*You fucking prick, Mulciber!*" Avery yelled, poking his head out over the top of the bin and lobbing a curse of his own back at him.

Felix was grinning as he ducked out of the way, approaching them step by step. "Scared to come out, *Marvie?*" Felix taunted. "Shall I make it easy for you?" The next of Felix's killing curses blasted the metal bin out of its restraints.

While Avery dashed away from his destroyed cover, Hermione closed in, throwing a stunner at Felix.

He blocked it, but only just. "Aha, *there's* the bint," Felix sneered, aiming his next curses at her.

"I told you to run!" Avery yelled from behind one of the station's benches, standing long enough to toss several hexes toward Felix.

"Not—" Hermione ducked behind a thick tree trunk that took the impact of Felix's curse, "—likely!"

Felix was casting quickly, and as the wood of the trunk splintered, Hermione dashed between his curses to the cover of a different tree. He seemed to be a one-spell wonder, and the force behind his curses was *strong*. The impact of them into the trees was enough to make them groan, threatening to come down. But what he lacked, was finesse. There wasn't any thought in his duelling, just sheer force.

Avery on the other hand... since meeting him, Hermione had wondered about Tom's recruitment of

Avery. He was aloof, relaxed, and youthful; not really the sort she'd expect for one of Tom's early Death Eaters. She'd supposed that his family name and his money must've been valuable assets. But she could see now, that they mustn't have been entirely it.

Avery was a good dueller. His long limbs made him fast, and while he didn't immediately resort to the unforgivables in the way Felix did, she made out the tell-tale indigo of the Imperius curse, and a single flash of green in there. He was cleverer about his use of them, more patient, slotting them in between less severe spells.

But though Avery was more skilful, Felix's bombardment of lethal curses had him just about dancing to avoiding being hit. And with each curse, Felix was getting closer, and at the shorter range, it would be harder to gauge the trajectory of his curses, and they would be harder to dodge.

She had to end the spar while she could. She'd come *too far* just to be murdered by one of Tom's minions in a back alley.

Hermione stepped out from behind her latest tree when it was hit with another of Felix's green curses and sent a well-placed slicing hex toward his arm back in return. It was a harsher method of disarming, but Felix was duelling to kill. There was a time and a place for a polite expelliarmus, and this wasn't it.

But—oh, *oh no*—before her hex reached its target, Felix ducked to avoid one of Avery's curses, putting him right in the line of her hex.

And it almost seemed to happen in slow motion, her hex striking him right in the neck.

At the impact, Felix was thrown back, falling back onto the snow, and the duelling ceased.

Avery peered out from behind one of the station's lamp posts while Hermione watched Felix's form with bated breath, slowly lowering her wand. He was moving, twitching on the ground, but he wasn't getting up.

The seconds stretched on. Oh God. He wasn't getting up.

Concern for her own safety rapidly dissipating, Hermione ran over there, skidding down to her knees when she reached him.

Felix had turned onto his side. He was gurgling for breath with gruesome, wet gasps, and a feeble hand was up at his throat. Blood was streaming from high up on his neck. Hermione had never seen so much, not in the infirmary, not in all of her years with Harry.

She reached out and put her hand beneath his, down onto the wound, trying to increase the pressure on it while she readied her wand. The wound was long and deep, her hand only just covering it.

"*E-episkey*," she cast.

The wound didn't close. Blood was pulsing beneath her hand.

She did her best to steady her wand hand. "*Episkey*."

Nothing.

"*Episkey!*"

For the love of—*why wasn't it fucking working?!*

"*Episkey! Episkey!*" Her casting became urgent. "*Episkey!!*"

"Hermione."

In her peripherals, she saw Avery hovering over them.

"Oh good, help me!" She checked the wound again. Still nothing, but the blood flow had slowed. "Avery?!"

She looked up in time to see him drop his wand and lower his head into his hands, covering his eyes.

Felix's hand wasn't by his throat anymore, and had fallen limp by his side. It was then that she noticed he wasn't gasping for breath anymore. He wasn't breathing at all.

It dawned on her why her charms weren't working. Healing charms were only effective with a live subject.

She jolted back away from Felix, falling onto her backside into the snow. "No. No, no, no, I..."

Bile burned in her throat. He was dead. Her hex had been the spell that'd hit him, and she'd...

"I..." she glanced up to Avery as though it would help, "I didn't mean..."

"I know," he whispered, and as he pulled his hands from his face, she could see he was shaking.

"It... it was an accident, I didn't mean to..."

He didn't look at her, but he nodded. "I know."

Hermione glanced around them. It was dark now, and while she couldn't actually see anyone, there could've been witnesses hidden in the dark. Their fighting hadn't been subtle.

Her pulse pounded in her ears.

"It... we... we have to do something," she uttered, trying to pull herself back to it, to force herself back into her body. "We have to move quickly. We either... leave him to be found... or we get rid of him."

She looked up at Avery. He wiped his eyes. He looked just the way she felt— on the brink of a breakdown. But then he took a deep breath and nodded.

"Um. Okay, you levitate him up and disillusion him," Avery decided. "I'll vanish the blood. We'll head down there, take him down to the lake." He gestured off toward the forest. "The mermaids and the squid will take care of it."

Hermione hesitated. While the thought of leaving him there for someone to find was awful enough, the thought of leaving his body to be eaten by *wild creatures* was even worse.

"I..."

"Well, do you have a better idea?!" Avery asked insistently, bordering on panic.

"Well—no, I just... no."

Avery nodded stiffly, and when he swallowed, it was audible. "All right then," he muttered. "Let's

get to it, shall we?"

They stood side by side, not close to touching, staring out over the black of the lake. The ripples that'd formed as Felix's body disturbed the surface had long since dissipated, and the moonlight reflected neatly on the still, half-frozen surface.

Hermione held her icy hands together by her chest, still achingly cold from having rinsed off Felix's blood from them in the lake. Despite the pain, she didn't use a warming charm. She wanted to feel it.

Beside her, Avery was still. He seemed thoughtful, eyes unfocused.

She hadn't expected him to seem so... put together, to be able to function so quickly after having seen his friend bleed out before him. But he was one of Tom's knights, she supposed. He would've been hardened to death in a way that she never had been. He'd even thrown a killing curse himself.

She was grateful for it, his togetherness. She didn't know what she would've done, had she been on her own.

"Why are you helping me?" Hermione whispered, the question slipping out of its own accord.

Avery's eyes remained firmly fixed on the lake and he shook his head, a slow scowl on his lips. "I'm not going to Azkaban for *Mulciber*. He tried to kill us. And... it just as easily could've been me—my curse, I mean. Could've been either of us."

There was another pause.

"I'm sorry," she breathed.

Avery didn't speak, and the silence became loud. Hermione tried not to think about them, the two Mulcibers she'd known from her own time, but it was hard not to. How directly would they have been related? Were they his son and his grandson? His nephew and great-nephew? How many other descendants had there been that she hadn't met, who now wouldn't be born because of her?

"It's just..." Avery eventually muttered without tearing his eyes from the lake. "I've known him since we were kids."

A sob slipped free. Hermione couldn't hold it in. She covered her mouth with her hand.

Avery turned to her at last. "Hey—"

"No," she said, stepping back to avoid his touch. "No, I'm fine."

She wiped away the beginnings of her tears. She couldn't cry, couldn't let it out. If she started, she wouldn't be able to stop.

Avery's arms dropped to his sides. "None of this is fine," he uttered.

Hermione laughed, but there was no humour in it. "Yeah. But I just— I don't have the time to not be fine. So..." She took a deep breath. "I'm *fine*."

They stood in silence for another long while. Every now and then, the sound of the wind brushing through the trees would reach them, the gentle hooting of the forest's owls.

"Will you come with me?" Avery eventually asked. "My family has a holiday estate out by York. It's well protected," he offered, before he added semi-jokingly, "there's a basement we could stash you in. Tom wouldn't find you there. Although at this rate, I should probably join you."

Her lip quivered. She wanted to.

She wanted to more than anything, but...

"I can't," she murmured. "There's still something... I need to do."

Avery gaped at her. "You can't honestly be suggesting that you're going to go back to the castle."

Hermione shook her head. She couldn't leave without the diary. *Couldn't*. And the ring was still in the room of requirement...

"I don't have a choice."

"Are you kidding?!" Avery said incredulously. "Hermione—he's not going to just stop. Especially after..."

"I don't expect him to, but... maybe if I could just convince him I'm not working with Dumbledore, then maybe I can—"

"*He's not going to stop*. If you're actively trying to get in Tom's way, then it doesn't matter who you're working with. *He will kill you*. The only reason that you're still here, is because he was silly enough to send *Mulciber* of all people."

Hermione massaged her temples. "I've handled him for this long... I only need a little bit longer."

"You won't be *alive* a little bit longer, he's got a plan to—"

"Well I've got to try!" She yelled. "I don't have a choice! I've come too far to give up now!" She gestured over at the lake, over to the gap in the ice where they'd lowered Felix's body. "Too much has happened, too many have lost their lives, and I've given up *too much* to be here—"

Hermione stopped when her voice broke.

No. She couldn't let it out, not here. She could process later, could break down after Tom was dead.

"Ah. I'm sorry," she murmured, and unlike when she and Avery had spoken at Slughorn's party, this time, she realised her mistake as soon as she made it. "I've said too much."

Avery's eyes were rounded. "...Hermione?"

She drew her wand.

"Woah—" He eyed its tip. "What are you doing?"

"I'm sorry," she repeated. "But I can't risk Tom knowing what we've spoken about, not again."

"*Hermione—*"

"You might not put it together, but he might. I can't risk that." She aimed right at his face. "Thank you for helping me. It means more than you know."

"N—"

"*Obliviate.*"

She left Avery by the train station, stunned on one of the benches with a warming charm on him so he wouldn't freeze out in the snow. She tucked the scarf she'd bought for him for Christmas beneath his head as a makeshift pillow, and before she left, she pressed a light kiss to his cheek.

When he woke, he would remember his night at the Hog's Head with his friends, and with any luck, would assume he'd had one too many Christmas drinks. He would wake, bemused that he must've wandered down to the station alone in a drunken stupor, but that would be all. He wouldn't remember Felix, wouldn't remember what she'd done. He wouldn't remember seeing her at all.

While it killed her to do it, and while having someone to lean on felt like all she'd been craving... it was for the best.

And sure, if Tom tried to get any answers from Avery, he would figure out that his memory had been tampered with, but it didn't matter. It would be apparent that it was her doing, and hopefully the blame for what had happened would rest solely on her.

She hoped it would be enough. She didn't know if she could bear it if something happened to Avery, too.

Hermione wandered back to the school grounds, taking her time to clear her head. It only dawned on her as she walked that she'd completely lost track of the time. It'd been dark for hours. It must've been Christmas morning.

Happy Christmas, Hermione.

There was a tremble to her limbs that remained all the way back to the castle, and it wasn't from the cold.

Tom would be enraged to see her again. She'd seen with Harry that each failed murder attempt only drove him to further lengths. What would he throw at her next, she wondered? Would it be the basilisk? A curse? Or would he come for her himself?

She'd lost him a knight. How long would it take for him to realise Felix wasn't coming back? Would he be upset? Mournful, never, but inconvenienced? Absolutely. Would he torture her for that? Take it out on Edward?

But the most pressing of all, her biggest worry she couldn't shake—*how the fuck was she supposed to get to his chambers now?*

Adrenaline, regret, and panic were weaving together, threatening to drag her down. She wanted to give in, to find somewhere safe to curl up and hide, and let them drown her, but... to do so wouldn't get her anywhere. It would be a waste of her time, and it would only make stopping Tom all the more difficult.

She would have plenty of time for panic later.

But now, for the time being... she had a ring to destroy.

Chapter 19

Early Christmas morning, before the sun had risen, the main walks of the castle were deserted. The lanterns burned low, the occupants of the portraits had long drifted to sleep. Even the ghosts weren't anywhere to be found.

It was then, roaming the quiet corridors with a calm, white rage, that Hermione decided that if there was one silver lining of Tom having tried to murder her, it was the window of opportunity she had whilst he thought her dead. Without needing to worry about running into the basilisk, reaching the seventh-floor corridor without being spotted was easy. She hadn't even needed to disillusion herself.

The Room of Hidden Things was just as she left it, dusty and cluttered, and once inside, she sought out a quiet corner. Ducking between two aisles of treasured rubbish, Hermione followed it down to the end.

She set up base on an open patch of floor and fished through her bag to find the knife she'd bought. She pulled it out and—*God*, she thought, staring down at it. What had she been thinking? It wasn't even *sharp*. She should've kept looking, but... ah. Oh well. Beggars couldn't be choosers, and so, she dug around in her bag for the phial of poisoned tea. It wouldn't hurt to *try*.

Holding the phial up to the light, she saw the tea inside had formed a thick, black skin on the top. She bet it smelled foul.

Wrinkling her nose, she uncorked the phial, and with a steady hand, keeping her skin safely out of contact with the liquid, she poured one, two, three drops onto the blade of the knife.

She watched it closely, but was quickly disheartened by the fact that nothing seemed to be happening. It was just a knife with some brown drops on it.

Hmm. What if there hadn't been enough venom in the tea for it to impregnate the silver? Or what if it had been sitting too long, and the venom had precipitated out? Did basilisk venom have a half-life once removed from the tooth?

But then again—maybe nothing *would* happen. Maybe the venom seeping into the metal wouldn't give any visible sign at all.

Deciding her safest bet was the middle ground, Hermione left the knife to stew with the tea on it for a moment while she went to find Tom's ring.

And there, right where she'd left it, nestled in amongst the old quidditch things, was the ring's protective container. She brought it back over to the knife, and spelled the container open, carefully tipping it upside down. Tom's ring fell to the stone with a soft metallic echo.

Her eyes starting to sting with tiredness, she stared down at it. She had a strong urge to spit on it.

How would it defend itself, she wondered? The locket played on one's insecurities, while the diary formed a personal connection with whomever came into contact with it. The ring's defence... Hermione suspected it was in its appeal. It would lure one into putting the ring on, try it on for size, and at which point, the curse Tom had given it would seal their fate.

But Hermione was not to be fooled. She was far too furious to be. Tom had forced himself on her, tried to kill her, *again*, and the monster he would become would tear her entire life from her.

Destroying his ring would be the least she could do to repay him.

Deciding that staring at it wasn't a good idea—she'd given it long enough to have an attempt, surely—Hermione scooped up the knife by the handle, and angled it back so that the droplets of tea dropped back into her phial, *just in case*.

One never knew when basilisk venom might come in handy.

Then, squeezed the hilt of the knife and crouched by the ring.

She thought she could feel it, then; a pulse brushing against her skin that wasn't hers, steadily picking up. Did it know it had reached the end of its life, the portion of his soul trapped within the ring? Like the rest of him, did it fear death over all else?

She hoped so.

Hermione took a deep breath, and with rage quickening her blood, she brought the knife down, stabbing into the ring.

Light filled the room as the metal hit metal, a loud crack filling the space, and at the impact, she was thrown backwards.

She had the distinct sensation of falling, and then all went black.

There was a soft, indistinct echo.

...truly made a sound?

Hermione had that odd inkling you sometimes get, you know, the one that happens when you're not alone? That pressing, unnerving, skin-tightening sensation that comes when you're being watched?

It was an obscure thing for her to be feeling, partly because she didn't believe in a sixth sense, and partly because she couldn't see anyone—couldn't see anything, for that matter. There didn't seem to be anyone in the space she was in, not even herself, but despite that, she could've sworn that somehow, she *heard* someone.

How do you find meaning in a life that's forgotten?

Oh. There it was again. She was sure of it this time; a voice, blurred at its edges, just on the brink of being tangible.

"Where are you?" she asked into the space, with a mouth she didn't have.

There was a low thrum, almost as it were in response—

If you're not remembered... have you ever truly existed at all?

Now that she was listening for it, she could make out what it was saying.

Nonsense, of course you would have, she thought back at it, a bit irritated it was asking such a philosophical question when there were clearly more important questions at hand. Such as, where

was she? Why had her body gone?

Ah, but Hermione, to be, is to be perceived.

She'd heard that saying before. But, wait— can you hear what I'm thinking?

If one can never die, one can never be forgotten.

Oh. There was something familiar about the voice now, a surety, a confidence, a smoothness she recognised—

"...Tom?"

Hermione woke suddenly, and when she did, the first thing she became aware of was that she was uncomfortably cold. Then, she noticed an ache in her neck, the sort that came from sleeping in an uncomfortable position for too long.

She slowly pushed herself up, muscles protesting, finding herself on the ground of the room of requirement where she'd been pressed awkwardly into an overflowing cupboard. She rubbed at her tender muscles, stretching them out.

There was light streaming in through the windows. She must've been knocked out. How long had she been unconscious for? She had a vague sensation that she'd been dreaming, but couldn't quite remember it. And—

Oh. The ring.

Hermione forced herself up and hobbled back to the centre of the room, over to the spot where she'd stabbed the ring. There were scorch marks charring the middle of the open stone, presumably in the spot she'd stabbed the horcrux and nearby— several gold shards of metal were scattered, pieces of Tom's ring.

It had worked.

Merlin, it had *worked*.

Sheer, beautiful relief washed over her, and despite her aching muscles, she laughed out loud and jumped on the spot. It *worked*.

Her pathetic little knife did the trick, and now, with the ring gone at her hand instead of Dumbledore's, he would never be cursed. Dumbledore would never lose his hand, would never arrange with Snape to be killed. *She'd saved him.*

She swelled with pride. If Tom succeeded and managed to kill her, then now at least, she could die happy. One horcrux down would make a world of difference, in the end.

Hermione lowered to a crouch, closing in to examine the broken ring. Had the curse been broken along with its vessel? She suspected so, but erring on the side of caution, she collected the pieces with her wand, levitating them back into the rings protective case.

She was about to stand up when her eyes caught onto a small, black stone.

She blinked. The resurrection stone. One of the Hallows, the one Tom hadn't known he'd had when he'd turned the ring into a vessel for his soul.

Hermione didn't think about it. Before she could register what she was doing, she plucked up the smooth stone and considered it in her palm.

It didn't feel like anything special. Just a sleek black stone, subtle geometric markings on its surface. It wasn't surprising that Tom, raised with muggles, hadn't identified it for what it was—it just seemed a nice rock.

But now, with it in her hand, the sight of its markings had her pondering again on the marking Dumbledore had left in the Tales of Beedle the Bard—the marking he had left for her. At the time, when she'd found the drawing in the book, she'd assumed the marking had been a hint for *that* time, for stopping Voldemort in the nineties.

But he hadn't left the book to Harry. He'd left it for *her*, just as he'd left this entire doomed mission for her should Harry fail. Maybe... maybe Dumbledore had thought the Hallows could help her *now*?

Hermione rolled the stone in her palm, considering it.

No, she decided. While she had the stone, the wand belonged to Dumbledore, and the cloak must've been with Harry's ancestors. She didn't think thieving the cloak from them would help, nor did she think Dumbledore had planned for her to nick his wand.

And the stone... how was *that* supposed to help her? It was surely the most useless, flawed Hallow of the lot, and she was grateful that she had it now, in the past. To her, it was just a rock, and the temptation of it couldn't possibly pose a risk; everyone she knew who had died, wouldn't have been born yet.

Mad-Eye, Dobby, Lavender, Tonks, Remus, Fred, *Harry*.

Whenever thoughts of Harry popped up, Hermione tended to try to repress them. But now the stone was in her hand, the same one that Harry had been so convinced of, the thoughts barrelled their way in.

And so, with a morbid sort of curiosity driven by the empty ache in her chest, Hermione turned the stone over three times.

She didn't hold her breath, didn't expect anything to happen, but—

From the ring, light materialised, forming an intricate apparition. The light strung itself together, weaving into the shape of a figure, and then, Harry was standing before her, his hair scruffed and his shirt untucked, just the way she remembered him.

Hermione froze.

"I...impossible," she muttered to herself, transfixed by how *real* he seemed. She must've been dreaming.

She blinked, expecting him to be gone when she opened her eyes.

But he wasn't. Harry just smiled crookedly, gave a bit of a shrug. "That's magic for you."

Hermione flinched and had to cover her mouth to smother a sob at the sound of his voice. He

wasn't real, wasn't really there, she *knew* that, but he sounded like he was, looked like he was. And she could— she could *hear* him.

"H-how... how are you here?" she whispered aloud, a spoken thought as she glanced between him and the stone.

It was impossible. He wasn't dead yet— he hadn't even been *born* yet.

Harry smiled like he could hear her thoughts. "We're always here," said Harry, pointing toward the centre of his chest.

Hermione thought she understood.

She frowned. What a terrible, *stunning* piece of magic.

"I'm sorry," he went on to say. "I never meant for all of this to be left to you. But I'm so proud of you. You've come so far."

Hermione shook her head. She told herself he wasn't real, none of what he was saying was real, it was all an elaborate trick—but he was all she was longing to hear. "I wish you were here. You always knew exactly what to..." she whispered. "I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know what to do."

The apparition of Harry gave a sad smile, and reached out for her hand. She offered it, and while she couldn't feel his touch, the sight of his hand over hers felt warming all the same.

"Yes, you do," said Harry. "Remember. There is one thing he covets above all else."

Hermione just about rolled her eyes. How did that help? "Power," she scoffed.

Harry nodded.

"But that's— that's completely impractical, I can't *use* that, I—"

Hermione broke off.

Harry's smile widened as if he could see the cogs turning, and he nodded again as if to say, 'go on'.

Oh.

Oh.

He was right. That was *it*.

And it was so *annoying* because she'd been right from the beginning. Her original approach was the best way forward, it had to be, but... she'd gone about it from the wrong angle.

The only way to truly hold Tom off, the only way to get to his diary, was to be recruited, was to be *valuable*, was to be seen as a means to add to his *power*.

She'd been silly to think her use of the Imperius curse would be enough to sway him, sloppy to think knowledge of the founders objects would tempt him, but *now*...

What had happened to Felix had been a horrible accident... but Tom didn't have to know that.

And what better way to show that she wasn't working with Dumbledore than to claim a gruesome

killing of a past student. Dumbledore would have never supported that, no matter what, and Tom would know it.

To claim Felix's death as an intentional, brutal act, would prove her strength, her value, and her independence from Dumbledore all in one fell swoop.

And then, if even *that* wasn't enough to sway him... She'd been fighting tooth and nail to keep her secret, to withhold her time travel from him, when the whole time... maybe it should have been her way forward. A last resort to save herself from being killed. Tom knowing of her time travel would make her far more precious to him than any prophecy, far more useful than any Seer. And if she manipulated it well enough, she could even withhold *why* she'd been sent back...

It would make her so valuable, he'd practically *have* to recruit her, *have* to keep her around. He'd be stupid not to.

"That's... that's it," she said wondrously. "*Oh*, that's *it!* I could *kiss* you, Harry!"

Harry grinned.

"Thank you," she gushed. "I won't let you down. I promise."

"Good," said Harry. "Now go and finish this."

Ah, Christmas dinner. Possibly the cosiest night of the Hogwarts year.

It had taken some effort to psych herself up, but Hermione decided that if she were to rip off the band-aid that was seeing Tom again, she might as well do it at the busiest possible time.

Edging into the Great Hall that evening, she found the tables warmly filled, and the few students and professors who had remained for the break were scattered around the hall, lines between staff and students more blurred than they would usually be. The fireplaces were crackling, a set of instruments were playing themselves by the back wall, strumming together classic carols, and the white noise of laughter and chatter filled the air.

It was a beautiful set up, but in all honesty, Hermione was terrified. By joining the dinner, by showing her face, she felt as though she would be lining up a nail into her coffin.

But she couldn't stop, couldn't cower and hide, and so, whilst picturing Harry by her side, she forced herself forward.

She didn't immediately spot him. His usual place at the staff table was empty, but— ah. There. Over on the Slytherin table, she made out Tom's tall form, wedged between the students. He had a Christmas scarf around his neck, and he was laughing at something one of the students had said. He... hadn't noticed her. He seemed relaxed, at ease. He had none of his usual vigilance about him.

Hermione swelled with smugness. He must've had such a wonderful Christmas in a peaceful, happy bubble, thinking her dead.

And now, she was going to go and pop it.

Had he been able to feel it, she wondered, when she'd destroyed his ring? In the past, it had been

apparent Voldemort hadn't been able to feel the pieces of his soul being destroyed, but that had been when he'd split it into eight. In this time, Tom had split it twice, and the ring had presumably been the first one. It almost seemed hard to fathom that he might *not* have felt half of his soul being destroyed, but... he seemed entirely relaxed.

He must've been none the wiser.

That thought steadied her a bit, and in that setting—at the students table, with the bright, knitted scarf on—he didn't seem half as threatening as he usually did. It was another enormous help, and with her shoulders back, hands steady, she went over there.

He didn't notice her approaching—of course he didn't—and as she came up behind him, she gently slid a hand up and along his spine, resting it between his shoulder blades, and leaned in, her head by his shoulder.

"Good evening, Tom," she cooed, and his muscles tensed beneath her hand at the unexpected touch. "Happy Christmas."

One look at her, and the slight smile he'd been wearing fell from his lips.

It only made Hermione's widen. "Sorry for not catching you earlier. I was a bit preoccupied this morning, you see. The gift you left me was very thoughtful, but a bit of a handful, to be entirely honest," she said with a light laugh. "But we'll have to catch up later so I can thank you properly."

Tom didn't react. Aside from a bob of his Adam's apple, he gave her nothing at all.

"I'll see you around, then," she said, and quickly leaned in to place a light peck on his cheek.

While the students at the Slytherin table made a chorus of whoops, Hermione left, trailing her fingertips along his back as she went, in the exact way that he had once done.

Hermione continued on down the hall, up to the staff table toward her usual spot, biting down hard onto her tongue to hold her nerve.

She felt the eyes of the hall's occupants on her the entire way, but it was a good thing, she reminded herself. She needed anything she could get to help ensure her survival, and while she hated to do it, she reasoned that stroking the rumours of her and Tom would ensure that if something happened to her, eyes would naturally turn to him.

As Hermione reached her place and sat down, Kettleburn raised his glass to her, his eyebrows raising suggestively.

"What did you do to that poor boy?" he said.

She gave him a light pat on the arm, and though she wasn't really hungry, she reached out for some bread all the same.

"Never you mind, Slivanus."

Now that she was seating up on higher ground, and the whooping of the students had settled down, she dared a glance back down at Tom.

He was staring and there wasn't an inch of subtlety about it.

Hermione met his eyes defiantly, leaning her chin languidly onto her hand. She couldn't tell what

he was thinking, but by the blank look on his face and the stillness of his posture, she knew it couldn't have been good. She was grateful for the long, festive tablecloth on the staff table; with it, he couldn't see the treacherous, anxious bouncing of her foot.

She took a measured breath to steady herself, and with a strict amount of focus, she let her occlumency up, just a little bit, just enough to create a small, inviting cavity of thought for Tom to slip into.

Into it, she pictured Mulciber. Laying down with unseeing eyes, throat slit, the snow beneath him stained with blood.

She held Tom's eye contact. She needed to know that he *saw* it. And then she thought loudly, *is that the best you've got?*

Tom's fork slipped from his fingers.

He was the one to look away first. Without any attention on the students around him, she watched as he found a napkin and wiped at his mouth, and without another glance in her direction, he simply got up and left.

Seeing his back to her, seeing him leave the hall, and the students quietly laughing in his wake, Hermione had to fight off a smile.

And—Merlin—she knew it was a dangerous game she was playing. She knew what had just transpired would either be her making or undoing, and she knew the burden of what she'd done, of what had happened to Mulciber was not one to be taken lightly.

But despite the screeching of her nerves, despite the sickness in her stomach, Hermione wasn't sure if she'd ever felt more smug in all of her life.

Chapter 20

Between almost being murdered and destroying one of Tom's horcruxes, Hermione had been so busy over Christmas, that something important had been forgotten. It had slid through the cracks, and now, she was suffering the consequences.

When she entered the infirmary Boxing Day morning, Edward, still the only occupant, glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, and rolled over, turning his back to her.

Oh dear.

"...Edward?" she said, wincing as she reached his bed.

He made a grunt.

"I'm... I'm *so* sorry about yesterday," she gushed. "I got tied up late on Christmas Eve, and then yesterday I was just so busy that I just..."

Another grunt.

While Hermione knew that being snubbed by a fourteen year old boy should be the very least of her worries, it still didn't feel very good, especially now that she'd gone and tweaked the memory of the only other friend she had. And so, determined to make him come around—she needed *one* friend, damn it—Hermione summoned the infirmary's Christmas tree over a bit closer to his bed and spelled its lights on. She closed the window curtains and lit the candles on his bedside dresser. Then she spelled on the nearest radio, having it play some soft Christmas carols.

"I have a gift for you," she said in a sing-song voice, drawing his shrunken gift out of her bag and returning it to its usual size. She reached over him and dangled it in front of his face. A gift to a child, was like a bone to a dog.

There was a long pause—

Edward slowly started to roll back over. "Oh?"

Hermione gave him a sheepish smile as he hesitantly plucked the gift from her hands.

"...You didn't have to," he said meekly.

"I know. But I wanted to."

Edward smiled grudgingly as he pulled on the ribbon of his gift. "...Thanks, Miss."

"Of course," she chimed. "Now. Nispy?" she called out to the room at large.

Moments later, there was a loud crack, and a short, wrinkled house elf appeared with kind eyes and a lopsided tunic.

"Miss called?" the house elf called Nispy squeaked.

"Yes," she said. "I was hoping you would be so kind as to pop to the kitchens and fetch Edward and myself some Christmas pudding?"

"But it's not even ten—"

"Oh, yes, Miss!" Nispy exclaimed excitedly over Edward. "Nispy will just be a moment!"

Another pop, and Nispy was gone.

"It's a bit early for pudding," Edward grumbled fingers neatly plucking at his wrapping paper.

"It's Christmas." Hermione shrugged.

"It's *Boxing Day*."

"Hm. Okay then, if that's a problem for you, I can have your share and see if we can get you some more cold toast and yog—"

"No, no," he said quickly at the threat of more of the hospital wing's standard food. "No, pudding's fine."

Hermione beamed. "Happy Christmas, Edward."

Edward's face lit up as he pulled the paper back to reveal his chess set. "Happy Christmas, Miss."

Hours later, Hermione freed herself from the infirmary and took her late lunch out into the courtyard, one of the castle's busiest spots for that time of day.

There wasn't much wind that afternoon, and so, despite the snow, there were a handful of Ravenclaws over by the fountains with their heads collectively over a book. Professor Shrew was reading over on one of the benches, and Beery was over with a troop of Hufflepuffs boasting about *back in his day*.

Choosing a spot far enough away that she could tune it out, Hermione found a bench under the eave of the castle's west wing.

It was nice, the cold fresh air, the white noise of the other people. It helped her to imagine that all was well, that she wasn't entirely alone, that she wasn't living in a castle with someone who wanted to murder her, that didn't have a Hallow tucked away underneath her pillow.

Hermione wasn't actually hungry. The pudding she'd had earlier was filling, and the sandwich she'd brought with her had peanut butter on it. Not her favourite. But she forced herself through it regardless; they said that diet was important for maintaining one's mental health.

Hermione was only halfway through her sandwich when her heart skipped a beat. From across the courtyard, she could make out Tom's tall form coming from the Entrance Hall. It was the first she'd seen of him since the previous night, and she wasn't exactly surprised. She knew he'd come looking for her soon enough.

And just as she expected, he moved in a way characteristic for someone looking for another person, until—there.

His eyes fell upon her.

Her stomach twisted, and she had to force herself to take another bite as he started in her direction. She watched him approach, her chewing slowing down, intentionally keeping her eyes steady. Eye

contact worked for lions and magpies—maybe it would work for him too?

Instinct urged her to get up and run, but— it was fine. She couldn't hide from him forever, and at least here, they were in public, in plain sight. What could he possibly do?

It was *fine*.

Ah, and it seemed that Tom more resembled a leopard than a lion, because the eye contact didn't do a thing to deter him. And when he reached her, he didn't say anything, just sat down on the bench beside her, leaving a comfortable distance between them.

See? Fine. It was fine.

Still, Hermione continued to stare. As though he didn't notice her, Tom leaned back into the bench, a long arm stretching out onto the back rest. He didn't pay her any mind—his focus was seemingly on the Hufflepuffs, the corners of his eyes wrinkling as he winced at the way Beery was smirking at the underage girls.

Hermione swallowed her mouthful and cleared her throat.

"Can I help you?" she eventually asked.

There was another stretch of quiet. It was uncomfortable, and she was right on the brink of getting up and leaving when he finally spoke.

"That's how they kill lambs, you know," Tom mumbled vaguely, still not looking at her.

Hermione's brows drew together. Now he'd been next to her a while, she could smell him. Whatever the scent was that he was wearing was... well. She'd be lying if said it wasn't nice. It reminded her of the night in the dungeons, before he'd tried to poison her.

"They hoist them up, make a slit to the throat, and..."

"Yes, I know how animals are slaughtered, thank you."

Tom turned abruptly, facing her at last. His eyes were sharp, his mouth a thin line.

She wanted to shrink, disappear on the spot.

"They're strung up so that they bleed out faster, makes it humane." His eyes roamed over her, and she could feel herself flushing—with anger, terror, and, oh, maybe something else, she wasn't sure. "But you didn't string Mulciber up, did you?"

Despite it all, her tangle of emotions, Hermione willed herself to stay solid. "No," she said, as though the way he was staring wasn't bothering her. "Like you said. That would've made it humane."

Tom's lips parted, the slight movement catching her notice. They looked soft, smooth. Deceptive.

"I don't believe you," he murmured.

She frowned. "I *didn't* string him—"

"That's not what I meant."

Hermione rolled her eyes; there wasn't a hope of withholding it. *Exhausting*. "Then would you for

once care to speak plainly?"

Tom's eyes brightened, those lips picking up. He looked exceptionally amused. It was impressive, how his demeanour could change so quickly. "I don't think you killed him. I think you're lying to me, but I don't—" he glanced away briefly. "Was it Avery? Are you claiming it for him, trying to protect him?"

"Do you think it couldn't have been me because I'm a *woman*? Besides, Avery—" She tried to choose her words carefully, "Avery wasn't even there."

Tom smile became closed-mouthed. "How long did it take you to learn Occlumency?"

At yet another abstract statement, Hermione felt her eye twitch. "About a year," she ground out, begrudgingly humouring him. "Why?"

"Then I'd like to offer my condolences to whomever spent that year teaching you. Shielding one's thoughts is a complete waste of time when one is a horrendous liar."

"I'm not lying."

Tom hummed. "Do you think lying to me will protect him?"

"I'm *not* lying."

"You're only irritating me further."

"It's *true*."

"Initially, I thought I'd just slit his throat—an eye for an eye, and all of that—but with every word that leaves your mouth, you're making me want to drag it out."

"Avery had *nothing* to do with it."

Tom raised a neat brow. "No?"

"No."

"All right," Tom said simply. "*Imperio*."

There wasn't a hope of stopping it. It was so *sudden* that she barely comprehended what he'd said before the wave of ease from Tom's spell washed over her, each of her muscles relaxing completely.

And she felt—*oh*, it was like she was being held up in a cloud, a soft yet firm padding around her mind. It disconnected her from her body, and it was *blissful*, the lack of thought, the sudden lack of care, the absence of worry.

There was a cool, gentle touch on her cheek, one she barely felt, and Tom turned her head toward him.

He was smiling at her, perfectly politely. "Hm," he hummed, a low, soothing sound, one that echoed as though spoken from the other end of a long tunnel. "Now. I'd like it if you could answer me truthfully, Hermione," he said quietly, his hand lowering from her cheek to take hold of hers. "Can you do that for me?"

A gentle, yet wilful voice in her head nudged her forward. "Yes, of course," she heard herself say.

"Was Avery with you the night Mulciber died?"

"Yes," she provided at once, uninhibited.

"Ah," he sounded brightly, "would you look at that? Rather clever use of the curse, wouldn't you say? I really ought to thank you. I hadn't considered it as a work around to Occlumency before, until you showed me..."

Hermione felt herself smiling distantly.

There was a soft voice at the back of her head, the beginnings of protest— *no, we shouldn't be smiling, no, no*— but Hermione struggled to hear it, because it was euphoric, not having to worry. Why *should* she listen when things could be so calm and stress-free instead?

"Tell me," Tom went on in a purr, his fingers stroking the back of her hand. "Did Avery kill Mulciber?"

"No."

His brows shot up, his fingers slowing their ministrations. "Did you?"

"Yes."

His smile started to fall. "Did Avery... help you?"

"No."

"Huh," he sounded, frowning a little bit as his fingers stilled. "Well then, if he *wasn't* responsible for Mulciber... why lie?"

Hermione opened her mouth. There was that voice again, that small one in the back of her head, and it insisted she *be quiet*, insisted that she not answer him. But another supportive nudge from Tom's spell, and it was effectively silenced.

"I don't want you to hurt him. I thought if you knew he tried to protect me, then you would punish him."

"Ah." Tom lifted his chin, the beginnings of a nod. "I've known Marvin for many years. What is it that makes you think I'd... *punish* him?"

"You threatened him so plainly over dinner, and Mulciber tried to kill him. He wouldn't have done so without your instruction."

"...and what is it that makes you think that?"

Don't say it. Don't say it, don't say it, don't say—

"Mulciber was your Knight," she said simply. "He would only do what you told him."

Tom looked away. His hand tightened around hers and the muscles of his jaw tensed.

Hermione continued to watch him, smiling blankly.

"Where did you hear that?" he soon asked, taking his time with each word. "The word, 'Knight'?"

The voice in the back of her head was becoming louder, getting more insistent. *Don't. Don't say it.*

Say anything, anything at all, anything but—

"Dumbledore," she heard herself say brightly.

Tom's eyes snapped shut. She heard him breathing through his nose. He stayed like that for several moments. The voice in her head was whining, at her, close to yelling, but it was muffled.

"Come," he suddenly ordered, pulling her up as he stood, his hand clasped tightly around hers.

He held her tightly enough that through the fog of the curse, she felt that it hurt. Hermione let herself go with him, though.

He pulled her along at a quick pace, heading back into the castle and he didn't release her as they walked. She followed him through into the Great Hall, starting up the staircase. They passed a couple of students on their way, and Tom greeted them politely as they went.

Her hand remained firmly clasped within his.

He veered them off the stairs into the third-floor corridor, and they continued on past the charms and history classrooms, until they came to a large picture, one as tall as she herself was. In it, was a large, beautiful, antiquated church in the night, a bishop standing on its front steps.

The bishop straightened at the sight of them. "My Lord," he greeted with a polite nod of his head, despite Tom not uttering a single word.

There was a hollow sound of a click, and the picture swung from the wall, revealing a pointed archway. Tom pulled them through it.

The short hall led into a bedroom. Inside, the rug and upholstery were dark shades of green and even in the dim light, it was plain that the room was immaculately kept. Hermione was dimly aware that it smelled incredibly pleasant, and somewhere deep down, she was *excited* to be there.

She couldn't for the life of her think why.

"Stay there," Tom ordered, leaving her standing in the middle of the room by the bed.

Hermione obediently waited while he left her field of vision. There were the quiet sounds of rummaging, and when Tom came back, he had a sharp knife in his hand. He tossed it onto the bed before her before he loosened his tie. He shrugged off his jacket and rolled his sleeves, before he finally took his time in seating himself on the end of the bed in front of her, leaning himself back onto one arm.

He tilted his head as he seemingly considered her.

"Take off your robes, and your shirt," he said suddenly.

At the clear order, Hermione immediately shrugged off her outer robe, dropping it to the floor without a care. Her fingers quickly got to work on the buttons of her shirt.

"Slower," he instructed.

Her fingers slowed.

"*Slower*," he snapped.

"I'm sorry." She slowed down even further, her hands moving at an unnaturally slow pace—

Tom leaned forward and grabbed her arm, pulling her roughly downward toward him. His other hand caught onto her jaw, his fingers digging in painfully tightly. "I'm sorry, *what*?" he prompted.

She didn't know what to say, but then a smooth, calming voice that wasn't her own urged her on, gave her the answer. She liked the voice. It was comforting, gave her surety, and it was nicer than her own. Why wouldn't she like the voice?

"I'm sorry," she repeated, this time adding on, "My Lord."

Tom smiled slowly, loosening his hold. He licked his lips. "Better."

He released her jaw, and Hermione straightened, continuing on with her buttons. When they were all undone, she slowly peeled her shirt back, dropping it to the floor onto her robe.

She waited, left exposed in her thin bra, her arms dropping by her side.

Tom's eyes roamed over her, and she felt a prickle of anxiousness—but it was only fleeting. As soon as she'd felt it, his curse squashed it right back down.

Tom's next instruction was, "give me your arm," and he held out his hand expectantly. "That one," he added, gesturing to her left.

She obeyed.

He gently pulled her closer, bringing his free hand up to her forearm to lightly brush his fingertips along the lines of her scars. He did that for some time, tracing back and forth over the letters, inspecting.

Hermione waited patiently. She didn't mind it. His fingers felt quite nice.

"I'd like to try something, I think," he eventually said, and it seemed as though it was more to himself. He released her arm and plucked up the knife that was by his side. "Another idea from you, actually," he told her. "Your scars. Is this how they were made?" He gestured with the knife. "Initially I thought it must've been a wand, but I couldn't quite manage to string together a curse with a slicing hex—not in a way that would leave such controlled markings, at least..."

"Yes," she answered in a matter of factly. "It was a knife."

"Good... but before we get started..." he said, pulling her other arm—her right one—toward him. He touched her skin with the cold blade of the knife, just lightly enough for her to feel, and not hard enough to scratch the skin. "What does Dumbledore know of Slytherin's Chamber?"

Tom's spell nudged her forward and she opened her mouth to speak, but she stalled. It wasn't a clear enough instruction; he hadn't specified *which* Dumbledore he meant. *Her* Dumbledore, or *his* Dumbledore?

The will from Tom's spell started to push harder as he became impatient, and so, the knowledge that *Tom* only knew *one* Dumbledore had the decision made.

"That it houses a monster," she said, "one only controllable by Slytherin's heir. He doesn't believe this to be Hagrid. He thinks it's you."

Tom's lip picked up, a light sneer. "And does he know *what* monster lies in the chamber?"

"No."

"Do *you* know what monster lies in the chamber?" he asked, stroking the knife gently up from her wrist, all the way to the crook of her arm.

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"I deduced it. I've only read of one creature that will have spiders fleeing in such an organised manner, and there is only one creature larger than an earthworm at risk from a rooster. While Myrtle Warren died, several other students were petrified. There is only one creature I know of that can petrify like that, and kill without leaving a mark."

Tom hummed. "A right little bookworm, aren't you?"

"Yes. Many in my life have called me that."

A laugh broke through Tom's displeasure, and his grip around her wrist tightened. He centred the blade in the middle of her arm and instructed her, "hold still."

He started to press down, driving the blade into her skin. Blood pooled around it, quickly trickling around her arm.

It hurt. It hurt a *lot*. But even though she felt it, each and every nerve ending being severed, she also... didn't. It was strange. Like she couldn't act on it, like she was screaming, but only on the inside.

Tom cut agonisingly slowly, taking his time before he lifted the knife, and looking down at it, she saw he'd cut a neat, straight line.

"Hmm," Tom hummed thoughtfully, inspecting his work. He seemed to contemplate it, and then he brought the knife back, continuing on to extend the line into an 'L' shape. Next to it, he proceeded to cut in a neat 'V'.

Finally lowering the knife, Tom watched the blood running down her arm, pupils blown. "Good." He let her go, leaned back onto the bed. "Now, heal it."

Hermione crouched by her robes, arm throbbing, and fished through them with her good hand until she found her wand.

"*E-episkey*."

Nothing happened. The wound remained, the blood continuing to flow.

Tom grinned. "Good. Now try this," he said, summoning over a small jar and offering it to her. She didn't examine it, just obediently applied the ointment to her arm.

The bleeding gradually started to slow, but the wound didn't quite close.

She was starting to become light-headed.

Tom made a satisfied sort of laugh. "I thought so," he muttered to himself, eyes trained on her arm. "Such a simple method... so effective." He abruptly looked up. "That just about kept me up all night, you know?"

"I'm sorry, My Lord."

He barked a laugh, pulling at his lip with his thumb and forefinger; a thoughtful, subconscious action. "Who gave that to you?" he asked.

"A witch called Bellatrix LeStrange," she said.

"Bellatrix LeStrange..." he said, tasting the name, his brows lowering in thought.

"She's not from here."

"Hm." Tom watched her arm. She could feel it continuing to ooze, her blood slowly dripping from her elbow. "How did you get it to heal, in the end?" he asked. "Your other arm?"

"My friend's brother had years of experience as a curse breaker. He couldn't be rid of the curse, but he managed to expel it to the epidermis, contained it there."

Tom frowned a little bit. "Clever," he eventually remarked. "Let me try it."

She obediently passed him her arm again, letting him get to work.

A deep burn set in, like alcohol being rubbed into split skin. Tom worked for a few minutes, murmuring to himself as he did so, and the final product, just like her other arm, was ugly. The wounds weren't open anymore, and the resultant scars were raised and red, but at least the lines of his letters were straight. Bellatrix hadn't put in nearly as much care.

Tom looked it over, admiring his handiwork, and stroked back over the finished product.

"Clean this up," he instructed her when he seemed satisfied, gesturing to his blood-stained rug before he stepped away to take the knife back over to his dresser.

His curse pushed her on. It took a couple of charms to get the floor clean—one for the rug, and another for the stone beneath it. Blood was always trickier than the usual spills.

When she was finished, Tom was already back waiting for her by the bed, arms folded, eyes scrutinising.

He stared at her silently before he murmured, "why are you doing the old man's bidding? Dumbledore's?"

Her arm throbbed, but despite it, she felt herself smiling politely. "Because it's the right thing to do."

"Do you truly believe that?" Tom asked. He sounded, almost... sad.

"For the most part, yes."

He nodded, sighing through his nose. "A shame."

Without instruction to act on, Hermione remained where she was. Tom approached her, bringing his hands to cup her face. She had a quick urge to step back, and there was that small voice again—*no, don't touch me, don't touch me*—but Tom's spell squashed it down, held her in place. And his touch felt nice. Why wouldn't she like it?

Tom smiled like he knew what she was thinking, and then he turned her head up toward him, and kissed her.

It was remarkably gentle, almost tender, and urged on by the encouraging nudge in her head, she

kissed him back.

While not thinking was amazing—it just what she *needed*—the kissing made it even better. The whiny, grating voice in her head chimed in that *no it didn't, no, stop*, but why should she listen to it?

Tom's tongue passed over hers, tasting like warmth and comfort, and his hands slid down from her jaw down to circle her neck.

By instinct, her heart rate spiked when he squeezed, but it was only a few seconds. Tom groaned as he released the pressure, pulling back to rest his forehead against hers.

"Ah," he sighed, his breath brushing against her skin. His thumbs stroked over her cheekbones. "I would like you... to put your clothes back on and go, take a walk up to the Astronomy Tower," he murmured. "Greet those you see on your way up as you normally would, but don't linger. Once you've made it there, go up to the viewing deck, and wait there for twenty minutes. When your time is up, I'd like for you to climb up onto the ledge of the western facing window. Once you're up there, I'd like you to leave your wand, and throw yourself out—no cushioning charms, no apparating. Can you do that for me?"

"Yes, my Lord," she heard herself murmur.

"Good." He leaned in, kissing her again. It was slow and leisured, and spurred on by the spell, she leaned into him.

His hands roamed downward, passing down her neck and over her breasts. While one of his hands circled around her waist, settling into the small of her back, his other slipped down between their bodies, down over the fabric of her skirt. He pulled it up, sliding his hand along her thigh to cup her between her legs. Hermione pushed into his touch, ignoring the quiet protests—*get off me, get off me*—from her annoying inner voice. It felt good. Why shouldn't it feel good? The curse spurred her on, and she moved against him, rocking to get some friction—

Tom pulled away again, all too soon. "Go on," he instructed coarsely, but still, he didn't let her go. "Before I change my mind."

"Yes, My Lord."

Tom closed his eyes, sighing deeply. He squeezed her hip and ran his fingers along her underwear, along the lines of the lips of her cunt. "Say it again before you go."

"Say what, My Lord?"

He groaned softly, and he leaned in to bite her lip while his fingers teased at her entrance through the fabric. "Go."

The curse stepped her back, cold now that she didn't have his body heat against her. She shook out her shirt and pulled it back on, the raw skin of her arm stinging as the fabric passed over it. She pulled her robes over the top, and without another word, she was driven by the spell to leave.

It was colder out in the castle's corridors, and Hermione passed through them blankly, greeting the few students she passed as instructed. When she passed Professor Poppyworth, she seemed to want to stay and chat, but Hermione politely excused herself. She had somewhere to be.

She passed up and along the seventh-floor corridor, and started up the astronomy tower's steps, not slowing even when her thighs started to burn. She didn't stop until she reached the top, moving to

take the ladder up to the viewing deck.

At the top of the ladder, at the top of the tower, it was freezing. It didn't stop her though, and the voice in her head was yelling—*stop it, stop it, Hermione, turn around*, please—but she just couldn't. The insistent push of Tom's curse wouldn't let her.

She found a spot over by the window and started to count the seconds.

Eleven hundred and ninety-nine...

Eleven hundred and ninety-eight...

Eleven hundred and ninety-seven...

Stop it right now, Hermione, stop it—

We're stronger than this, don't do it—

Turn around. Turn around—

Seven hundred and thirty-four...

Seven hundred and thirty-three...

Seven hundred and thirty-one...

Her body was quivering from the cold.

It can't end like this, we've worked too hard!

Don't, Hermione, don't—

Three...

Two...

One...

Hermione took her wand from her pocket and placed it on the ground by her feet.

Please, please stop, we don't want to do this, what would they think—

She stepped up onto the ledge.

What would they all think, what would Harry think—

She looked down.

Everyone's relying on us, they need us not to do this—

The grounds around the tower were quite far away. The trees, the boathouse, Hagrid's hut, all looked tiny, and Hermione—

She hesitated.

Because wasn't just a shrill, grating voice in her head anymore; there was also Harry's. *I'm so proud of you. You've come so far.*

Tom's spell gave a harsh, insistent urge forward, pushing her to jump, but the other voice in her head—her voice—was *shrieking* now, *don't do it, don't jump, don't jump, we can't let him win—*

Hermione felt a snapping sensation, like the stretch of a rubber band, and she all but jumped backwards.

Landing back onto the safety of the viewing deck, she fell to her knees, gasping for air as clarity and pain came rushing back in full force. The sudden onslaught of pain from her arm where he'd cut her drove a whine through her teeth, and she clung to the floor as a wave of vertigo hit.

Her head was spinning, like she'd woken up drunk. The wind at that height was far harsher than it'd been on the ground, and it felt like the tower was spinning too.

She'd— she'd nearly—

She clambered to the side, scooping up her wand. Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

She'd sworn he would never disarm her again, and there she was, dropping her wand willingly.

She squeezed its hilt, breathing fast and deeply. Jesus Christ, she'd just about done it. A few seconds more, and she would've fallen to her grave, and *God*. He'd kissed her, put his *hands* on her, and she'd let him. She hadn't been close to stopping him, she would've let him do *anything—*

Hermione threw up.

It burned and it was lumpy, and— oh. There was the peanut butter.

She shuffled back away from her mess and lay herself down, splaying herself across the floor on her back.

She swept her hand through her hair and pulled it, and the flood gates opened. She didn't have a hope of stopping it, and so, for the first time in weeks, she sobbed, properly letting it all out.

Chapter 21

Arm tucked tightly against her chest, Hermione rushed into the infirmary, eyes watering at the pain. The sting of the curse was on the cusp of being overwhelming, driving a deep urge to just tear her arm right off. When it had been Bellatrix who'd assaulted her and Bill and Fleur had helped her back to health at Shell Cottage, numbing her arm had been the only thing to do to manage it while the curse had settled.

So, her first priority was to get some her hands on some balm and numb the hell out of it.

And—oh, *God*. Reaching the infirmary medicine cupboard, she pulled her sleeve to expose the angry scars.

LV.

It was disgusting. He'd branded her, like the lambs he'd spoken of slaughtering.

She fumbled at the cupboard with her good arm, swearing as she knocked a dose of pepperup potion, its phial smashing by her feet. Finally finding the numbing balm, she grappled with its lid.

"...Are you all right, Miss?"

Hermione whined through her teeth as she lathered it on, a deep burn setting in down her bones.

"Ah—yes," she hissed. "Yes, fine."

"What's happened?" Edward asked, sitting up in his bed.

Fuck, it felt like her skin was ripping open, millimetre by millimetre. "N-never you mind."

"You look... really sick, Miss—"

"*Not now*, Edward!" she snapped.

Edward's eyes became wide, but she barely noticed, because it felt like she was being flayed alive.

And when the balm finally, *finally* started to settle into her arm, the tense muscles in her back relaxed one by one. The pain started to subside, and she sighed in relief, briefly resting her head against the cupboard door.

She closed her eyes, taking a series of deep breaths in through her mouth. But now that the pain was subsiding, panic started to seep back in. How long would she have before he again found that she wasn't dead? The snow kept most of the castle's occupants indoors, but Hagrid, Kettleburn and the occasional students would be out in the grounds.

If one of them found a body, one that was seemingly a result of suicide, word would spread about the school in no time at all. Tom was surely waiting innocently in plain sight, a perfect alibi for when he thought her body would be found. How long would he wait?

Half an hour?

An hour?

Two?

He wouldn't wait too long, and there was a good chance she'd wasted most of her time already.

If he came looking for her—which she assumed he would—then, one of the first places he'd check would be the infirmary. Which meant...

Hermione sighed and despite the tired ache that had reached her bones, she forced herself onward and approached Edward's bed.

"...Edward? I-I'm sorry that I snapped at you just now. I had a bit of an incident upstairs and hurt my arm, and not that it excuses it, but I was in a lot of pain."

"It's all right, Miss," he said meekly.

"I'm really sorry."

He sniffed. "Don't worry about it."

Ugh. Edward's mouth was saying one thing, but his eyes were saying another. Bloody hell, but... oh well. She didn't have time for it now. He could be as upset with her as he wanted, as long as he didn't get stuck in the crossfire between her and Tom. That was all that mattered.

"Now, I know that Madam Spindle insisted you remain here another day, but I have decided that I think it would be a good idea to discharge you now," she said.

Ah. *That* perked him up. "Really, Miss?!"

"Yes," she said, "*on the condition*, that you spend your time in the Hufflepuff common room. You still *must* take it easy, all right? No running, no jumping, no strenuous activity whatsoever."

Edward was already clambering out of his bed. "Yes, Miss," he said excitedly, starting to gather up his belongings.

"Go straight there. Don't wander. And you can be sure that I'll have Nispy check up on you, so I'll find out if you don't take it easy enough."

"Sure thing, Miss!"

She frowned at his dismissiveness, but then again, she didn't blame him. He'd been cooped up all alone for the better half of a week, and over Christmas no less. In his place, she'd be running on out of there, too.

Edward finished shoving his gifts into his bag, and with a slight limp, circled the bed. "Thanks for everything, Miss. I'll come visit."

"No, you won't, because you'll be down in the Hufflepuff basement, where you'll be *resting*."

"Oh—yeah. Right. That's what I meant." He grinned sheepishly.

She frowned at him, but shooed him off all the same. "Go on then."

He gave her a small wave, and then he hobbled off.

Ahh. Hermione stared at the now empty infirmary. There. That was good. Spindle would be annoyed, but she could deal with her. At least Edward would be safe.

But now she was alone again, her stomach started to twist with unease, her hairs on the back of her

neck standing to attention. How far away was Tom? Would he be looking for her already?

Hermione began pacing, unable to keep herself still. Flexing her numbed fingers, she couldn't help but consider that perhaps Avery had been right. She couldn't stay in the castle. Not if she'd enraged Tom enough for him to be as bold as to imperio her in plain sight... but—fuck—she just couldn't leave without his diary, couldn't—

Hermione paused her pacing.

A sudden idea sprouted to life, an impulsive, *stupid* one, the sort of idea that Harry would've suggested...

Tom might start looking for her as soon as he realised she wasn't dead, but... there was one place he wouldn't think to check.

...his own rooms.

Now that she knew where his chambers were, and she was all but certain he'd be scouring the castle for her... it could make for the perfect opportunity to snatch the diary.

But—ah, how to get in there?

His portrait's bishop wouldn't just let anyone in. But then again, he'd seen her come in *with* Tom, only about an hour ago... maybe she could convince him to let her in again?

Or...

Or...

Could she confound a painting? She supposed she could *try* it—

Oh. *Oh, oh!*

Nevermind confounding. Hermione had an even better idea.

"*Nispy?!*" she called out to the empty room without pause.

Seconds later, a crack sounded from the door way.

"Miss called?" Nispy squeaked.

"Nispy!" Hermione greeted excitedly, lowering to a crouch to level their heights a bit. "I am in *urgent* need of a favour. A... discreet one."

At the prospect of another task, Nispy's ears pricked up. "Nispy would be most happy to help, Miss!"

"Wonderful, it's... it's a delicate matter, you see. Um... Professor Riddle and I, well... we've been... seeing each other, I suppose you could say," she said, the lie easily leaving her lips. "And please don't tell anyone this, Nispy, but his birthday is coming up, in just a couple of days. He doesn't like to make a fuss, so I thought that I might surprise him by leaving him a gift in his room."

"Of course, Miss! Nispy can place your gift anywhere you is needing," she declared brightly.

"No, that's not quite... I need to be *in* his room myself, you see. It's not... a physical gift, per se..."

Nispy blinked blankly.

"Well, we've... we've been *seeing* each other," Hermione repeated. Nispy continued to stare blankly. Oh, for goodness' sake. "*I would be the gift, if you catch my meaning.*"

"Nispy... Nispy thinks you is saying that you need to be *in* Professor Riddle's personal quarters?"

"Yes," said Hermione. "Yes, that's exactly it, but, you see, I can't have his portrait seeing me, because that will ruin the surprise."

"Nispy thinks Nispy understands now, Miss! Would Miss be liking Nispy to take Miss into his room?"

"Precisely! Do you think you could apparate us in there? I don't know whether the exemption for elven magic would permit side-along apparition with a human, but do you think we could give it a try?"

Nispy's ears lowered slightly as she considered it. "Nispy can try, but cannot make any promises. When would Miss be liking to go?"

"Um..." Hermione glanced around. She didn't think she needed anything. "Now?"

Nispy nodded, and looked down at herself, seemingly in thought. "Nispy thinks... that Miss will have to take Nispy's hand," Nispy said apologetically.

"That's all right," Hermione said, offering her hand to Nispy.

Nispy looked uncomfortable, but still, reached up and put her hand in Hermione's. Though her hand was small and bony, it was surprisingly warm, skin surprisingly soft,

"Hold your breath, Miss."

Hermione took a deep breath, and with a crack, was squeezed into darkness.

The dark pressure around her released as fast as it had set in, her lungs eagerly welcoming in a fresh breath. One look at the bed they'd appeared in front of was enough to tell her—

It had worked. They were in Tom's room.

Hermione's heart raced.

"You did it, Nispy! This is perfect!" Hermione exclaimed, just about having to ground her teeth together to stop herself from thanking her.

"Of course, Miss," Nispy said brightly. "And if Miss is needing anything else, Nispy is only a call away!"

There was another crack, and then Nispy was gone.

As the room fell back into silence, Hermione properly took in the space. Now that she was there whilst properly conscious, she was struck by the scent of the room. It smelled... like *boy*. Like

Tom. Not that that was surprising, of course, but it was jarringly... *normal*.

She swept her eyes over the room, giving it a surface level search for the diary. Aside from some assorted parchments on the desk, the room was pristinely clean, not so much as a speck of dust to be seen.

There was minimal furniture; a desk, a tall boy, beside cabinets and an old-looking, mahogany trunk. And his *bed*—it was a king, surely—looked freshly made, fabric straight and pillows fluffed. It looked so *comfortable*, and she wanted to roll in it, wanted to burn it, rip it to shreds all at the same time. She wondered where he slept. On the left, or the right? Or was he a middle sleeper? Would he—

Hermione tried to stop herself. But, oh, now she was looking at the bed, she couldn't help but think of the way he'd kissed her, the way he'd *touched* her. Her memory of being under the Imperius curse wasn't perfect, but still, she remembered the brush of his tongue, the gentle stroking of his hand... Why had he—

No. She closed her eyes and took a breath, reminding herself that he was vile, and that to try to find reason in any of his actions would be a futile effort. No, she had to *focus*.

She forced her attention from the bed, starting her search at his bedside table. There were some history books piled up, a blank sheet of parchment, a quill; no diary. In its drawer, she found assorted bookmarks and—hmm. A potion for dreamless sleep.

What could Tom be dreaming about that was so awful that he would resort to stopping it with a potion?

But though she burned with curiosity, Hermione tucked the potion back into his drawer and forced herself to move onto his desk. Sitting right on top of it, was the knife he'd cut her with, and underneath it, the desk was littered with hand-written notes.

She scowled. His hand was beautiful, and on the parchments, she scanned over his notes of the curse, theorising how it had been woven together. Huh. Figuring it out, how to curse a knife in such a way, really must've taken him a while.

She pondered whether if in her time, it had been him who'd taught Bellatrix.

Next, Hermione went on to nose through the top drawers, finding spare quills, parchments, ink pots, envelopes, wax—but no diary. In the lower drawers—oh. Wow.

They were filled with notebooks. She picked one up and sifted through its pages, finding it full of more of his handwritten notes. Jesus. There must've been twenty, thirty? Year's worth of notes.

Now that she'd found them, the temptation to sit down and sort through them all, find out everything he'd been preoccupied by over the years, was strong. Would he have documented the process of making his horcruxes? Trails to Slytherin's chamber, Slytherin's locket? What other precious artefacts and obscure branches of magic that had occupied Tom's youth were waiting for her in these notes? The Voldemort of her time had taught himself to *fly*; had Tom started on that yet?

But—*argh*, no time for that, either.

Grudgingly putting the notebook back with the others, Hermione next went and tried Tom's dresser. His clothes were all folded crisply, organised from top to bottom the way one would wear them—accessories on top, shirts in the middle, trousers on the bottom. There was no diary amongst

them.

Bloody hell, where was it?

She tried his trunk, but it was entirely empty. She ducked down to check under the bed, only to find it spotless. She checked behind the tall boy, behind his bedside tables— nothing.

Where was it, where was it, where the bloody *fuck* was it?!

The diary had to be somewhere. If it wasn't here, then where the hell else would he keep it?!

Hermione squeezed her eyes closed, tried to keep calm, but it was difficult. Like his ring, he might've stashed the diary in the walls, or behind a concealing charm. Unless she ripped up every panel, how would she know? And she couldn't *feel* any lingering magic in the room, nothing that would suggest a concealment charm...

Fuck.

She rubbed her temples. She could hear her heart beating in her ears.

Fuck.

She'd been so sure it would be in his room, so *certain*.

But— Dumbledore had told Harry that once he'd turned the ring into a horcrux, he'd stored it. He hadn't wanted it near him anymore.

Maybe it was the same case for his diary. Of course, she'd never split her soul, never stored a portion of it outside of her body, but... maybe to one who had, being near it would be... uncomfortable. Voldemort hadn't kept close to any of them, after all, aside from Nagini...

Hmm.

Hermione didn't know how long she'd been in his room. It might've been five minutes, might've been twenty. Either way, she was on borrowed time. Damn it. She had to leave before he came back.

She scurried over to the short entrance hall of his room, wincing as she reached out for the portrait handle. But her reservations were for naught; the handle turned easily, and the portrait swung open. Hermione wasn't exactly surprised. Tom would've protected from others *entering* his room, but of course, he didn't have anything in place to stop anyone *leaving*. He never would've expected anyone to make it that far.

Typical, arrogant Tom.

Hermione disillusioned herself and hurried off down the corridor in the opposite direction than the one the portrait opened in. With any luck, she'd be fast enough that the portrait wouldn't notice the sound of her footsteps, and her search would go entirely unnoticed.

She crept back through the castle corridors, choosing to take the dimly lit route back down to her own quarters that avoided the main staircase. Though she couldn't risk bumping into anyone, she couldn't help but drag her feet a little bit. If Tom's diary wasn't in his room... where else would it be? In her own time, Lucius had been entrusted with it... but in this time, he was only a child. In all likelihood, Tom wouldn't have even met the boy yet. Had he even been born? But... maybe Tom had passed it onto his father, and it was destined to be passed down?

Oh, she hoped not. Sneaking around the castle was one thing, but sneaking around after the Malfoys would be an entirely different challenge. Hmm. Maybe she could go back to Tom's rooms another time and copy his notebooks? Surely he'd have *something* in them about his horcruxes? Maybe even something about the diary's hiding place? It was wishful thinking at best, but she couldn't think of anything else.

A sigh slipped past her lips. Well, fuck.

It was *supposed* to have been in his room.

She pulled at her hair as she walked, finding the bizarre sensation of tugging with her numbed hand to be oddly soothing. For once, her brain was running fresh out of ideas. Maybe a sleep would help.

Finally reaching her own quarters, Hermione sighed deeply as she ducked in behind her own portrait, removing her disillusionment charm in the way one would remove their shoes after a long day.

Thank *God*, she thought, closing the portrait behind her. She was exhausted. She never wanted to step a foot out of her room again—

As Hermione reached the end of her hall, she stiffened.

Because Tom was *there*, leaning lazily against her cluttered desk. His eyes were on his wand, watching it as he twisted it between his long fingers.

"A fucking cat, aren't you?" Tom glanced up at her, his cool eyes meeting hers, his body completely still.

Though her blood frosted over, Hermione didn't hesitate. She turned and ran.

She made it to the door, but fumbled at its handle, and although she'd been fast, Tom caught her by her hair before she managed to get the portrait door open, pulling her back by a fistful.

She swung out wildly.

"Ah— get— get *off* me—!"

Despite her efforts, Tom dragged her back into the bedroom by her hair, her scalp burning, and she screeched as he threw her down onto the bed.

She landed backwards, and he came down on top of her, his knees on either side of her waist, pinning her down.

"Begging becomes you." Tom grinned down at her as though he were *enjoying* what he was doing, gripping her wrists, forcing her struggles to a halt.

Hermione shoved at him, lashing out as hard as she could, but his legs made a vice around hers, and he— wait, what was...? Oh *God*, she tasted bile realising what it was that was pressing against her. He was *hard*.

A whole new variety of panic set in, and Hermione thrashed as violently as she could. "You won't — you'll never get away with this!" she screeched.

"Hmm," Tom sounded mockingly, releasing her wrists quickly to wrap his hands around her neck, "actually, I think I'll manage."

She pulled at his arms, trying to pry him off, but it wasn't easy with one good arm, and he started to *squeeze*.

"How many times must we do this before I'm rid of you?" he murmured as he strangled her, and in that moment, with frustration and hunger and want written on his features, he was monstrous.

How had she ever thought him unremarkable? How had she ever not known him for what he was?

Unlike the last time his hands had been wrapped around her neck, this time, he didn't let up. He squeezed hard enough that she saw stars.

Hermione clawed at him, sheer, animalistic desperation. "Only— only once," she wheezed, "if you do it right."

She stopped fighting at his grip and instead placed her hand on his chest, and then, she cast a wandless knock back jinx.

It did the trick, and Tom was thrown off. Hermione gasped for air. Sweet, sweet air.

The spots in her vision didn't immediately fade, and as she got back on her feet, she stumbled a bit. By the time she straightened, Tom was pushing himself up from where he'd been thrown into her bookcase, and Hermione raised her wand at him.

"*Get - out*," she growled.

Tom bared his teeth, eying her wand. "Or what?"

"Take one more step and you'll find out."

Tom scoffed, stalking toward her, and although he was smiling, he was plainly livid, but—oh.

So was she.

"*Crucio*."

Though the red curse left her wand and met her target, there wasn't an immediate change in Tom's demeanour, and so, there was still a split second where she wasn't sure if she cast it right.

But then, Tom's advance slowed, he seemed to stiffen. His muscles seemed to contract, and the tendons in his neck became prominent. He squeezed his eyes closed, tilted his head.

"You have to—" he broke off, a soft, drawn-out groan interrupting his words, "you have to *mean* it, Hermione."

He opened his eyes, and stiffly stepped forward, advancing on her even despite her curse, and Hermione—

She thought on all he'd done, all he would do. The Battle of Hogwarts from her own time, all who would die because of him— Fred, Lavender, Tonks, Remus, *Harry*. He'd murdered Myrtle, murdered his own family. She thought on all he'd done to her now. He'd tried to kill her not once, not even twice, he'd forced himself on her, *touched* her—

Tom had just about reached her when his legs gave out.

He dropped to his knees, buckling forward, and his hands squeezed closed around her rug. The sounds he made were strangled, as though he were trying to hold them in— until they broke, and he

started to yell.

She'd been under the cruciatus curse herself, had witnessed its effects during the battle of Hogwarts, but this—seeing it now from the other side, from the side of the caster—was an entirely different experience.

The muscles in Tom's forearms were tight, his veins prominent, and as the moments passed and his entire body constricted, his yells morphed into bloodcurdling screams.

He deserved it. He had it coming, and in that moment, with the control back in her hands, she wanted nothing more for him to suffer, to pay for what he'd done... but *this*...

Hermione stopped.

At the cessation of her curse, Tom's screams broke off and became ragged groans as his form slumped on her floor. His movements were slow and jittery, and his groans were ragged as he started to push himself up on quivering arms. Halfway up, he was panting to catch his breath and there was the trail of a tear on his cheek.

She almost pitied him. Seeing him there, muscles twitching and struggling to move, she even had the most ridiculous urge to *apologise*. But before she could get a word out, Tom—

Tom *laughed*. It was high, unhinged and wild, spaced between his groans of pain.

"Who—" he paused, bowing his head as he laughed entirely without restraint, "who *are* you?"

He pushed himself forward, reached out for her leg.

"Don't you," Hermione harshly kicked him off, "*dare* touch me!"

"Where did you—" Tom's hands were twitching, and he shifted to put a foot underneath himself, "where did you *come from*?"

Hermione scowled at him. "Maybe you would've found out, had you stayed your hand," she spat. "But instead, you chose this, and now, I'm going to be the one who kills you."

Crouched on his hands and feet, Tom gave a viscous smile. His eyes were alight, and he was stunning. "You—"

But Hermione didn't want to hear it. She was *done* hearing him. Another flash of red left her wand, and her stunning jinx did its job.

Lowering her wand arm, she backed up to lean against her wall and breathed a deep sigh of relief, her heart pounding.

Now, staring down at Tom unconscious on her floor, she was sure—Avery had absolutely been right. Clearly, Tom would stop at nothing, and so, she absolutely couldn't stay in the castle long term, not if he could get into the one place she truly thought she'd be safe.

She stood there for a moment, watching his body slowly moving as he breathed, and bit into her lip, toying with the idea—should she do it now? Kill him? He was unconscious, couldn't fight back. Would she ever get another opportunity like this? She could do it, Mulciber had taught her so.

But—no, she decided. The diary was still out there. A spirited version of him that could come back

at any time would be a patch job, not a practical solution. She needed to end him properly while she could.

So, leaving Tom where he was, Hermione stepped sideways, keeping her eyes trained on him. She glanced away only for long enough for her to scoop up her valuables from her bedside cabinet, dumping them haphazardly into her beaded bag. How long had he been waiting for her? How many of her belongings had he sifted through, the way she'd sifted through his?

But—oh, that didn't matter, as long as he didn't find—

She went over to her bed, fished her hand under her pillow, her fingers closing around the resurrection stone.

She sighed in relief. Thank Merlin Tom hadn't found it.

Satisfied that she would be fine parting from the rest of her belongings, Hermione scrunched her nose and tiptoed past Tom carefully, watching cautiously for even the slightest sign of movement.

She left her room and sealed her portrait closed behind her, sealing him in. It wouldn't hold him up for long, she knew, but that didn't matter. Every minute would count.

Hermione's muscles protested as she started back down the castle corridor, one thought in mind. What she needed now, was somewhere she'd absolutely be safe, somewhere she *knew* he couldn't get to her, somewhere she could sleep and tend to her arm, to the bruises that would surely be forming around her neck.

There was only one place left that fit the description.

The Room of Requirement greeted her like an old friend, welcoming her into the perfect room for her situation.

The room it presented was small and cosy, and by the wide bed in the corner, there was another door, presumably leading to a bathroom. The bed was neatly made with an extraordinary number of pillows and fleece blankets, providing a perfect spot to cocoon herself safely away.

The far wall was lined with glass cabinets, stocked full of medical supplies. It looked like it might've been stocked just as well as the infirmary was, and Hermione easily spied the numbing balm she would be needing to reapply in a few hours. She silently thanked the Hogwarts founders for installing such a room.

Sighing with exhaustion, Hermione flopped herself down onto the bed.

"Ahh," she moaned as she relaxed into it, its softness greeting her like an old friend. She shimmied herself up and along the mattress, and tucked herself away beneath the blankets, curling herself up into the foetal position.

Tom would, with any luck, be unconscious for hours. He'd be irate when he woke—she'd escaped him yet *again*—but she decided that it didn't matter. She'd leave the castle in the morning when she was rested and could panic about the diary once she was safe.

I thought I'd just slit his throat—an eye for an eye, and all of that, Tom had said. Which meant, that once she was safely off the grounds, her first priority would be getting to Avery.

Hermione sighed into her pillow.

She just hoped Tom didn't get to him first.

Chapter 22

The space around Hermione was dark, dark enough that she was entirely enveloped, swallowed whole.

There was a dull, repetitive thudding sound. It was oddly peaceful. She thought she might be able to drift off with it.

Thud.

Thud.

Thud.

What do you think happens?

Hermione felt a surge of irritation at the interruption of her peace.

"What do I think happens *when*?" she snapped at the voice, trying to listen again for the thudding. Hmm. On second thought, it sounded more like rumbling, and it almost seemed to pulse. Like a heartbeat.

When you die? clarified the voice.

"...I don't know," Hermione mumbled to the voice. She wished it would be quiet. "Nothing."

Nothing?

"Nothing."

The more she listened to it, the more convinced she became that it *was* a heartbeat. *Thud thud, thud thud, thud thud.*

How sad, said the voice.

"Well, that's life for you."

The thudding went on and though she couldn't see her body, couldn't feel it or move it, or even be sure that she had one, she somehow felt as though she were swaying to the sound.

How did you find this place?

Hermione didn't know why she felt so impatient, so bothered by the voice, but she did. "What place?" she snapped.

The room of hidden things?

Oh. "Is *that* where we are?" Hermione tried to scan her surroundings again, but still, she perceived nothing but blackness and the sound of thudding.

How did you find it? the voice urged.

"Word of mouth," Hermione said, remembering Harry's excitement when he'd told her and Ron of Dobby's suggestion for their D.A. meetings, like it was only yesterday.

There was a pause, filled by the peaceful thudding.

Others know of the room? asked the voice.

Although Hermione's own form wasn't solid, she tried her best to scowl. What a silly question. "It's a *communal* room," Hermione stated. "Of course others would've found it over the years. Where do you think all of the clutter came from?"

There was another long pause.

Thud thud, thud thud, thud thud.

The voice didn't speak again.

When Hermione woke, it was slowly, naturally, and she stretched out her sore, rested muscles, sighing contentedly into her warm pillow. She lay there, beginning to bask in her comfort, but then the memory of where she was seeped back in, and she abruptly sat herself up.

Searching around her, the room was quiet. She was alone. The room of requirement was in the same form it had been in when she'd gone to sleep, not a thing was amiss.

Hermione relaxed a little bit, but then—

Oh, she'd had the *strangest* dream. It was vaguely familiar, too, like she'd had that very same dream before.

She remembered darkness... and... a sound? What was it, what was— oh. It had been a voice. A male voice, one that had sounded almost just like...

Frowning, Hermione pulled her blankets back and dipped her hand into her pocket, pulling out the resurrection stone. She held it in her palm, examining it, rubbing a finger gently over its markings.

She *had* had a similar dream, she realised, one the same day that the stone had been released from Tom's ring when she'd destroyed it. The voice—the one that had sounded like Tom's—had been in that dream, too.

She narrowed her eyes at the stone, turning it over in her hand...

What if... her dream—or dreams, rather—hadn't entirely been dreams? What if the voice she'd been speaking with truly had been Tom? Just... just not *all* of him?

She bit into her lip.

Oh well, she supposed. What did it matter? The stone's magic wasn't *real*, it didn't truly bring the dead back. It simply allowed one to speak with their memory of the dead.

But... despite that, Hermione found herself considering her dream again, thinking back over what dream-horcrux-Tom had said to her.

Others know of the room?

His voice had been quiet, meek, as if he hadn't considered the possibility that anyone other than himself might've stumbled across the room...

Others know of the room?

...

All at once, Hermione just about threw herself up and out of bed.

Oh!

Her dream might've just been an illusion fuelled by the resurrection stone but— *oh, oh oh!*

Voldemort from her time has trusted the room of requirement enough to keep his diadem there! True, he'd stashed it more than a decade ahead of the time she was currently in, but maybe now that she'd changed history and he was back at Hogwarts far, far sooner than he'd been in her own time... could he have decided to keep his diary there instead?!

Hermione snatched up her beaded bag in a hurry and dashed to the room's conjured medicine cabinet. She grabbed a few pots of numbing balm for her arm and shoved them into her bag, and hurriedly opened one and lathered it into her skin. Like the last time, the burn was intense, but Hermione was *invigorated*.

Because God, it was *obvious!* How hadn't she thought of it *before?! How could she be so thick?!*

Hermione was just about buzzing when she crept out of the room and crossed the quiet seventh-floor corridor, waiting for the room of requirement's door to disappear. When it did, she immediately started to pace again, willing it to show her the room of hidden things.

The door reappeared, and in she went.

Hermione wasted no time in getting started. With an energy she hadn't had in days, she started searching through every cabinet, high and low. She sifted through countless notebooks, aged photos of couples, newspaper clippings, muggle items, jewellery, accessories— all things that had once been valuable to other inhabitants of the castle. From the cabinets, she moved onto the desks, drawers, and shelves, like a woman possessed. Many of the old books piqued her interest, tempted her to sit and read, but none were the one she was after.

Hmm. If she were Tom, where would she put it, where would she put it? Somewhere that it wouldn't catch attention, she decided. Somewhere one wouldn't think to look twice.

Hermione circled on the spot. Why did the room have to be so *big?* She could be there for days! There were piles of books in every direction!

She supposed that at least she'd be safe in there, so she decided to start on the main bookcase, start at the books in a methodical manner. It was by the end of the room, and it was a grand one that spanned the entire length of the wall and ran all the way to the ceiling. Goodness. There must've been thousands of books.

But, alas, Hermione was not a quitter, especially when it came to books, so, she got to work.

She started off on the shelves she could reach, and when she found no diary, she transfigured a chair into a ladder to get started on the higher ones.

She searched until she lost track of time, until her toes ached from stretching so much, until all the

books started to look the same. The longer she went on, the more boring it became, the ancient dates no longer exciting her the way they had when she first started. But she had to keep going. She had to be sure. If Tom hadn't kept it in his room, then this was the next best place.

It was then, as her grip slipped from the shelf she was up to and she almost toppled from her ladder, that she decided she needed a break.

Just five minutes.

Back on the ground, she summoned over a dusty goblet from one of the cabinets and spelled it clean. She filled it with water and downed it in three large gulps. After it, her throat still felt dry, so she filled it again, leaning against a large wooden cupboard as she sipped at it.

There was a pile of books in front of her. It was precariously balanced on an old desk.

Jesus, she thought to herself. The room was absolutely *filled to the brim* with books. How on earth was she supposed to check each one? Maybe she could summon Nispy, and a few of her friends? Multiple hands would make the job a great deal easier, but then—

Slowly, Hermione lowered her goblet. Her attention caught on the book at the top of the pile before her, her eyes narrowing. It was black, unremarkable. But unlike the majority of the other books in the room... it was suspiciously dust-free.

Hermione put her goblet down and stretched up on her toes to pull the black book down.

Goosebumps rose on her skin. Because the black leather cover was blank. Flicking its pages, they were empty. Her heart rate picked up. Inside of the cover, there on the first page, written in faded ink—

T.M. Riddle

Hermione just about screeched with joy.

"Yes!" she cheered to the empty room, jumping on the spot. "Yes, yes, yes!"

She clutched it tightly, just about hugging it. She jumped some more, struggling to think straight now she was bursting with adrenaline—*she'd found it, she'd really found it!*

But after jumping until she needed to catch her breath, as she looked down at it and she was reminded of what it was and what it meant, she quickly started to sombre.

Now that she had it, she needed to destroy it, and once she did... she would have to have a go at Tom himself.

A lump formed in her throat.

But— oh, she couldn't get ahead of herself. She still needed to get out of the castle, that much was clear. She needed time. Time to think, time to plan, time to prepare herself for killing someone *intentionally*, time she wouldn't have if she stayed here where the threat from Tom was constant. Besides, she couldn't very well just have a go at murdering Tom in the middle of Hogwarts. She needed to be sure she wouldn't miss, and then, even if she succeeded, there would be a body to deal with, potential witnesses to silence. If she wasn't careful, she could be caught, and would have to spend the rest of her life on the run, or worse, in Azkaban.

While that was a price she was willing to pay if it meant the world would never see Voldemort, it

wasn't her first choice.

And— Tom certainly wouldn't be easy. She wasn't sure how she would try to kill him, but regardless, he wouldn't go without a fight. Which all meant, she needed time to *think*.

Hermione opened her bag and tucked the diary inside before she started to pace thoughtfully.

Of course, the safest option of getting out of the castle was to use the room of requirement, take the hidden passage to the Hog's Head. She wouldn't need to go anywhere, wouldn't run the risk of running into Tom again. It was a perfect solution.

But—oh, it was selfish of her, and she knew it—she still wanted a life to come back to. If she survived Tom, managed to succeed in killing him, then she would still be stuck in this time for the rest of her life. She was comfortable in her job at Hogwarts, there she would eventually meet Harry, and Ron, and Ginny, and Luna, and Neville, and everyone else once they were old enough. If she just upped and left without a word, then she mightn't have a job to come back to.

Bloody hell.

So, Hermione grudgingly decided that she would go to Dippet's office. There, she would speak with Dippet, and with any luck, arrange for a leave from her position. After which, he would surely be kind enough to allow her to take his Floo out of the castle. She didn't have anywhere set in mind to go after that, but that didn't matter. She'd find Avery, make sure he was safe, and figure it out from there.

It would all work out. It would.

The headmaster's office was a far cry from how it'd been when Dumbledore was its occupant. With Dippet at the reigns, it was... well. Empty. *Boring*.

The trinkets Dumbledore had kept were missing, the colour was lacking, and even the portraits behind the desk were mostly empty. It was dull.

"Erm, excuse me, Professor?" Hermione said, approaching his desk after having been let in by the gargoyle.

"How might I... " Dippet's nose was low over his newspaper. "...help you, Miss Granger?"

Hermione shifted, a little bit uncomfortable about speaking to him while he was clearly engrossed in something else, and sat down opposite him. "I'm very sorry to barge in on you like this, but I was hoping for a word with you about my position."

At that, Dippet glanced up. He finally gave her his full attention, and Hermione wasn't surprised. It was only typical that it would take the prospect of another staff member resigning for him to listen. "Oh?"

"Um." Hmm, how to put it? "You see, it's— an emergency has come up with a close family friend of mine, and I really must go and visit to make sure all is well. I don't know how long it will take me, but in all likelihood, it will take longer than the rest of the break..."

Dippet blinked. "But you are... intending to return?" he asked slowly.

"Yes. Which is what I wanted to speak to you about. I would like nothing more to keep my position, but it really is an urgent matter, and I can't promise you my return will be quick..."

"Ah, never mind that, never mind that," Dippet said, tone picking up. "Worry not. Marigold mightn't be pleased, but you've been an excellent help around the castle, many of the professors can attest to that. As long as you are eager to return, then you can be sure that Hogwarts will have a place for you."

Hermione could've cried. "Thank you. *Thank you*, sir."

Dippet smiled warmly. "Of course, my dear. Now, would you care for a spot of lunch? I was just about to head down, and some company would be—"

"Oh, actually, sir—I was also hoping to ask if I might be able to head out straight away, and use your Floo?"

Instead of the immediate 'yes' she'd been expecting, Dippet winced. "Ah," he said. "About that. I'm afraid that's not actually possible at the present moment..."

"Sir...?"

"The, ah, Ministry has, how should I put it, seen fit to block the Floo connections to the castle, at present..."

Hermione gaped. "...Excuse me?"

"There's been... a bit of a misunderstanding, you see. The Ministry is of the opinion that in the interest of security, the school's Floo connections shouldn't be used for anything that is not strictly business, and fair enough, fair enough," he said. "That is, of course, how it should be. But—and I spoke with Colin about this personally, and he agrees with me—this should logically therefore extend to allow those who reside in the castle on a permanent basis to see their families."

"Are... are you trying to tell me..." Hermione said slowly, "that the castle's Floo connections have been blocked because you've been misusing them to visit your family?"

Dippet looked offended. "No, my dear, of course not! Juniper—my wife—has, *on occasion*, visited me here in my office, but you can be sure that I have never once left the castle, I have never once neglected my position."

Hermione couldn't quite believe what she was hearing.

"Now, unfortunately, the rest of the Wizengamot didn't quite agree with Colin and I, and there remains the better half of a month left under the restrictions. However, after this time, you can be sure our connections will be fully reinstated. Until then, Silvanus has been kind enough to sort out some carriages, so if you're intending to head off today, he can arrange for you to be transported to gates, from where you can easily apparate to your destination," Dippet explained happily, as though it were only a slight inconvenience.

Hermione breathed through her nose. Useless, foolish, *incompetent* Dippet.

"All right," she said slowly, rising to her feet. "Well. Thank you, sir. I might, um, head off now to find Silvanus."

"Good, good!" Dippet said, standing as well. "I'll walk you down."

"That's quite all right, sir—"

"Nonsense, we're heading the same way," he insisted.

Hermione momentarily panicked. With the option of the Floo out of the window, she needed to get back to the room of requirement, not leisurely wander down to the Great Hall with one of the loudest people in the castle. But Dippet seemed determined, happily shrugging on his outer robe.

It seemed... she was stuck.

But—he was still the headmaster. Dippet might've been a bit of a goose, but he was still a proficient wizard who was in control of who stayed at Hogwarts. If her luck had run dry and they did run into Tom on their way, he wouldn't take the risk of harming her in front of Dippet, she told herself. Surely not.

And so, even though it made her stomach turn, Hermione followed out after Dippet as he led the way out of the office and joined him en route to the Great Hall.

Her worries might be for nothing, anyway, she told herself. They mightn't even run into Tom. It was still relatively early in the day. He might be recovering from his experience with her cruciatus curse, might still be in his rooms.

It would be fine.

Hermione jumped as they entered the Grand Staircase and ran into a tall figure, but it was just a sixth year Hufflepuff passing by. She tensed up again as yelling echoed down the second-floor corridor, but it was another false alarm. Just a couple of first years squabbling over a book.

Then, Dippet halted at the first-floor corridor, and Hermione was so distracted from keeping an eye out for Tom, that she nearly ran into his back.

"Horace!" Dippet called down the hall. Hermione winced. His voice must've carried all the way down the stairs. "Come to join us for lunch?"

Slughorn, who had been heading down the corridor in their direction, beamed at them and sped up. "Yes, yes," he said, shuffling over to them. "Wonderful timing, Armando, Hermione."

"The more the merrier," Dippet said as they started down the stairs and Slughorn fell into step with them. "How are the preparations coming along for next week?"

"Wonderfully," Slughorn declared. "I've just heard back from Primrose Hawkins—"

Dippet gasped.

"Who has *graciously* agreed to sing for us."

"You must tell me your ways, Horace," implored Dippet.

"Now, now," said Slughorn, "one never forgets their favourite Professor."

Dippet tipped his head to that, and Hermione pressed her lips together. They were just about at the bottom of the stairs now. Maybe she *would* make it out of the castle unscathed after all...

"Speaking of favourite Professors, I've heard you're getting along rather well with Mr. Riddle,

yes?" Slughorn went on to say.

Hermione glanced up. Slughorn's nosy eyes were entirely on her.

"Um. I suppose. Yes," she squeaked. "We're getting along fine."

"Fine!" Slughorn repeated, chortling as if he were in on something she wasn't. "Well, when the wedding bells ring, you must keep in mind that I was once his favourite Professor, too."

Both of the Professors beamed at her. She cleared her throat. "I... wouldn't hold my breath on that, Professor," she said tightly.

"Oh nonsense, I've the impression that he's most taken with you," Slughorn said. "And while I don't wish to meddle in personal affairs, while I have you here, I am obligated to put a good word in. Tom is a fine man, I've heard only good things from my own house, and the scores of the history students are trending upward astronomically! Isn't that right, Armando?"

"Oh yes," Dippet agreed. "I haven't had to step a foot in that classroom a single time since Tom started. Cuthbert had me racing up to the fourth floor at least three times a day, what a blessing it's been," he said, before coughing and adding under his breath, "may he rest in peace, of course."

Hermione nodded as though she were taking what they were saying on board, but was more focused on the fact that they'd *finally* reached the Great Hall.

Thank Merlin. Now she just needed to ditch the Professors, and she'd be out of there.

Hermione tried to fall behind as they turned into the doorway, heading in toward the smell of food, but it was right at the same time someone was heading out—

"Ah, good morning, Tom!" Dippet chimed brightly. "Horace and I were just telling Miss Granger here about what a difference you've made to the History of Magic program already."

Fucking, fucking, *fuck*. Of course.

Tom glanced between them, and she felt the weight of him looking in her direction. Her bag suddenly felt rather heavy, and she didn't dare meet his eyes.

Hermione grit her teeth, tried to stop the slight tremor of her hands by wringing them together. She thought about running. It would be rude, especially since Dippet had just granted her a leave of absence, but rude was better than dead.

"You're far too kind, Armando, Horace," Tom said. His voice was coarser than it usually was.

Must've been from his screams the night before. Good.

She dared a glance at him then, and it was hard not to notice that his hair was uncharacteristically out of place, and had dark rings under his eyes. He looked... incredibly tired. Like he'd been up all night.

He must've combed the castle for her.

Her stomach turned.

"Credit where credit's due, my boy!" Dippet said, clapping a hand on Tom's shoulder. "Now, would you—"

"Ah, Armando, are those croissants I spy up on the staff table?" Slughorn interjected. "And, possibly some roast lamb?" As Dippet was distracted by the sight of the food, Hermione saw Slughorn shoot Tom a quick wink.

Oh, *fuck* no.

Sensing that she was about to be thrown into the deep end, Hermione stepped back to leave—

Tom's hand shot out with reflexes he looked too tired to have, grabbing hold of her wrist before she could get further than a step away. His grip was painfully tight.

"Oh, yes, I do believe so!" Dippet said, eyes locked on the food. "Shall we?"

"I think we shall," Slughorn agreed, leading the way in.

"We'll be in in just a moment, professors," Tom said, holding Hermione back.

Dippet and Slughorn waved them off, and seemingly not noticing either Hermione's desperate glances or the way Tom was holding her back, they went on their way.

Hermione's heart fought to escape her chest. "Let *go* of me," she hissed.

Tom intruded into her space, stepping close enough that she could see his eyes were bloodshot, mouth twisting upward. "We're not done."

"Yes, we are, unless you *want* a repeat of yesterday." Hermione pulled her arm back, hard enough that to an onlooker, there wouldn't have been any doubt they were fighting. "Let *go*, everyone can see—"

Tom glanced back toward the Great Hall. Sure enough, their altercation had already caught the attention of several of the students, several of the professors, too.

Tom let her go.

Hermione stepped back, reinstating some distance between them.

But despite that he'd let her go, despite the eyes on them, despite the diary burning a hole in her bag, Hermione's hands trembled, nonetheless. Because everyone watching from the hall would all assume it was a lovers spat, a mild disagreement; no one would consider it could be anything more serious. No one would suspect her life was at stake.

And— now he'd found her, what would it be this time? What would he throw at her? Would he imperio her in front of all those witnesses? It hadn't stopped him before, and she mightn't snap out of it another time.

Instinct took a hold of her. She couldn't go through that again. *Wouldn't*. Now that she finally had his diary, she couldn't let him win. She had to *finish* it.

And so, Hermione bolted.

Breaking out onto the grounds, Hermione pulled her wand from her pocket and disillusioned herself, running like her life depended on it. The main path of the castle was snowed over, and as it started to veer down into the steep slope, it became difficult to be swift. Her thighs quickly started to burn with the effort and with each step, sharp pain stabbed into her knees, but she pushed through it.

Her lungs finally got the better of her when she made it down to the forest path, and she slowed down as she hit the main carriage way, still not daring to look back. She couldn't waste any time; Tom's legs were long, and though she'd disillusioned herself, she'd left tracks in the snow. If he'd followed her out of the castle, then she was sure he'd catch up with her.

It felt safer in the forest though, with the cover of trees on either side. If he *had* followed her, then he would have a much harder time of aiming through the branches, a harder time seeing her footprints in the thinner snow—

"Ah!"

Hermione was thrown off her feet as a stray branch caught her ankle, grazing her hands as she landed face down in the frozen forest dirt.

She pushed herself up, but as she did, she saw her arms. They'd become visible again.

Fuck, fuck, fuck—

Hermione turned back just in time to see a curse coming at her. She swore, aloud this time, only just managing to conjure a shield in time.

From where the curse had come from, Tom was stalking down the hill toward her, and when she tried again to push herself up, the branch that'd tripped her stretched itself out to wind around her ankle.

Hermione kicked at it, striking it with her free foot, and when it didn't let up, she cast, "*incendio*."

Though her charm burned her own leg, it did the trick. But though she was free, she'd wasted valuable time in the process, and when she reached her feet, Tom had just about caught up with her.

And he looked exhausted. He looked entirely *done*, and when he cast at her, his spell ricocheted off her shield with enough force that the ground by her feet cracked.

He threw another, and another, and another. His spells were slowly paced, and from the looks of them, he was casting to restrain her, but—fuck—he might as well have been casting to kill. The force behind his curses were enough that they broke all of her shields, driving her back toward the tree line and she had to cast a new one each time.

Hermione had been on the receiving end of many wands throughout her years, but it had never been anything like this. Her shields were just about useless. His curses blew right through them with a force that she felt through her wand, and she had to use the cover of the trees to avoid them.

How did he *do* that?

And how in hell had Harry survived all of those times, facing Voldemort head on?

It became obvious quickly; she wouldn't be able to fight him off—not fairly, anyway.

"I'm not—I'm not with Dumbledore!" she yelled out desperately between his spells, but Tom sent a strong slicing hex right at her that she only narrowly avoided. It splintered the tree she'd ducked behind, and she had to jump out of the way as a large branch fell to the ground.

Her cover gone, Hermione raised her wand to shield herself, but then Tom—

He vanished.

Hermione eyes scanned her surroundings, shuffling backwards as she searched for any sign of movement, any sign of him at all.

"Homenum revelio."

All was quiet. Her charm didn't reveal him, and she didn't see any sign of movement. Aside from the gentle hooting of the owls of the forest—nothing. He was gone.

There was only one thing for it.

Hermione turned and continued to run, continuing on down toward the edge of the grounds.

She didn't have far to go now, she was sure. She bolted past a stack of rocks she knew that marked a point near the gates. Just a little further—

The wind was knocked out of her as she collided into Tom's unseen form, and while she struggled for air, he wrenched her wand out from her fingers. He wrestled her back until she was shoved against a thick tree trunk.

Tom became visible before her, and though he was panting, he was grinning. "You thought you could outrun me?"

Hermione kicked and scratched at him. "Let me *go*— everyone saw you leave with me, you'll never—"

Tom brought her hands together, holding them down between them while his other hand gripped her jaw and forced her head up. "Look at me."

She kicked out some more, screeching at him wildly, desperately. "You don't need to— I'm not working with Dumbledore!" she spat. "I swear—*ah!*"

Hermione's muscles all contracted at once, and her neck craned back, the back of her skull colliding against the tree. Unrelenting agony set in, and she'd never felt anything like it. Her bones were breaking, skin ripping, nerves burning, and she screamed. She screamed and screamed, completely losing sense of self, losing everything except for the pain—

It went on and on, and when it finally let up, she cracked her eyes open to find herself, once again, face-down in the dirt. She didn't remember falling, had no recollection of Tom letting her go.

Tremors coursed through her body, and she tried to move, to push herself up, but her limbs refused to do her bidding. She gasped for air and by the time she caught her breath, she was dragged over onto her back. Tom crouched over her.

"You see?" She heard him say, slightly out of breath, brushing back his hair. "When you use the cruciatus, to reach the full capacity of the spell, you need to keep the end of your wand here, at the base of your palm, at the end of the metacarpals." He held his wand out demonstratively. "The movement isn't as important, but it needs to be straight, a true extension of the forearm."

He pointed his wand at her once more. "Like this."

"N-no—" Hermione fumbled her words. "*Stop it, ple—*"

"Look at me," he repeated, and though his words were gentle, soothing, he didn't lower his wand.

She didn't want to, but she wanted to avoid being tortured again even more so, and so, she did as he said. But she kept her occlumency up as best she could, and as her eyes met his, an entirely different type of pain struck, like knives piercing into her temples. It wasn't as awful as the torture had been, but it was still intense, and combined with the lingering pain in her muscles, it became too much to bear.

She squeezed her eyes closed.

Tom growled as the stabbing suddenly let up. He moved over her, swatting her hands away and roughly gripping at her jaw again.

"*Let me in*," he hissed.

She shoved at him, tried to buck him off. "They'll know," she whined. "They all saw you follow me, if you kill me, you'll be caught—"

"*Crucio*."

Somehow, it was even worse the second time, like heat on an existing burn. It was white and unrelenting, like being burned from the inside out, and all Hermione wanted was to die.

When the curse let up the second time, Tom was still over her, and his hand was over her mouth. Her throat was raw and dry, ears ringing, and she could feel her tears streaming into her hair.

As her whimpering quietened, Tom's hand left her mouth, and he wiped her tears from her cheek. "Let me in, Hermione," he repeated, jarringly gently, "and I'll stop."

She squeezed her eyes closed. She'd thought of revealing her time travel to him before. Maybe it was for the best— it might even save her.

But if he found out about his ring, his diary in her bag...?

She couldn't risk it. She could hold out. She could.

"It's a simple choice. Aren't you tired of this? This game we're playing?" Tom murmured. He sounded pained. "I know I am."

She could last longer. She had it in her, she knew she did, but— oh, *fuck*, what was the point? He would keep torturing her until he got what he wanted. They were alone in the forest. No one was coming for her.

At least if she let him into her head on her own terms while she still had some energy left, she might have a chance to control it, to show him only what she wanted him to see.

Her occlumency was good. If she could *just* keep him away from the horcruxes...

Stiffly, she nodded. "Just, n-not again. Please."

Tom's smile didn't meet his eyes. "*Look at me*." His hand was wrapped around her head, into her hair, holding her still.

Hermione opened her eyes, and she grudgingly met his.

Then, this time, she finally relaxed, bringing down her walls, welcoming him in.

Tom's presence in her head was immediate and harsh, and he didn't waste any time in ripping from

memory to memory. But while she tried to steer him, to show him only what she wanted to see, she found him far more difficult to control than she'd expected now that he was in.

She tried to throw them at him, memories that might catch his interest—

She was in a quiet, icy street of Hogsmeade. Avery was before her, and he'd only just ceased his pacing. "He wants you dead," he whispered.

The scene changed, and then, Hermione ducked out from behind a tree to cast a slicing hex. Felix was knocked back by a spell from Avery, and her hex struck him squarely in the neck.

Then, Hermione and Avery were at the lake, standing close to the waters. "You might not put it together, but he might. I can't risk that." Hermione aimed her wand right at Avery's face. "Thank you for helping me. It means more than you know."

"N—"

"*Obliviate.*"

Her memories flashed by, too fast to see, and then they wove back together, forming an entirely new scene.

She was only a child, seated cross-legged in the middle of her living room in a pair of overalls, her favourite book perched open on her lap. Her mother came in, interrupting her reading to chime, "Hermione, sweetie, a letter's arrived for you!"

Then, she was at Hogwarts, seated along a full table adorned with red and gold. Red banners were hanging from the Great Hall ceiling; Gryffindor had won the house cup.

She was on the train, walking its corridor with Ron, doing their prefect rounds. "Bloody Neville," he whined, rubbing at a blob of stinksap on his trousers. "What's he bringing that *thing* on the train for?"

She was seated in a grandstand. The music that had been playing abruptly broke off as Harry had materialised in the centre of the stage before a giant, hedge maze. He was crouched protectively over a body.

There were screams and gasps, and an elderly, bearded Dumbledore surged forward.

"He's back, he's back!" Harry yelled. "Voldemort's back!"

The scene changed drastically once more, and she was sprinting through a ruined Great Hall. The space was filled with duellers, stray curses of red and green flying overhead. The entire castle was in *ruins*—

She was in the headmaster's office. Dumbledore's portrait was before her, and Dumbledore's image was aged and solemn. "I'm afraid... I must now ask the unthinkable of you, Miss Granger."

Tom's presence abruptly tore out of her head as he got up, releasing her.

And—Hermione had never seen him like that. Tom was breathing heavily, and his eyes were wide, lips parted. He was plainly... shocked.

Hermione's head was pounding, her muscles stiff and raw, but despite her body's protests, he was off of her, so she forced herself to move, forced herself to her feet. Her limbs quivered, and she

gripped the nearest tree to hold herself up.

"When... when was that?" Tom slowly murmured, almost too quiet to hear, staring at her. His wand was down by his side. "When are you from?"

"I..." Hermione sniffed. "I left on the third of May, nineteen ninety-eight."

"Ninety..." Tom's breath was sharp and he glanced away. He moved abruptly, starting to pace, before he halted just as quickly. Then, he dragged his hands over his face and laughed. It was loud, unrestrained, reminiscent of the previous night. "Fifty years," he said between laughs, "Dumbledore managed to send you back *fifty* fucking years?!"

As he'd spoken, his voice had risen to a yell. Hermione gave him a slight shrug. *Fuck*. She hadn't wanted him to see anything of Dumbledore's involvement. And now, he— Tom had resumed his pacing. He was quickly becoming furious. On the brink. She didn't know what to say.

"How old was he then?!" Tom snapped. "In your head, in the memory I saw? In the portrait?"

She shook her head. "I... I couldn't t-tell you. One-hundred and ten, or thereabouts, maybe?"

His mouth twitched. "That long?" His pacing was getting faster, angrier. His hands were just about shaking. "I let him live for *that* long?"

"Well, I— I wouldn't say you *let* him."

Tom groaned, squeezed his eyes closed. "But he was dead? Yes? That's why you were speaking with a portrait?"

"...Yes."

"How did he die?" he pressed.

Hermione swallowed. She hadn't anticipated him being this focused on *Dumbledore* of all things. "Y-you killed him. Well—one of your followers, rather."

Tom continued to pace, deep frown firmly in place.

Hermione leaned her weight onto the tree. Her body was screaming at her, even her bones. She wanted to try to run again. Surely she wasn't far from the border of the grounds now? She didn't know if she had it in her to apparate far without being splinched, but—oh, he had her wand...

"You... that's how you knew. *That's* how you knew." Tom was murmuring quietly, as if speaking to himself. He laughed again shortly, incredulously. "And it—" he paused to groan. "*Dumbledore* did this?"

She gave him a shaky nod.

"*Fucking*... that's..." Tom spoke under his breath, tapping his wand against his leg in agitation. He abruptly stopped, eyes boring into hers. "Why?"

Hermione's stomach twisted.

"We—where I'm from, the wizarding world was at war. One you started. Almost e-everything was lost. Dumbledore wanted to end it before it began."

Tom's eyes were unwavering. "And he sent *you*?"

She gave an uncertain laugh. "I was one of the last ones left. He led a... resistance, I suppose you could c-call it. I don't think I was his first choice, but all others... well. They were either too struck by grief, or they didn't make it."

Tom slowly looked her down and up. "Did you know me?"

"N-no. We'd never met, actually," she said, licking her lips. They tasted like dirt.

"But you knew of me?"

"...Everyone knew of you."

Tom's lip pricked up. "So... what? Dumbledore thought you'd... *what*? Kill me?" He smiled at that, as though the thought of it was laughable.

He wouldn't be laughing soon enough.

"He sent me back to stop the war from happening," Hermione said. "You are central to that, yes, but... there are multiple ways to skin a cat."

Tom paused, the curve of his brow becoming sharp.

"Well, believe it or not, but Dumbledore and I weren't *close*," she said when it became clear he was waiting for her to go on. "He ruined my life. He conspired for *children* to fight his war, my b-best friend died because of him! He sent me *here*, and I'll never see my family again, never see my friends!" Hermione folded her arms to stop their shaking. "I... I thought... maybe I could sway you. Help you make better decisions, nudge you in a way that would get you what you want without it taking half a century, without it costing so many lives. But then you started trying to kill me, and here we are!"

Tom watched her for a long moment. Her heart was beating in her neck. It was terrifying, standing there, wandless while he scrutinised her.

"You're an awful liar," he eventually stated when he looked away, resuming his pacing.

"It's—it's the truth," she insisted, but Tom only scowled at her.

He paced quietly for a while after that, and Hermione wrapped her arms tightly around herself to stop her tremors. He seemed deep in thought, and she could see his mouth moving subtly as he seemed to speak quietly to himself.

She didn't know how long he did that for, but eventually, he stopped turning back to her.

"If he sent you back..." he murmured, "and he believed you could change it, the future... then, have you?" he asked, stepping closer to her. "Is anything... different?"

She gave him a small nod. "Some things have already changed. You never taught at Hogwarts, where I'm from."

Tom took another step closer. He was only an arm's reach away. "We've diverged?" he asked.

Hermione nodded again, and Tom glanced off into the forest. He stayed like that for a while, eyes unfocused and thoughtful, until he eventually nodded. "Well. Then you're useless to me," he said, and just like that, his wand was back on her, pressing into the hollow of her neck.

Hermione raised her hands, heart just about stopping. "No, no, no— wait! Wait, I can help you!"

Tom's lip picked up into a slight sneer. "If this time is not the one you know, then you are no more useful than tea leaves."

"No, I— let me prove it!" she pleaded, pressing herself as far back into the tree as she could. She just needed time, just a *little* bit of time. "There has to be something you want, I— what about the locket?" she blurted.

Tom's features remained in place. He didn't seem impressed. "The locket," he stated. It wasn't spoken as a question.

"I-I can get it for you."

Tom was still. "...Can you?"

He didn't sound like he believed her.

She nodded stiffly.

His mouth twitched. "Clutching at straws now, aren't you?" he said, a slight laugh. "Your will to live is nothing if not inspiring, but the locket is long gone."

"It's not! Where I'm from— it was found. I swear it, and I-I know who has it," she said, desperately clinging to his arm, trying to make him lower his wand. "I know you're descended from Slytherin. It's rightfully yours, and I can get it for you. I promise."

Tom slowly grinned. With his wand pressed into her neck, burning her skin, it was menacing. "If that's the truth, then I can take that memory from you as well."

"Please," she pleaded from between her teeth. "I-I can be of use to you. Surely you can see that, just let me prove it! Besides, you're... a man down now, aren't you? Doesn't that mean you have an opening?"

She gave him a feeble, desperate smile, and his eyes roamed down to her lips. He looked incredibly amused.

"Oh. Just when I think I've got you all figured out..." Tom closed in to reach up and ran his thumb over her lip. His eyes focused on her mouth.

Hermione could barely breathe.

"A week," he eventually said, eyes snapping back to hers. "Get me the locket, and then we'll see if you can be of use."

Her heart skipped a beat. She nodded. "C-consider it yours."

Finally, *finally*, he lowered his wand, the burn at her neck finally letting up.

She breathed a deep breath of relief, but Tom didn't step away.

"Could— could you give me my wand back," she dared to say, outstretching her hand expectantly.

He was looking at her strangely. Differently. She didn't want to stay and figure out why, she just wanted to leave.

He didn't say anything, and then slowly, Tom reached back into his pocket and pulled it out. He offered her the handle.

She grabbed it at once, but Tom didn't immediately release it. He raised his eyebrows, as if daring her to try something, before he finally let her have it.

Hermione squeezed herself out from between him and the tree at once, and with one last look, she turned and started back down the path toward the boundary of the Hogwarts grounds.

"Remember what I told you, Hermione," he called after her, his smooth voice carrying through the trees.

Hermione paused, glancing back.

He was on higher ground than her now, and he was smiling warmly, pleasantly, as if he hadn't just been torturing her, hadn't been a breath away from killing her.

Her hairs stood on end.

"I'll find you."

Hermione swallowed, gave him the smallest, most subtle of nods.

Oh. She was counting on it.

And then she left without another look back.

Chapter 23

The gate before her was imposing, almost twice her height. It was wrought iron, flanked by high stone walls with thick vines growing over the bricks. Atop of the stone pillar that connected with the gate, was a dark, weathered gargoyle. Through the gate, she had view of a three-storied manor, Victorian style, just like the gate. It was dark, but she could still make out a beautiful garden, overgrown and lush.

It was intimidating, and despite her sense of urgency, Hermione wasn't immediately sure what to do. Should she knock on the gate? Send a patronus up to the manor? Maybe she could—

"State your business."

Her eyes snapped to the gargoyle.

Creepy.

She cleared her throat, "I'm here to see Av— sorry, Marvin," she corrected, and when the gargoyle didn't immediately speak again, she added, "My name's Hermione. He... he'll know who I am."

The gargoyle didn't move, didn't speak again. It didn't register her answer at all, and Hermione was left waiting awkwardly, shifting on the spot to try to get a better look at the manor.

It had a tower. *A tower.*

No wonder Tom had been so jealous of Avery, she would've been too.

"Enter," the gargoyle announced abruptly, making Hermione jump.

The gate opened itself, and she gave the gargoyle a nod. "Thank you," she told it, slipping through the gate before it could change its mind.

The manor at the end of the garden path was more intimidating from directly at the foot of its stairs. It screamed *money*, and its double doors could've given Hogwarts a run for its money, with beautiful, runic patterns carved into the wood.

They cracked open before she'd reached the top of the steps, and Avery's thin form slipped through. Though he was staring at her incredulously, seeing him rather than a stranger, safe and in one piece, made her shoulders drop in relief.

"...What are you doing here?"

Under other circumstances, she might've scolded him for his rudeness, but instead, she gave him a meek, "hello."

Avery just about closed the door behind him, keeping it slightly ajar. "How do you know where I live?"

She smiled sheepishly. She knew how it would look, like he had a stalker. "Um... the real estate records in the public library. I... might've had to confound the matron to get to them."

Avery laughed at that, but glanced around as if he were worried about being seen speaking with her.

"What are you doing here?" he pressed again. "Is this about your letter? I'm sorry, I meant to get back to you, really, but things have just been..."

Hermione shook her head. "No, I'm— is there somewhere we could talk?" she asked urgently, scanning around them.

Since leaving Hogwarts, she hadn't been able to shake the uncomfortable, itching feeling that Tom was right behind her, breathing down her neck, that he'd get to Avery first. And even now that she'd found him, they were stood exposed out the front of the manor. If Tom was on her trail, he'd be able to see them from the street, hear them, cast at them.

"Um." Avery scratched at his head. He looked like he quite wanted to say no, but instead, "yeah, uh... okay. Yeah, come in," he mumbled, opening the door for her.

Phew. She hurriedly slipped past him into the manor, through to a short entry hall. Inside, the building was equally as impressive as it'd been on the outside. The ceilings were high with intricate patterns sculptured in that framed the light-fittings. Candles lit the faces of worn portraits, and the lush rug in the entry way was a deep emerald with glistening, golden patterns woven in.

Stepping deeper into the manor, the hardwood floor groaned with their footsteps, and Avery paused at the foot of a wide, grand staircase.

"Maybe... up here would be best," he murmured, more to himself than to her, and he led the way up.

Hermione trailed after him to the first floor, taking him in as she went. His hair was swept back, and he though he wore a button up shirt and trousers, the material looked appealing to the touch, soft and comfortable.

She wondered if he'd managed to have a nice Christmas after she'd tampered with his memory. She hoped so.

Avery guided her down the first floor hall, and it was an effort to not be distracted by the manor itself. Upstairs was brighter, with more modern furnishings, and she could make out muffled voices—the other Avery's, presumably. But—oh—now that she was thinking of them, she couldn't help but wonder, was *Sylvia* there? Was that why he didn't seem to want to be seen speaking with her?

But if she was there, they didn't run into her, and Avery slowed toward the end of the hall. He opened a double set of doors and held them open to what looked like a reading room.

"Who's this?"

Hermione was a foot into the room when the voice rung out from back down the hall.

"A friend," Avery said dismissively over his shoulder.

The woman who'd spoken approached them and leaned herself on the nearest doorframe. She looked young, Hermione's own age, and was tall and slim—beautiful, undoubtedly—with long, sandy blonde hair.

The resemblance was uncanny. She must've been Avery's sister.

"A friend...?" she asked, with judgemental eyes and an upward inflection.

Avery sighed quietly. "This is Hermione," he introduced tightly. "Hermione, this is my dear sister, Clarissa."

"A pleasure," Hermione said, nodding politely.

But it wasn't reciprocated, and when Clarissa's eyes passed over her, Hermione felt a bit like a stain on a rug. "Hermione...?"

"None of your business," Avery snapped, and Clarissa snorted.

"Mother won't be happy you brought a half-blood in here," said Clarissa, connecting the dots for herself.

"What Mother doesn't *know* won't hurt her," Avery said harshly, "will it?"

Clarissa folded her arms neatly, turned her nose up. "Oh, please, I don't owe you a thi—"

"If you want to be like that, then shall I tell her about Eustice, hmm? Or how last summer when you were supposed to be on holiday with Jules, you were actually—"

She interrupted him with a scoff. "You're so annoying." With that, Clarissa rolled her eyes and pushed off the doorframe, and headed off back down the hall.

"I learned from the best!" Avery called after her before ushering Hermione properly into the reading room.

"Sorry," he said, closing the door behind him. "Don't mind her. She's not entirely thrilled about her upcoming nuptials and naturally, has decided to take it out on everyone else."

"It's all right, I did come unannounced," Hermione allowed, stepping back and choosing a spot over toward the window. She promptly drew her wand and placed a muffling charm over the room.

"And I'm— I really am sorry to barge in on you like this," she blurted, "but I wouldn't be here if it wasn't urgent. It's going to sound really out of the blue, but... you see, I had to find you before Tom did. He's... I think he's going to try to... hurt you."

Avery blinked and Hermione tightened her arms around herself. "Sorry," she repeated. "Look, I-I know that you mightn't have much of a reason to trust me over him, and I know it's a lot to take in, but—"

Avery interrupted her with a nervous laugh, one that stretched into a slight groan, scratching at his stubble. "I don't think out of the two of us, I'm the one who needs to be worried," he muttered.

"Avery—"

He held a hand up. "Let me..." he said over her. "Look, I've been meaning to— what happened with you and Tom?" he pressed. "Did you tell him you know about Myrtle?"

Hermione could've laughed, and seeming to sense it coming, Avery went on, "I'm serious!" he insisted. "Did you tell him? And what about the basilisk? Do you know about that too? Because Tom thinks you do!"

Hermione shook her head. "That's... oh, Merlin," she murmured, sighing. "Avery... we've already had this conversation. We might've... on Christmas Eve, we caught up, you and I, and I... I might've removed the entire ordeal from your memory."

Avery raised his eyebrows at her, smiling as though he thought her joking. She didn't blame him. Now that she was saying it aloud, she really did sound a bit loopy.

"Don't you— didn't you think it strange to wake up on a train station bench with no recollection of how you got there?" she proposed to him. "Your night wasn't that big! Who do you think made you a makeshift pillow out of a scarf, hmm? It was tartan, wasn't it? Hand woven?"

His smile slowly started to drop. Good.

"That evening, when we caught up," she went on, "you asked me the very same things you've just asked. And then you also told me that Tom wants me dead, and you tried to help me when Mulciber— look, this would all be much simpler if you would allow me to show you my memory of the night," she offered.

Avery remained still, doing nothing at all for a good long moment before he finally laughed.

"I'm serious," she said.

He laughed a bit louder.

"Marvin!" she snapped. "Please. I know it's ridiculous, I know, but please could you just... humour me? Please? We mightn't have long."

"Sorry," he said, laughs trailing off. "Sorry, I don't mean to laugh. It's just..."

"I know. But I swear, it's the truth."

Avery's disbelief was plain, and so, Hermione stepped over and took his hand. His skin was rougher than hers, warm to the touch. It was nice.

"Just let me show you," she insisted. "That's all I'm asking. Then you can decide for yourself."

Avery looked down to watch their hands. He rubbed his thumb over the back of her fingers.

"Go on then, I guess," he sighed tiredly, giving a slight roll of his eyes. "Let me have it."

So, she did.

When it was done and Avery had seen all her memory had to offer, he broke back, blinking heavily as he returned fully to his own head. He rubbed at his temples, stepping backward to lower himself into the armchair.

He looked pained, and he murmured softly, "I wondered why I didn't hear back from Mulciber on Christmas..."

Hermione winced. The look on his face— it was like reliving that moment with him in the forest, and it was her fault. It was all her fault, but even though the guilt was a knife to her stomach and she wanted nothing more than to grovel, she also knew that if she didn't push through it, then there would be another person dead because of her. She couldn't let that happen.

"I'm sorry," she murmured. "I know you were good friends."

"Well," whispered Avery, "he clearly didn't think that way."

They fell into a pause, and it was a harsh one. Hermione didn't know where they would stand now. Before she'd taken his memory, Avery had helped her, offered her refuge. But now that she'd confessed to killing his friend and removing his memory of it... yeah. It was a miracle he hadn't kicked her to the street already.

"I... I know it's a lot, and I know you probably don't care too much for what I have to say at the moment, but... that night, the night Mulciber..." Hermione wrung her hands together. "Well, you mentioned your family had an estate. One Tom wouldn't find."

Avery's eyes were on the fireplace, but he gave a slow nod.

"I think you should go there," she suggested. "Go as soon as you can, and don't tell anyone you're doing it. I hope to have the situation sorted in a week, but... I can't make any promises."

His head snapped up. "'Sorted'?" he parroted. "What does that mean, 'sorted'?"

"I made a deal with Tom," she explained, choosing her words carefully. She wouldn't again make the mistake of telling him too much. "I'll get him what he wants, and in return, he'll leave me be. I'll bargain for you too, and it'll be... sorted. But I need a bit of time before I can do that."

Avery scoffed. "Riddle doesn't bargain."

She gave a shrug. "It seems for the right price, he does."

"No," Avery disagreed. "He doesn't. He'll just wait until he gets whatever it is that he wants from you, and *then* he'll kill you."

"Well... that very well might be what he has in mind. But I need the time, not his truthfulness," she reasoned. "I have to try."

"No, you don't! Riddle isn't the sort to play games with, Hermione!"

"What else am I to do? Hide myself away for the rest of my life, let him go with free reign? If I don't try to stop him, no one else will, not until it's too late."

"Yes! Why does this have to be your fight?" Avery said. "Just let him go! Maybe... he can be reasonable, you know. Maybe if we just let this settle for a while, and then go see him together, apologise and explain the situation, he'll come around! This has all just been a misunderstanding."

"You don't believe that," she said, but looking at him, seeing the expression on his face, it was plainly clear—Avery *did* believe that. She sighed. "He tried to have us *killed*! I already tried to diffuse the situation, and it didn't work. He's tried to kill me multiple times now, and the only reason he hasn't come for you again, is because he's been so distracted by me that he hasn't gotten around to it yet! An *apology* isn't going to settle this, he's not going to stop, and I'm not going to either," she insisted. "And in the process, I would prefer that you remain safe. All I'm asking for, is a week. Just lay low, stay hidden, for a week."

Avery put his head in his hands, shaking it slightly. "You haven't even told me where this all started, how you knew about Myrtle," he murmured. "And now you expect me to—what? Just *trust* you?"

"I'll tell you everything," she insisted. "I promise you, I will, just... not right now."

He scowled. "That's bullshit."

"We don't have time—just a week. Please. What's a week? If you go, and then it turns out this *has* all been a big mix up, then you would have needlessly wasted a few days. But if I'm right, and you don't leave, and Tom does come for you, then it could cost you your *life*. What's worth more to you?"

Avery didn't say anything, and his jaw tightened. He slowly shifted to lean his head back, closing his eyes and swearing up at the ceiling. Then, he abruptly stood up. "This is ridiculous," he said.

"I know."

"This is— insane. Actually insane."

"I know."

Avery stared at her for a long moment before his shoulders finally dropped. "Fine. *Fine*," he eventually said, "I guess... I'll just grab some stuff for us. How much do you think we'll need?"

She didn't understand. "...what?"

"A week, that's it, right?" Avery said, "that shouldn't be too bad, let me just..."

"Avery?" Hermione asked, but Avery ignored her and before she could stop him, he dashed out of the reading room. Hermione was left a little bit stunned, and when he came back a few minutes later, he had a backpack in each hand.

"Okay, I've grabbed some clothes, some potions, some snacks, and some butterbeer. Do you think we'll need a broom? The house has bedding and kitchenware and all that, I think, but I can't remember if there's much entertainment there, so I thought I'd—"

"Avery."

"—bring some—what?"

"What are you doing?"

He blinked. "Packing some stuff. If we're going to lay low, we may as well make a time of it, eh?"

"No, but... you only need things for you."

"Don't be stupid," he scoffed. "We'll go together."

"Avery—"

"Where else are you going to go?" he challenged, raising his brows.

She didn't immediately have an answer. She knew *what* she'd be doing... but she hadn't yet planned where she'd be doing it. "I... never you mind. I'll figure it out."

But Avery easily dismissed her. "We'll go together," he decided.

"It's too dangerous," she protested. "I mean it! If something happened to you because of me, then..."

"If what you say is true, then I'm already in danger. We'll be safer together. Two wands are better

than one," he said. "Besides. The family estate has a pool. Does wherever you were planning to go have a pool?"

She opened her mouth to argue, but... well. He had her there.

"Think of it as a New Year's trip," said Avery, smiling smugly. "This'll be great."

After sneaking out of the Avery manor and apparating from the gates, Hermione and Avery appeared before a large, weathered building. It was worn—far more so than she'd been anticipating—and some of the bricks from the front wall were starting to crack and fall, while vines were growing over its front. The stairs leading up to it had been cracked by large tree roots, and the roof looked bowed.

"Hmm," Avery hummed from beside her as she released his arm. "It's a bit... shabbier than I remember."

"It's fine," Hermione assured him. "It's got a roof, a door, a fireplace. That's all we need, really."

Avery gave her a nod and led the way up. The stairs were a bit slippery in the snow, but Avery helped her up to the door. It took a bit of muscle to prying the front door open, but when Avery got it—

"Oh dear," Avery murmured from beside her.

"Um..." Hermione said warily. It certainly wasn't what she'd had in mind when he'd first mentioned the word 'estate'. It was dilapidated.

"I guess Mum thought the elves were better used elsewhere." Avery stepped into the house and plucked a spiderweb out of his hair. "We could always get a hotel room for the night? Come back in the morning?"

Hermione sighed. "No, it shouldn't take too much to make this room liveable," she said, gesturing to what she thought might've been a dining room. "We'll start here and sort out a bathroom, and then we can sort the others tomorrow."

If anything, she supposed that staying in a decrepit building gave them a better cover. It wouldn't be comfortable... but at least Tom wouldn't think to look for them there. She hoped.

Avery looked skeptical, but since it was already close to midnight, she quickly urged him to get to work.

Unsurprisingly, Avery wasn't very good with household charms.

'We were never taught any of this stuff!' He complained when she'd run out of patience and told him to just sit down and get out of her way.

It took about half an hour and a bit of sweat, but when she was done with the small main room, Hermione was rather chuffed with herself. It would need more work in the morning, but for the meanwhile, it would do. The walls didn't clean up too badly, and the hardwood floors polished really nicely. She'd transfigured them two beds with inviting pillows, and while she'd been

working, Avery had gotten a healthy fire going in the fireplace and had transfigured some flowers. 'To brighten things up', he'd explained proudly.

It would be fine for the night, and in the morning, she could start working on the kitchen and bathroom. It'd be the perfect safe house in no time.

After finishing with the room preparations, Hermione transfigured her clothes into pyjamas, and clambered into her bed. She'd thought about setting them up for some privacy... but in truth, she didn't really want it. It all felt safer with Avery by her side.

Hermione sat up in her bed, muscles eagerly relaxing into the mattress, while Avery summoned himself a couple bottles of butterbeer, and after opening them, he sent one over to her.

Hermione happily accepted it and didn't hesitate to take a sip, welcoming the warm flush of the alcohol.

"This isn't so bad," Avery said as he slipped into his own bed, leaning his head back and stretching a long arm along the headboard.

"It's really not," she agreed, wiggling her toes beneath the covers. The beds she'd transfigured herself really were quite comfortable, and in that posture, relaxed with his hair drawn back, Avery made for a pleasant sight.

"Ah, and with no students, no staff, no sisters, no *Tom*— we'll have a better time here than we ever did at home or at Hogwarts, you'll see."

Hermione laughed at that. At the current rate of things, he wasn't wrong. She told him as much, and then added, "it's hard not to feel like a right coward though. He quite literally *chased* me out of there, and I ran."

"It's better than the alternative. And hey, it brought us together," said Avery, grinning widely. "And I'm glad you got out of there when you did. When the group of us met on Christmas Eve, Tom spoke about you. Said you were a problem, but wouldn't be after New Year's."

Hermione snorted. That sounded about right.

She took a swig of her butterbeer, and thought back to that evening after Tom's botched poisoning when he'd invited her to Slughorn's New Year's party. If what Avery said was true, then her initial instinct had been right—the original plan, to try again at killing her, had been scheduled for New Year's. Tom's *birthday*.

He must've really hated her.

But then, she couldn't help but think, that if he'd already had a plan formed, then why had he—*ah*. She supposed he'd simply been taken off guard. Tom hadn't expected to find her out by herself and vulnerable in Hogsmeade on Christmas Eve, and so, changed his plans accordingly. Mulciber must've been a spare of the moment decision.

It reminded her of... *ugh*. Herself. How many times had she changed her approach on the fly? How many times now had she reconsidered and altered her course based on Tom's actions?

He was an opportunist, just like her.

"I wonder how he'd have done it," she mumbled, unable to withhold the curiosity. "Whether it would've worked..."

Avery gave her a shrug. "Not worth thinking about. We're here, we're together, and you're safe, that's all that matters now." His smile, warmly lit from the firelight, was soothing, and Hermione—damn it—felt herself welling up.

He should hate her. Why didn't he?

She took a mouthful of her butterbeer to distract herself, and, oblivious to how close Hermione was getting to the brink, Avery went on saying, "and as to how, he didn't say. Tom's never been the sort to share explicit details, but he did say he was going to do it at the same time as Dumbledore."

The warm and fluffy feeling in her stomach was rudely squashed, and she snorted up her beer, sending some of it down into her airway. "...w-what?"

"Dumbledore," Avery repeated, laughing at her struggling for breath.

Hermione coughed a few times to clear her airway properly. "No— sorry. The whole sentence? Say again?"

"Sorry— I said he was going to try to off Dumbledore at the same time as you," he said, shrugging. "At least, that's the impression he gave. He's had it out for the old man for years."

Oh. Hermione took a deep breath, testing that her lungs were properly clear. *Oh*. Tom wasn't just aiming for her, and—

She closed her eyes. Fuck. It made sense. If he was aiming for Dumbledore, then that must've been why he'd been so enraged to hear that Dumbledore had been alive in her time.

Which meant that she'd all but told him to his face that he would *fail*, without even realising it! And then—bloody hell—she went and told him the timeline had diverged! Which meant, that even with the knowledge that her Dumbledore had lived well into his hundreds, Tom might still decide to try his hand anyway.

Shit, shit, *shit*.

"And he— he definitely didn't say how?" she pressed, sitting up straighter.

"Nope." Avery frowned lightly and took a long swig. "But it would've been in a way that could take out multiple people at once. He stressed that it had to be the same time."

Hermione gave a slow nod. That also made sense, because at the time, Tom had thought she was with Dumbledore. Killing one of them, would've alerted the other... and yet, despite himself, he'd *still* chosen to risk it with Mulciber.

He must've *really* hated her.

"Bugger," Hermione uttered, taking another large mouthful as she tried to do the mental math and put the pieces together.

She'd sworn up and down in the forest to Tom that she *wasn't* with Dumbledore. Which meant that now, more likely than not, without her in the way, he'd think he had a free run at him.

Maybe he hadn't followed her, had let her leave the castle, not necessarily because he wanted the locket... but because he wanted Dumbledore all to himself.

Hermione leaned her forehead on her hand. She tried to think logically.

There were three nights left before New Year's. She'd wasted a day of her agreed upon week tracking Avery down, and if she now had to fast forward to killing Tom before New Year's, then that *really* didn't leave her with much time.

She'd never planned a murder before. She'd been counting on using every moment of the time she'd bought, but now...

Fuck.

Avery—bless him—was a snorer. It didn't take long after their conversation died down for him to drift off, and now, the sound of his snorts echoed around in their shoebox of a room. Hermione actually didn't mind it. After their conversation, she hadn't been able to sleep anyway, and it was a good indication that she'd have some privacy.

Free from his prying eyes, Hermione tugged her sleeve up, inspecting her throbbing wounds by the light of the fire.

She winced. The letters were just as inflamed as they'd been the previous day, and when she applied another layer of balm to it, she had to bite her mouth closed to stop herself from waking Avery.

It took a moment, but—ah. A quiet moan slipped free as the balm kicked in and the pain started to subside. Much better.

Like her *mudblood* scars, she knew that in all likelihood, they wouldn't ever fade away. But, she thought wistfully, once they had settled a bit more and Tom was gone for good, she could conceal them. While she didn't *like* the scars Bellatrix had given her, there was something... proud about them. She'd been given them in a time of war, had gotten them to protect her friends. They were a badge of honour.

But these new ones from Tom? Just thinking about them and what he'd put her through made her nauseous. There was no pride in his brand, nothing but shame.

Hermione sighed—hiding the scars would be a task for another day—and tugged her sleeve back down.

A particularly loud snore drew her attention back over to Avery. His head was craned back on his pillow, mouth hanging open. She smiled fondly, and before forcing herself back to the task at hand.

She drew her bag over, and rummaged through it until she found Tom's diary, and placed it on her bed.

She angled it toward the firelight and stared down at it. Since finding it, she'd been *itching* to properly inspect it. Ginny had told her all about it, as had Harry. Ginny had spoken of diary-Tom's charm, how he'd been a friend, one with all of the patience in the world, while Harry had gone on about how diary-Tom had drawn him *in*. What would it try with her?

Though she'd spent her fair share of time wearing Tom's locket years ago, back in her own time, she'd never really had the opportunity to really experience soul magic, to test it, to see what it could

do. The ring had been lethal, so she hadn't been able to work with it, but the diary, she knew, wouldn't be as volatile. And now that it was in front of her and she had a *little* bit of time while Avery slept... she couldn't help but be a little curious. It was only natural.

Hermione ran her fingers over it, and it was striking, in that it seemed to be just a diary. The locket had had an energy about it, a weight to it, and the ring had been all but screaming with magic. But this... as she stroked its cover and flicked its pages... nothing. Just a diary.

It was a nice one though. The leather cover felt smooth and soft on her fingers, and the pages were in perfect condition. Just like the locket, the cup, and the diadem, she was certain it must've been impervious to damage. An effect of the soul it harboured.

It was bizarre to think about. She had a part of Tom's soul in her hands.

Realising she was still stroking its cover, Hermione abruptly stopped. It seemed oddly... intimate.

She put it back down onto the bed and, knowing all too well that she shouldn't, Hermione opened the diary to a blank page. She then took out a quill from her bag before hesitantly pressing its nib into the parchment.

She just wanted to see how it worked, just for a moment.

Hello, she wrote.

The ink of her untidy scrawl sat there, fresh on the page. It took a few seconds, but then, just as Harry had described, it began to fade as if seeping into the book until it entirely disappeared.

Remarkable.

Hello there.

At the first sign of Tom's hand—that familiar, elegant scrawl—Hermione shoved the diary away from her as though it might burn her.

There. She'd seen it. That was enough. She shouldn't have even tried it to begin with—

Might I ask who I'm speaking with?

Huh. The diary was pushy, just like the Tom she knew. But of course it was, she supposed. It was his soul; it *was* the Tom she knew.

Biting her lip, Hermione ignored the voice in her head that knew better and picked her quill back up, pulled the diary back over.

She'd come this far, and Avery sounded deeply asleep. She had a bit of time. She might as well make the most of it, and she'd destroy it as soon as she was done.

It couldn't hurt.

My name is Hermione, she scrawled.

Hello Hermione. My name is Tom.

How did you come about my diary?

I found it.

There was an extended pause.

Thank you for finding me. My owner would surely appreciate it if you returned me to him.

An interesting thing for the diary to write, she thought, asking to be returned to his *owner*. Did the part of Tom that lived in the diary want to be close to the rest of him? Was it sentient enough for that? Or was it just self-preservation? Better to be back in the hands of the rest of its soul than a stranger?

I will, she ended up writing. It was far easier to lie in ink. *But I wanted to ask you a question or two first, if that's all right.*

You may ask me whatever you wish.

If nothing else, at least diary-Tom was accommodating.

Could you tell me how you were made?

There was another pause then, a long one. She almost started to think he wouldn't answer her.

I cannot.

You said, whatever I wish.

You are welcome to ask whatever you wish.

But I made no promises as to whether I would answer your questions.

Hermione narrowed her eyes at it.

Your wording implied you would answer.

Another extended pause.

I cannot give you an answer to that particular question, because I don't have one. I don't know how I was made.

Hermione flicked her quill several times, the splashed flecks of ink seeping into the page.

I don't believe you, she scribbled.

I have no reason to lie to you.

Yes you do, she thought irritably, feeling the beginnings of the very same frustration she often felt when speaking with Tom himself.

I know you're part of him, she wrote. No point beating around the bush, not, when this would be her only interaction with the diary. Best to skip the small talk. *Part of his soul.*

Another long pause. It was so long, that Hermione almost gave up on waiting, and put her quill down—

How did you come about my diary? Tom's elegant hand repeated.

Hermione found herself smiling. She thought she could just about hear the words as if Tom had truly uttered them. He'd be so furious that his voice would be cold, wouldn't it, the way it'd been

when he'd caught her in the forest. His eyes would be bright, jaw tight, and he would be poised to strike.

She could picture him perfectly and her stomach tangled at the thought.

Let's just say that your owner and I have some unfinished business, she scribbled, her smile becoming smug. *Now if you'd like to remain intact, I'd advise you answer my questions.*

All of them.

After her words vanished into the parchment, a black dot appeared. As if one was holding the tip of a quill onto it, but was keeping it motionless. It remained there, distinct, and unmissable, as if he were thinking—

There was a loud cough from Avery's side of the room, and his snores quietened.

Not wanting to be caught, Hermione snapped the diary closed and tucked it back into her bag, quickly laying her body back down on the bed.

Slowly, Avery's breathing returned to a rhythmic pattern, and Hermione turned in her bed, tossing up whether to head outside to destroy the diary. But...

After hearing of Tom's plans for Dumbledore, Hermione suddenly wasn't opposed to letting the diary linger with the knowledge that she knew what it was, letting it fear for its life. The diary's suffering was *Tom's* suffering, and it might've been a bit sadistic of her, but the thought of Tom suffering was exceedingly appealing...

She'd destroy it tomorrow, she decided. Let the diary quiver in its metaphorical boots.

What was the harm? She had three more nights.

Plenty of time.

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

Happy 2023

(heed the tags)

"Is this all we have?!" Hermione yelled.

"Is *what* all we—" Avery's retort was interrupted by the loud clanging of metal falling to the ground. She heard a muffled string of swearing, followed by some thumping, and then Avery poked his head through the doorway. "Is what all we have?"

Hermione gestured at his backpack. She'd taken a break from fixing up the bathroom to make some lunch for them, and had tipped it out onto their transfigured table to find chocolates, pasties, butterbeer, some Every Flavour Beans, and some liquorice straps.

That's all there was.

Avery looked between her and the food as though he didn't see a problem and shrugged.

"Are you serious?" she pressed, a hand on her hip.

"What?" he said defensively. "What's wrong with that?"

"We can't live off junk food."

"Sure we can." He shrugged. "It's only a week."

"We can't live off junk food," she repeated more sternly. "Is this what you normally eat?"

"Um," he said, frowning. "It's... I mean... it's not *not* what I eat?"

"Good lord," she said. "How are you so slim?"

He flashed a crooked smile. "Good genes, I suppose. What? Normally the elves do the cooking."

She snorted and murmured, "you're a 'pureblood', so I'd actually wager it's *poor* genes."

Despite the quietness of her tone, Avery straightened with wide eyes and gave a short gasp.

"Sorry," she gushed, realising what'd left her mouth. "I'm sorry. That was a terrible thing to say."

He put his hand over his chest. "Wow. Despite my upbringing, I've never once held your blood-status against you."

"I know, I'm sorry. It just slipped out. I'm sorry."

"Despite the pressure of my family, I've never even asked how half-blooded you are."

"I know, I'm *sorry*, I didn't mean—" Hermione broke off when Avery started to smile. "Hey."

His smile became a laugh, and then he said, "Did you think I meant it? You should've seen your face. And, just so you know, my father is actually my mother's first cousin, once removed."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. She couldn't tell if he was being serious. "...oh?"

"Truly. And Clarissa is marrying our second cousin once removed. So, who knows, maybe it is a result of poor genes."

"Your parents would still choose a relative for her?" she asked, baffled. "Even knowing the health risks of consanguinity?"

"Nothing but the best for dear sister."

"Gross."

Avery hummed in the affirmative and plucked a chocolate from the table, popping it straight into his mouth.

"Are you related to Sylvia too, then?" Hermione pried, unable to help herself.

"Yeah," Avery said around his chocolate. "We're second or third cousins, or something like that."

Hermione winced, but then, realising she was getting quite distracted, sighed.

"Well. Regardless of our, um, backgrounds... we still can't live off of just this. We're going to have to visit the nearest town, get some supplies."

"Nearest one's probably Flaxton. Muggle town."

"That's okay," she said. "It's probably better that way, then we won't run into anyone we know."

As far as she knew, Tom's circle of Knights was still small. But even still, the anxiousness of being spotted with Avery now when she was so close to stopping Tom for good was hard to ignore.

Hmm.

She could go herself to pick up the supplies, be certain they weren't seen, make sure they grabbed the right things... or, she could send Avery. Avery had already proven himself useless when it came to food selection, but he'd also be close to useless if left at the estate by himself. She'd tasked him with clearing out the kitchen, and if the crashing she'd heard earlier was anything to go by, it mustn't have been going very well.

Sending him might be risky... but in that time she'd be able to finish off the bathroom, and she *really* wanted a proper shower. And then, she supposed, if she was left alone, then that meant she'd have another chance at Tom's diary...

Mind made up, she rummaged through her bag and found her coin purse and took out some muggle coins. "Here," she said, handing them over. "You go, and I'll stay and finish working on the bathroom. Those ones are pennies, and those are shillings. There are twelve pennies to a shilling, and twenty shillings to a pound."

Avery blinked.

"Just—pennies, and shillings. Give the muggles whatever they ask for, you shouldn't need any

more than that. Got it?"

"Um. Yeah, I guess."

He didn't look particularly convincing, but excited at the prospect of getting Tom's diary back out, Hermione didn't press him. "Just make sure you get some potatoes. We should be able to make do with whatever else you can get your hands on, but we *need* potatoes."

"Yeah, okay," he said, "I got it."

"...Be safe?"

He flashed her a grin and gave a small wave, "always am."

Hermione had good intentions when it came to the bathroom.

She really did.

But the diary's call proved to be hard to ignore, and so, once she finally had the shower properly cleaned and functioning, she decided that the bathtub could wait and gave into it.

She fetched her bag, bringing it back to the bathroom, and locked herself in before she sat herself down on the freshly cleaned floor mat. She pulled out the diary and her quill, flicking the diary open, but before she'd even had time to get her ink out, a line of elegant scrawl spread itself across the page.

Who are you?

Hermione's stomach contorted. She could just about hear Tom speak it, *who are you*, in the same frustrated, unhinged tone he'd used after she'd tortured him.

She ignored the unease the memory gave her and wrote, *I told you yesterday, my name is Hermione. Have you thought about my question?*

The diary didn't immediately respond, and so, she pressed further, *or do you need me to remind you?*

If you know what I am, then you must already be familiar with what my creation entailed, Tom's pristine hand finally wrote.

I'm aware of the basics, she acknowledged.

The passage detailing horcruxes in 'Secrets of the Darkest Art' had been... graphic. But it hadn't given *all* of the details, and it stated that splitting one's soul didn't only require the sacrifice of another. It also required a sacrifice of the self, and though she *knew* it was a waste of time, she couldn't help it. She desperately itched to know what Tom had sacrificed of himself to make his.

Had it been his heart, per se? His ability to feel? Had the fear of death and the creation of his horcruxes been what turned him into a monster, or had he been born one?

At some point, as he created more, she assumed he would go on to sacrifice his looks, his eyes, his

nose, his hair, his skin, and that that's what would turn him into the monster of her memories.

But what had he started with? What was it that made the diary?

What did you sacrifice? she slowly wrote.

The diary paused, until...

The potion used for my creation contained my tooth.

Hermione's shoulder's fell.

Oh.

That wasn't nearly as interesting as she'd been expecting, and she suddenly felt rather stupid.

It's as simple as that?

Yes, wrote the diary. The potion itself is a difficult brew, but as long as the blood used is pure, and there is a victim, then the sacrifice of self is straightforward.

Hermione frowned at the diary, watching the ink seep back into the page as if it were never there at all. Humans had thirty-two teeth. By that logic then, it was plausible that the Voldemort of her time had used a different tooth for each horcrux, and still had plenty to spare.

Damn. She'd thought she'd figured it out, his snakelike transformation. It was an answer that made sense, but if the creation of his horcruxes hadn't been what turned him into a literal monster... then what had?

If you're considering making a horcrux of your own,

Then, perhaps I can be of use to you.

A laugh slipped past her lips.

Thank you, but no thank you, she wrote back, and before the diary could write back, she snapped it shut.

It was a good reminder of what she was supposed to be doing, the diary's blatant attempt at self-preservation. She'd been selfishly underestimating it, all for her own curiosity, when she shouldn't have risked speaking with it at all, let alone have given it the opportunity to try to save itself.

What had she been thinking?

Cursing herself, she put her quill and ink back in her bag, and then she rummaged around in her bag for her basilisk venom-embedded knife. Best destroy it now, she decided. Best to remove any further temptation while she had the chance.

She dug her arm further into her bag. Where had she put it, where had she put—

From back out in the house, she heard the tell-tale sound of thumping. *Damn* it. Avery must've been back.

While she had every intention of filling Avery in when it came to her time travel, she drew the line when it came to Tom's horcruxes. She couldn't risk Tom finding out that she knew about them, not under any circumstances, just in case her attempt at killing him failed. And so, swearing to herself

under her breath, Hermione stashed the diary back into her bag and hurried out of the bathroom.

She poked her head into their shared living area just in time for Avery to stride in, a large paper bag clutched in his arms.

"Got it," he declared proudly, "all that you asked for. Potatoes, peas, bread, and some milk."

"And that's all you bought, is it?" she asked, frowning at what looked to be the cork of a wine bottle poking out the top of the bag.

"Well," he said, "we can't exactly toast to nothing on New Year's, can we?" He dumped the bag down onto their table, revealing that there, tucked between the bag and Avery's chest, had also been a newspaper. The images on the back page were *moving*.

"Where did you get that?!" Hermione screeched.

He gave her a one-shouldered shrug. "I stopped in at Diagonal Alley while I was out. Thought it'd be useful to stay in the loop," he explained, and seeing her disapproving glare, he added, "what? I was careful. No one saw me."

"How do you know?!"

"I disillusioned myself, nicked it from an outdoor table at a cafe," he said. "What? It's *fine*. Don't worry so much."

She glared at him, annoyed that he'd chosen to take the risk knowing what could be at stake, but... hmm, now that she was looking at the newspaper, she did feel rather tempted to look over its headlines...

But that would have to wait.

Hermione crossed the room to fetch two more of Avery's butterbeers and handed him one as she passed him. Then she went and sat herself on her bed, opening the other one for herself.

She took a deep mouthful.

"Here," she said, tapping her free hand beside her on the bed. "Have a seat. It's about time we had a talk."

Over their butterbeers, Hermione told Avery everything. That she'd been born in nineteen-seventy-nine, that Dumbledore had sent her back from a war-torn time, that the war had been Tom's doing, that he'd *win* if she didn't intervene. She told him of her time as a student of Hogwarts, about the opening of the chamber, how she'd been petrified herself by Tom's basilisk. She kept the intimate details of Harry and his connection to Voldemort to herself along with the details of Tom's horcruxes, but she told him openly of the countless lives that would be lost, the witches and wizards and children that would die just because of their muggle blood and Tom's desire for power, and then she—

She pulled up her sleeve, showed him the scars Bellatrix had given her.

"...oh," was all he said.

"This was given to me—well. It feels like it was about three years ago to me. It was toward the end of my time there, in my own time," she said, sheepishly adding, "my parents were dentists."

They fell into a long, uncomfortable quiet and Avery seemed... shocked. Like he was going to be sick.

"I'm sorry," he finally said. "I didn't mean to assume you were— I didn't realise that you—"

She shook her head. "It's okay. I wanted you to assume I was a half-blood. Between Tom and Grindelwald... it was just easier that way."

She wasn't sure how he'd take it. While easy-going was one of the first terms that sprung to her mind when she thought of him, he was still a pureblood. He'd still been raised to discriminate against those of muggle descent, he'd still been in Slytherin House, had still been one of Tom's Knights.

But Avery wasn't springing away from her, wasn't distancing them. His features just became pained, and he asked quietly, "did... did he do that to you?" he asked.

She could've laughed. She didn't think she had the energy to bring up her other arm. "It wasn't by his hand, but it might as well have been."

"Shit," Avery murmured, and he ran a hand over his forehead. "I'm sorry. That's— fuck."

"I know. It's a lot, you can take your time," she assured him. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you until now, but I couldn't risk... I'm sorry about everything."

Avery's frowned deepened. "Why are you telling me now?"

"You've given up so much for me, so I owe you the truth. And Tom... he knows now anyway, about where I'm from." She shook her head, looking down at her butterbeer. "Well, not *everything*, but... enough."

Avery covered his eyes with his hands. He stayed that way for a while before he eventually sighed and focused down on the bed spread.

"Tom's never... I mean, he's been talking about it since school, how great he is, calling himself—and even *in* school, he always... but it was just... I don't know, small scale stuff," he rambled. "I mean— there was Warren, but he said she was an accident. And lately, he's been speaking about growing our numbers, recruiting at the school, but I never... it's a *club*. It's not serious like that, it was just— he taught us loads."

Hermione winced. "I know."

"And, I know we talk a lot of shit about muggles and stuff. But everyone does, don't they? And I know some of the magic has been pretty dark, and sometimes it gets a bit out of hand, but—"

"You don't have to tell me."

"—not to the point of *war*," insisted Avery. "But then, the last time, at the Hogs Head, just before Christmas, the way he spoke about you, I..."

"Avery."

"You know I'd never—"

"I know. It's okay."

Avery finally looked up from the bed, features pained. "No, it's not," he said. "Was I—? In the future, will I...?"

She shook her head. "I couldn't say. I'm sorry. We never met. One of Tom's older followers was an Avery, but it wasn't you. I couldn't tell you how you were related."

Avery polished off what was left of his butterbeer with a large mouthful.

"It's just a club," he murmured. "Tom's never hidden the fact that he's deep in the magic and he talks a lot of shit, like, killing a few muggles, that level of shit, but... I didn't think it was that serious."

Hermione reached out for his hand, biting her tongue to stop herself from telling him that killing a few muggles *is* that serious.

"Don't... do that to yourself," she told him instead. "It hasn't happened yet. You got out."

Avery watched their hands, watching as Hermione laced her fingers through his.

"It happened to you though, right?"

She wasn't sure what to say to that, but then Avery lifted their hands, bringing them up to press his lips to the back of her palm. It was the hand of her scarred arm, the arm that said 'mudblood'.

"It's all right," he murmured quietly. It sounded like it might've been more to himself than to her. "We'll fix it. Yeah? We'll stop him?"

Hermione leaned her head onto his shoulder. He felt warm. Safe.

"We will," she whispered. "Then this will have been nothing but a bad dream."

The next morning, after finally having the steamy shower she'd long been craving, Hermione finished off the bathroom and made a good start on the kitchen with Avery.

He was different that morning. Gentler. More considerate, more eager to help, his humour not quite as dry as usual. It was nice having him around, and for once, his help was actually useful.

But even still, despite the warmth his company provided... she needed to get rid of him.

She needed a long window with him off the estate so she could dispose of the diary once and for all. There was only one more night now until New Year's. It was her last chance if she wanted to save Dumbledore.

And so, when the clock told them it'd almost reached one in the afternoon, Hermione sheepishly said, "do you... think you could maybe... head back to Diagon Alley today?"

Avery was struggling to keep all of the pots levitating while she dusted their cupboard, and her question nearly made him fumble the lot. "Did—ah, ah," he winced, making a lucky save, "did I forget something?"

She gestured for him to put the pots back down before she spoke. "I was hoping you might be able to pick up another paper, if it's not too much trouble? But then I thought, if you're going to go to the effort of heading down there, then I think we should get some slug repellent for the garden patch by the back door, and maybe also some pepperup potions, you know, just to have on hand? And also some Floo powder so we can get the fireplace up and going, and then if you can, there's a particular book that's supposed to have come out just the other week, called 'Homemaking for the Prudent Witch'. Some of the other professors were talking about it last week, and I'm sure it's a bit of a bore, but I think it might have just the spell I need to fix up this stove, so, if you wouldn't mind...?"

Avery blinked.

Hermione felt a little guilty, but she needed to keep him occupied for a good long while. Above all else, she *needed* to destroy the diary.

"You'll... write that all down for me?" he asked.

"Mhmm," she hummed pleasantly, summoning over some parchment, ink and a quill. "And make sure you're not seen under *any* circumstances."

His mouth popped open. "Flourish and Blotts will be bloody crowded this time of year, getting through there without being spotted will be—"

"You can manage, right?" She shot him a warm smile and spelled the quill to write down the list of items. "For me?"

Avery sighed, shoulders slumping. "I'll do my best."

"Perfect!" Hermione chimed, handing him the shopping list before she summoned his wallet over for him.

He looked a bit annoyed, but took the wallet and stepped over to grab his jacket regardless.

"Wait," she said after him when he went to leave, hurrying after him to reach up on her toes and press a kiss to his cheek. "Thank you, for this, and for all of your help here. I really appreciate it."

A faint blush appeared on his cheeks. "I'll do your shopping anytime you ask if you kiss me for it."

She gave him a light whack on his arm. "Don't push it."

Avery laughed and waved her off, and then with a final cheeky grin, he ducked out of the house.

Hermione waited until she heard the old front door latch shut before she swept up her bag and tucked herself back into the bathroom. *Finally*.

She hurriedly pulled out the diary and fished around in her bag again for her knife. It took a few minutes and a series of swear words her mother would've been scandalised by, but she finally found it stuck underneath a large pile of books, wedged in by its blade.

Her eyes found the diary. Looking down at it, an odd sort of... sadness washed over her. But it

didn't matter. She wouldn't make the mistake of writing to it again, couldn't afford to, so she lined the knife up with the centre of the diary's cover, went to raise it—

Hmm. Last time with the ring, she remembered, she'd been thrown a good distance by the impact of the knife, hard enough to be knocked unconscious. She didn't want Avery to come back and find her knocked out with the knife and mangled diary, so she decided it would be a good idea to cushion the wall behind her, just in case.

She lowered the knife and went to cast a cushioning charm, but right after the spell left her lips, she made out a faint squeak coming from back out toward the front of the house. A faint squeak, that sounded just like the old front door.

Bugger, she thought bitterly. Why in all of hell was he back so soon? Maybe he'd forgotten something? Or had she misheard? Or maybe it hadn't been the door, and was a bird outside...

Deciding to check it out just to be safe, Hermione tucked the knife, diary and her bag into the cupboard under the sink before she hopped up and headed out to the living area, humming as she went.

But as she reached the doorway, she halted in her tracks, hums dying in her throat.

She hadn't misheard. Someone *had* entered the house, and they were over by their table, sifting through the papers they'd left out.

But it wasn't Avery.

"Cute set up you've got here," Tom said without turning, continuing to nose through the papers.

Hermione's mouth was suddenly dry. She blinked a few times in case she was imagining him, but he didn't disappear.

"How... how did you...?"

Her heart pounded in her neck. There wasn't any way he could've found them. It wasn't possible. The property was warded, he wouldn't have had any reason to suspect the estate.

Not... not unless Avery had—

Tom's dark eyes finally looked in her direction, and Hermione became acutely aware that she was alone in an enclosed space with him. There wasn't anything in the way. The only thing she had to protect herself was her wand and the lure of the locket.

"I'm still working on it," she blurted. "We agreed, four more days—"

He raised a hand to silence her, and she snapped her mouth closed.

"I'm not here for you," he said, turning to lean his long form on the table, and Hermione again found herself impressed at his ability to convey such authority with such a quiet tone. "I dropped by the Avery's the other day—just, to wish them a Happy Christmas, of course—and imagine my surprise when I was informed that Marvin had left with a homeless-looking girl called *Harmony*, and hadn't returned since."

Oh.

Fuck.

"He's not here," she said at once.

"But he was here, wasn't he, and he'll be back, yes?" Tom nodded behind him to where Avery's backpacks were dumped on their table. "I can wait."

If the fact that she'd been caught in a property owned by the Avery's wasn't obvious enough, Avery's things were distinct. There wasn't any talking out of the fact that Avery had indeed been staying with her, and so, Hermione blurted the only thing she could think to say.

"No," she said.

Tom crossed his legs over at his ankles and his mouth toyed at a smile. "No...?"

"I won't let you touch him," she said. "We've spoken about this. If you're looking for someone to blame for Mulciber, then blame me."

The smile won out, his teeth becoming visible. "I do blame you."

"Then leave him out of it!"

"You brought him into it," said Tom. "I'm only here to finish what you started."

"But— he was your friend! You grew up with him, how could you just..."

The look on his face silenced her, and it was only then, when she was quiet, that he spoke.

"Exactly," he said simply. "Thirteen years, and how little it took, to make him sing."

Since that evening in Hogsmeade when Mulciber had come for them, Hermione had been convinced that Avery was only on Tom's radar because of her, that he'd use him to punish her. But she hadn't considered it seriously enough, not until hearing those words—*how little it took to make him sing*—that Tom's desire to kill Avery mightn't have had much to do with her at all.

Tom had used legilimency with Avery the night after Slughorn's end of year celebration, Avery had all but told her so. Which meant that Tom would've seen the way Avery had blurted out to her: *you want to know about the chamber, and what really happened to Warren? Go and ask Tom!*

And then afterwards, she'd been so focused by the threat of Tom to herself, so distracted by his flirtatious facade, that she hadn't properly put it together the way she should've.

Tom had *seen* Avery tell her about Myrtle. And then, despite what he must've taken as a clear betrayal, Tom had gone and given Avery a second chance, had trusted him with the knowledge he wanted her dead. And what had he done with it?

As Tom had put it, he'd sung. He'd betrayed him twice, and Tom might find that unforgivable. The Voldemort of her own time certainly would have.

"What will it take? Hm? What do you want?" she offered, a hint of desperation seeping into her tone. "There has to be something. Name it."

He shook his head.

"There *has* to be something."

Tom tilted his head and his features became thoughtful. "What was he to you?"

"I... nothing," she said, taken a little off guard by the question. "I didn't know him."

"His... relative, then?"

She shook her head. "I didn't know any other Avery's personally."

Tom's expression was plain. He didn't believe her. "Then why protect him? He gave you up, you know, and he'll do it again," said Tom, and he eyed their set up. "If it wasn't for his big mouth, I mightn't have found you here. Not so soon, anyway."

"He-he's my friend."

Tom rolled his eyes.

"In the future, they'll be loyal to you. The Avery's," she tried. "If you hurt Marvin, if you take away their heir, you'll lose a wealthy family from your pocket."

"I don't need their money."

"Multiple generations of loyal servants are more useful than money. And the pureblooded lines—they're all related. What other families might you lose if your word gets out that their rising *Lord* murdered one of their own?"

Tom gave a slow smile. "Only a problem if word gets out."

"Do you think Avery's the only one with a good vocal range?"

Tom laughed properly at that, and Hermione's cheeks heated. It had been a while. She'd forgotten the sound of it, its silken edge. "None of those with any influence will take the word of a mudblood over my own."

"All it takes is doubt."

"Then I'll silence you, too."

"How's that worked out for you so far?" she quipped, unable to stop herself.

She expected Tom to snap at her for that one, but he only continued to grin.

Hermione opened her mouth to continue arguing, but—oh. She recognised that look, that amused, bright-eyed look.

He was fucking with her. Wasting her time with the back and forth, shortening the window of Avery's absence.

She sighed through her nose. "Just, enough. Tell me what you want," she ordered. "You wouldn't be bothering to speak with me if there wasn't potentially something in it for you. What will it take?"

Tom laughed as though he'd been caught red handed and rested his hands behind his head. "You think you're so clever, don't you? And it's not just because of the advantage of time, is it? You really think you have it all figured out."

Hermione didn't bother to answer that and waited.

"Go on," Tom pushed when it became clear she wasn't going to bite. "If you already have the

answers, then why don't you tell me what I want."

It was a trick question. Every fucking thing that left Tom's mouth was a trick, but she just couldn't help herself and said, "information?"

Tom gave a low grunt as if to say 'no'.

"Money?"

A scoff.

"I... I need more time on the locket."

"I know."

"Loyalty?" she tried. "I promise I'll—"

Tom's nose crinkled and Hermione broke off in exasperation. "Well then what— I can show you more. You only saw snippets the other day. Leave him be, and I'll show you whatever memories you want."

He shook his head.

"What more could you possibly want from me?!" she snapped.

Tom just smiled and—*God*, he was so *annoying*—Hermione couldn't get a read on him. As always, he was impossible—well.

Actually, she realised... there had been a few times where he hadn't been entirely impossible to read. Just a couple of instances where what he wanted... had actually been quite plain.

Oh.

Oh.

The idea formed quickly, but... oh, no. No, no, Hermione didn't want to do that. Absolutely not. The blurred recollection of how he'd touched her while she'd been under the Imperius curse, the memory of how he'd felt in her mouth, how he'd *tasted*, were enough to make her sick, but—

Oh, fuck.

What else could he want? She didn't have anything else to offer, and if it meant he'd back off of Avery... if it was the only thing...

She clenched her teeth, and hastily, before she could think herself out of it, she took off her cloak.

Tom's brows shot upward, but Hermione, quickly becoming sure it was her best play, paid him no mind, and drew her shirt up and over her head.

When it was off, she started at the buttons of her skirt, and let it drop to her feet. Stepping out of the skirt, she flicked off her shoes and removed her tights, all without daring to look at him, wobbling as she balanced to get them off of both legs.

When she finished with that, she straightened and flicked her hair back, raising her chin as she met Tom's eyes. He'd lowered his arms and he was staring, lips slightly parted, not quite smiling anymore.

It wasn't exactly encouraging, but she didn't let it stop her, and reached behind her back to unhook her bra. She pulled her arms out and added it to her pile, and then winced as she slipped herself out of her knickers.

There.

She tightened her jaw as she straightened, forcing herself to look at him.

She waited, more exposed than she'd ever been in her life, while his eyes roamed over her slowly, leisurely. She'd started off confident—she knew already that he didn't find her unappealing—but as the moments passed and Tom just continued to stare, it became agonising and she felt herself starting to tremble.

Hermione closed her fists. She tried to tell herself it was only the cold, but her nerves were quickly starting to give out. Tom was looking over her like he was reading her, tracing her lines, and the vulnerability of it became too much. She couldn't take it, so she approached, stopping only when he was close enough for her to touch.

"This is what you wanted, is-isn't it? I know you want me," she said, a bothersome tremor in her voice giving her fear away. She could feel goose-pimples forming on her skin, her hairs standing on end, her nipples tightening at the cold. "If you leave him be, then... you can have me."

Tom licked his lower lip, but didn't move, didn't speak.

Oh, for goodness' sake.

Far too boldly, she reached out and took his hands, pulling them up and placing them over her breasts.

Her nerve endings just about purred under the warmth of his touch, and though logically she knew what she was doing was repulsive, it certainly didn't *feel* repulsive—

"Don't," Tom muttered, pulling his hands away to grip at her wrists.

Hermione flushed.

Oh. Oh Jesus *Christ*— she'd absolutely lost the plot, because somehow, it felt like the only thing worse than exposing herself to him, touching him, being intimate with him, was being *rejected* by him.

What in all of hell was wrong with her?

But then—

"Which one is Avery's?" Tom asked without releasing her, his eyes flicking back behind her over to the beds.

"Um. That one," said Hermione, nodding to the one on the left.

With a steady grip on her wrists, Tom started to push her back toward it. She let him, pulse picking up, and when the backs of her legs met the mattress, she stopped and met his eyes, not letting him push her down on the bed.

"Only if you swear you won't hurt him," she told him.

Tom's eyes flicked down to her lips. "No."

She pulled her arms free and put her hand on his chest, ready to push him back.

"Swear it," she repeated.

He met her eyes and smiled, teeth showing, and then he reached up to her face with both hands, resting them on either side of her jaw. It was almost tender, and he reached up to tuck her hair behind her ear.

The look he gave her was intense, like he could see right into her soul.

She had the sudden urge to cry.

"You're not special," he murmured. "You know that, right?"

Hermione tried her best not to flinch, but there was something about it, to be told, *you're not special*, that made it impossible not to.

But she knew who he was, knew what he was trying to do, and this wasn't about her feelings. She held her chin up and maintained his eye contact. His words couldn't hurt her, not anymore, she wouldn't let them.

"*Swear it*," she repeated, keeping her hand steady on his chest.

Tom's smile fell, and he leaned closer into her, his body into hers, pinning her arm between them. He was so close. She could feel his warmth through his clothes. "You might be useful, I'll give you that much," he murmured, his thumbs brushing along her jaw. "But you're nothing to me. I could have anyone I want."

"Then either swear it," she ordered, "or go and find whoever else it is you—"

Tom interrupted her with a rumble of a laugh and he leaned into her, one hand resting on her hip and his mouth by her ear. "I won't hurt him," he murmured, his warm breath brushing pleasantly over her skin. "Today."

Hermione tensed. "That's not good enough."

Tom's lips brushed against the shell of her ear. "It's all you're going to get."

A shiver ran down her nerves at the depth of his voice.

"It's not enough."

"It's all you're worth."

Ouch. Tom's words were sharp as ever, but— no. Hermione wouldn't let herself feel it, she *wouldn't*. Too much depended on it.

A day wasn't long. It wasn't a good trade, not by any definition, but... she supposed at least he was offering something. She could work with a day. It would be long enough to get Avery somewhere safe, long enough to dispose of the diary. It would give her just enough breathing room to plan his murder before New Year's.

And that was all she needed... right?

She turned her head toward him, and he was so close that their noses almost brushed.

Her heart skipped a beat. Was this what it felt like to sell one's soul?

"A day," she murmured.

Tom hummed, low, satisfied, and pushed her down onto the bed. This time, she let him, lowering down to sit on the edge of the mattress, but when he moved to lay her back, she stopped him.

"Ah, ah," she said, pushing firmly on his shoulders. It was a risky play, and she didn't expect it to work, but if there was any chance she could make it through what was to come without *actually* having sex with him, then of course she was going to try it. "Get on your knees," she told him.

Tom's mouth twitched. She held her breath, anticipating a refusal, an insult, another thinly veiled threat, but instead—

Merlin.

Tom lowered to his knees before her, holding her eye contact all the while, trailing his fingertips along her thighs and down along the curves of her calves as he went.

"What shall I do?" he asked musically, hooking the tips of his fingers around the backs of her knees. He pulled, applying enough pressure to spread her legs. "Tell me."

Hermione's mouth was dry. The sight of him, kneeling between her legs, eyes on her cunt, was terrifying, disgusting. Exhilarating.

"I don't want you to tie my shoes."

She didn't know if he'd remember, but he must've, because the ensuing grin Tom gave her was depraved.

Heat pooled in her belly, nerves alight with anticipation, and then he dragged her to the very edge of the bed and brought his mouth to her—

"Oh my—*ah*—" Hermione muffled her mouth with her own palm, and leaned herself back down on the bed.

The sensation of it, the wet heat of his tongue passing over her clit, was torturous. She'd anticipated a dull, pleasant, familiar sensation, for it to feel like her own fingers, but it was— oh, fucking hell, it was so much *better*.

Tom's laugh rumbled against her. "I've thought about this," he murmured, warm breath dancing across her nerve endings, "ever since that night, in the potions classroom."

He closed his mouth back over her, gave a gentle suck, and Hermione drew a sharp breath.

"Have you?" he asked against her. "Thought about it?"

When she didn't answer, Tom stopped, pulling back from her. Hermione shifted her hips, chasing the friction. When he didn't give it, she finally murmured a breathless, "yes. I have." It wasn't even a lie. "Could you— *ah*."

He rewarded her answer by raking his tongue along the length of her lips, lightly sucking back over her clit.

"It almost made me regret poisoning your tea," he murmured, and when he paused again, Hermione dared a glance down to find him grinning up at her devilishly. "Almost."

The fact that he was speaking of trying to kill her went completely unnoticed, because *Jesus*. His lips and chin were glistening, glistening with *her*.

Her head fell back, and she moaned, couldn't keep it in, as he flicked his tongue over her in precise, steady movements. He ran his hand up and along the tendons of her inner thigh until his fingers brushed upon the lips of her cunt. He slid a finger inside of her—just one—but his were thicker than hers, coarser too. The stretch made his tongue feel even better and when he added a second, she hissed, arching her back off the bed.

Tom made a soft groan. "Oh," he breathed, slowly starting to slide his fingers back and forth, "are you a *virgin*?"

In another setting, she might've snapped back that virginity was a social construct, a primitive, outdated concept that society used to objectify women. But now, as she gripped onto the bedsheets and he slowly fucked her with his fingers, she wasn't capable of a word.

When it became clear she wasn't going to answer, Tom hissed, low and drawn out. She couldn't make out what he was saying—the sound was foreign to her—but its tone was drawn out, similar to the tone one would use to curse with.

"A gift that keeps on giving, aren't you?" he mumbled to himself, and then his mouth was back on her.

It wasn't long until she was seeing stars, and Hermione— she'd had orgasms before. Plenty. Hell, that night after their encounter in the potions classroom, she'd gotten herself off to the thought of this exact scenario twice. She was a *pro* at orgasms.

But *this* one was slow, torturous, reluctant, and it was far more intense than any she could remember. Tom held the pressure over her clit as she passed over the edge, kept his fingers buried deep while it peaked and she pulsed around him. And as she came down from it, she could barely remember where she was, let alone the fact that *Tom* had been the one to get her off like that.

She laid back against the bed, her muscles liquefying as colours danced beneath her eyelids, and there was a distant sound of fabric rustling.

She didn't pay it any mind until she felt the pressure of Tom moving over her.

Forcing herself back into her body, Tom was undressed and he pushed her up the mattress, caging her in with his arms. The tip of his cock brushed against her navel and the mattress dipped beneath them under their combined weight.

Hermione brought a hand to his chest to stop him. "N-I don't—"

"I have you," he said, a low purr, as his hand snaked underneath her knee. "That was the deal."

She tensed at his touch, and pushed back against him with her knee, trying to get him off. "No. I don't want to."

She didn't think he would, but just like that, he stopped. He clenched his jaw and looked plainly annoyed, but still, he started to back off.

Oh. Oh, thank *God*—

"Have it your way then," he said. "I'll just wait out there, have a cup of tea instead, shall I? And before I cut his throat, I'll be sure to let Avery know it was your fault, that you easily could've

helped—"

"No!"

Tom leaned back, looming over her, and he licked his lip. "No...?"

"Don't," Hermione whispered. "Please."

She tried to ignore her sense of revulsion and reminded herself that it could be worse. Her body was still thrumming with the lazy aftermath of her orgasm, and if she went with it, maybe like what he'd just done with his mouth, it wouldn't even be that bad. It was just sex. Meaningless, mechanical sex, and at the end of it all, it wouldn't matter if Tom was her first.

Avery's safety was more important, wasn't it?

With that, her decision was made, and Hermione reached out for his arm and pulled him back down over her.

Tom brushed her hair back out of her face, and though the action was gentle, it still felt degrading. He laughed. "Look at you," he murmured. "Do you think you're martyring yourself?"

"Don't."

He laughed louder. "Do you think he'll think you courageous?" Hermione flinched as he reached down to brush the tip of his cock against her clit, slick and warm. "He'll hate you."

"Shut—" Hermione jolted as he stroked the top along her slit, putting hard, insistent pressure at her entrance, "up."

"He'll want nothing to do with you once he knows you let me fuck you."

"Is this how you speak to all of the women you fuck?" she snapped.

Tom's smile widened darkly. "Only you."

He drove his hips down, the head of his cock starting to slide into her, and though she was soaked from her earlier orgasm, her walls didn't easily give way to him. His intrusion stung and she whined through her teeth while Tom groaned above her. She tensed up, clenching her eyes closed, nails gripping desperately at his forearms. It *hurt*.

And now that her entire body had clenched up, it'd become almost impossible to relax.

"Hermione."

Ah. Ah, ah, ah, he felt far bigger than he looked. Surely— surely that was it? Surely that was all of him—

Tom had spoken her name gently, but then he reached up to tangle his hand in her hair, harshly pulling at her scalp. "Look at me. *Look at me.*"

She didn't want to, didn't want to register him at all, but he pulled harder, so she did as he said.

"You won't pretend you're not here," he whispered harshly and—Christ— he shifted his hips, his cock slowly inching deeper. "You won't imagine you're somewhere else. You will relax, and you will take me, all of me, because you're—"

Tom broke off with a groan at the same time that Hermione cried out as she finally managed to relax, and he filled her completely.

It was— oh, God, it felt like he was tearing her. He dropped his head into the crook of her neck and his groan grew into a hiss, a low, strangled one. He paused, but only briefly, and then he shifted back, his cock slowly sliding back out. Hermione just about sobbed. It really fucking hurt.

"Shh," he shushed her, and his grip in her hair became gentle. "Shh, don't. Don't do that or you'll make me—"

He started to move over her, slowly rocking his hips, and the sting didn't ease. She bit painfully into her lip to keep quiet. How did people do this for *fun*?

"Relax," he just about moaned, pushing his body up as he started to fuck her with slow, lazy strokes. "Fuck, you're so— tight..."

Relaxing was just about the last thing on her mind, and when her muscles remained firmly coiled, Tom stilled, keeping his cock buried deep. He reached over her and pried her nails out of his arm and turned her arm over.

He traced the pad of his thumb over the lines of the scars he'd given her, back and forth, L, V, L, V. The scars ached as he caressed over it, and it was only when he started to move again in long, slow strokes, that she found the pain of the scars to be oddly... soothing.

"Does it hurt?" he murmured, still tracing her scars as he fucked her.

She didn't know if he meant her arm or his cock, but it didn't really matter. Either way, the answer was the same. "Yes."

He smiled and dropped her arm to hook his hands under her knees. He dragged her legs up and around his hips, and watched down at where they were joined, slowly sliding back and forth.

"You're bleeding."

Yeah, it fucking felt like it.

He reached down between them, and the dull feeling of his fingers brushing over her clit was a welcome distraction. "A useful thing," he uttered, starting to move a bit faster, "the blood of a virgin."

While she wouldn't say she felt accustomed to the stretch of his intrusion, the sting had started to ease and the pace was better. The movement didn't feel awful, and with the pressure on her clit, it was starting to mix with something almost pleasant—

"Full of uses, aren't you?" Tom murmured, and then he pulled back, his cock sliding all the way out of her. It was a relief, but it was short lived, because then he tugged at her hips, pushing her to turn over.

Hermione went with him, allowing herself to be turned onto her hands and knees. She was almost grateful for it, too, because it meant she wouldn't have to look at him.

And Tom didn't waste any time before he lined himself back up with her cunt and harshly pushed back in.

"Ah, ah," she whined, reaching back to slow his movements. "Please, it—"

Tom interrupted her by pulling her hair again, pulling her head back to brush against his shoulder. The position arched her back and his cock hit deeper.

"Tell me," he breathed huskily into her ear, and his thrusts became unrelenting, marked by the slap of wet skin. "*Beg* me to stop."

"I—" Hermione struggled to make a coherent sound, each of his thrusts agonisingly deep. It still hurt, but, oh, there was that building tension again, growing with each stroke of his cock. "Please." Please stop. Don't stop. "*Please*, I—"

He released her hair and pushed her down harshly, a firm hand between her shoulder blades until her head was pressing into the mattress.

Her knees buckled beneath her as he fucked her with fast strokes, and the angle was even *better*, and—fuck—it was his groan that did it, the sound of it reminding her that it was him, Tom, coming completely undone for her that pushed her over the edge.

The sounds she made were foreign to her own ears, muffled by the sound of white noise, and she was only briefly aware of him slowing, of his guttural groan as he filled her completely, emptying himself inside of her.

She stayed that way, face against the mattress until her heart started to slow and Tom rolled off her. She turned over and felt the mattress move as he lay on the bed beside her, laughing tiredly.

He didn't say anything, but she thought she could feel something insulting coming, so she forced herself up before he could. Hermione's legs protested, but she just didn't have it in her to look at him, to be in the same room as him any longer than she had to. Instead, she ducked straight back into the bathroom, his come seeping out of her as she went, trickling warmly down her leg.

She just about slammed the door behind her and immediately locked it behind her, thankful the bathroom was useable, and sat straight on the toilet, partly because Ginny had always said, '*you have to pee after sex, everytime!*' and partly because her legs were still quivering, threatening to give out. Jesus.

When she was finished, she spelled herself clean several times over, adding in a charm to scent herself with lavender for good measure. God forbid, she smelled like him. After that, she washed her hands manually—despite the cleaning charms, she always felt cleaner with running water—and avoided looking at her own reflection.

Satisfied she was as clean as she was going to get for now, she cracked the door open only enough to summon her clothes in, dressing as fast as she could.

She didn't want to go back out there, didn't want to have to look at his obnoxious, smug face again, but she wanted him to snoop through her things even less, so she decided she'd worry about a birth control potion after he'd pissed off, and bit the bullet.

And it was a good thing she did, too, because when she came out, Tom was dressed already and, unsurprisingly, had resumed his nosing, sifting through Avery's things on his bedside cabinet.

Aside from a healthy flush to his cheeks, he looked perfectly put together. A far cry from the mess she must've been.

Hermione's legs were still a bit shaky, the throbbing between her legs a painful reminder of what she'd just let him do, and if that wasn't enough, she noticed that there was still a sizeable wet patch on Avery's bed. She wasn't surprised in the slightest that Tom hadn't bothered to clean it.

It was hard to meet his eyes, and for once, she found herself thankful that he was the one who spoke first.

"I wanted to give you this," Tom said, smiling as though he enjoyed her discomfort, pulling a tiny package from his trouser pocket. It expanded as he offered it to her, into a suspicious, lumpy looking shape, wrapped in brown parchment.

She looked between him and the package. "Um. No, thank you."

He grinned at her hesitation. "I think you'll like it."

He continued to offer it. Hermione didn't want to take it, didn't trust anything coming from him, but he himself was touching it with his bare hands, so she supposed that must've meant it wasn't cursed.

In the hopes it would make him leave faster, she hesitantly plucked it from his fingers.

"Open it later tonight," he told her, a low murmur, and she gave a noncommittal nod, as if she wasn't planning on tossing it the moment he left.

Tom's mouth twitched, amused. "I'll see you soon," he said, reaching out to pinch at her cheek.

Hermione swatted him away, and as he laughed, he left without a look back.

She stayed right where she was, not willing to move until she heard the tell-tale crack of his disappearance.

Then, she tossed his package aside and went straight for a shower.

No amount of scrubbing made her feel clean.

Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

I wanted to quickly give an extra acknowledgement to those who left me some predictions from the last chapter, some of you have had some very clever and close ones, some have been warm and others have been precisely spot on, and they've all been a lot of fun to read, especially now that we're embarking on the part of the story I've been the most excited about :) Please enjoy!

Hermione wanted nothing more than to climb into her bed, hide beneath her covers, and stay there for the next ten years... well. Nothing, perhaps, other than to fill Tom's diary with as many stab wounds as physically possible and then feed whatever was left over to a pen full of ravenous pigs.

But unfortunately, she wasn't able to do either of those things, because her top priority had now become to get them the hell out of the Avery's estate. She had a day to get them settled somewhere safe, and she supposed it didn't particularly matter whether it'd been Avery or his sister who'd informed Tom of their whereabouts; what mattered is that Tom had gotten past its Fidelius charm. She could deal with who told what to whom, later.

And so, after she'd showered until her skin had begun to sting from how hard she'd scrubbed, she cleaned up Avery's bed—God forbid, he see the tell-tale, pink-tinged stain—and promptly started packing up their things. She wasn't sure where they'd go next, but that didn't matter. As long as they made it somewhere that Tom couldn't find them, then as far as she was concerned, sharing a shed with a flock of chickens would be good enough.

Her own things were easier to pack than Avery's. Hers were, for the most part, already tucked neatly in her bag, while Avery's clothes were sprawled out by the end of his bed, his toiletries scattered around the bathroom, his bags emptied over the table and floor of the living area.

Despite his mess, she thought she managed to find all of his things, and when the estate was starting to look bare, she next got started on her own bed by slipping her hand underneath her pillow to feel around for the resurrection stone.

Hmm.

Not finding it in its usual spot beneath the pillows, she threw them off the bed and checked on the mattress and underneath the quilt in case it'd been dislodged as she'd slept.

There was a loud squeak and some thumping from the entrance hall behind her, but Hermione kept searching.

"Hey."

Hermione gave Avery a noncommittal grunt back in greeting, and took the pillows out of their cases, checking inside the fabric.

"You'll be pleased to know I got everything you wanted," he announced, groaning as a loud thumping of the table indicated he'd put down a heavy bag, "even that damned book, and— what

are you doing?"

But Hermione barely heard him. She couldn't focus, couldn't think over the sound of her own heartbeat. It was getting louder, closing in on her, and she could feel it thudding in her neck, faster and faster and faster.

The stone wasn't there. Wasn't stuck behind the mattress, wasn't caught in the bedding, wasn't wedged between the floorboards.

It wasn't there.

She tried to calm herself, tried to see it logically. It had to be somewhere. She didn't remember seeing it that morning, didn't give it the squeeze and thought of Harry that she normally gave it, so she probably *had* just dislodged it while she'd slept.

But—

Tom had been alone in the room.

Tom had been alone in the room.

Which meant— if he'd nosed over to her side and had found the stone while she'd been in the bathroom—

Very quickly, Hermione was hyperventilating.

"Hermione...?"

He'd left quickly. He hadn't seemed bothered, not in the way she would've expected had he happened to have found the stone, but he'd left *so* quickly. He hadn't taken what must've been a perfect opportunity to mock her, to rub her nose in what they'd done, had only stayed long enough to give her that bloody package— oh.

Her eyes found the package over on the floor by the end of her bed.

"Bloody hell," she grumbled, and ignoring her better judgement, she snatched it up. Paying no mind to Avery's pestering, she pried open the wrapping with one finger, and, not wanting to touch the contents just in case, tipped the package out over the table. Out of it, came clattering—

Hermione instantly realised what she was seeing and reared back, and though she'd covered her mouth, they didn't do much to muffle her scream.

Avery was by her side in an instant.

"What?!" he demanded, a hand on her shoulder. "What is it?! Are you okay?!"

Hermione couldn't get a word out, could only whimper in horror, so she pointed to the ground, to where the glasses had fallen.

"What is it?" Avery spoke as he went to pick them up. "Are these... these are glasses," he stated, turning them over in his hand. "They're just glasses. What's wrong?"

"They... they're..." Her attempt at speaking turned into a panicked sort of sob, and she couldn't say it, could barely think it.

But Avery was properly inspecting them now, and he seemed to get there without needing her

help. "Oh, are they— are these *Dumbledore's's*?"

They were distinct, unmistakable, and it was all she could do to give him a stiff nod.

"Fucking hell," Avery remarked with a sight chuckle, turning them over. "Where'd you get these? Hope he's got spares."

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut, and covered her face with her hands, pressing down over her eyes as a high whine slipped from her throat. The room was spinning, floor slipping out from beneath her.

Fuck. Fucking, fucking, *fuck fuck fuck*, and like a series of dominoes, it was all falling into place.

No wonder Tom had stayed after finding Avery gone. He *had* lingered because of her, hadn't he, but not for *sex*. He'd—he'd just wanted to see if she was still there! He'd seen in her memory that Dumbledore had been the one to send her back! If Tom had succeeded this time, if he'd brought his plans forward and Dumbledore was now dead, then that meant he could never send her back, and if the time she'd come from was linked to their current time, then that meant that upon his death, she would disappear.

But she hadn't. And to Tom— that would be confirmation that the time she'd known was *meaningless*. It was a beautiful test; if the timelines were linked and she vanished, she'd finally be out of his hair, problem solved. If they weren't and she was there for good, then her power, her leverage—her knowledge of what was to come—would be all but gone. It was bloody fucking brilliant, and—

"*Fuck!*" she yelled.

"Woah, you think..." Avery was saying, "you think this means that Dumbledore's..."

But Hermione didn't hear a word of it.

She hadn't been quick enough with the diary, had misinterpreted, and then she'd bloody well gone and offered herself up on a silver platter! And to top it all off, she'd just about told him she knew about his horcruxes, she might as well have just handed him the stone herself!

Hermione dropped into a squat, hands over her face and just about screamed.

All her plans, ruined, and Dumbledore—*Dumbledore*—her safety net, the only one she could trust to keep Tom in check at Hogwarts should she fail, the *one* person who would form the Order, figure out Tom's horcruxes, and prepare Harry...

"Hermione?" Avery said timidly, crouching by her side, rubbing his hand over her back. It sounded like he'd spoken to her from the other end of a long tunnel. "It—it's okay. It might be—they're just glasses. He might be fine. He might've just—"

"Don't," she groaned, rocking slightly. She couldn't kid herself; she knew what they meant. Tom wouldn't have given them to her if Dumbledore was fine. This was his way, his sick, twisted, *fucked up* way of bragging, of proving her and her timeline wrong, of saying, '*see? I am greater than even time itself*'.

And—oh God— *I think you'll like it*, he'd said.

I think you'll like it.

Was that how well she'd sold it to him that she wasn't working with Dumbledore? Had he interpreted it as hate? Had he thought he'd be doing her a favour, that she'd be *glad* to see him dead?

She knew she'd fucked the timeline up already, but this... *this*, was worse than anything she could imagine. And to make matters even worse still, if Tom did have the stone, if he recognised it, realised it was the very same stone that'd been in his ring, then he'd come for them. He'd be an entirely different shade of *murderous* and no amount of negotiating would help her this time, not even the lure of the locket, which meant—

Get it together, she told herself, swallowing down the urge to vomit. Get it *together*.

Tom would've been gone... maybe about an hour. That was a long time if he'd found the stone, would've given him plenty of time for him to check on his ring, might've even been long enough for him to check on the diary, too. It was a miracle he wasn't already back upon them.

She could process the ramifications of Dumbledore later; for now, she just needed to keep them alive.

"Grab your things," she told Avery, forcing herself up and out of her ball, quickly wiping her eyes and moving to scoop up her bag.

"I-sorry?"

"We're leaving."

"What's going—"

"*Get your things!*" she yelled, her panic breaking through.

Avery's eyes widened, taken aback, but instead of doing what she said, he reached out for her. Hermione went to shove him off, but despite his lankiness, he was surprisingly strong. He gripped at her shoulders, held her still. "Hermione. *Hermione*. Just, bloody talk to me. What's going on?"

"I..." She squeezed her eyes closed, breathed in heavily. "I did something very, *very* stupid," she said. "He knows where we are. We have to leave, *now*."

"What? But—how could he possibly—"

"Because you went and opened your damned mouth, didn't you?!" she yelled, unable to keep it in.

Avery let her go, stepping back. "What?! No! No, I wouldn't do that!"

"And then I had to clean up your mess! All because you told your fucking family! Didn't you? While you packed your bags and I waited for you, you told them where we were going, even after I explicitly told you not to!"

Avery's features fell. "I... but it was... only Clarissa, but she wouldn't..."

Hermione scoffed and rubbed at her temples.

He gave you up, and he'll do it again.

"Well, it doesn't matter now." She paused to take a long breath. "Tom was here. While you went to Diagon Alley," she told him. "I didn't want to tell you. I didn't want to worry you, but he's going to come back, and when he does, we need to be far, *far* away from here."

"Well— what happened?! Are you all right, did... did he hurt you?"

"It doesn't matter," she hissed, "we just have to go."

"But where else are we supposed to g—"

"It doesn't matter! Just get your bloody things!"

Avery huffed, but at least he finally started to move, picking up the backpacks and slinging one over each shoulder.

"Thank you," Hermione murmured before she pocketed Dumbledore's glasses, shrunk down the bag of items Avery had just bought and added them to her bag, and returned all of the estate's items that she'd transfigured to their original state.

Looking back over the small house... that was it.

"Come on," said Hermione, leading the way through the estate's back entrance.

Avery followed along closely, and as they crossed the gardens, she gripped his hand tightly, earlier than she had to, just for the comfort of it. He gave her a reassuring squeeze back, and once they were past the charm line, with the most mundane location she could muster in mind, she twisted them on the spot, and the estate was gone.

"Where... *are* we?" Avery asked as they stepped out of the alleyway they'd appeared in.

"Albert Square, Manchester," she said, finding it a bit jarring to see the same area that she'd seen many times over in her grandparents' old photographs. "As muggle an area as they come."

Avery turned on his heel, taking in the drab street and the busy, lower-class muggles passing by them. Some of the muggles were staring back; with her and Avery's long coats and Avery's bright shirt, they must've looked really out of place.

"Come on," she said, grabbing his hand again and pulling him onward. "Shouldn't be too hard to find a hotel that'll take us."

The first establishment they tried was too flashy, too predictable, but the second was a middle of the range hotel around the block from the square. It seemed so perfectly nondescript, that when they were told they were fully booked, Hermione had a light confundus charm ensuring that had a last-minute cancellation would pop up in the nicest suite they had to offer.

The room on the top floor that they were subsequently led to was musky-smelling and generously sized, and the moment the muggle left them, Avery turned his nose up. "Disgusting," he remarked, eyeing off one of the light fittings. It looked like as though it hadn't been dusted in quite some time.

"You say that as if you know how to dust it yourself," Hermione mumbled, locking the door and pulling her wand to start warding off the room. She'd have to pop back down to the lobby soon, make the muggles forget ever seeing them.

"That's not the point," Avery said as he put down the bags. "These people claim to be running a business."

Leaving Avery to his muttering, Hermione sealed the room's door and windows, muffled it, shielded it, warded it for apparition...

"And they've got no taste, whatsoever," Avery said to the tablecloth, "and—good bloody Merlin, what is this?"

"That's a toaster," Hermione provided between her charms.

"A 'toaster'?"

"For making toast," she clarified.

Avery scoffed loudly. "It's bit much, isn't it? It takes up half the counter, and the cream doesn't at all match with that other big old thing."

"It's a fridge."

"A '*fridge*'?"

"Refrigerator. It keeps things cold," she snapped, her stress wearing her patience thin.

Recognising her irritation, Avery continued to mutter about the eyesore that was the fridge at a lower volume while she finished off her charms and pulled her bag onto the kitchen counter.

Hermione sunk her arm deep into it and took the diary and her knife out of her bag, placing the diary in the middle of the counter. She gestured for Avery to come over.

"Here." Hermione pointed the handle of the knife at Avery. "I need you to stab this," she told him.

She didn't want Avery to know about the diary, didn't want him to see it, think about or even so much as *smell* it, but something always seemed to get in the way. She wasn't sure what it was, whether it was an effect of having written in it, or an effect of one's relationship with the soul in question, but it was starting to feel like the locket had all of those years ago, like her head was clearer when she wasn't around it, and every time she went to destroy the diary, something seemed to stall her.

Whether it was just a coincidence or if it truly was a defensive mechanism of the diary—she decided it didn't matter. It was too important. Hermione wouldn't be taking any more chances.

"...sorry?"

Avery, who'd been so distracted by the room's mundane-ness, looked between her and the diary blankly.

"Just— take it!" she just about yelled, and at her insistence, Avery hesitantly took the knife. "Now, stab the book."

"Hermione—"

"Just— trust me, stab the book!"

"Whatever did it do to you?" He laughed hesitantly. "What does this have to do with—"

"I'll explain everything soon enough, but just, *please* Avery, if you want to make it through this week, then just stab the bloody thing!"

Avery stared at her as though she'd lost the plot, but then he sighed, and with a solid swing, he brought the blade of the knife down into the diary.

It was slower than the ring. As it was pierced, the diary started to ooze out a thick, tarry, black substance and started to let out a high-pitched shriek. It visibly shocked Avery, and seeing him about to let up, Hermione lunged forward to put her hands over his, driving the knife in deeper.

With the increased pressure, the shriek grew louder, louder, and louder, and when it felt like it was on the brink of bursting her eardrums, it finally broke, and a bright white flash threw them back.

Hermione had been thrown to the side, colliding with one of the dining chairs. Muggle furniture was built differently in the fifties; the chair remained intact as she hit it, and the impact of its back with her hip and shoulder was hard enough that she'd surely be left with a couple of nasty bruises.

She lay there for a moment, one of the chair legs driving painfully into her back, and she groaned when she mustered the strength to push herself up from the floor. She couldn't hear anything but the deafening ring of white noise.

Her eyes took several long blinks to adjust back to the room's lighting, and she quickly made out Avery's form slumped over by the fridge.

"Avery?"

She scrambled over and crouched by his side, giving his shoulders a testing shake. But though he didn't respond, he was clearly breathing, and a quick glance over was enough to see that didn't seem to have any overly serious injuries. Must've been knocked out.

Leaving him where he was, Hermione's eyes locked onto the diary, still on the bench, impaled by the knife. The bench top around it was marred with scorch marks, the same way the floor of the room of requirement had been from the ring. The black fluid that'd seeped out of it was trickling down to the linoleum flooring.

Hermione slumped against the wall, body aching all over, and the tears she'd been holding in since Tom appeared at the estate finally escaped.

It was done.

It was done.

Both horcruxes, finally destroyed. Whatever happened now, Ginny would at least never be possessed by the diary, the chamber would never be reopened, and Harry would never have to risk his life fighting a bloody basilisk.

Good. Her efforts to save Dumbledore from the ring might've been for naught, but at least Ginny would never be harmed by Tom's memory. That was still something, right?

And now, all that was left, was to find Tom and kill him before he got to her first.

His learning about her knowledge of his horcruxes might've meant she'd lost her element of surprise. It might've meant she needed to strike as soon as she possibly could, and had no time left to plan, and he'd be actively trying his hardest to murder her in return, and it might've meant she had no idea where to look for him, but...

She couldn't give up now. She'd made it this far, further than she ever thought she would. Both horcruxes were down and Tom was finally killable.

She had nothing left to lose, and she'd escaped him before. She could do it again.

Easy. No problem at all.

Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

We are well and truly on the home stretch now, please hold on tight 😊

"Have you completely lost your mind?!" Avery turned around to snap.

"Keep still," Hermione hissed, mending the gashes on Avery's back scratch by scratch. "And... it's not as if I have much of a choice."

"Yes, you do!" Avery said, popping another of his chocolates into his mouth. "You've got loads of them!"

"Stop it."

"Do you need me to list them for you? Because I'll do it, get me a quill!"

"Avery."

"No," he said, pausing to wince as she extracted a long splinter from his neck that he'd gotten when he'd collided with the pantry door. "Going back to Hogwarts is the worst idea I've ever heard, and I'm putting my foot down. I won't let you."

She sighed. She was just about done now. Just a few gashes left.

"It's not up to you," she told him. "I'm going, tonight, and that's final. *I need* to do this."

Avery paused for a moment, chewing his chocolate quietly as he let her work, but then he said decidedly, "well then, I'm coming with you."

"No, you're not."

"*It's not up to you*," he said in what she assumed was supposed to be an impression of her.

"This isn't a joke," she hissed.

"I know it's not, and that's precisely why I'm not letting you trot on off to your death all alone."

Hermione ignored him. "I think we're... all done," she said when she finished with the last of his scratches, promptly handing him his shirt back.

He took it from her, but instead of putting it on, he turned the dining chair around so he was facing where she was seated on the kitchen table. He stared judgmentally.

"What?" she snapped, before she told him firmly, "you're staying here. That's it. *I need* you to stay here."

"I'm not just going to sit by and twiddle my thumbs while you—"

"If something happens to me, then *I need* you to be safe!" she said, raising her voice. "Here," she

fished through her bag and handed him a notebook, one that she'd been steadily filling ever since they'd left the Avery's manor together. "I've written everything down for you, everything you could possibly need to know."

Avery didn't take it. "I don't want your notebook; I want us to stay together."

"Don't you understand? If I don't... if I don't make it, then I need to be sure there's someone else left who knows of what's to come. It was supposed to be Dumbledore, but now, it's looks like it's just going to have to be you."

Avery blinked. "No. *No*—"

"Don't misinterpret me, but you weren't my first choice for the job either," she said, huffing. "When the war begins—and at this stage, it's looking more and more likely that it's a *when*, not an *if*—there are families who will fight back, but they need someone to bring them together. In my time, Dumbledore was the one to rally them, and together, they were called the Order of the Phoenix. But now, without Dumbledore, and if I don't make it either... it'll have to be up to you."

Avery gaped at her. "Absolutely not, I'm not rallying anybody, Hermione—"

"The Prewetts, Potters, Longbottoms, Weasleys. Those four families, you can count on, I've written them all down in the book. And then, over all others, there's one person you absolutely *must* recruit. He will say no when you ask him, he will want to put his head down and stay out of it, but you *can't* let him," said Hermione. "Aberforth Dumbledore."

"A... another Dumbledore?"

"Yes, Abe, from the Hog's Head," she said. "He's Professor Dumbledore's brother."

"*Abe*?"

"Yes. He may not be the same calibre of leader as Professor Dumbledore, but I just can't think of anyone better suited to fill his place. Eventually, years down the line, an auror called Mad-Eye Moody will be the one leadership falls to, but to bridge the gap between now and then—Aberforth. To get him onside, you'll need to tell him that Tom killed his brother. Hopefully, that on its own will be enough to sway him, but if it's not, your last option will be to guilt him into it by insisting to him it's what his sister would want. Got it?"

"No," Avery said, taking her hand. "I don't have any of it! Hermione, please, can't we just... run away? We can keep hiding, there's plenty of places we could go, and we could rally your Order of the Whatsit together. Or—or we could go to the Ministry, give *them* your book, let them handle it."

"The Ministry wouldn't know how to handle a wet fish," she mumbled, staring down at their hands.

"Just... don't go," he said. "Stay here."

"I have to."

"Hermione—"

"I can't let go now, not when I've gotten so close," she insisted. "I've already given up my life for this. What's a little bit more?"

He tugged on her hand. "You can make a new one. With me."

She wanted nothing more than to say yes. The prospect of what would happen should she chase after Tom was *terrifying*, more so than anything else she'd ever done, and deep down, she longed to give up, to disappear with Avery, to hide far, far away, somewhere she'd never have to think about Tom again, but...

She shook her head. She couldn't. As long as Tom was still out there, she wouldn't be able to live with herself. Too much depended on her, too many *lives* counted on her.

Hermione leaned forward, rested her forehead against Avery's. He felt sturdy, safe. Tempting. "I have to do this," she whispered.

She heard him sigh through his nose, and then he reached up, a hand at the base of her neck, and pulled her toward him, pressing his lips against hers.

His lips were warm and soft, timid and undemanding, nothing at all like Tom's. And while it wasn't more than a drawn-out peck, it was also...

"Sorry," Avery murmured, smiling sheepishly when he pulled back. "I just... I wouldn't have been able to forgive myself if I didn't take the chance."

A lump was rapidly forming in the base of her throat, growing bigger by the second, and her eyes threatened to well over. "Don't be sorry," she told him.

He shrugged, looking a little bit awkward, and the action was so endearing that she reached for his face and pulled him back to kiss him again.

It was deeper the second time. Less polite, more desperate. Avery let her pull him closer, and when his tongue passed over hers, he tasted like the chocolates he'd been eating.

She tried to put as much as she could into it, to tell him without words how scared she was, how much she wanted him, how much she wanted to say yes.

But it was only a fairy-tale, and all too soon, she pulled away. "Don't worry. I'll be fine, and I'll... see you soon," she said, equally as much for her own benefit as it was for his. She reached out and put her hand on his chest, her palm flat over his heart. "You be safe. *Please*, be safe."

Avery smiled sadly. "I always am."

Late that evening at Hogwarts, and all was quiet.

It'd been eight-thirty when she'd parted from Avery at the muggle hotel, and for the few students and the hand full of professors who were spending their New Years at Hogwarts, dinner would've wrapped up and curfew would be just about to come into effect.

She was accompanied on her walk by the panicked thrumming of her heart, but aside from that, it was lonely, and the only other soul she met out on the grounds as she passed through them was Kettleburn. He was out in the greenhouses, locking them up for the night, and though she was disillusioned and he didn't notice her presence, she waved as she trudged through the snow all the same.

Seeing a familiar face, even at a distance, was comforting, but upon reaching the castle itself and finding its corridors deserted, the comfort quickly dissipated. Hogwarts had always been frightening at night, and what she'd come to do made it more intimidating still.

Merlin, what was she doing? Maybe Avery was right, maybe she was crazy. But she just didn't know what else to do. She'd come so close—so *tantalisingly* close—to getting rid of Tom for good, that she just couldn't give up now.

It was a long shot, she knew. If she was right and Tom had checked on his horcruxes, he'd probably be off trying to track her and Avery down, he wouldn't just be sitting around Hogwarts. But she knew he'd come back eventually, and so her plan was to wait him out. If she could just get back to his rooms, she could ambush him when he finally showed his face.

It was a simple plan, a 'what-would-Harry-do?' sort of plan, not even remotely close to being as well thought out as she would've liked, but with so little time under her sleeve... it was all she had.

She just couldn't think of how else to find him any sooner, not if she wanted to retain some element of surprise, and if there was one thing she absolutely couldn't have happen, it was Tom making another horcrux before she killed him. If Dumbledore truly was dead, then he had another murder under his belt. She could imagine the importance of Dumbledore's death to Tom, and guessed that if there was one murder he would've wanted to use for a horcrux more than any other, it'd be Dumbledore's. And though that meant he must've had all he needed... based on everything she knew about him, she was all but certain he'd still save it for when he had one of the founder's objects.

The locket and the cup—she wasn't worried about those. But the diadem, she was less confident about. In her own time, Harry and Dumbledore had thought he'd turned it into a horcrux *after* the locket and cup. Presumably, that meant he hadn't tracked it down yet, and therefore, even with Tom becoming aware that she'd destroyed his ring and stolen his diary, she might still have a good window in which to kill him.

At least... that's what she told herself.

Hermione weaved up through the castle, a light headache forming as she turned her predicament over and over, and as she passed the first floor, she thought she heard some dull thudding from the staircase below her. In the dimly lit corridor, she didn't see anyone, but still, not wanting to chance someone running into her, she quickened her pace.

The third-floor corridors leading toward Tom's chambers were close to pitch black, only dimly lit by small flames flickering in their wall-mounted lanterns. The movement of the light had the shadows cast by the statues moving too, and it gave her the hair-raising sensation of being watched.

She ignored it, squeezing the hilt of her wand as she hurried along. Just a little further.

With quiet footsteps, she turned the corner by the end of the corridor and finally laid eyes upon the portrait to Tom's chamber—

But there was someone already there.

Hermione mouthed a silent curse, and narrowed her eyes at Cygnus, who was leaning against the wall next to Tom's portrait, the definition of relaxed. What in hell was he doing there?

Could... could Tom have been *in* there? Was Cygnus waiting out in the corridor for him?

Hermione crept up to one of the sculptures by the corner and stood behind it, watching Cygnus as she waited. She crinkled her nose. He looked as smug as ever, not at all bothered by the darkness of the corridor, and he was dressed like he'd just come from a formal dinner, his hands tucked into the pockets of his expensive-looking dress robes.

He looked ready for a long stay, and not seeing another option, Hermione waited, watching as he waited, and...

Nothing happened.

She stood there until she had to sit from the ache of her feet, and while Cygnus started to alternate between pacing back and forth and leaning against the wall, it became frustratingly clear; he wasn't going anywhere.

Fucking hell. She'd been plonked there long enough that it didn't seem likely that Tom was in there, which meant, *what was he waiting for?*

It must've long passed curfew, and so she briefly considered the possibility that Tom had quite intentionally put Cygnus there, had recruited him to join his Knights and had tasked him with being on watch. She quickly dismissed it though; even if Tom *had* recruited him and had anticipated her coming to the castle, she didn't think it mattered. There was only one of him. She could handle Cygnus.

And so, pressured by her nagging sense of urgency, Hermione made up her mind. She was just going to have to risk it and try to flush him out.

She ducked back behind the corner and dropped her disillusionment charm before taking a deep breath and stepping back out.

Cygnus' eyebrows raised as he saw her.

"Oh. Evening, Miss," he drawled.

Hermione's lips thinned at his tone. "Hello there, Cygnus," she grumbled tightly.

"Haven't seen you in a few days," he remarked.

"Yes, unfortunately it couldn't have been longer," she said, folding her arms. "You *do* realise it's past curfew?"

Cygnus laughed, but there wasn't humour in it. "Funny. You know, Miss," he drawled, ignoring her comment about curfew, "I was just saying to Petyr how strange it was, wasn't I, Pete? That you suddenly just seemed to up and disappear?"

Hermione followed Cygnus' eyes and turned back in the direction from which she'd come, and sure enough, Petyr Dolohov, a renowned fifth-year menace, was there, camouflaged by the darkness a way down the corridor.

"Yeah, you were," he said, voice echoing through the darkness.

"And you know," Cygnus went on, "I think you might've been there too, Al."

On Petyr's right, Aloysius Nott stepped out from the shadows, and moments after, another second-year, Joseph Rowle appeared on his other side.

Hermione turned back to Cygnus, and from the other end of the corridor, two of the Fawley's, Marshall and Leonard, a sixth- and second year, had seemingly appeared out of nowhere.

The smile Cygnus had been wearing on his fat little face had somehow grown smugger, and now, seeing them all together, Hermione was abruptly reminded of what Dumbledore had said only weeks ago when he'd caught her in the entrance hall.

I am becoming increasingly aware that... a group, of sorts, seems to have formed, consisting of students in Slytherin house who are here for the break.

Well, *shit*.

Hermione cleared her throat, her grip tightening around her wand. "Well. While it's been lovely seeing you all, it's getting late. I don't think any of you are strangers to the consequence of being out after curfew, so I think it would be best if you boys headed back off to your dormitory."

"Nah," Cygnus said, unbothered as he closed in on her, "I don't reckon we will. Not now our night's about to get interesting."

Hermione caught the movement of Cygnus' hand in his pocket, and that was all she needed. At once, she threw up a shield charm, and Cygnus' incoming curse disintegrated into it right at the last moment.

The others were spurred on by Cygnus, and the corridor was illuminated by the light of the onslaught of curses. Even though they were only students, not only was she seriously outnumbered, but she was surrounded, too. Duelling six opponents simultaneously was one thing, but duelling them from all angles with no cover, in the dark, posed a whole different challenge, students or not.

Taking out Rowle and Leonard, the younger of the students, was easy enough, but Cygnus had years' worth of experience as one of the school's most efficient bullies. He cast above his level, and Marshall, Nott and Dolohov weren't much worse.

And so, it really wasn't surprising that after Hermione had managed to hit Dolohov with a stunner to the thigh and Nott with a forceful *incarcerus*, a hard pressure she never saw coming collided with her back.

At its impact, Hermione felt her wand slip through her fingers, and she was falling, and then all she saw was black.

When Hermione woke, her wrists were burning.

Forcing her stiff neck to move, she glanced downwards to find herself tied to a hard chair, her hands behind its back, and she was... huh. Where *was* she? She didn't recognise her surroundings, but the room she was in was dark and the windows were letting in an eerie green light, so she assumed she must've been somewhere underneath the lake.

There was an abrupt movement in her peripheral vision, and seeing who it was, Hermione, twice in one evening, found herself relieved to see Cygnus.

"Cygnus?"

Thank *Merlin* it was just him. Her instinctive guess had been that she'd been brought to the chamber. But if she'd been brought to wherever she was and was still being held by Cygnus, then that must've meant she was still in the castle itself. Tom would never have given students access to the chamber.

"Where... are we?" she asked him.

Cygnus scowled at her. "Shut it, Miss."

Hermione blinked at the coldness of his tone. "Excuse me?"

He toyed with his wand, taking a slow step. "Bet all those detentions aren't so funny now, are they?" he sneered.

She scowled at him. That little *bastard*. She never should've bothered with keeping Bellatrix's timeline intact, should've smothered him when she had the chance.

Hermione clawed at her restraints and a bit of desperation seeped into her voice. "Cygnus. Let me — let me go. If you value your place in this school, then you will let me *go*—"

"Nah," he said nonchalantly, crossing his arms, "I don't think I will. You see, the Professor wants to see you. We're under strict instruction that should we run into you, we're to keep you here until he gets back."

Hermione swallowed loudly.

Until he gets back. *Until he gets back.*

She assumed that meant, until he gets back from his own attempts of finding her. For him to have tasked students to keep watch for him suggested he'd anticipated being gone for an extended period of time.

But that then had her wondering whether Cygnus truly knew what he was doing. He'd been under the impression that she and Tom were shagging, hadn't he, so maybe he didn't quite grasp the severity of her situation...

"Cygnus," Hermione insisted, her voice giving away her growing panic. "This is— I don't know what he's told you, but this is a matter of life and death, so if you could *please*—"

"Oh, don't worry, Miss, I know," he said. "But you see, I'll be in his favour after this. Then my family will be good and set for when it happens."

Fuck. "For... when it happens?"

"For when we regain our rightful place, muggles underfoot. For when we free our people from the muddled influence of *your* kind."

Oh. *Oh*, that sadistic, fucking little *monster*. "He-he's using you, Cygnus," she told him, changing her angle. "He doesn't care about the purity of your blood, he couldn't care less! He's a half-blood himself, his father was a muggle—"

"Getting a bit sick of the sound of your voice, if I'm honest," Cygnus sneered. "He said not to harm you... but I think he wouldn't mind if I just..."

Cygnus raised his wand, aiming it right between her eyes.

"No. No, Cygnus, no, *please*—"

Another flash of red, and Hermione was returned to darkness.

The next time she woke, it was to the feel of a rough hand harshly clasping her jaw, shaking her awake.

Her entire body *ached*; her neck throbbed with the characteristic stiffness of being stuck at an awkward angle for a long amount of time, and she had barely any feeling left in her arse.

But her sore muscles quickly became the least of her worries, because when she cracked her eyes open, her heart stopped. The rough hand had been Tom's, and he was right *there*, crouched before her, his deep brown eyes staring back at her.

"Didn't harm a hair on her head," Cygnus was saying from behind her as Tom released her jaw. "But I'd be more than happy to, if you'd like."

Hermione barely heard Cygnus. It was hard to notice anything other than Tom, the way he tilted his head as he considered her, and while Hermione dared to not so much as blink, she couldn't help but notice his appearance. He looked far less put together than he usually did; wrinkled shirt, hair messed as though he'd been repeatedly running his hands through it, dark, heavy circles under his reddened eyes as if he hadn't slept.

"That won't be necessary," he eventually murmured before he stood, finally stepping back from her.

Hermione drew a sharp breath only when he looked away and gave her muscles a good flex. The ropes binding her to the chair were tight, and though she could feel the knots around her hands, could physically hold them with her fingers, she somehow couldn't get a good grip on them. They must've been magically put in place.

The room was a bit lighter than it'd been the first time she woke, light enough that she could make out that she was in a classroom. But the light coming in was still tinged green, so she deduced she must've been in the lower wing of the dungeons.

Fuck. That was telling in itself. Tying her up and holding her there, *right there*, in a classroom, was bold. Without Dumbledore at Hogwarts, Tom probably thought himself untouchable.

But then—she supposed he probably was.

And now that the room was lighter, that must've meant it was day... and that it was Tom's birthday. Hermione struggled at her bindings again at that realisation, but it was useless. She was good and stuck.

It looked like she was set to meet her death on his birthday after all, and she'd gone and walked right into it.

Just like Harry had.

"Go fetch the boy," she heard Tom say to Cygnus.

Hermione snapped her head up in their direction. The boy. *The boy*. Her heart ached, threatened to burst out of her throat, because there was only one boy he could possibly mean. And so, after she heard the sounds of Cygnus leaving, and Tom had stepped back into her line of sight, she gave him the roundest eyes she was capable of.

"Tom," she tried, voice as soft and helpless as she could muster, "Tom, please. Edward has nothing to do with—"

He raised a hand to quiet her.

Sensing that it would be a bad idea to push him while she was alone with him, wandless and bound to a chair, she obediently snapped her mouth shut.

And Tom— well, he didn't really do anything. He took his time crossing the room and leaned his long form on the front desk, not looking at her, waiting patiently. He seemed deep in thought, his fingers thrumming quietly on the surface of the desk, but... hmm. He didn't seem overtly angry. Maybe she could...

"Tom." She gave her bindings another tug. "Please, I thought we were in a good place. I thought we were finally past this. *Please*."

Tom still didn't look at her, but she heard his quiet exhale and he moved to reach into his pocket. He pulled out a wand—Oh. She recognised it in an instant, it was *her* wand, and he held it down by his lap between both hands, inspecting it, his fingertips tracing over the grooves in the wood.

"Where is it?" he asked abruptly, still looking down at her wand as he stroked it, in a tired tone that was only a hint above a whisper.

Even with no context, Hermione knew what he meant. There could only be one thing. He'd seen a piece of his ring, and by now, he knew it had been destroyed. That only left the diary.

But she wasn't about to go admitting that she knew about it, so she said, "where is what?"

Finally, he moved, turning his head to meet her eyes, and in an abrupt action, he snapped her wand clean in two.

Hermione stared in horror as he tossed the pieces down toward her feet, whimpering as they clattered on the stone.

No, no, *nonono*, she'd rather he'd broken her arm. Hell, she'd rather he'd taken her arm completely off. Because without her wand, without her magic, how was she supposed to—

A muffled thumping started from out in the corridor beyond the classroom door, one that sounded like a struggle. Hermione couldn't crane her neck that far, couldn't see the door, but the struggle quickly became louder, and then it almost sounded like a faint voice...

"—fessor!" As the voice grew louder, she recognised it as Cygnus', calling out from out in the corridor behind her. "Sir, I need your h—"

A flash of red filled the room from behind her, and then it went abruptly quiet.

Tom glanced over her, over to the door, straightening as his eyebrows picked up in interest.

There was a long stretch of quiet... and abruptly, there was a hollow crash behind her, and fragments of the door were scattering around the room around her.

Hermione tensed, unable to properly see what had happened, but when a green curse shot through the room from behind her and collided with the front wall, only narrowly missing Tom, she did her best to duck behind the chair she was tied to.

Before her, Tom moved quickly, drawing other chairs and desks from around the room upward to intercept the onslaught of incoming curses. Between them, he sent his own curses back, filling the room with red light, and Hermione shrank down as small as she could make herself to avoid being caught in the crossfire.

There were loud footsteps from behind her, and then, out of the corner of her eye, she saw someone throw themselves to the ground to avoid one of Tom's stunners. It was Avery.

Oh, for the love of—

Hermione screeched as Avery abruptly threw a spell in her direction and the chair she was on collapsed beneath her. She landed firmly on her tailbone, but—*aha!*—with the chair in pieces, she was able to shimmy her legs and her hands free from it. They were still bound together, but at least she was free of the chair.

She rolled herself over to see what was going on just in time to see Avery being hit by one of the chairs Tom had levitated, throwing him back onto the ground.

"What has she told you to earn such blind devotion?!" Tom called across the room while Avery struggled back to his feet. "Has she told you she's a mudblood?"

"Do you ever stop talking?!" Avery lobbed another green curse at Tom, one that was stopped by an intercepting table.

Tom laughed. "Did she tell you she sucked me off in the infirmary?" he grinned, the white of his teeth showing. He was *enjoying* himself. "Or—what about yesterday when I fucked her in your bed?"

Tom was so obviously taunting him, so clearly saying whatever he could to distract him, but—fuck—despite the obviousness of what he was doing, Avery still fumbled. He lost focus, taking only an extra second to look in her direction, to meet her eyes, and—

"*No!*" Hermione yelled, just as Tom's next spell collided with Avery's chest, and the classroom abruptly fell quiet.

Hermione whined as she *thrashed* at her bindings, tugging to free her hands and legs with all she had, and yet it was still no use. Cygnus' ropes held firm, and Tom took his time crossing the room to reach Avery, slow, measured steps.

She continued to struggle while Tom bent down and slowly started dragging Avery over by his arms, pulling him carelessly through the wreckage of the furniture, over to where she was stuck laying on her side, stopping when he had Avery lined up beside her.

A sob escaped her. Avery had a fresh scrape along his jaw, but aside from that, with his hair fallen loose around his face, he looked peaceful, like he were sleeping.

It was supposed to be *her*, only her, fucking stupid, *stupid* Avery.

"Now," Tom said, panting lightly, as he crouched down by Avery's head. The smile he gave her didn't at all meet his eyes. "Shall we see if you've found your voice yet?"

Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Peremo. *Latin, verb: annihilate; extinguish; slay; kill*

*

"Renervate."

Avery woke groggily, with slow, heavy blinks, but the moment he became aware of the wand at his neck and the hand holding his head up, he thrashed out.

"Ah, ah." Tom pulled back harshly on Avery's hair and visibly pressed the tip of his wand deeper into his neck, and Avery winced, stilling at the warning.

Avery's eyes, quickly becoming panicked, found hers, and seeing her laying bound before him, he whispered, "I'm sorry. I couldn't let you come by yourself. I couldn't, I—"

Tom's wand lit with a white light, and Avery's voice became silent.

"Touching," Tom remarked, watching as Avery continued to silently speak to her.

"It's okay," Hermione told Avery in a tight whisper, even though she didn't believe the words herself. "It'll be okay."

She thought she could make out the movement of his lips. *I'm sorry, Hermione. I'm sorry, I tried.*

"Do you love him?" Tom asked, the abruptness of his voice drawing her attention from Avery. His expression was entirely blank. Perfectly unreadable. Bored, almost.

Hermione looked to Avery and—fuck. She mightn't have loved Avery the way he wanted her to, she mightn't dream of him, mightn't ache for him when he was gone, but his eyes were wide and terrified, and he'd been her only rock, and so, she nodded.

"Yes," she whispered, more to Avery than to Tom, "I do."

Tom grunted, a light sound of disinterest. "Then I'll ask you once more, Hermione," he said calmly, conversationally, as if his wand wasn't pressing against Avery's jugular. "Only once. Where is it?"

"I—" Hermione's words tangled in her throat. She couldn't tell him. She *couldn't* or they'd both be doomed, but Avery's life depended on it.

As though he knew her struggle, Avery thrashed again, giving her the smallest of movements, the slightest of a shake of his head. *Don't give him anything.*

And so, Hermione shook her head and said, "I don't know what you're talking about."

Tom's mask cracked and he gave a halfway smile, and then his wand flashed red.

Blood erupted from the line of the curse along Avery's neck, and Tom pulled his head back by his hair, tilting his head back as blood spurted from the wound.

"No!" Hermione screamed, lurching against Cygnus' bindings, "*no, no no!*"

The sounds Avery made were strangled, and he thrashed in Tom's grip, clawing at Tom's arms, his groans becoming thick, wet, gurgles.

Tom held him that way, upright, head tilted back, until the flow started to slow and Avery's arms slackened. Then he let Avery fall, collapsing down beside her.

Hermione bucked at her bindings, screaming through closed teeth as Avery fought for breath, and she could feel it reaching her, his blood that'd seeped along the stone. It was warm against her skin, and she tried to shuffle back.

"No, I'm sorry," she sobbed to Avery as his eyes became unfocused, "I'm sorry, I'm so sor—"

Tom climbed over her, dragging her over so she was flat on her back, and she screamed at him, bucking to get him off. He held her down with his own weight, stilling her head with a rough hold on her jaw.

Avery's blood was on his face, flecks scattered across his cheek, but she could only see his eyes. Like his skin, they were flecked with red, and they drew her in as an onslaught of pressure set in around her head, his magic probing at her, piercing into her temples.

She wouldn't let it in though. She couldn't—*couldn't, couldn't, couldn't*—give in to it, no matter what he did to her. Tom not knowing what had become of his diary was all she had, it was the only thing left keeping her alive, and her Occlumency had to stay strong.

The pain abruptly let up, and Tom pressed her painfully into the stone and snarled, "*tell - me.*"

"No. I'll never— *ahh!*"

The cruciatus curse started slow, this time, in ripping sensations along her nail beds, in the pulling of her joints, the extraction of her teeth. But then it went deeper, to the splitting of bone, the slicing of flesh, the tearing of tissue, the twisting of her spine, and oh— his torture in the forest had been *nothing*. The pain of his attempts of legillimency, nothing. Her skull was swelling, constricting and releasing, and she'd never met pain, not like this, and it went on and on—surely she would die, *please*, just let her—

Until it didn't.

"...do it?"

Hermione gasped for air, only at the brink of consciousness, feeling herself convulsing harshly with the aftermath of her muscles being ripped from their tendons.

"—didn't want to do this, not again." She could hear it now, that the voice was Tom's, distant and muffled. She opened her eyes, finding him over her, tendons tightening in his neck as though *he* were the one being tortured. "But you-you had to go and *make* me, didn't you? You just keep pushing, and pushing, and *pushing*, and you give me no choice."

Hermione couldn't make out what he was saying. What was he saying?

"—could've been so much more. You had so much potential, and you just *threw* it away!"

Hermione felt her tears streaming down her face, through into her hair. She didn't know what he was saying, but it didn't matter. "I'll never tell you a-anything. You'll have to kill me," she slurred,

her voice morphing into a delirious laugh. "But if you do, it— gone. It'll be gone f-forever. You'll never know what happened to it."

Tom scowled down at her, and his mask was well and truly gone. He was wearing his anger, shaking with it. "Do you—" he interrupted himself, giving a quick, high laugh. "Do you think killing you is the worst I can do?"

He abruptly let her go, and moved back, straightening to a stand, and with a flick of his wand, she... she was untied.

It was so unexpected that at first, she thought she imagined it, and it was only after she'd rolled over and scrambled to her feet, her entire body protesting, that she noticed what he was doing. He'd started chanting, a combination of Latin words that weren't familiar to her, but whatever he was doing, he was using his whole body to channel it, and... she could *feel* it in the air.

The spell he was working on was tangible, cold and humid, like a thick, suffocating smog of frost being cast over the room. But she didn't recognise the words, and she could handle being cold, so she didn't waste her chance by staying to figure out what he was working on.

While Tom continued to chant, Hermione used the opportunity to stumble across the room and fumble at her bag for the only other weapon she had—her knife—but then, right as she took hold of it and slipped it up into her sleeve, from her peripheral vision—

Avery started to *move*.

Finished with his spell, Tom breathed heavily, stumbling back to lean on the front desk, his magic visibly tiring him. But despite it, he still managed to grin menacingly. "Best run, Hermione," he hissed, "he won't stop until he has your eyes."

Hermione stared in horror as Avery's body made it up onto hands and feet, and while she'd never seen an inferius with her own eyes, she'd read about them, seen them in books, had heard about them from Harry. Skeletal, half-rotted and rabid, they were the material of nightmares. But unlike the sketches of the Inferi presented in textbooks, unlike Harry's recollection of them, Avery was fresh, and other than the deep gash that extended halfway around his neck, it was only his clouded over eyes and the way he moved that gave him away as inferius.

With animalistic movements, joints bending at unnatural angles, he started closing in on her.

Her body just about screamed, but Hermione didn't hesitate. She took Tom's advice and ran.

Without her wand to help her, she stumbled haphazardly around the classroom's remaining desks, keeping as much space between her and inferius-Avery as she could, but it wouldn't hold out. He was throwing the remaining tables aside as he pursued her, clearing what was left of the obstacles in the room, and Hermione's body was close to its limit.

Fuck. Inferi, inferi, inferi—*fire*. She needed *fire*.

There was an ingredient cupboard at the back of the room, and Hermione stumbled towards it. She didn't stop and look as she reached it; she blindly grabbed any vial she could reach and lobbed them at Avery. Surely at least one of them would be flammable, surely, *had to be*.

"Avery!" she pleaded as he closed in, a vial of clear fluid smashing as it collided with his chest. "Avery, ple—"

Hermione ducked herself out of the way as he lunged at her, and he collided with the potions

cabinet. Glassware smashed around him, and he roared rabidly.

But despite the shards of glass, despite the acidity of the ingredients that'd spilled over him, he didn't slow down. He just kept coming like they were nothing, and when he charged at her, her body just wouldn't move fast enough.

He barrelled her down, coming down on top of her, and his nails dug so tightly into her arms that they drew blood.

"Avery," she sobbed, "Avery, please don't do—*ah!*"

Inferius-Avery growled as he swiped across her face, his nails scratching deep into her cheek, and Hermione screamed, thrashing her limbs with all she had to get him off.

From the other side of the room, Tom remarked with a loud, "that was close."

He continued to claw at her face, aiming for her eyes, and with nothing else left, Hermione slipped her table knife out from her sleeve. She swung out blindly, but she was so focused on protecting her face, that it was a pathetic shot. It barely scratched across his cheek, but inferius-Avery *screamed*. It was an awful, ear-splitting scream, like an animal being slaughtered, and he released her, rearing back like he'd been burned.

Hermione didn't immediately understand—it was just a table knife, and her cut hadn't even been deep, but— of course.

The venom.

With her moment of freedom, Hermione shuffled herself back along the stone, using the wall to help get back on her feet. She hobbled as far as she could, making it over what was left of the door and ducked out into the corridor.

Inferius-Avery, recovering from her blow, followed closely after her and she almost tripped over Cygnus as she went. But out there in the corridor, she almost wept with relief. Because even though she wouldn't call wandless magic one of her strengths, she could cast simple spells well enough, and now, in the open corridor lined with lanterns, it only took a simple one to summon one over and throw it at Avery.

She missed with her first lantern, but the second one met its mark, and he lit up. One of the potions ingredients must've been potent, because the candle ignited like he'd been doused in petrol.

Hermione gasped seeing it, his body being engulfed in flames, and she almost sobbed. While she knew that would finish it, it was also *Avery*, and she'd set him alight.

But he was already gone, she knew that, and at least it was fast. Inferi were incredibly susceptible to fire, and his raw screams died out in only a matter of seconds, his figure crumbling in the flames.

Hermione's relief didn't last long though. Now that Avery had fallen, she could see past him, and could see that Tom had followed them out into the corridor. He was watching from by the classroom door, and he looked... disappointed. Tired. At the end of his patience.

"No matter," he said, eying Avery's burning remains with a crinkled nose. "More enjoyable to do it myself, anyway."

He raised his wand and with all she had left, Hermione threw herself to the side to duck behind a stone-carved bust.

His first spell missed her only by a fraction, and then her cover was smashed open by his second.

She tried to run, tried to avoid him, but oh, she was *exhausted*, and his third spell threw her backward, winding her as she landed flat on her back.

From the impact of her landing, she'd dropped her knife, and she groaned as she stretched over, reaching out for it—

But Tom reached her first. He crouched down over her, tilting his head as he used the tip of his wand to brush her hair out of her eyes.

"No," she pleaded, and she shoved out at him even though her muscles didn't have much left to give. "Please, no more, *please* just do it—"

"Oh, Hermione," he cooed, bringing his hand to the good side of her face, stroking the side that Avery hadn't ripped his fingernails into as if to soothe her, and he groaned, "shh, Hermione. Don't do that. I hate it when you cry. You know what you do to me."

Her skin *crawled* at his touch, at the threat of not only physical torture—*no, no, nonono*, "just kill me," she sobbed, "please, just do it."

"Don't worry," he murmured softly, thumb dragging over her lip. "I'm going to. Whether I get the answer out of you or not, I'll let you go. But you have a choice to make. If you talk to me, if you make this easy," he paused, brushing away the stream of tears from her cheek, "we can make it quick. *Nice* and quick, just like Marvin. But if you don't... I'll be slow. I'll be *so* slow, I think I can even keep you going for weeks. I might even..." His eyes roamed over her face, lingering on her lips and he wiped her tears again. "Prefer it that way. But it's up to you."

With her other hand, she stretched as far as she could, and her fingers brushed upon the cold hilt of her knife. That was it, just a little more, just a *little more*—

"Talk to me," he purred, as if he weren't still wearing Avery's blood, as if the corridor didn't stink with the smell of burned flesh. "Tell me where it is."

Hermione managed to get the hilt of the knife with her fingertip, and it was just enough for her to drag it slightly closer, just enough to get a good grip on it. She squeezed its hilt with all she had and looked him dead in the eye.

"It's gone," she spat through her tears. "It's in pieces, and just like your ugly old ring, it's *gone*. It screamed when we killed it, just like you will when I kill you too."

And then she drove the knife deep into his chest.

But— her shot was high. Higher than she'd aimed for, wedging it in just under his collarbone. It wasn't a fatal blow, mightn't have even been enough for him to lose function of his arm.

Still, he reared back, making a surprised, agonised growl at the pain. He looked down, groaning as he inspected the handle protruding from his chest, and Hermione scarpered out from under him, pushing herself back until she reached the wall.

He glared down at her, giving a surprised sort of laugh, before he gripped at the handle and pulled the knife free.

"You're— a terrible fucking shot," he growled, throwing the knife across the corridor.

Using the wall to steady her, Hermione eased herself backed up to her feet. "I d-don't think so. How long do you think it will take?" she asked him. "A blow at the shoulder... that's quite close to your h-heart."

Tom scowled, not understanding, and stalked toward her.

"Will it protect you, I wonder? The blood of S-Slytherin?" she went on, stumbling a little bit as she moved back along the wall. "I don't think it will."

Tom scoffed, closing more of the distance, but then— he slowed. He blinked heavily, started to look a bit uneasy.

"Oh, no," she breathed, and an unhinged, disbelieving laugh slipped out. "Are you starting to feel it? Ninety seconds is all it takes, it says in the text books. First is general unease, then comes the clamminess. But then once it really sets in, your throat will start to close up, the tachycardia will begin, and you'll lose your vision."

He scowled at her, recognition and disbelief written on his features.

"Basilisk venom really is quite potent, wouldn't you say?"

"That's not—" Tom's mouth twitched, and he took another step closer, "not possible."

"That pathetic knife was goblin made," she told him, unable to withhold her grin when he surged forward to lean an arm against the wall to steady himself. "I know I don't need to explain the properties of goblin silver to you. And you gave me the venom yourself, when you tried to poison me."

His scowl dropped, only a little, and she could see it as it all came together on his face.

He lunged forward, reaching out for her, but she stepped back, just out of reach, and he fell to his knees, dropping his wand as he caught himself with the palms of his hands. His breathing was getting louder.

He looked up at her, rage and horror mixed in his eyes. "You— no. You didn't."

"Oh, you *bet* I did," she sneered. "And without your ring, without your diary... you'll be gone forever, entirely forgotten. No one else will *ever* know the name Voldemort."

Tom made a strangled sound, and looking down at the stone beneath him, he laughed. It was high, and disbelieving, and it didn't last long before he broke off to cough. His breathing became more textured, and though it was clear he was starting to struggle, he started to yell through it, coarse and desperate.

He yelled until his voice gave out, and he tried to keep himself up, tried to move, to get back up, but his arms gave out from beneath him.

Tom struggled as he tried to push himself up again, and the sound he made between breaths was somewhere between a whimper and a groan, and this time, when he looked up at her—

Oh. She'd never seen him look like that, hadn't thought him capable, but he—

He was *scared*.

Hermione didn't know what overcame her. She must've been too exhausted to have any sense left,

but she crouched down by his side and turned him onto his back with a forceful push on his shoulder.

"I'll stay with you while you go," she told him as she kneeled by his head, only halfway revelling in it, because while she'd dreamed of him being dead, given her life to the task of killing him, in that moment, he wasn't a monster anymore, not now. He was just a man, a *young* man, terrified of what was to become of him.

She reached for his face, placing a hand over his cheek to try to keep him calm. He grabbed at her hand in return, fingers closing over hers, and his touch was cold. It felt like he was trying to pull her away, to get her off, but his grip was weak, so she held on despite it. No one should be alone in their last moments.

"I—" He drew breath with a coarse wheeze, and his eyes weren't focussing properly anymore, weren't quite finding her, "—will find— you."

Loss of vision and hallucinations were the last symptom of the poisoning, before cardiac arrest, and there was something... empowering about knowing his last thought, his last hallucination, was of her.

"Shh," she said, and his breathing had quickened, coming in short, rapid breaths, and he seemed to be having trouble keeping his eyes open. She kept hold of his hand, and stroked over the skin of his cheek.

"Goodbye, Tom," she whispered to him. He was slipping, eyes heavy and barely open, and she didn't know if he could hear her anymore, but she spoke to him regardless. "I won't miss you."

She held him until he drew his last breath and didn't let go until long after.

When it was over, after Tom had stilled and he was nothing more than an empty shell and Hermione felt like she could move again, she searched his pockets. She found the stone there, in the pocket of his robe, and she replaced it with Dumbledore's glasses.

There wouldn't be any question as to who was responsible for Dumbledore's death, not on her watch.

Before she left him, Hermione gave Tom a last, wistful look, feeling oddly... empty. She'd imagined killing him too many times to count, had imagined how the world would benefit from Voldemort never rising, and had always envisioned herself happy, proud, or at least a little triumphant at the end of it.

But now... she wasn't any of those things.

She left him there in the corridor, left the mess of the classroom and what was left of Avery's body, not wanting to tamper with what the Ministry would find. They were deeper in the dungeons than even the Slytherin common room, so she hoped no one would venture down there to find them until she reported what'd happened, especially considering the time of year.

Hermione went back over to Cygnus and took his wand, and proceeded to levitate him up to the infirmary—leaving him stunned, of course. Once she got him settled, she mended the larger of the

cuts she'd received while she was there, the ones across her cheek and arms, before she hobbled back off.

But before she went to see Dippet, to report Tom and Avery's deaths and demand Cygnus be arrested, she stopped in again at Tom's chambers.

The portrait hadn't wanted to let her in when she got there, hadn't even bothered to speak with her, but Cygnus' wand wasn't entirely unyielding, and her confundus charm did the trick.

And inside— it was jarring.

The room was a mess. It'd been completely trashed, almost to the point of her doubting that she'd entered the right room. But it smelled like him, and she recognised his handwriting on the mess of papers. It was Tom's room, all right.

She wondered how it'd gotten that way. Had he done it himself? Had he been so enraged finding his ring and diary missing that he'd taken it out on his own things?

She hoped so.

Hermione started searching, and without needing to worry about being caught, it didn't take long. In his desk, third drawer down, sealed in with a tricky binding charm, was Dumbledore's wand. The Elder Wand.

Rightfully hers.

Hermione told herself it wasn't because she had the stone. It wasn't because she knew where the cloak was, and it wasn't because she wanted all three. No, Hermione told herself she was pocketing it because she couldn't allow the Elder Wand to end up in the wrong hands, and her own timeline had taught her that it being buried with Dumbledore wasn't good enough.

Well... that, and she was in need of a new wand now anyway.

With the wand stowed away, she moved to the next drawer down and fished out Tom's notebooks, the ones she'd come across the last time she snooped through his things. All of them. She didn't need to flick through them to know that they'd contain invaluable, dangerous, *horrible* information. It was too big a risk to leave them there for Dippet to decide what to do with, so she started piling them into her bag, one by one.

She stopped when she reached the last book, the newest of the lot. She didn't have much time, but her curiosity couldn't be helped. It *couldn't*, and she took a moment to flick through the pages.

And it— Hermione almost dropped it. It was full... of *her*.

...taunts me openly, in front of my class... the heir...

...knows of the Gaunts... Warren... have to kill her...

...If she dies, then then she is gone, but if she doesn't, then she knows, she must know...

...she is there each night, speaking in the darkness... sometimes with blood on her face... hands around my neck...

...cannot kill her...

Pages and pages, note after note after note— all about her.

Hermione couldn't bear to look at it. She snapped it shut and quickly added it to the rest of the pile. Then, she wiped her eyes and went to see Dippet.

It took months to fully clear her name. The incident in the lower dungeons on New Year's Eve sent shockwaves not only throughout the castle, but through the entire magical community, and there were demands to publicise the killer of the bright Professor Riddle, the Avery family's heir, the esteemed Albus Dumbledore.

Hermione was on her own, no money, no family, no influence to fight for her. She made an easy target, and she spent days in holding with the Ministry, recounting her story over and over. She willingly gave them all of the memories of what'd happened—everything they could possibly need other than the detail of her time travel—and in the end, it was only because of *fucking* Cygnus that she was eventually released.

As the only other witness, he'd been taken in for questioning at the same time she had, and though the Blacks had dragged their feet and thrown as much money at the situation as they could, his extracted memories were all they needed, and were eventually deemed sufficient to corroborate her story.

It was a hurricane, sorting out the aftermath of killing Tom and keeping herself out of Azkaban. She was in and out of the Ministry, had to prepare for and testify at Cygnus' trial, her name had been publicly dragged through the mud, she was fired and rehired by Dippet twice throughout the whole process, and when it seemed to be over, she finally took the time she needed to grieve.

And so, it wasn't surprising, not *really*, that among it all, something rather important went entirely forgotten.

Hermione had made countless mistakes throughout her youth, but Klaus was the best one.

Klaus James Granger— born in September of nineteen fifty-three, a perfect little boy with brown eyes and a head full of hair. 'James', for Harry, because 'Harry' just didn't have the right ring to it, and 'Granger', because there wasn't a chance in hell she'd ever admit out loud to his paternity.

Over the years, Hermione actively avoided her memories of Tom. She never once brought him forth with the stone, and she didn't have any photographs of him, but she didn't need any of those things to know who Klaus took after. He was a small but spitting image of the monster of her nightmares, but thankfully, with none of his bite.

As he grew, it became apparent that he was sharp, like his father, and he developed a wicked sense of humour, one that tugged at her heart strings and reminded her of some of her first interactions with Tom, before his first attempts of killing her. But Klaus also had her curiosity, her freckles, her kindness, her warmth. He took after Tom, without doubt, but he took after her too, and after he entered her life, she couldn't imagine one without him.

He was her light. He filled the void that'd been left inside of her, the one that craved family, to love and be loved, and life with him by her side was better than any life she envisioned for herself.

She hadn't planned her life in the fifties, the life that came without Tom or Voldemort in it, but it felt like borrowed time, and with Klaus, she filled it with as many passions as she could squeeze into it.

She wrote more. She never stopped writing.

She invested in Sleekezy's Hair Potion, and when their improved strength concoction hit the shelves, she made a comfortable sum of money. But despite that, when Madam Spindle eventually announced her retirement from her position in the infirmary in fifty-eight and Dippet offered it to her, she took it. She didn't need to work, but Hogwarts was the only place that felt like home. She felt a little guilty for the position she'd taken from Madam Pomfrey, but she'd given enough, she decided. She was allowed to be selfish.

Klaus came with her—an arrangement she'd needed to strong arm Dippet into—and he spent his childhood years growing up between Hogwarts during the school year and a small house she'd bought just out of Nottingham in the holidays, giving him a blend of magical and muggle life. The other professors at Hogwarts seemed to love him—no surprises there—and even though she was certain Slughorn and Dippet *knew*... they never once asked who his father was.

She was careful with the Elder Wand, and more so with stone... but she wasn't perfect. She allowed herself to see Harry every now and then over the years, and she'd spoken with Avery several times, too.

And the cloak... well. It was a constant temptation. She *wasn't* perfect.

She dated over the years, but nothing really stuck. There must've been something about a woman who woke screaming more often than not, who flinched at abrupt touches, who couldn't stand the darkness, that seemed to be too much for most men. But that was all right. She didn't need a man. She had all she needed.

She had ups and downs. She made more mistakes.

But through it all... she lived.

Chapter End Notes

ahem Hello everyone, an enormous thank you for reading if you've made it to this point! I wanted to make it clear because the chapter count says there's one more, that this is the end. This is the ending, Peremo is done, finite.

The next part, which I am aiming to post in a couple of days (fingers crossed), will be a non-essential epilogue, and I will tell you right now, that it may change some of your feelings about the story. SO, please, I implore you, if this is an ending you like, if you are satisfied and have gotten all you could've wanted, then you should take this one as the final ending and skip the epilogue.

But, if this isn't you and you're instead sitting wherever you are, angrily cursing me and thinking to yourself, 'hey, what about x, y and z?!', well then, you might find that

the epilogue ties up these ends for you, so hang tight! BUT DON'T COME CRYING TO ME IF YOU READ THE EPILOGUE AND IT UPSETS YOU, I WARNED YOU. IF YOU DO THIS TO ME, I WILL MOCK YOU.

Anyway 😊 Whatever route you choose to take, I also wanted to take this opportunity to profusely thank you again for coming on this ride with me. I've been incredibly blown away by the reception to this story, and I've had such a fun, rewarding time writing it. I'm so beyond grateful for a fandom that has been so supportive and has allowed me to explore some rather unsavoury themes in such a creative way

Epilogue

Her soup was burning.

It had thickened, become tar-like, and bubbled aggressively, filling the kitchen with smoke, and—

"Mum?!"

Hermione closed her eyes, massaging at her temples as a dull throb pounded between them.

When she didn't reply, the sound of her pulse was joined by the quiet thumping of feet slowly getting closer.

"Have you seen Dahlia?!"

Hermione glanced up from her sludge—because let's face it, it hardly could be classified as a soup anymore—just long enough to give Klaus a hard look. "What have I told you about keeping her in her enclosure?"

At her unhelpful answer, Klaus scoffed irritably and went to go back to his searching, but then abruptly stopped and turned back, his nose crinkling. "It smells like something died in here," he told her.

Hermione huffed and shooed him off with a wave of her hands, and he dashed out again. The sound of his feet on the hardwood floor followed him, becoming loud when he reached the stairs.

"*And don't run on the stairs!*" Hermione yelled after him.

Grumbling to herself about the last time he'd tripped and sprained his ankle, Hermione took out her wand and charmed her pot clean, before spelling the kitchen window open to waft out the smell of her ruined meal. Then, she tipped her head back and let out a long, dejected sigh, before she headed back toward the pantry to get all of her ingredients back out again.

What had her life become? She'd gone from having the *entire wizarding world* depending on her, needing her, and now, she was on snake watch in her own home, couldn't even make a simple pot of soup—

"—Ah!"

She had to extend her stride at the last second to avoid the snake that was coiled in the pantry doorway, and clung onto one of the shelves to keep her balance.

"Oh, you fucking little— *Klaus!*" she yelled, glancing at the damned snake. Its head was raised—looking right *at* her, the creepy little thing—but its body remained coiled, comfortable. "She's here! Come and get her before I squash her!"

Dahlia's tongue flicked out, and some more loud thumping ensued—he was running on the *damned* stairs again—before he reappeared.

"Sorry," Klaus mumbled as he ran back into the kitchen, eyes searching frantically for the snake. When he spied her in the pantry, his shoulders visibly relaxed and he hurried over to her. "She's been a bit stressed today."

"Oh, has she?" Hermione said dryly, silently questioning what on earth could make what had to be

the most pampered snake in all of Britain *stressed*.

Klaus cooed at the snake, offering her his arm, and after a bit of encouragement, she finally started to uncoil as she slithered up his arm.

"Yeah, we... might've gotten separated at the museum yesterday, when I went in with Oliver," Klaus said sheepishly, standing back up. "I don't think she's fully forgiven me yet."

Klaus wasn't much shorter than her anymore, but it didn't stop Hermione from staring down her nose disapprovingly.

"You *lost* her?"

He grunted, stroking gently over her patterned scales. "I didn't mean to," he whined. "I only put her down for a bit so she could enjoy the plants around the fountain, but then... I just... got a bit distracted."

Hermione met the snake's beady little eyes, feeling the slightest bit guilty for swearing at her. "Huh. Poor thing."

"It took ages to find her," he said, sounding annoyed with himself. "She made it all the way to the second floor to the forestry exhibit, but thankfully some guy found her before a muggle stood on her."

"Oh, for goodness'— *Klaus*." Two flights of stairs were an impressive feat for a snake of Dahlia's size, and he and that bloody snake were usually inseparable. He must've been properly distracted to part with her for that long.

"I *know*, I didn't mean to," he insisted. "I told her I was sorry."

Hermione sighed before she started filling her arms with the ingredients she needed for her second batch of soup. "Well, at least she was found, and no harm was done."

"I know... yeah..."

Hermione, sensing from his tone that there was something more to the story, turned to raise her eyebrows at him over her bag of potatoes, as if to say, '*well?*'

"It's just... the guy that found her, he— he... *spoke* to her," said Klaus, frowning at the snake, "and she's been bothered ever since. It's like... like she doesn't want to be with me anymore."

"Oh, don't be ridiculous," she said, a little distracted as she crossed the kitchen and plonked her ingredients on the kitchen counter. "Of course she wants to be with you. She loves you."

"She's a *snake*, Mum," he told her, as though it had escaped her notice. "They don't *love* the way people do. They like people they can trust, and I went and *lost* her, so what if... what if she's decided she likes him more?"

"*Likes him more?*" Hermione repeated incredulously, not quite sure what he was getting at. "What do you— wait, what did you mean by, he *spoke* to her?"

"I mean, he *spoke* to her. Like I do," he said, before tacking on an accusatory, "you never told me there were others who could do it."

"I..." Hermione paused, heart skipping a beat. "I didn't think there were."

Parselmouths were rare. *Really* rare, and almost all parselmouths known throughout history had been able to be traced back to the same familial line...

Dahlia raised her head off of Klaus' shoulder just then, and at the abrupt movement, he said something to her, a quiet hiss that Hermione couldn't understand.

Could it... could there have been another surviving line descended from Slytherin, other than the Gaunts? Or... *a surviving Gaunt?*

She supposed it could have just been... an impossible co-incidence, but the odds that the ability to speak to snakes had just happened to appear in another family line, in the same part of the country, was just so infinitesimally small... *so* small, that it was probably more likely that...

Dahlia slithered further up along Klaus' shoulder and hissed something back at him. Ugh. It was strange enough to hear Klaus speaking parseltongue, but she'd never get used to the sound of the snake doing it back.

Creepy little thing.

"Uhm... Mum?" said Klaus uncertainly, glancing between her and Dahlia.

Hermione bit into her lip, still mulling over another supposed parselmouth in Nottingham. "Hmm?"

"She... I think she wants me to tell you something," Klaus said, frowning as he hovered in the doorway.

Hermione eyed the snake, finding the snake staring back.

Usually, the snake wanted nothing to do with her, which suited Hermione just fine, thank you very much. Over the few years that Klaus had had her, instances when Dahlia wanted to address *her* had only occurred a total of two times.

The first time had been on a winter's day, and she'd wanted her to move out of the way of the fire so the warmth would reach her unimpeded.

The second time had been to request that she started purchasing slightly larger mice for her dinners.

Reasonable requests, really.

"She says..." Klaus paused to hiss again at Dahlia, his frown deepening further when she hissed back. "She says, she was told to tell you... 'you missed one'...? Sorry, I don't know what she means..."

Hermione drew a sharp breath, fumbling against the counter, and the onion she'd been holding slipped from her fingers.

"Oh." Klaus quickly bent to pick up the onion and offered it back. When she didn't take it, he said, "Um... Mum? Is... is everything—"

Hermione shook herself off. "Yes," she said, much too quickly, clearing her throat. "Yes, fine. You know, I was just—I think it might be about time to give up on the soup, don't you? Now that you know she's safe, how about you go and get Dahlia settled back in her enclosure and find your shoes, and we'll head out for dinner, instead?"

Klaus' eyes narrowed in suspicion—he looked *so* much like his father when he did that that it

hurt—but then, at the prospect of proper food, he said, "...okay. I won't be long."

Hermione gave him a small reassuring smile and shooed him off. Then, with Dahlia draped over his shoulders, he dashed up the stairs, a quick pace that wasn't quite a jog.

The moment he was out of sight, Hermione *moved*.

She hurriedly snatched up her wand and started summoning things over into a neat pile on the dining table—only the absolute essentials, a bit of food, some water, baby photos and other irreplaceable trinkets from the living room. While they organised themselves, she exited the kitchen, running up the stairs to go and fetch her bag.

Think, think, *think*—what did they need? Her bag, the stone, and the box of Tom's old books she'd kept stashed away in her cupboard all of these years. That was all, right? Everything else, she could make do without. She and Klaus could get new things. As long as they had the necessities, they could make do with everything else, and—oh. She mustn't forget the cloak—

In her panic, she slipped on the second step from the top.

Hermione fumbled back to her feet, swearing quietly, and opened her bedroom door, hurried on in, and—

He was there, sitting on her bed.

He looked older than he did in her nightmares. Tired. Worn. But it was unmistakably him, Tom, in the flesh, sitting casually, elbows resting on his knees, at the foot of her bed.

She froze, raising her wand at him only out of muscle memory, but it didn't seem to bother him. Instead, when he saw her, he didn't say anything, just raised a single finger to his lips.

The warning didn't need to be spoken.

Don't let him hear you.

Hermione didn't breathe, didn't dare move a muscle, and the hinges of her door groaned as it slowly fell closed behind her, latching quietly.

When Tom stood, she pressed herself back against the door, blinking firmly, not trusting what her eyes were telling her. But he wasn't going away, and he— had he always been that tall? Had his shoulders always been so broad?

He crossed her space casually, and with both flight and fight responses stalling, she shrunk as far back into the door as she could. But instead of approaching her the way she anticipated, he passed her by, stopping by her dresser. He plucked up one of the many picture frames— in it, was her favourite photo, a black and white photograph of her and Klaus, taken with a muggle camera.

"Thirteen this year, isn't he?" he murmured, and it was the sound of his voice, the gentle, endlessly familiar baritone that broke her composure.

She muffled her mouth with her hand to restrain her gasp, and the corners of his lips picked up as he placed the picture back where he'd found it.

"How—" It was an effort to find the words, more, to keep them steady. "How are you here?"

Tom smiled properly as he approached her, stopping only when the tip of her wand pressed into his

chest, and his eyes roamed over her features. They were excited, hungry, like a cat, and it was only now that he was so close that she could see it; the warm brown eyes she remembered were gone. His irises were entirely enveloped with crimson.

"That's it?" he murmured softly, and in her state of shock, he easily plucked her wand from her. "No pleasantries? No, 'how've you been', 'it's good to see you', or... 'I've missed you'?"

Hermione couldn't breathe.

Was he real? He looked it. He'd taken her wand.

He looked *so real*.

"Well. I've certainly missed *you*," he said. "In fact... I thought about you, almost every day while I was gone. I thought about, all of the things I'd do to you once I had my body back. You could even say... you inspired me, you kept me going, and now that I'm finally here, I..." His lips picked up, and he drew a quick breath, smile widening. "You're even more beautiful than I remember."

"It—Dumbledore?" she whispered, her mind scrambling to figure it out. "It was him, wasn't it?"

"But it's... *remarkable*, isn't it?" he interrupted, eyes narrowing as he searched her features.

"Twelve, almost thirteen years, and... it's as if you've barely aged a day." He looked her down and up. "Isn't it?"

She didn't hear him. The words weren't making sense. "Did you already have it? The diadem?"

Tom ignored her. "How have you done it?"

"That night, after... you weren't looking for me at all, were you? Your others were gone, so you made another."

But he only smiled. "I'll tell you mine, if you tell me yours."

"Tom—"

"*That's not—*" Tom struck, hands clasping her around her neck, cutting off her windpipe as he drove her into the door loudly, handle driving into her back. "—my name, anymore."

Hermione trembled pathetically in his grip. Because she'd dreamed of it endlessly over the years, his hands around her throat. Sometimes in her nightmares, they squeezed, sometimes they twisted, and sometimes it was worse, and he'd be fucking her while they constricted, holding her down, stopping her from screaming.

And—oh God—those red eyes were bottomless, and *what had she done?*

He'd had another horcrux, must have, one he shouldn't have had, and— those *eyes*.

How many did he have now? What even were they?

What had she done?

There was a sudden light sound of hissing, and Tom was distracted, easing up ever so slightly as he glanced downward.

While she gasped for breath, he let out a hiss of his own, smoother than the way Klaus spoke it, refined and *seductive*, and when she followed his eyes, and down on the ground, she spotted Dahlia

slithering past her feet. Reaching Tom's foot, she started coiling her way up his leg.

Hermione blanched, and her state of shock broke. "*What did you do—*"

"Shh, shh, shh, it's all right," he cooed, pressing his body against hers to stop her struggle, one of his hands moving up to press his thumb over her lips. "It's all right. She's only put him to sleep for us. You don't want him to hear us, do you?"

"No—leave him out of it," she hissed, pulling at his arms, "you *leave him—*"

"Oh, no," he said, stopping to laugh. "I can't do that."

"Not him," she pleaded, slackening against him, and his hands loosened, his tight grip softening into a gentle caress over her skin. She could take anything he threw at her, she knew she could, but *Klaus—*

"A-anything. Please, just— *not him.*"

Tom's smile was cruel, smug, and he leaned into her, running his nose along her neck, breathing her in like he were drinking her, groaning against her skin. "I *missed* you," he groaned. "And you—you kept my things. You had my *child.*" He lifted her chin, forced her to look at him. "You can't tell me you didn't miss me, too."

No.

Yes— no.

No.

"Please."

Tom's teeth dug into his lip while he smiled, red eyes aflame.

"You're going to do exactly as I tell you," he murmured slowly, word by word. "You're going to get me that fucking locket. You're going to give me *everything* you keep in here." He swept his hand back, over her skin and into her hairline, his fingers tapping on her temple. "Every memory, every secret, every fucking *fleeting thought*. You're going to give me anything I ask for this time, won't you? Because you're a good mother. You love your son. *My son.*"

She trembled all over, not only just where he touched her. "Don't touch him. Please. *Please—*"

"Oh, I won't. I won't, not unless you make me," he said gently. "You understand?"

Hermione willed herself to wake up.

Wake up, wake up, wake up.

But she didn't.

She nodded.

"Good girl," he purred, a hint of a laugh on his lips. "Now I'd like you to stay very, *very* quiet." He brought his hands down, sliding them over her throat, over the swell of her breasts, the dip of her waist and along her hips, until he was tugging at her skirt, pulling it up over her thighs, bunching it in his hands. "You can do that for me, can't you?"

When he touched her, Hermione bit down on her tongue so hard that she tasted blood.

What had she done?

Klaus I

Chapter Notes

Um hello there. It's been a little while. Thank you to everyone who commented on the final parts of the story! To those who I didn't get back to, I am very sorry. I meant to get back to them all, but I quickly found it difficult to keep up with answering them all individually. But please know that I've cherished your kind words, and each one meant/means the world to me, and I've read them all countless times over the last few months during my down times, and each and every read brought me so much happiness ☺

As a show of appreciation, here is my promised follow up... epilogue? One-shot? Mini-sequel? It's not really a coherent story in itself, just a one (two) shot of how I see their relationship/s progressing. There will be two parts to it (hence the one remaining chapter in the chapter count). I was going to post it all in one enormous bit, but editing that became too big a challenge. So two parts it is.

It's quite different to the rest of the story, in that here, we will hear from Klaus. I'm sure you probably wanted to hear more about Tom and Hermione from Hermione herself, but Klaus just wouldn't keep himself quiet in my brain. He demanded to be heard, and I hope you like what I've done with him, and I hope you find that it adds to the story.

(Special thanks also must be given to seollem and ninijune for their valuable advice for this piece)

EDIT: In case you have forgotten my author note from Chapter 27, and in case it wasn't clear enough -- this is an OPTIONAL EXTRA. If you liked the original ending, please just take that one. This is a much darker route, and was written for fun, ok! Thank you

One of Klaus' earliest memories was from when he'd been five.

The group of older Hufflepuff kids who normally played with him had all gone home to see their families for the winter break, leaving him at the castle with Mum and the other professors for company.

While Mum worked, Klaus would trail after the other professors, 'helping' wherever he could, exploring as much as the castle as he could get away with.

Several of them asked him what he wanted for Christmas that year, and when Professor Slughorn told him he could ask for anything he wanted, he decided to ask for a family, one he could go and see for Christmas like all the other kids.

He fell asleep on Christmas Eve wishing for brothers and sisters, grandparents and cousins, and uncles and aunts, and more than anything else, a father.

That was the year he realised that Christmas was a lie.

When Klaus was eight, he met Mum's new boyfriend Elliot.

Elliot was clingy. He was a muggle, and he was chatty, always around, weirdly into cats, and when they broke up only a month later, Klaus couldn't have been happier.

Mum was all he had and he didn't like sharing her, and once Elliot was out of the picture, he came to the decision that he didn't need brothers and sisters to play with, he didn't need grandparents or cousins or uncles and aunties, and he most certainly didn't need a father.

He had Mum, and she had him.

It was just the two of them.

When Klaus was nine, after a particularly gruesome match between Ravenclaw and Slytherin, Mum was swamped in the infirmary. He hadn't been in the mood to stick around for all of the wailing while she tended to their injuries, so Klaus went out to wander the grounds, as he often did on weekends and when Mum was busy. He was a quarter of the way around the lake when he found a snake by the shore line.

It was a small one, clearly only young, and it was so close to the water that it looked like it might've washed up there.

Klaus crouched down by it.

"*Are you hurt?*"

The snake raised its head, tongue slipping out.

"*It sssspeaks,*" observed the snake.

The snake gave another flick of its tongue, tasting him, and Klaus waited a moment before trying again, "*do you need help?*"

The snake moved its head. "*The human blockssss the ssssun.*"

Oh.

"*Sorry,*" Klaus apologised quickly, stepping aside to move his shadow out of the snake's way. "*I'll leave you to it.*"

The snake's tongue flicked again and Klaus went to leave, but then, thought—

"*There's a rock up there, up the hill,*" he told it. "*It'd be warmer up there than here in the wet sand. I can take you, if you like.*"

The snake watched him for a long while, beady eyes unmoving.

"If it'ssss dry... the human may take ussss," it eventually said.

Klaus grinned and offered the snake his arm, and it slowly slithered its way up.

It took a week of convincing—Klaus even had to resort to forcing out a tear—and though she wasn't thrilled about it, Mum eventually said he could keep the snake.

He'd found her in the valley of the lake, and so, he named her Dahlia.

When Klaus was ten, he was invited to help Professor Slughorn with decorating his office for his upcoming Christmas party.

Of all the professors at Hogwarts, Slughorn was his favourite without competition. He sneaked him sweets when Mum wasn't watching, loaned him books when he needed more material above his age bracket, and was always happy to have him along when he needed an escape from the infirmary.

Klaus still didn't much care for Christmas, but some of his third years were helping Slughorn as well, and eager to be included, he'd jumped at the chance to help out.

Normally, the Slytherins didn't pay him much notice. He'd overheard himself being called '*that kid*' here and there, but other than that, it was like he didn't exist to them.

But Klaus noticed them. While Rodolphus LeStrange—third year—was still a junior player, he was easily one of the best chasers at Hogwarts. And while Mum wouldn't allow him a broom of his own yet, he figured if he could get in with Rodolphus and his friends, then he could have him teach him to fly.

Getting him alone, however, proved to be a challenge. Slughorn divvied them up, splitting up the tree decorating, room decorating, organising the furniture, and fixing the lighting between them.

A half hour into the decorating, and Rodolphus was on the far side of the room, laughing with his friends, not being overly helpful. It would've been the perfect time to approach them, had Klaus been able to escape Slughorn.

"Vesta sent her apologies, but Aerwynna Ollivander confirmed her attendance, just this evening!" Slughorn was rambling between placing baubles. "She's the great niece of Garrick, did you know, and she's a remarkably talented potioneer, if I can say so myself, and—oh, could you— ah, that bauble, just there— your hands are nice and small..."

"No problem, Sir." Klaus squeezed himself in under the tree and plucked Slughorn's bauble from where it'd fallen and been caught between the branches.

"Ah, you've spared an old man his back," Slughorn chortled, taking the bauble and levitating it up to the top of the tree. "If you were sorted, I'd have given you five points."

Klaus beamed at him, but Slughorn smiled back a little strangely. He was about to question him, but Slughorn beat him to it and abruptly said, "you look so much like your father, dear boy."

Klaus blinked.

"You... you knew my father?" he said, straightening as all thoughts of how to approach Rodolphus flew out of the window. "What was he like?"

"Of course!" Slughorn's face flushed red and he suddenly seemed particularly interested in the placement of the tinsel. "I was his favourite Professor, you know. He was one of the finest students I ever taught. A tremendous amount of potential, and it was such a tragedy... what became of him..."

"If you don't mind me asking, Sir... what happened?"

Slughorn looked surprised. "You— that is— your mother hasn't...?"

Klaus shook his head. "She doesn't like to talk about him."

"Oh. Oh dear, I didn't... well then. Forget I said anything. It's not my place."

"But, Sir—"

"Do you think white for the icicle lights, or blue? Usually I'd opt for white, but with the hue of the lake, by the window, they'd look rather green... blue might be best, I think. We'll have one row here, one over on that wall, and another just here... Yes, that'd be perfect..."

Two nights after speaking with Slughorn in his office, Klaus mustered the courage to bring it up with Mum.

He waited for the right moment at dinner, after old Kettleburn had drifted off to sleep beside Mum, mouth catching flies, while Mum sipped at a goblet of wine.

She was always more talkative after she had wine.

"...Mum?"

"Hmm?" she hummed.

"I wanted to ask about... my Dad," he said hesitantly.

Klaus could count on a single hand the number of times they'd spoken about his father over the years. Mum went out of her way to avoid the topic, despite Klaus' many attempts to bring him up, and would usually squash any conversation with some variety of, 'he died before you were born', before she'd suddenly be urgently needed elsewhere.

But not today. Invigorated by Slughorn's slip up, Klaus was determined.

"Oh, honey," Mum cooed, her face softening in the same way it had the last time he'd asked about his father. "He died before you were—"

"I know," he cut her off irritably. "I know that, but... you've never really told me anything about him. What was he like?"

"Klaus—"

"Please, Mum."

She looked very much like she didn't want to be having the conversation and glanced along the staff table, as if looking for someone to help her. Klaus was at the end, and the place Professor Jigger usually occupied beside Kettleburn was empty. They wouldn't be overheard.

"Professor Slughorn said he was the best student he ever taught," Klaus pressed with the wide, innocent eyes he knew she liked. "And you know Mum, it's really not fair that I should hear more about him from Professor Slughorn than you, don't you think?"

Mum frowned down at him. "*Did* he now?" she said.

"I just want to know more about him," he whined. "Please. You're always saying I should remember where I come from when we're out with the muggles. How do you expect me to do that if I don't even know where I come from?"

Mum's eyes narrowed, but Klaus wasn't quite done. He reached out and took her hand—she was a *sucker* for him holding her hand.

Mum sighed quietly.

"His name was Tom."

Klaus straightened. That was the most usable information he'd ever gotten out of her. Tom. *Tom*.

"And he— well Horace wasn't wrong," she said, her hand tightening around his. "He was an exceptional wizard. I've never met another quite so in tune with their magic as your father was," she said, and Klaus felt himself swelling with pride. "But, honey... it's important that you know, that although our magic is a part of us, and it can help us and even save our lives when we need it to, it can also be... dangerous."

"Like... dark magic, you mean," Klaus concluded.

He knew about dark magic. He'd heard Rodolphus and his friends speaking in Slughorn's office, discussing the curriculum at Durmstrang, how it didn't compare to Hogwarts, how they were taught the *Dark Arts* over there. Abraxas Malfoy—fifth year—had bragged about his studies over the holidays with his father, about being taught a good spell for having Michael Fletcher from Hufflepuff fall from his broom, and once, Klaus had seen Mum tend to some deep, blue gashes along Evan Rosier's back. He'd refused to tell her how he got them, and after he'd left, Mum had mumbled to herself, wondering where he possibly could've come into contact with such a dark spell.

Mum frowned at him. "Yes. Just like dark magic," she said from between her teeth. "Now, eat your pudding before it gets cold."

Klaus had watched the new students being sorted each and every year for as long as he could remember. He'd thought of it almost endlessly, pondered over which house would suit him best, fretted over the possibility of the hat deciding he didn't suit any of them after all. But after years of waiting, when he was finally eleven and it was finally his turn, he found the ordeal rather... anticlimactic.

The hat had been perched on his head for all of half an instant, before it loudly declared, "Slytherin!"

Mum smiled at him from up at the professor's table, but it didn't quite meet her eyes. She looked... nervous.

But Klaus was elated—getting in with Rodolphus and his friends would be a *breeze* now he was in Slytherin—and he didn't think anything of it.

"You're that kid," the third student up the table from him said when they were a good half hour into the feast. He had plainly new, well-fitted robes on, and he looked like money. "That one who lives here, right?"

Klaus stared right back at him. "It's a boarding school," he said. "We'll all be living here."

Some of the kids around him sniggered.

"But you're the one who grew up here, right?" the rich kid pressed, his scowl deepening. "Why's that? Can't you afford a home?"

The students around sniggered again, and Klaus flushed. "I-I have a house," he told him. "But my Mum's the matron, so I stayed here with her during the term."

It only made the rich kid's smirk widen. "Is it true she's a *mudblood*?"

More of the kids along the table had started staring at him now, their own conversations quietening down, and Klaus tightened his grip on his fork. "Well... I mean... yeah, she's muggleborn," he reluctantly said. "But my Dad's not."

The rich kid snorted. "With a name like Granger, he must be."

Klaus had to take a breath to calm himself.

"What would you know," Klaus settled with, topping it off with a sneer, because he knew enough about Slytherin house to know that admitting to not knowing his father's surname would only make matters worse.

The rich kid laughed. "Well. Welcome to Slytherin, little Mudblood. I'm sure we'll all have a great time... getting to know you."

Down in his new dormitory, Klaus found himself stuck with the last unclaimed bed, the one at the end of the room pressed against the wall, closest to the window. The stone wall was damp and cold, and it had a musky sort of smell to it. Great.

He took his time unpacking his things, and while the other students in his dormitory spoke excitedly amongst themselves, he set Dahlia down onto his pillow.

"*Home*," hissed Dahlia, and Klaus scowled down at her. She really was quite stupid.

He tried to remind himself that it wasn't her fault she had such a small brain, and when his unpacking was finished, he lay himself down on the bed's thin mattress, pulling the curtains closed around it for some privacy. As Dahlia slithered over his chest, he pondered over his predicament, and all angles seemed to lead to the same answer.

The best way to survive being the Mudblood in Slytherin, was of course, to not be a Mudblood.

Which meant, he needed to know his father.

And if Mum wouldn't help him... well then, he'd just have to help himself.

Now officially a student at Hogwarts, the first thing Klaus did when he was free of both Mum and his classes, was go through the old student records in the library.

He meticulously combed through for every Tom or Thomas who'd attended during the thirties and forties, making them around Mum's age, and found a total of twenty-eight of them.

But Slughorn had spoken highly of his father, and had claimed to have been his favourite Professor, while Mum had said herself that his own ability to talk to snakes had come from his father.

And so, Klaus assumed he must've been a Slytherin, just like him, and that left only three candidates.

There was Thomas Fawley, who Klaus immediately ruled out for the Fawley name alone. Red hair was prominent amongst the Greengrasses, and so Klaus also ruled out Thomas Greengrass. Which then only left...

Red-Eyed Riddle.

It was one of those castle stories that no one spoke about, and yet somehow, everyone seemed to know about it. Red-Eyed Riddle, the young history Professor who'd lost it on New Year's and murdered two people right in the castle in broad daylight.

While he'd almost become an urban legend around the school, his name had also become a bit of a joke amongst the students, one that was often mentioned at the hint of professor frustration—

'Ooh, careful, he'll pull a Riddle on you!'

'Is that a hint of red I see, Professor?'

'Watch out for Shrew, she's a hair from a Riddle today!'

It was a story Klaus knew particularly well, because Mum was famous for having been there on the night it all supposedly happened, and Riddle's body count would've been three had she not made it out.

At first glance, Riddle seemed like another impossible candidate—Mum had publicly claimed he'd tried to *kill* her, after all—but the longer Klaus stared down at his list of Toms, the more the snippets of evidence started to align.

Mum and Slughorn's refusals to speak of him, Mum's comment of dark magic, his having Mum's surname... and Klaus knew the two had worked at the castle at the same time...

Klaus' stomach lurched, like it wanted to come up and out of his throat, so he returned the records to the librarian and went to go see Mum.

"*Red-Eyed Riddle?*" Klaus loudly accused to the infirmary office, and Mum didn't need to answer. One look at her face was enough to tell him he was right.

Klaus had long known his father must've done something to offend Mum for her to never want to even speak of him. But he'd just assumed it'd been something trivial, like an affair, like his neighbour Oliver's dad. Not *murder*.

"Did you think I wouldn't find out?!" he yelled.

Mum put her quill down, gaping up at him stupidly, and she almost looked... *scared*.

It only made him more angry. "Why didn't you tell me?!"

"I— Klaus, please," she fumbled, "I-I was only trying to protect you—"

"By *lying* to me?!"

"I didn't *lie* to you, I just..."

"You just didn't think to tell me my Dad's a murderer, yeah that's loads better, thanks."

"You're only— you're still a *child*," she stressed, getting up to approach him. "The burden of what he did shouldn't rest on your shoulders."

"You always treat me like a helpless little kid!" he accused. "You know I'm not! I can handle it!"

"But you shouldn't have to!" she said. "That's the point! I don't want you to grow up thinking that his actions and his mistakes have any reflection on who *you* are!"

"How do you expect me to figure that out if I don't know who I am?! I deserve to know the truth!" he yelled back, and Mum straightened, features falling like he'd hit her.

"I-I'm *sorry*," she insisted. "I didn't mean—"

"Stop it, I don't want to talk to you," Klaus cut her off, and she kept talking, saying something about how much she loved him and how she thought she was only doing what was best, but Klaus didn't take any of it in.

He turned and left without another word.

Klaus avoided Mum wherever he could for the rest of the term, half out of anger, and the other half out of self-preservation. The rich kid, Nott, had taken to calling him 'The Mudblood', and with his lackeys Selwyn and Rodolphus' younger brother Rabastan always there to back him up, Klaus decided it would be best in his best interest to not be seen with her.

He spent his time between classes avoiding the other Slytherins alone in the library, finishing off his homework well ahead of time, reading fourth-year material, combing through more old school records, learning more about his father.

Tom Riddle had graduated with eleven NEWTS, Outstandings in each—a Hogwarts record that was yet to be beaten. He'd been prefect in fifth year, awarded with special services to the school, Head Boy in seventh year, and he'd then gone on to become the youngest appointed professor Hogwarts had ever seen.

A fine student indeed... that was, aside from the murders.

Discovering Riddle was his father wasn't just disturbing, but it was also disappointing. He was the son of a shamed murderer, one who didn't even have a good family name. 'Riddle' wouldn't get Nott off his back, wouldn't help the nickname of 'The Mudblood'. Being Red-Eyed Riddle's kid would only make matters far, far worse.

And so, Klaus tried to forget about it, to tell himself it didn't matter who his father was. He focused on getting through the day to day, on getting perfect grades, and on trying to find a spell to dry the wall by his bed, to soften the mattress, to get rid of the smell of mold. He sat with the Ravenclaws at lunch times, caught up with some of the older Hufflepuffs who remembered him.

It wasn't always pleasant, but he had Dahlia by his side, and he got through it.

Over the summer break, between first and second year, Klaus was still so bothered by Mum and her lies that he resorted to taking Dahlia out on a trip to the museum with his muggle neighbour Oliver.

Oliver wasn't *great* company, but he was all right for a muggle, and he hadn't lied to him his whole life about his parentage, so he'd have to do.

He'd been to the museum multiple times with Mum over the years—*it's important that you always remember where you come from*, she'd nag hypocritically about muggle history.

On this visit with Oliver, there didn't seem to be much new to see since his last visit. There was a new set up in the centre of the ground floor dedicated to some dinosaur fossils unearthed in South Africa, but everything else was mostly the same. Oliver was more enthused than he was.

"Come on, let's go see the Egyptian stuff!" Oliver insisted eagerly, hurrying over to the stairs.

Klaus trailed behind, adjusting his clothes. Dahlia was slithering up the back of his shirt, starting to poke her head out of his collar. Something had gotten into her—she'd been more active than usual all morning—and her constant repositioning was starting to get a bit annoying.

"Just a second," Klaus called to Oliver, and he stopped by the fountain to set her down on the edge by the plants.

"Wait here, all right? I won't be long."

Dahlia gave a dismissive flick of her tongue and slithered off to coil herself underneath the leaves.

Klaus rolled his eyes. She could be so *moody*.

"Back soon," he told her, and then he hurried off to join Oliver. "Okay, let's go!"

The exhibits upstairs were even lamer than he remembered. The taxidermy animals were creepy, and most of the exhibits had been around so long they'd started to collect dust.

He should've expected as much from muggles.

When they were finished and Oliver popped into the gift shop, Klaus headed back to the fountain to get Dahlia.

He checked under the plants, lifting the leaves of each plant.

And she... wasn't there.

Not wanting the muggles to catch him speaking parseltongue—Mum would never let him hear the end of it if they did—Klaus searched high and low around the fountain, relying on his eyes alone.

Not spotting her, he ditched Oliver and slowly worked his way around the museum up to the first, second, third floor, carefully combing through exhibit after exhibit.

The longer he searched, the more his dread grew. Oh no. What if a muggle had found her and put her outside?

She could be anywhere!

Or—or what if they called someone to take her away, or they killed her? Oh no. No, no, no...

The forestry exhibit on the third floor was one of the last ones left to search through. The entire corner of that floor had been dressed up like a forest, with fluffy brown carpets, the walls painted with trees, bushes and eerie animal eyes. It made searching for her that much more difficult, and he was about halfway through when he suddenly noticed that there, through the crowd, was a man.

Unlike all of the other muggles, he wasn't hurrying. He wasn't following after a family, wasn't trying to control any boisterous toddlers. He was just standing there, leaning against a thick pillar that'd been decorated to look like a tree with his ankles crossed, and he seemed bored, plainly uninterested in his surroundings.

But he was, however, looking right at him.

Klaus stared back, brows drawing together, and he was about to leave when he noticed that there, curled along the man's forearm on the outside of his shirt, with her head resting on his bicep, was *Dahlia*.

With his other hand, the man gestured for him to come over.

Klaus wasn't stupid. Mum had drilled it into him since before he could remember not to approach strangers, but he wasn't about to leave Dahlia with some muggle creep. Besides—he had his wand.

He went over to him.

"That's my snake," Klaus said bluntly, extending his arm expectantly.

But the muggle didn't give. "You should be more careful," he said instead. "Easy to lose a snake of this size in a place like this."

Klaus frowned. He didn't need a lecture from some stranger, not when he'd be sure to have his ear harped in by Mum when he got home. "Yeah, thanks," he said, keeping his arm extended out for Dahlia to slither onto.

But Dahlia still didn't move.

The muggle gave her a prod. "*Go on.*"

Klaus flinched. "You... you speak it?"

Dahlia finally started to slither across to Klaus' arm, and the man answered only with a raised eyebrow.

"Um," Klaus said once Dahlia was fully back in his possession. "Okay. Well, thanks. I guess."

The man didn't answer, only offering a slight smile, and Klaus hesitantly took a step back.

But the muggle still didn't say anything, didn't move at all, so he turned and hurried on out of there.

What a *creep*.

As he went, Dahlia slithered down to curl herself up into his jacket pocket—an unusual place for her—and the feeling of being watched didn't pass until he made it home.

Klaus woke to the familiar, cool sensation of Dahlia's scales running over his face.

"*Wake up.*"

Klaus groaned, tired down to his bones, and swatted groggily at her tail to get it off him. "Stop it."

"*It musssst wake.*"

He tried again to get her off. "Leave me alone."

Dahlia's tail continued to flick, and Klaus went to protest again—

"Klaus."

At the voice, the deep one that'd been spoken in English, Klaus' words died in his throat, and he shot up.

There, standing in his doorway, was a man.

Klaus scrambled back from him, and though the man's features were calm, and he had his hands raised submissively, *there was a man in his room*, and he searched for his wand.

"I mean you no harm," the man said gently.

Klaus hadn't even had his wand a year yet, and while he knew he wasn't supposed to do magic outside of school, surely there was a clause for strange men breaking into one's bedroom?

They'd been taught only a few basic spells in the first half a year at Hogwarts, but Klaus was years ahead with his reading. He was positive he could cast a solid stunner, and surely they'd understand if he broke the rules just this once?

He snatched his wand up, fumbling a little bit before he managed to point his wand at the man, but... now that he was standing, he noticed the man's robes. They were all-black, but they were a wizarding cut, and there was something *about* him that seemed oddly familiar—

"It's you," whispered Klaus, putting it together and recognising him as the man who'd been at the museum, the one who'd found Dahlia. "From the— who are you?"

The man smiled at him, the same light smile he'd offered at the museum. He seemed amused, not at all threatened by Klaus' wand. "I didn't mean to startle you."

Klaus didn't back down. "How did you get in here? Where's my mum?"

"She's waiting for us downstairs," the man said gently. "Are you still hungry?"

Klaus *was* still hungry, but how did *he* know that?

"Come on down, and we'll explain everything," said the man. "It's all right."

He didn't want to. There was something *off* about him, something he couldn't quite put his finger on, and he didn't want to go with him—

"*It will be ssssafe with massster*," Dahlia hissed, and Klaus' eyes narrowed as she slithered over and curled herself up the man's leg.

Her surety didn't calm his nerves. But wanting to make sure Mum was all right, he slowly lowered his wand and gave in with a reluctant, "...okay."

The man stepped out of the way of the door and gestured towards it with an 'after you' motion.

Klaus hurriedly slipped past and led the way out down the stairs.

At the bottom of the landing on the lower floor, Mum was there waiting, just as he'd been told, and she visibly jolted at the sight of them. She stepped toward the stairs, and the skin around her eyes was red like she'd been crying, and she had her arms wrapped tightly around her torso.

She looked jittery, small and feeble, not at all like herself.

Klaus hurried down to her.

"What's happened?" he demanded as she put her arms around him, sniffing quietly. "What's going on? Mum?"

Klaus turned in her hold to glare back at the man, the one who must've done *something*. In all of his life, he couldn't remember having ever seen Mum cry. Who did he think he was? What had he done to her, what was he—

"Klaus..." Mum said between sniffs. "This is your father."

Klaus II

Chapter Notes

Lol um, my apologies for the sheer length of this. It legit is a mini-sequel in itself, and frankly, I just really enjoyed putting this together and got carried away. There is no structure to be found here, no real beginning, middle or end, just sheer self-indulgence of how I envision the Granger-Riddles. Don't mind me.

Secondly, while I decided that I didn't think it was necessary to add another tag specifically for this bit, I think that at the very least, I need to warn you that there are strong tones here in this last bit of domestic abuse. I know that if you've made it this far, you're probably expecting it, but yeah, this is your warning, please only read what you're comfortable with, thank you

Klaus had long outgrown the childish desire for a father, but that didn't mean he hadn't fantasised about what it would be like to have one.

Prior to learning of his father's misdeeds, he'd imagined having someone to stay with while Mum worked, not having to entertain himself alone in the infirmary office.

He'd imagined spending summer days out in the back garden, being taught to fly like Rodolphus and Rabastan could.

He'd even imagined coming home for the winter break and returning to school with extravagant gifts the way Abraxas always had.

Klaus had pieced together a vivid picture of what the father he didn't need would be like; successful, loving, energetic, protective. He'd teach him spells he shouldn't know so young, he'd sneak him extra pocket money when Mum wasn't watching, he'd be the fun to Mum's strict.

But the man Klaus met in his living room that evening wasn't any of those things.

After that first night, after he had yelled, and Mum had cried, and his supposed father had tried to calm them both, he *didn't leave*.

Klaus had eventually surfaced from his room the following morning after having stormed off and skipped dinner, just to find Mum fast asleep on the couch, and him *there*, making toast and coffee in their kitchen like he owned the place.

Klaus begrudgingly accepted his offering of toast, partly because at that point, it felt like his stomach was trying to eat itself, and partly because if this man *was* his father, then that meant he was a killer. Surely it wouldn't be wise to tell a killer where he could shove his toast.

"...thanks," Klaus muttered after he'd hesitantly taken the plate. The stacked pieces of toast were

spread with jam. Jam wasn't his favourite, but he supposed he'd make do.

"You're welcome," Riddle said, smiling warmly, and he glanced down to the mug of coffee he was preparing. "How does your mother take her coffee?"

Klaus shrugged, taking a wide bite of his first piece.

"You don't know?"

"She normally makes it herself," Klaus told him.

Riddle didn't say anything to that and added a dash of milk.

Klaus watched him do it and took another bite. "Yeah, good luck with that," he snorted, and then he took his toast with him back up to his room.

Those first days didn't go anywhere near the way Klaus had expected them to, and he didn't know what was going on.

He spent the whole day hiding away upstairs, and when it was starting to get dark and he finally came out for dinner, Riddle still hadn't left.

He'd murdered two people and allegedly attempted to kill her too, and yet, when the next night passed and the morning came and Mum *still* hadn't kicked him out, it started to seem like he'd be there to stay.

Klaus just couldn't grasp what she was thinking, letting him stay with them, and if that wasn't confusing enough on its own, it also became apparent very early on that there was something *going on* between them. It was *weird*, with a thick sort of tension, and being stuck in the middle of it was uncomfortable.

And through it, he just didn't know what to make of him. For the most part, to Klaus, his father's presence in the house over those first few days was quiet, not too far, but not too close either. He gave him space and he was quietly spoken, gentle with his words and actions; he continued to cook for them, breakfasts, lunch and dinners, even though neither he nor Mum had much of an appetite; and he seemed particularly attentive to Mum, rubbing her shoulders, affectionate with light, passing touches, whispering lightly into her ear.

Meanwhile, was Mum visibly jittery, skittish, and refused to eat anything he made for her. She also started to *hover*, not seeming to want to let Klaus out of her sight, which didn't suit him at all, because he in turn wanted nothing to do with her.

She'd lied to him about his father, *again*, even after their row in the infirmary. She *must've* done, because if she truly had been there the way she'd claimed, and if it hadn't been real all along, if he hadn't *really* died, then there wasn't a chance she wouldn't have known about it.

Not only had she lied, time and time again, but what was worse, was that she'd kept it going for his *entire life*. She'd intentionally robbed him of a father—murderer or no. What sort of parent *does* that to their child?

But there was one thought above all, one he couldn't shake, one that was robbing him of sleep, and it was that now, he was the son of a murderer *and* a chronic liar.

What did that say about him?

On the third evening after meeting his father, the living room felt far too small for the three of them.

Klaus, having decided he couldn't keep hiding in his room, had come out with his already-finished Charms homework, making unnecessary changes in a bid to seem occupied. He was so infuriated with Mum that he couldn't think straight, but he didn't really want to leave her on her own with someone she'd claimed had once tried to kill her, either.

So, there he sat, pretending to work, intermittently watching his father, ensuring he didn't try anything, all the while trying to establish some sort of gauge on him.

He didn't *look* like a murderer. Didn't act like one either.

He was well-groomed, nicely dressed. He looked about forty, seemed to be in good shape, and had some of the same features Klaus himself had been complimented for—brown eyes, dark hair, pale skin. He was calm, put-together. Not flustered at all, not like Mum.

But similarly to both he and Mum, he seemed to be a reader. As far as he could tell, Riddle had spent most of his time when he wasn't with them either in the upstairs library, or right where he currently was, in the armchair closest to the fireplace.

He had that day's newspaper opened out on his lap, reading it in silence, and he seemed perfectly relaxed, eyes quickly scanning across the page. They didn't look red at all.

Meanwhile, Mum was hovering. She had a book in her hand, but Klaus doubted she was reading it, because she was pacing back and forth along the length of the couch behind where he sat.

While his father mightn't have noticed his staring, he couldn't have possibly missed Mum's pacing. But he didn't say anything, simply continued to read, and every now and then, he'd lick his thumb and turn another page. His father seemed completely at ease, like he was oblivious to the deafening tension in the room.

Klaus, however, was not, and he evidently hadn't inherited any of his patience, because it wasn't long until he snapped. "Must you walk *right* there?!"

Mum abruptly halted.

"Pardon?" she said softly.

Klaus huffed. "I'm trying to focus, and your stomping on the floorboards is distracting. There's plenty of room to walk out *there*," he told her.

Opposite him, his father tipped his head up, lowering his paper and crossing his legs over. "Why don't you get some fresh air, Hermione?" Riddle suggested gently. "You look like you need it. I can stay here, keep an eye on Klaus."

Klaus watched Mum as her jaw tightened, wringing her hands together. She scowled at his father, but only for only as long as it took her to notice that Klaus was watching.

Then she plonked herself down on the other armchair.

"I'm fine here," she said feebly.

She didn't *sound* fine, but she was a liar, so Klaus just rolled his eyes and didn't question her.

He went back to poke at his essay, and the next time he spied up at his father, he found him looking at him. Their eyes met only for the briefest of moments, and Klaus might've been mistaken, but he looked like he might've been annoyed.

It made him uneasy, and it was then that Klaus first had the distinct impression that his father didn't actually like him very much.

But that was fine by him. Klaus didn't like him much either.

Four days after meeting his father—four *measly* days—and Mum told him that she urgently needed to head out for work to assist with some critical problem of Dippet's and would be leaving him at home with his new *Dad*.

Klaus wanted some distance from Mum, was still so furious with her that he could barely bring himself to look at her, but still... he didn't know this man. He was a *murderer*.

Negligent, is what it was.

And it seemed like she knew it too, because before she left in the morning, she caught him when he came for breakfast, ambushing him in the kitchen and forced him into an overbearing hug. Klaus didn't hug her back, but it didn't deter her, and she squeezed him tightly.

"I love you," she whispered, quietly enough that he barely heard her.

Klaus grunted.

She pressed a kiss into his hair. "Be safe."

Another grunt.

"I mean it. Do as your father says while I'm gone. You understand?"

When Klaus didn't answer, she pressed, "you can be as angry with me as you want, but you must *promise* me, that you won't antagonise your father."

"Yeah—fine," he mumbled dismissively. Like he'd been planning on riling Riddle up. "Whatever."

Mum leaned back and looked him in the eye. She stroked his cheek, the way she would back when he was little, and—ugh, she looked like she might've been about to cry again.

"I'll be back soon," she whispered. "I promise."

"If you don't want to go," Klaus mumbled moodily, "then maybe you should stay."

She sniffed and then let him go to wipe under her nose. "I have to," she told him, giving a slight shake of her head. "It'll be fine. You'll be fine."

It was like she was speaking for her own benefit, and Klaus gave her a firm nod. "I'll be fine," he agreed.

But really, her nervousness was starting to make him nervous, and when she stepped back to grab her things, he almost pulled her back to hug her properly.

He didn't though.

Klaus instead followed her out to the entry way to where Riddle was waiting, and Mum murmured, "I suppose I'll be off, then."

"Don't worry," his father told her, smiling warmly, and he brought his hand to rest on Klaus' shoulder. "We'll be fine. Won't we, Klaus?"

Klaus looked between Riddle and his hand. Mum had said not to push him, so Klaus grit his teeth and withheld from brushing him off, stiffly nodding in agreement.

Mum's lips thinned, looking entirely unconvinced.

But though she seemed unconvinced, she left them anyway, and Klaus waved after her as she headed out into the front garden. She returned it with a small, uncertain smile, and then she twisted on the spot and was gone.

His father let him go and with a flick of his wrist, closed the door after her, and the house fell into quiet.

Riddle looked down at him. Klaus stared back.

He wouldn't hurt his own kid, Klaus assured himself. If he'd been planning on harming them, he would've done it that first night. He had nothing to worry about.

But he took a small step back regardless.

"What now?" Klaus asked, needing to fill the quiet with something.

His father sighed. "Go and... play with your toys or something," he suggested, and then, he waved him off dismissively before turning and starting off down the corridor toward the stairs.

Klaus scowled. He hadn't played with *toys* since he was eight years old, and while he supposed that Mum was probably right in that he should be cautious of Riddle, he finally had her out of his hair.

He may have been a murderer... but he still wanted to know him, and this was the perfect opportunity.

And so, Klaus followed after him.

"Where are *you* going?" he asked, having to hurry to keep up.

"I have work to do."

"I'll come with you," Klaus decided. He'd sat around with Mum while she worked for years. He

didn't mind.

Riddle sighed again, but Klaus wasn't to be deterred. "What sort of work do you then?" he asked, unable to guess at what sort of workplace would take someone said to be a killer.

"I manage people."

Oh. A manager. That meant he was a *leader*.

"How many people?"

"Forty or so."

Forty. Rodolphus and Rabastan's father was the Deputy Head of Law Enforcement at the Ministry, and was responsible for more than a hundred workers. They bragged about it at every opportunity, and while forty was a distance from a hundred... it was still good.

Klaus kept on his trail as they went upstairs, and when they reached the upper floor, he asked, "is it true you have red eyes?"

Riddle stopped abruptly and stared down at him. He blinked. His eyes were plainly brown. "Where did you hear that?"

"Kids at school still talk about you, you know," said Klaus. "They say that when you used to get angry, your eyes would flash red."

Riddle's mouth turned up, not quite a smile. "Are they flashing red now?"

Klaus rolled his eyes and though he should've taken heed of Mum's advice, he muttered, "didn't realise you were so sensitive."

His father didn't look impressed. "Go find something to do," he repeated, firmer this time. "Preferably something outdoors."

With that, his Riddle stepped into the library and closed the door behind him before Klaus could follow.

Klaus stared, scowling at the closed door.

Geez. He was worse than Mum.

Mum was a liar, and he was still mad at her, but Klaus was really starting to wish she'd hurry up and come home already.

She'd been gone an *entire day*. While he knew that Dippet was old and demanding and could carry on when he wanted to, he hadn't expected her to be gone a whole night, and he couldn't remember her ever leaving for that long before.

It meant he was stuck with another awkward breakfast with Riddle, although... his cooking was pretty good. Better than Mum's.

After watching him for a few days now, Klaus was starting to get used to having him around, starting to pick up on his patterns.

He was meticulous. He ate properly, formally at the table with manners Mum had long been trying to instill into him, and he always cleaned up right away after finishing, returned his books to their spots precisely, tidied things around the house with a perfectionist's eye.

When Klaus would whine about his household chores, doing the dishes, putting his clothes away, cleaning his room, Mum would stress the importance of learning to do things by hand, that he couldn't always rely on her doing things for him with magic. But Riddle didn't seem to share her sentiments and was heavy handed with his magic, and it was all wandless, wordless; a wave of his hand here, a lift of his finger there.

Mum was far more reliant on her wand, and now that he'd seen how easy his father made it look, he decided he'd have a practice at it when he was back at school. Nott would never see it coming.

Klaus had never been one for eating in silence. He didn't care for the wet sounds of chewing, the clink of cutlery against teeth, and so in between bites, he tried to make conversation. The problem was, however, he still knew so little about Riddle, that there was only one thing he could think to ask about.

"Are you still in trouble, then?" he asked from across the table.

Riddle, directly opposite him, looked up from that morning's newspaper, raising his eyebrows. While Mum often angrily threw out the Daily Prophet before she was halfway through, it seemed like he was fond of them.

"For... you know," Klaus added for clarification. "Those people... all those years ago." He refrained from adding, *that you killed*.

His father had been working on a mouth full of pancake, and finished it slowly before speaking. "Depends on what you call trouble," he eventually said, focusing back on his plate of food.

"But you're just... going to live with us now?" Klaus pressed.

"Mhmm," his father hummed vaguely.

"For how long?"

"As long as I like."

"And Mum's fine with that?"

"Yes."

"...And no one's going to... come looking for you?"

"No."

Klaus' eyes narrowed. "...But you and Mum aren't like... getting back together. Right?"

His father shrugged.

Ugh. Conversation with him was almost worse than it was with Oliver, and as their breakfast fell back into a lull, Klaus racked his brain for other things he could bring up. What else was there? He'd taught at Hogwarts. He could ask about that, but that might be too similar a topic to the

murders. He'd graduated with near perfect grades, but Klaus didn't need study tips. What else, what else—

Oh.

"Mum said you know dark magic."

Ah. *That* seemed to get his attention, and his eyes snapped back up. "Did she now?"

"Yeah," said Klaus daringly. "So, do you?"

He paused, taking a slow sip of his coffee, fighting a smile.

"Maybe," he finally said.

Klaus put down his fork. "Could you... maybe... if you have time, that is... show me some?" he asked carefully, remembering the way Rodolphus and Abraxas used to boast to the group of students in Slughorn's office. Maybe if *he* knew some dark magic too, it'd solve his 'Mudblood' problem, and he could get Nott and the others off his back.

His father looked as though if he hadn't been so surprised, he would've laughed. "Oh no," he said. "Your mother might very well skin me alive if I did that."

Klaus snorted. "Mum's snappy, but she's harmless," he said dismissively.

Riddle laughed loudly, like he knew something he didn't.

"What?" Klaus said.

"I don't know about that," he said, going for another sip of coffee. "I wouldn't want to cross your mother."

"You say that like you're *scared* of her."

"I am," he said simply.

Klaus laughed, but his father's face had straightened.

"She won't hurt you if you're with me," Klaus told him.

He meant it as a joke, but he wasn't sure if his father got it, because didn't laugh. He just finished the rest of his coffee and got up from his chair, and started heading back toward the kitchen, patting him on the shoulder as he passed. "I'm counting on it, kid."

Mum didn't come back until the next day—*two whole days* after she'd left.

Klaus had spent his day in the living room on one of the couches that had a clear view of the front door. He wasn't *waiting* for her. He *wasn't*. He just wanted to know when she came home.

But after it'd gotten dark and she still hadn't come in, Klaus gave up, and had only just gotten changed and climbed into bed, when there was a quiet knock on his door.

Mum let herself in.

"Hi," she greeted him. "I'm not waking you, am I?"

Klaus sat himself up and switched his lamp on. "No. I was awake," he said, and his smile quickly faded as he noticed that her eyes were puffy, like they'd become swollen from all of her crying.

"What's wrong? How was your trip?"

Mum smiled sadly and she sat herself at the end of his bed, and Klaus shuffled up to make more room for her.

"It was fine. Everything... went as it should've," she told him. "How are you? You're all okay?"

"Yeah, fine. I told you I'd be fine. What's wrong?" he asked again.

Mum closed her eyes, making a long sigh. "I... I wanted to tell you... I've decided I won't be coming with you this term. Back to Hogwarts."

Klaus' thoughts screeched to a halt. That... hadn't been what he'd been expecting.

And yes, he was still mad at her, and yes, he still didn't want much to do with her, but that didn't mean he wanted her *gone*, either.

"What?" he said. "Why not?"

"I... I have to sort some things out here with your father," she said, as though it were a logical explanation for abandoning him. "Things that I can't do from the castle. But don't worry. You can owl me any time, any day, about anything at all. I'll be reachable at all times."

He didn't know what to say. "Are... are you kidding?"

"Klaus—"

"So, what, now that *he* shows up, you're choosing to stay with him instead of coming back home with me?"

"That—" Mum broke off, and—oh, great, her eyes started to well up again. "That's not it. That's really, *really* not it at all."

"Then why? We've been at Hogwarts forever! It wouldn't be the same without—" Klaus stopped himself, right at the brink of becoming sappy. "It wouldn't be the same."

"I know, honey," she said, and a tear slipped down her cheek. "But please just— it's for the best this time. Trust me."

He locked his jaw. He wanted to tell her to just get out, to yell at her that he'd never trust her again, that she'd ruined everything by bringing Riddle back home. But she just looked so *sad* that he forced himself to keep quiet, and when she pulled him in for a tight, smothering hug, Klaus just nodded against her.

"I wish I could go back with you. More than anything, and I'll miss you," she whispered into his hair, "so very much. But you'll be safe."

"Course I will," he mumbled, voice muffled by her jumper.

"I'll write to you every day."

He grunted.

"And I'll send you those crisps you like."

"...The muggle ones?"

"Mhmm."

"...Thanks. I'd like that."

Mum sighed against him, and Klaus properly relaxed into her hug. He was still mad at her... but it'd been ages since he'd had a good one with her. He could enjoy a hug and still be mad.

"...Mum?" he asked after a little while.

"Yes?"

"It's not..." The thought nagged at him, but he didn't know how to put it. "It isn't... it's not because of him, is it? My Dad?"

"Klaus—"

"I mean— I know you said you have to sort stuff out, but he's not... he's not making you stay here, is he?"

"No, honey," she whispered into his hair, squeezing him a little bit tighter. "No."

Klaus was right. Hogwarts *wasn't* the same without Mum.

It was twice as lonely, made even worse by the fact that Dahlia hadn't wanted to come with him either. She'd been moping from the moment they'd left the house, and she was refusing to leave his dormitory, eating half the amount she normally would, and when she bothered to speak to him, she'd hiss vaguely about wanting to return back to 'Master'.

Little traitor.

But Mum at least followed through on her promise, writing him foot-long letters just about every single day, providing him with the same amount of nagging as he was used to, but without any of the comfort of her actually being there.

He hated it, and his father, on the other hand, didn't write once.

Meanwhile, Klaus cursed that bloody old hat for putting him in the wrong house, because Nott, Selwyn, and Rabastan were as pleasant as ever—more so, now that he didn't have 'Mudblood Mummy to run off to'. Klaus, thin and nimble, had become adept at dodging their curses in the corridors, anticipating the booby-traps they set on his bed and in the dorm bathroom. He'd even gotten so accustomed to their heckling, that one Saturday, when he heard someone across the courtyard saying, "where's the Mudblood?", he craned his neck before he'd even realised what he was doing.

To pass the time and to keep himself out of Nott's firing line, Klaus spent more time than he

should've going back through the records of his father's 'incident', old newspaper articles, public court records, anything at all that he could get his hands on.

Mum had pleaded to him that first night, had sworn up and down that she truly had thought his father had passed away. They were lies—they *had* to be—but it just... it wasn't adding up. The reports stated clearly that he'd died, that his *body* had been removed from the castle and incinerated, and so, through it all, he kept it all to himself. He didn't utter a word to anyone at Hogwarts about his father, not even Slughorn.

Mum never mentioned him in her letters either, and Klaus gradually started to think that maybe he'd lost it and had imagined Riddle coming home all along.

The first term of second year *dragged*, and when it blessedly came to its end and the train pulled into King's Cross for the Christmas break, Klaus had trouble spotting Mum through the crowd.

He leaned out of the compartment's window that he'd shared with some fourth year Hufflepuffs, trying not to bounce on his toes to see past the sea of parents—he didn't want to seem *too* excited—but couldn't spot her bush of hair anywhere. She must've been towards the back.

Giving up, he slung on his backpack and hurried off the train before he pushed his way through to the luggage to get his trunk, and began searching through the crowd for her.

After a good five minutes, right as he was starting to get a bit miffed that she hadn't come to the front to meet him, his attention was caught over toward the large station map. And there, speaking closely with the proud, rounded man he knew to be Rabastan's father was...

Oh. Great.

"I didn't expect *you*," Klaus said when he reached his father, and he received only a tight smile in response. "Where's Mum?" he asked.

"At home," Riddle said simply. He stepped behind him and placed his hand on Klaus' trunk, and it shrunk up into his hand until it resembled one belonging to a doll.

Wandless again. Not even a whisper of an incantation. Klaus hadn't had any luck with his practicing during the term, and he bit his tongue to keep from commenting.

"Is that everything?"

Klaus gave a nod and adjusted his cloak as Dahlia slithered out of his inner pocket. He rolled his eyes and scooped her up, offering her over to his father.

"Here," he said, annoyed. "She's been asking for you for months."

His father glanced at her, looking equally annoyed. "*Stay with the boy*," he told her quietly, and she reared back to slowly slither back up Klaus' forearm and down again to curl herself up into his pocket. "Come along then," Riddle said.

He started to lead the way toward the entry out to the muggle platform, and Mr. Lestrangle, Rabastan and Rodolphus flanked his other side.

Klaus followed after them obediently. "Um... where are we going?"

"I have business with Mr. Lestrangle," his father told him as though that sufficiently explained it.

Klaus peered past his father and Mr. Lestrangle, finding Rabastan shooting him a sharp, questioning look. He ignored it.

"What type of business?" Klaus pressed.

"Never you mind."

As they made their way across the crowded platform, Klaus started to notice the other parents noticing them. Some were double taking, some were whispering among themselves, some were hurrying their children away.

Did they... did they *recognise* him? Was Red-Eyed Riddle that familiar to them, even after all these years?

"Well, it's a bit hard not to mind when you're dragging me along," Klaus muttered before adding, "are you even *allowed* to be here?"

"Of course."

Klaus glanced around them uncomfortably. "They're all *staring*."

"Let them," his father said, unbothered. "Now keep up, would you?"

Klaus was left alone in the Lestrangle's extravagant third living room with Rodolphus and Rabastan after having been firmly instructed to keep themselves occupied. Rodolphus was staring, arms crossed tightly.

Great, Klaus thought, unsure of what to say to them. Once, he'd admired Rodolphus, wanted to *be* him, but then he and his brother had gone and turned out to be pricks.

"You should've said Riddle was your father," Rabastan said accusingly from where he was stretched out, lounging on the nearest couch to the fireplace.

Klaus refrained from telling him he didn't know that he was, and instead rolled his eyes and retorted with, "would it have mattered?"

"Course," Rabastan scoffed, resting his hands behind his head. "Dad said he's a psycho. Nott wouldn't mess with you if he knew."

A psycho. Perfect. First, he's the Slytherin Mudblood, now he'll be the psycho's kid.

Just what he needed.

"...is that right," he said, keeping his voice pointedly uninterested.

"What did you say to him?" Rodolphus asked coldly.

"What do you mean?"

"About us," he said. "Why else would you be here?"

Klaus sneered at him. "Not all of us need to run off to Daddy at the first sign of a problem, Lestrangle," he said. "I didn't tell him anything."

Rodolphus scoffed and leaned against one of the tall bookcases, while Rabastan sat up to lean forward, resting his elbows on his knees.

"Well?" Rabastan asked in a hushed tone. "Is it true, then?"

"Is what true?" Klaus snapped irritably.

"Is he really... you know... *immortal*?"

Klaus snorted, unable to stop it. "Been reading too many stories, have you?"

Rabastan shrugged, unbothered. By the bookshelf, Rodolphus' arms were still tightly crossed. He didn't look like he was joking either. "Dad went to school with him. Says he used to brag about being unkillable, even back then," said Rodolphus. "Think about it. Everyone's heard the story, and rumour says there was a body."

Klaus laughed again, albeit a little bit more uncertainly than the first time.

"Clearly the rumours are wrong," he said surely.

"Dad doesn't think so."

"Oh, right," Klaus scoffed. "Mr. Lestrangle thinks something's true, so it must be. My mistake."

Rabastan scoffed. "That attitude is why no one likes you, Granger."

"Silly me," he mumbled, "here I was thinking it was my dirty blood."

Before Rabastan or Rodolphus could get another word in, they were blessedly interrupted by the loud creaking of the doors, and—*finally*—Riddle's head popped through.

"We're done," he said simply, and he left again just as quickly as he'd entered.

"Well," said Klaus, taking that as his cue to leave, and he got up and grabbed his backpack. "As fun as this has been, I do hope not to do it again."

Rodolphus snorted, and Rabastan's lip picked up.

"See you at school, Granger," Rabastan called after him, and Klaus hurried on out.

"What was that about?" Klaus asked shortly after, trailing along with his father on their way back down the long drive of the Lestrangle's estate.

"Business."

"What sort of business?"

Riddle sighed. "Roderick is handling my case with the Ministry," he told him, taking Klaus by surprise. He hadn't expected him to actually answer.

"Your case?" Klaus asked.

"One of the members of the Wizengamot has filed a motion for an investigation into my... circumstances. Roderick is handling it for me."

"So... you're *not* in trouble?" Klaus asked again skeptically.

"Nothing I can't manage," said Riddle, and he offered him his arm.

"Right. Um," Klaus paused, looking between his father and his arm. "Next stop's home, right?"

"I think we've kept your mother waiting long enough, don't you?"

They'd barely stepped into the house when Mum barrelled into him.

"Oh!" She pressed several kisses to his forehead and Klaus tried to pull back, but she was stronger than she looked and didn't relent. "I'm so glad you're home!" Another one, two kisses. "Where have you been? Are you all right? You're not hurt?"

"I—ow, Mum—I will be if you don't let me breathe," Klaus whined, prying himself free from Mum. "I'm fine. We just stopped by the Lestrangle's on the way."

Mum at last let him go and said a quiet, "*oh*," and Klaus didn't miss the accusatory glare Mum gave his father.

His father smiled back warmly.

"Klaus has a budding friendship with young Rabastan," he said, a light hand on his shoulder, "isn't that right?"

"No," scoffed Klaus. "He's an asshole—"

"Language," Mum said, frowning.

"Sorry, sorry," Klaus said. "...It's true though."

Mum scoffed, while beside him, Riddle took his trunk out of his pocket and restored it to its full size. Leaving it with Klaus, he briefly placed his hand on Mum's shoulder before he went upstairs, leaving them on their own.

When he was gone, Mum let out a long breath. She looked relieved. "I'm so glad you're home," she repeated.

Klaus smiled back. It'd been a few months, and she was still a liar... but he admittedly was relieved to see her, too. "Yeah. Me too," he agreed. "What's for dinner?"

It didn't take him long to recognise that the tension he'd left with his parents when he'd gone back to the castle was still just as present—and uncomfortable—as ever. It might've actually gotten worse.

Because now, Mum wasn't only upset all the time, but she was snappy as well.

"What have you done with the picture in the library?" Mum said accusingly a couple of days before Christmas, interrupting Klaus and his father in the living room.

Riddle, who'd surprisingly agreed to check over Klaus' transfiguration homework for him the first time he'd asked, glanced up. Mum's arms were crossed, and she stood in the doorway. Klaus knew that look, and if he weren't so grateful it wasn't directed at him, he might've felt bad for his father.

"What picture?" his father asked.

Klaus winced. Wrong answer.

"You know *exactly* what picture," she ground out from between her teeth. "The one in the black frame. The one with my parents in it."

"Right. That one," his father said, and he clearly didn't recognise the direness of the situation he was about to enter into, because he followed up with, "I got rid of it."

Klaus shrunk back into the couch.

"What do you mean, 'you got rid of it'?" Mum questioned icily.

His father shrugged. "It had a coffee stain on it, it looked awful. It was torn on one side, and the picture wasn't even in focus, Hermione. The library's better off without it."

Mum stood eerily still with irate eyes, and Klaus could just about feel the radiating heat of her anger, but beside him, his father didn't seem concerned.

"You—" Mum cut herself off. "I don't— what is *wrong* with—"

She was just about trembling, seemingly unable to find the words, and Klaus couldn't bare it.

"Bloody hell, Mum," Klaus interjected. "It's a just a picture. You've got others. Let it go."

Her fury turned to him.

"It's not *just a picture*," she hissed. "It's— you *know* how much it—"

"Hermione," Riddle interrupted as gently as ever. "I'm terribly sorry, I never meant to upset you. I was only trying to improve our home. If it makes you feel better, I'll get you a new frame, and we'll put one of your others in it. Or we could even take another, if you like. One of us."

Mum's mouth twitched. She looked about ready to combust.

But instead of catching fire, her eyes narrowed viciously, and then without another word, she stormed out.

Klaus glared at his father.

"Thanks a lot," he mumbled, shaking his head. "You're not the only one who has to live with her, you know."

His father scoffed, and without any of the gentleness his voice had carried only moments earlier, he said, "it was a disgusting picture."

He said it more harshly than Klaus would've, but he wasn't exactly wrong. The muggle-taken picture was worn at its edges and the muggle in it—his grandfather—had been caught mid-blink. Mum had plenty of nicer ones.

But Klaus also knew how much her family meant to Mum, knew that they'd long passed, knew that she'd never be able to take any new pictures ever again.

"Yeah, but you didn't have to go and tell her that," Klaus said. "It's like you *want* to fight with— oh hey. Is that Mum's wand?"

He only just noticed the wand on the arm rest on his father's side of the couch. It was pale and beaded, just like Mum's.

"Yes. She loaned it to me," his father said simply. "You've brought over an extra zero, just here," he then pointed out, pointing high up on Klaus' homework. "That's why your equations aren't balancing."

"Ah!"

Christmas that year wasn't anything special, and Klaus was grateful for it. Mum being at his father's throat started to seem like it was to be the default state of things, and he just didn't think he could bare to sit at a table with them for a proper dinner.

But despite the bickering, he received a decent haul. Mum gave him an ornate, antique quill, some new clothes, and a nice new notebook for school, and he got some chocolates from Oliver next door and a bag of sweets a piece from Kettleburn and Slughorn in the mail.

His father didn't get him anything.

But that was fine. He'd never needed his gifts before, and he certainly didn't need them now.

While his father holed himself up in the upstairs library and Dahlia presumably joined him, Klaus spent the day with Mum, and though it wasn't a Hogwarts Christmas like he was used to, it was still nice. She doted on him, made her usual glazed ham for lunch, and they together played a few rounds of wizard's chess, followed by some exploding snap while Klaus told her all about his term at Hogwarts.

He was still mad at her—he *was*—but he found himself forgetting a few times.

When the day drew to an end and Klaus was starting to have a hard time keeping his eyes open, he muttered his goodnights to Mum and headed up to his room.

There was a book waiting for him on his bed.

It was thick with a hard, black cover, embroidered with golden font, and Klaus curiously snatched up the note from on top of its cover to inspect it.

'The Founding Families', by Cassiopeia Burke.

Intrigued, he ripped the note open.

Happy Christmas.

-Don't tell your mother.

Klaus grinned as he put the note aside on his dresser. Then, he quickly got changed before he climbed into bed and started to read.

With hopes to avoid a cup of tea just so happening to spill onto his robes on his first day back, Klaus avoided his dormmates by skipping breakfast and arrived at the first Defence class of the new term early, sitting alone toward the front of the class in his usual spot.

He organised his things on his desk meticulously, laying out his parchment, quill and ink pot.

He'd only just gotten everything the way he liked when there was the scrape of chair legs against the stone floor, and someone sat down beside him. It was Rabastan.

"Granger," he greeted with a wry sort of smile, and he placed a muffin on the desk in front of him. "Bought you this up from breakfast."

Klaus glanced suspiciously between Rabastan and the muffin. It smelled good. *Really* good.

"Um... thanks?" he said hesitantly.

"Don't mention it," Rabastan said, grinning, and he added, "don't worry. It's clean. Promise."

Klaus wasn't entirely convinced it hadn't been laced with something, but his stomach was growling angrily, so he slid it closer and started to pick at the muffin.

And—ah, it tasted as good as it smelled and it didn't make him sick. It didn't make him break out in hives, or body hair, or grow any extra digits. It was just... a very good blueberry muffin.

Rabastan smiled reassuringly, and though Klaus knew it wasn't entirely genuine, he smiled back.

Hmm. Maybe having Riddle around would be good for something after all.

It happened slowly after that. Gradually, Klaus heard less of 'oi, Mudblood!', and more of 'all right, Granger?'. Even Nott started to let up, and though his glaring and shouldering in the corridors continued, Klaus' bed sheets never tried to trap him in his bed again, never again did he climb into it to find it full of prickles.

After a year and a half of unrelenting harassment, Klaus' habit of keeping alert as he navigated the castle was hard to break, and he still anticipated being cursed from around corners, still kept a keen eye out for dungbombs and cursed light fittings. But it seemed to be all for naught; the curses stopped along with the heckling, and his days steadily became easier.

He gradually relaxed into it, choosing to read out in the courtyard rather than hidden away in the corner of the library. Rabastan even started to sit with him every now and then, peering over at his homework, asking for help and tips with his Transfiguration quiz preparations. Rabastan was *terrible* at Transfiguration, and it was almost enough to have Klaus wondering if he'd been better off being bullied.

But most of the time, Klaus was left alone in peace, and he spent all of his free time reading. While he'd finished the book his father had given him for Christmas mere days after having received it, he was up to his third reread of the chapter dedicated to Salazar Slytherin.

And it was... enlightening.

In the summer break between second and third year, Klaus found it near impossible to catch his father on his own.

Mum must've been practicing while he'd been at school, because she'd become unrelenting with her hovering, expertly keeping him from being alone with his father despite his best attempts.

"Could you get me some juice, Mum?" he'd tried, but that was met by her simply summoning some over.

"Would you mind reading this over for me, make sure I've got the theory right?" he'd asked his father, only for Mum to swoop in and volunteer to do it before his father could get a word in.

"Could I have a word with you? Alone?" he'd even tried directly, only for Mum to snap that anything he wished to speak to Riddle about could be said to her, too.

Klaus tried all he could think of, but Mum just didn't let up. But he was bursting at the seams—he *needed* to speak with his father—and so after a few days of being unable to get the privacy he wanted, he settled for the next best thing.

"*Slytherin*?" he asked in parseltongue when they were all together in the dining room for dinner.

Both his father and Mum looked up to him, but Klaus only had eyes for his father.

Riddle lowered his fork, smiling slowly as he dabbed at his mouth with his napkin. "Yes," he answered in English.

"*How*?"

His father glanced between him and Mum, and then he reverted to parseltongue to say, "*on my mother's side. She was a Gaunt.*"

"Tom," Mum interjected, clearly trying to cut them off, but with his father's confirmation, Klaus was buzzing. He *was* meant to be in Slytherin, the hat *hadn't* been wrong. He was descended from him himself—he belonged there more than anyone—and he continued to ignore her.

"*Is the chamber real*?" he asked.

His father grinned. "*When you find her, you mustn't show her any fear*," he said. "*You need to be strict with her. She's been hungry and alone for many years, and she can be extremely*

temperamental."

"Tom!" Mum snapped, and she moved in a way that Klaus was sure she'd kicked him under the table.

His father looked over to Mum, smile almost becoming playful, and he said without looking away from her, *"just like your mother."*

Mum's face was rapidly becoming bright red, but Klaus barely noticed, because his father must've been speaking about Slytherin's monster. *"What... is she?"*

"Don't ask stupid questions," his father said, and then abruptly added, "now you'll speak in English while you're in your mother's company."

His father focused back on his food, and sensing that was all he was going to get, Klaus smiled innocently at Mum. "Sorry, Mum."

"What was that about?" she asked angrily.

"Oh, nothing," Klaus told her, shovelling a forkful of mashed potato into his mouth. "We were just deciding what we're gonna do for your next birthday."

Mum's eyes narrowed, and she looked like she desperately wanted to pry further, but Klaus kept his eyes wide, and she grudgingly let it go.

Klaus' third year at school was his most enjoyable yet. His father must've given Dahlia a good talking to over the break, because her attitude that year improved drastically, and with Rabastan and Selwyn around to watch his back, Nott barely so much as spoke to him.

Between the three of them, in their free time, Rabastan would share the curses he learned from Rodolphus and his father, and Klaus would help them perfect their techniques. Selwyn was particularly adept at charms, while Rabastan seemed to be good at anything that required a combination of little thought and brute force. Every now and then, Rodolphus—now in sixth year—would slip them books from the restricted section, and gradually, they developed a good set of useful spells between them.

Meanwhile, Klaus got better at his wandless magic. Though he could still only reliably cast the most basic of spells—summoning charms, lumos, the occasional shield charm—once, during one of the Hogsmeade visits, he managed to cast a slicing hex at Nott's backpack when he wasn't looking, right as he'd been passing over a muddy puddle, successfully drenching all of his things. The best part was, that because he hadn't shared the fact that he was working on wandless magic, Nott had put the blame on poor Bones from Gryffindor who'd happened to have his wand out at the time. Klaus hadn't bothered to correct him.

It was a good year.

But despite searching everywhere he could think of, he didn't have any luck finding the chamber.

Klaus spent his holidays between his third and fourth year combing back through Slytherin's chapter in the book from his father, reading between the lines, racking his brain, pondering over the chamber, where in hell it could possibly be, what might be down there, what the rumoured monster it housed would be like. He pulled out as much information about Slytherin as his family's library would allow, and toward the end of the break, he'd put together a sizeable notebook full of his findings, including a list of spots to search for the chamber that he hadn't tried yet.

His fourth year would be the year. He just knew it, he could *feel* it, and he couldn't remember ever being so excited to return to the castle.

The day before he was due back, and he was still so distracted, that when he stumbled downstairs for a snack and caught his parents together in the kitchen, it took him a moment to comprehend what he was seeing.

Mum was leaning back into the counter while his father leaned into her. His hand was wound deeply into her hair, and their faces were close together, noses almost touching. It would've been awkward, like one of those moments Oliver had told him about when he'd caught his parents in bed together, except—

Mum was crying.

Riddle's grip in her hair looked tight, like he was *pulling*, craning her neck back.

"What's going on?" Klaus demanded.

His father released her hair at once, and Mum shoved him off.

She straightened quickly, wiping at her cheeks and smoothing her hair, before she said, "nothing, honey."

Klaus stepped into the kitchen. "Are you all right? What's—"

"Get back upstairs," his father ordered, a level tone that didn't at all match his features.

"Mum—"

"Please, Klaus," she said.

"N-no," he said incredulously. "No, I'm not just going to—"

"Then I'll come with you," she said, and before either he or his father could get a word in, she moved toward him. "All right?"

Mum took hold of his arm, starting to try to pull him back out of the kitchen, but Klaus tugged against her, keeping firmly in place.

"Hermione..." his father said warningly, but Mum snapped back, "*later*," and continued to try to pull him out.

But Klaus agreed with Riddle. "No," he refused, shooting him the sharpest glare he could muster. "No, what do think you're—"

"Please, Klaus," Mum insisted, and she sounded desperate. "*Please*."

Klaus had heard the Red-Eyed Riddle stories. He knew he was a killer, Mum obviously walked on eggshells around him, and Rodolphus had said he was a psycho. Everyone seemed to agree that he was dangerous.

But despite it all, Riddle had been consistently gentle—the most he'd ever seen from him was mild irritability—and since meeting him, he'd never really been able to reconcile the rumours with his father himself. And so, seeing him now, plainly livid, still came as a shock. He was almost unrecognisable and it wasn't only him. It was the atmosphere itself; the air in the kitchen felt sapped of warmth, full of static instead, full of *magic*.

Klaus had never experienced anything like it, but he didn't get the chance to think too hard on it, because Mum succeeded in roughly yanking him out of there. She was deceptively strong, and she didn't let him go despite his protests, and with grip so tight that he knew he'd feel it later, she managed to get him all the way up to his room.

"Sit down," she told him when she finally unhanded him, closing his bedroom door behind them.

Klaus didn't want to sit. He wanted to head back down and give Riddle a piece of his mind, but Mum was blocking the door and her hands were on her hips, and so he grudgingly gave in and plonked himself onto the bed. When Mum sat herself beside him, Klaus didn't even ask. He didn't have to. Mum just saw the look on his face and sighed.

"Please don't jump to conclusions, honey," she told him. "Don't worry. *Please*, don't worry. It's been a hard few years, and we're just... we're still trying to sort through our differences, that's all."

"Did... did he hurt you?"

Mum moved her head, not quite shaking it, not quite nodding. She wrung her hands together in her lap, as if she were having trouble keeping still. "It's nothing," she told him.

Klaus scowled. "Didn't look like nothing."

"It's between your father and I, you stay out of it. I can handle him, don't you worry," she said firmly, and then her eyes locked onto the pile of clothes on his desk. "Now, what have I told you about putting your clothes away?"

"Mum."

"Goodness," she uttered as she got up and plucked the shirt from the top of the pile. "Look at these wrinkles, it would take you all of ten minutes to hang all of this back—"

"*Mum!*" he snapped, and Mum quietened as she folded up the shirt she'd picked up. "Just— are you okay?"

"Klaus—"

"No," he interrupted stubbornly. "No more lies, I'm sick of— just tell me what's going on. Ever since he's moved in, you haven't been yourself. I'm not stupid, I know something's going on."

He thought she'd deny it, thought she'd try to feed him another lie, but she just shook her head and gave him a stubborn, "no."

"Mum—"

"*No*. I'm sorry, but it doesn't concern you."

"Like hell it doesn't—"

"Language."

"—I have to live with you! Of course it concerns me!"

Mum sighed. "Please just— trust me," she said sternly. "Your father and I might have our disagreements every now and then, but I promise you, that everything's fine. I'm fine."

Klaus glared at her, but Mum ignored it and went for another wrinkled shirt. She shook it out and tutted.

"Oh for goodness'— look at this!" she squawked. "How long has this been down here? What would your professors think if you went to school with your clothes scrunched up like this? I've told you — a good impression goes a long way. You can't have them thinking you don't take care of your things, or they'll think you don't care about your work, and that's just setting yourself up for failure, honey, so you really ought to..."

Klaus groaned.

The next morning, before heading off to the train station, Klaus had the rare opportunity of finding his father alone in his usual spot, reading the paper in the living room while Mum was busy in the bathroom.

If Mum wasn't going to help herself, then that was fine, he decided. He'd just have to take matters into his own hands.

"Keep your hands off my Mum."

He'd meant it to be threatening, but Riddle only gave a light laugh. He didn't even look up from the page he was on.

"I mean it."

He sighed as he lowered his paper and glanced up, crossing his legs over. "One day, there will come a time when you discover that a firm hand can go a long way with women," he said. "Particularly those as difficult as your mother."

Klaus narrowed his eyes further. "I don't care what sort of dark magic you're caught up in, and I don't care what you did to those other people all those years ago, but if you hurt *her*, then you'll regret it."

His father's smile grew as he'd spoken, eyes plainly amused. "I wasn't hurting her."

"You were pulling her hair, and she was—"

"I know it may be easy for you to forget, but your mother and I have a long history, Klaus," he told him. "You will also discover, soon enough, that sometimes a bit of pain can make things... well. More pleasurable, if you take my meaning."

Klaus recoiled. "*Ugh*— that's my— don't talk about her like that!"

His father shrugged. "Then might I advise you not to ask questions unless you're prepared for the answers."

"They don't count as answers when they're lies," Klaus snapped.

His father sighed loudly and leaned forward to discard the paper onto the coffee table. "Sit down," he instructed, gesturing to the seat opposite him.

Klaus locked his jaw, but it was a rare occasion that his father volunteered to speak to him, so he did as he was told.

"I can lose my temper sometimes," his father said calmly once he was seated. "I'll be the first one to admit that, and your mother and I have that trait in common. As a result, it's only natural that when we're together, we often... amplify that tendency in each other. You're young, and I know it might seem strange to you right now, but please try to understand that it's also one of the things we enjoy the most about each other."

At the combination of the words 'enjoy' and 'each other', Klaus nearly gagged. "Oh my *God*—gross."

"We can be volatile together," his father went on, ignoring his sounds of disgust, "and I'm sorry that you saw what you saw without having the full understanding of the context of the situation. But when you're older and you meet the right person... you'll understand."

"Jesus," he complained, wincing, "I get it, can you stop now?"

His father raised his hands gesturing as if to say, 'fine, fine', and Klaus didn't need to be told to hurry on out of there, eager to put an end to the conversation and forget it ever happened in the first place.

Christ. He couldn't wait to go back to school.

The start to Klaus' fourth year was slow, and though he worried about Mum, her daily letters didn't stop. She seemed fine. And so, Klaus slowly started to relax, starting to accept that maybe he *had* misread the situation after all, and allowed himself become engrossed in his schoolwork.

And then, the attack happened.

Only two weeks into the term, and in one night, four prominent families were hit simultaneously: the Longbottoms, the Prewetts, the Weasleys, and the Potters.

The Daily Prophet was labelling it as the worst crime against wizarding Britain in more than a decade, the worst since Grindelwald. None had seen it coming, no one in the castle seemed unaffected, and though none in their ranks had been directly related to the victims, the Slytherin's were particularly shaken, because all of the families had been purebloods.

Six Longbottoms, four Prewetts, three Weasleys, along with Fleamont Potter and his wife, had all been murdered across six different locations across the country in what seemed to be a professional hit, all within a single hour of each other.

On the night the news broke, Rabastan shared with Klaus and his dormmates that according to his father, the Ministry was baffled. They had no immediate suspects, no evidence had been recovered at any of the scenes, and other than the fact that they'd all been murdered without a trace at the same time of day, there wasn't any other link to tie the killings together.

But despite the lack of evidence, Rabastan, Selwyn and Nott all had their suspicions, and they all whispered from within the safety of their dorm room that they suspected that an up-and-coming dark wizard by the name of *Lord Voldemort* had been behind them.

The second attack happened later that very same year right before the Christmas holidays, though there were two significant differences compared to the first.

This time, there were three victims, all of differing blood-status, and all had been members of the Wizengamot, including Alfie Dawlish, the Head of Law Enforcement.

The second difference was that each home of the victims had been *marked*. Above each, a large, glittering, emerald cloud had been left hovering over them, identical ones that each formed the shape of a skull with a viper weaving out of its mouth.

Pictures were published in the Daily Prophet, and there wasn't any disputing that the attacks were terrifying. Between the two attacks, seven families without anything linking them together had been struck, and without a pattern, without any suspects, there wasn't any telling whose family would be next.

But though Klaus and the other boys of his dorm room all agreed that the attacks were terrifying, they also agreed that the marks above the victim's homes looked wicked.

When Klaus met Mum at King's Cross, he was taken aback by the amount of weight she'd lost.

She looked *tiny*, and she had prominent, dark rings under her eyes, but it didn't stop her from launching herself at him, hugging him as enthusiastically as ever.

Klaus had a hard time returning it. He'd grown a decent bit taller than her in the last year, and now that she was so skinny, she felt small. Fragile.

"Mum," he said when she didn't let him go. "*Mum*. Are you all right?"

She sighed lightly and backed off a bit to give him what he assumed was meant to be a reassuring smile. "I am now."

During that year's winter break, Klaus noticed very early on that his parents were being weird.

Well—even weirder than their usual.

They barely acknowledged each other, and there was something *different* about the interactions they did have, some additional layer of tension between them, and he was having a hard time pointing a finger on it. It took days to work out what it was, but eventually, after seeing his father blatantly ignore Mum's request to pass the salt across the table, Klaus finally pieced it together.

He felt silly for not realising it earlier, because it was actually quite obvious.

Usually, Mum made no secret of being put out with his father.

But now... it seemed like *he* was mad at *her*, too.

And so, the next morning, while his father made breakfast, Klaus went upstairs and popped his head into their room, finding Mum sifting through her sock drawer.

He knocked lightly, and when she gave him her attention, he bluntly said, "something happened while I was gone. What was it?"

"Hmm?"

"He's mad at you," Klaus stated. "Isn't he? What did you do?"

Mum huffed, frowning as she chose a pair of socks. "Why do you assume it's something *I've* done?" she muttered angrily.

"Well, isn't it?"

She sighed. "I-if you must know... last week, we had... a discussion. That's all. And your father didn't like it."

"So you had a fight," he concluded for her.

"No, we—"

"Can't you just... say sorry, and kiss and make up already?"

For a moment, she looked horrified, but then her features softened, and she edged closer. "Klaus... honey... I-I know that things must be horribly confusing to you, us all living together like this. And it would only be the natural assumption to make, that we're... I know it's complicated, but your father and I aren't... together like that."

"You live together."

"Yes, but like I said, that doesn't always mean—"

"You had me together."

"Yes."

"You sleep in the same room."

"I... well, *yes*," she agreed, somewhat reluctantly. "But... it's important to me that you know that when people are together romantically, they support each other. They're partners, and they care for each other, work for what's in the other's best interest. What your father and I have isn't... well it's not..."

"So, you're just fucking."

"Oh for— *language!*" she screeched, swatting his arm. "And *no*, we're—"

"I'm not a kid, Mum," he said over the top of her. "And you don't need to explain your... arrangement, I don't need to know the details. But living with the two of you is getting even more tiring than it usually is, so whatever's going on, I need you to hurry up and sort it out already."

She gaped at him.

"Okay? Thank you," he said, hoping that that would do it, and then he went down to grab some breakfast.

Mum, much to his surprise, seemed to take his words to heart, because weeks later, when his father dragged them both to Roderick Lestrangle's promotion party, they seemed the happiest Klaus had ever seen them.

The party was being hosted at Malfoy Manor, and when Klaus left his parents to go and say hello to Rabastan and the others out in the gardens, he came back later on to find his parents together, holding hands while they spoke with Selwyn's father.

He'd never seen them *holding hands* before.

"...Hey," he greeted, glancing between them. They looked... at ease.

Weird.

"Hi, honey," Mum cooed happily, sipping at her wine. "Having a nice time?"

"Um, yeah. It's all right, I guess," Klaus said, frowning. "So... Rodolphus brought his quidditch stuff. Is it okay if I go and—"

"Of course," his father said. "Go have fun."

Mum didn't say anything, just continued to smile happily, and she leaned her shoulder against her father affectionately.

Klaus frowned suspiciously, but nodded slowly, and said, "...thanks," and then waved them off to dash back off to join the others.

"Dad reckons now's the time," Rabastan said as he dismounted from his broom. "That it's different this time, not like Grindelwald."

"Nah, won't be like Grindelwald, 'cause he's coming for half-bloods and purebloods, too," Selwyn said.

"Yeah, but that's only 'cause he was clearing the Wizengamot," Rabastan reasoned. "How else do you expect us to take over without a majority vote?"

"Us'?" Klaus said, laughing incredulously. "You say that as if you're in."

"I'm as good as, Rod and I both. Dad's in his trusted circle. He'll get us in."

"He wasn't 'clearing the Wizengamot' when he went for Potter," Selwyn said. "Or the Prewetts, or the Weasleys."

Rabastan waved him off. "Semantics," he said dismissively. "Who're we to question him?"

"Who, indeed," mumbled Klaus.

"Fear not, my lads," Rabastan said. "I'll get you in. Mark my words."

Klaus snorted. Rabastan was so full of shit.

He finally found it halfway through the second term of fifth year, and it was entirely by accident.

After so long of actively searching every inch of the castle for the chamber, Klaus was losing his mind over it, and grudgingly come to the conclusion that what he needed was a break.

With his search for the chamber put on hold and his classes barely managing to challenge him, it meant that he was left with a good amount of free time, and he spent it stealing glances, brushing fingertips, and exchanging notes with Euphemia Beaumont, Nott's soon-to-be fiancée.

She was boring, only mildly pretty, but she had nice tits and a small waist, and his hard efforts finally paid off a few weeks before their mid-term quizzes, when during one of Slytherin's quidditch matches, they snuck off into the girls' bathroom and she sucked him off in one of the stalls.

She was his first, and he only lasted a couple of minutes, but the smugness of having beaten Nott to having his cock in her throat had been worth it. And it was then, after he'd cleaned himself up and tried to wash his hands, he noticed that the tap wasn't working.

"That one's *never* worked," Euphemia complained, rubbing at her knees, but Klaus didn't pay her any attention, suddenly transfixed by a small snake that was etched onto the copper tap.

Huh. An odd place for a sketch of a snake.

So, the next evening, after sneaking out of the common room and venturing back to the girls' bathroom after curfew, Klaus went back to check it out, and with a bit of parseltongue, he was *in*.

He landed badly after tumbling out of the chute, scraping his palms and knees on the damp stone at the bottom. It didn't bother him for long though, because as he ventured deeper and found the trails of shed skin littered throughout the chamber, trailing over piles of the bones of small mammals, he very quickly started to *panic*.

A basilisk. The monster in the chamber was a fucking *basilisk*.

Bloody hell. His father could've warned him, could've given him the heads up, but then again—well. What else could she have been?

His heart thundered in his chest, but now that he'd finally found the chamber after *years* of searching, he wasn't about to go turning back. Instead, he steadily ventured through—the chamber was far larger, far more run down than he'd imagined—and he slowed when he reached a circular, golden door, with an image of who could only be Salazar Slytherin carved into it.

He took his time inspecting it, eyes drinking it in, and his attention caught onto what looked to be a list of initials beside it.

He ran his fingers over them all, the marks of his ancestors.

It was a solid list, about ten sets of initials. Early on, there were two with initials ending with 'S', one 'P', followed by a string of 'G's.

On my mother's side, his father had said. She was a Gaunt.

The list of G's continued right down until the last initial, which was different to the others. It'd been crossed out with a mess of scratches, and Klaus couldn't tell what the initials underneath had been, but neatly carved next to it, was a neat, 'L.V.'.

Huh.

Eager to find out what else the chamber had to offer, Klaus commanded the door to open, and it rolled itself aside to lead into what must've been the deepest part of the chamber. And inside, he found *her*, in the flesh, her body coiled up tightly to fit within the space.

He hesitated only momentarily before he gradually approached, and when he was a few steps in, a loud rumbling filled the chamber as she started to move, her enormous body starting to unwind.

Klaus snapped his eyes closed and backed up, waiting until the rumbling slowed, and then there was the sound of airflow before him, the distinct sound of her smelling the air.

"*Masssster... hassss returned,*" she hissed slowly, and Klaus tried, he really did, but his heart threatened to burst.

What had his father told him? *You mustn't show her any fear. You need to be strict.*

He could do that. She could kill him with a glance, but he could be strict. No problem.

"*Close your eyes,*" he ordered her. His voice wasn't as level as he'd intended it to be, but—

"*It issss ssssafe,*" she answered him, and Klaus took a deep breath before he dared to squint his eyes open.

And she... oh.

She was *magnificent*.

She had her head rested on the stone flooring of the chamber before him, only a metre away, and her skull was the size of a small vehicle. Her scales were a deep green, lighter on her underside, glistening in the dim lighting, and she was so, so long. He couldn't see the end of her tail, just that she was still halfway coiled up over by the large statue at the back of the space.

Klaus opened his mouth to ask her if he could touch her, but then thought better of it. He mustn't

show any fear.

Ignoring his better senses, he slowly stepped forward without asking, reaching out until his fingers brushed over the scales over her nose. She was cool, deceptively soft to the touch.

"I want to feed, Massster..." she hissed as he stroked her, and Klaus pulled his arm back from her face in case she decided she was hungry enough to try him.

"What can I get for you?" he offered, remembering what his father had said about her having been alone and hungry for years. He felt painfully sorry for her. She was huge, and rodents would've only gone so far. Why had his father left her like this? He wasn't sure what he could find that would sate her; maybe a deer from the forest?

"Let me out," she hissed. *"Let me kill. Let me cleansse..."*

"Cleanse?"

"The unpure. The unworthhhhy."

Oh. Oh. She meant...

"I will bring you something to eat," he told her firmly. *"But that's—"*

Before him, she suddenly moved. Klaus lurched back, snapping his eyes closed again and he felt her cool breath blowing onto him.

She felt close. She must've raised her head and from the feel of her breath, she must've been right in front of him. He didn't dare crack his eyelids.

"Releassse me," she hissed. *"I want to sssstretch. I want to kill."*

Klaus clenched his fists, keeping his shoulders square. She sounded desperate.

You mustn't show her any fear, he reminded himself. *You mustn't show any fear.*

"No," he told her sternly. *"I said, no. I am your master, and you will obey."*

She answered only with a long, drawn-out hiss, not a proper answer, and her breathing went on, steady and loud.

"I'll... I'll let you out soon," he told her. *"I promise. In the meanwhile, I'll bring you something substantial."*

She hissed again and it was a clear sound of disapproval.

But Klaus wasn't eaten. She didn't strike him, didn't argue further, so he told her again, *"soon,"* and then after she coiled herself back up, tucking her head underneath her body, he left her right where he'd found her.

Klaus didn't return to the chamber again. He was a coward, leaving her to starve down there by herself, but he just didn't have it in him. What if he couldn't control her a second time? What if she

refused him? Her eyes weren't the only danger, she could easily decide to take a bite out of him. And he couldn't very well wrangle a deer through the castle without being noticed, so he decided that he wouldn't go back until he'd spoken with his father again.

He'd know what to do.

It was hard to pay attention in classes after that, hard to take in what the professors were saying when his thoughts were so stuck on the basilisk, but when they were taught about glamours in Defence, his interest was piqued.

To demonstrate, Professor Jigger glamoured himself a good twenty years younger and maintained it for the entire lesson, and Klaus had an epiphany. He was *sure* he'd encountered that tell-tale glint of general *offness* before.

And so, the next time he was home, with an entire list full of questions, he pinned his father down once more, and now that he knew what he was looking for, it seemed obvious. How hadn't he noticed?

"You wear a glamour," he accused, closing the library door behind him.

His father looked up from the letter he'd been writing. "Yes," he said, raising a brow. "Took you long enough."

"Why do you wear it?"

His father lowered his quill, and though it was hard to see in the dim lighting, his eyes distinctly changed in between blinks.

They brightened, becoming a vivid shade of red.

Klaus grinned, laughing aloud at the truth to the rumours and stepped closer to lean on the desk and have a better look. "Creepy," he decided. "Why are they like that?"

His father shrugged. "When particularly potent, magic can leave a mark upon its user."

Klaus remembered the conversation he'd had with his mother, all of those years ago. "Dark magic."

He expected him to deny it, to tell him to leave, and end the conversation as Mum usually would. But his father wasn't Mum, and instead, he gave a direct, "yes."

"What... what sort of dark magic?" he asked, thinking of all the magic he, Rabastan and Selwyn had spent all those months working on, practicing in their dorm late at night. Was that what would happen to them if they kept going? "What did you do that left its mark?"

His father leaned back, pausing thoughtfully. "How old are you now?" he asked.

"Fifteen."

He winced. "I'll tell you when you're of age."

"That's not fair."

"Sorry, kid."

"...is it because of those people you killed?"

"No," he said.

Klaus had so much left to discuss—the basilisk, the initials on the chamber wall—but he didn't often get his father alone, and it was even rarer that he got him talking like this, so not wanting to lose the opportunity, he sat down opposite him and asked instead, "why'd you do it, all those years ago? If you... um, don't mind me asking."

His father smiled to himself. "Had you ever met Albus Dumbledore, you'd understand," he told him. "And Avery... ask your mother."

It was then, that Klaus had the sudden, bizarre realisation that despite all his father's shortfallings, he *trusted* him.

Unlike with Mum, he knew, with surety, that if he asked him something, he'd get the truth in return, and it had him remembering the advice he'd been given months earlier.

Don't ask questions unless you're prepared for the answers.

He shouldn't. He knew he shouldn't, but driven by some odd sort of morbid fascination, he went on to ask, "...are they the only people you've killed?"

His father didn't flinch. "No."

"How do you... but doesn't that bother you?" he asked, feeling that nauseous sensation, the same one he'd had when he'd spoken with the basilisk. "Don't you feel... I don't know. Bad?"

"No."

"Don't you... do you regret them at all?"

His father opened his mouth, but then snapped it shut. His brows drew together thoughtfully. "Only one," he eventually said. "But... I never killed her, in the end."

Klaus was confused. "...Sorry? Why would you regret it if you didn't do it?"

His father looked down at the desk between them, his crimson eyes becoming unfocused in a wistful sort of way. "Sometimes, letting someone live can be a steeper price to pay."

Klaus wasn't sure he got it, but he nodded anyway.

"Um... so, on the chamber wall, there were a list of—"

His father straightened, and before Klaus could go on, he interrupted, "you found it?"

"Yeah," said Klaus. "Yeah, I did. And I was just—are... are you L.V.?"

His father gave a brief nod.

"...Lord Voldemort," he concluded. "And that's... she knows, doesn't she? That's why Mum's the way she is, why she's been so mad at you."

He smiled crookedly. "That's..." he said, "certainly a contributing factor."

Klaus' list of questions was rapidly growing by the second—good ones, well-thought-out ones, and yet, the one that won out, the one he blurted before he could stop it, was, "did you *really* die? Way back then?"

His father laughed at that, and after looking thoughtful, he thrummed his fingers on the desk a few times and said, "a conversation for another time, I think."

"But—"

"Another time."

Klaus sighed. "Okay, okay. Um... I also... the basilisk, she's... I don't know what to do. She's hungry, like you said. Restless. She wants to get out—"

"Let her."

"—and I think she'll— what?"

"Let her out," his father told him. "She's been locked up in that sewer for decades. She needs to stretch, she needs to be free."

"B-but she wants to kill *people*—"

"It will be worse in the long run if you don't allow her to. She can be patient—she *has* been patient—but she has her limits," he said. "You may have Slytherin's blood, but she will turn on you if she believes she has to."

"I... I don't..."

"Listen to me carefully," his father said sternly, leaning forward. "Ankou is very old, and she was raised by Salazar himself. She has been locked up for a millennium, and last we spoke, she was closing in to her breaking point. If you permit her to leave, if you allow her to follow his orders, then it will not be your will she is obeying. Any deaths she causes will be on his hands," he told him. "But if you restrict her, if you keep her restrained within that dungeon where all she has to feed on are rodents, then she *will* lash out. It's only a matter of time, and the deaths she causes then—not one, but many—will be entirely upon you."

Klaus felt sick.

"I-I don't want her," he confessed, unable to meet his eyes. "I don't— you're... better at this sort of stuff than I am. You know her, can't you come and get her? Can't *you* let her out? Please, I don't want to be..."

His father stood and circled the desk, and with a firm grip, placed his hand on his shoulder.

He stared down at him. Klaus felt pathetic.

"I won't take this power from you," his father told him, not leaving room for question. "You are young, and I know it may seem overwhelming right now. But you are my blood. You were made for it. Take it."

"I don't know if I—"

"You can. You must. She is your responsibility now, and if you handle yourself well... if you prove yourself... then there will be room for you. By my side."

Klaus closed his eyes. Rabastan and the others spoke about it all the time, following their fathers, joining Lord Voldemort's revolution, tearing down the statute of secrecy.

He'd thought about it too—of course he had—but he hadn't imagined it like this.

"Will... will you help me?" he asked, even though he knew his father wasn't fond of stupid questions.

"You don't need my help," his father said, and he let him go to circle back around the desk. "You know what to do."

Leaving home at the end of the break—leaving Mum—felt harder that year, and when she hugged him goodbye at the station, he had a hard time letting her go. She didn't seem to mind it, like she had a hard time letting him go, too.

"Look after yourself," she told him quietly.

"You too," he said, and now that he was tall enough, he rested his chin on her head. "Give Dad hell for me, yeah?"

She pulled back from him, and though she was smiling, she also seemed to be on the brink of tears. "I always do."

Klaus squeezed her hand and gave her a reassuring smile, and then he went to board the train.

He hoped she would understand.

Klaus received his first '*acceptable*' that term, on not one, but on *two* separate assignments. Professor Slughorn even pulled him aside after class and sat him down and for a spill about the temptations of young women and how he mustn't let fleeting pleasures affect the grades that would stay with him for his entire life.

Klaus hasn't even had it in him to argue. He'd been so tired that he just nodded and said, 'yes, Sir', 'sorry, Sir', 'it won't happen again, Sir'.

He continued that way, unfocused and distracted, ignoring his problems, until he received a letter a month into the term. It wasn't signed, but it didn't have to be. He easily recognised the hand.

Remember what we spoke about.

That's all it said.

Klaus scowled down at it. As if he hadn't been thinking that conversation over every moment of every bloody day, as if he could've forgotten. And meanwhile, Rabastan, Selwyn and Nott were getting louder about joining Lord Voldemort's budding movement, and there were more whispers amongst the rest of the house, from the Black's, the Goyles, the Travers' too. It was like the entirety of Slytherin house was mocking him, and so Klaus angrily scrunched up the letter, and when he passed the next fireplace, he tossed it right in.

Months into the term, and his father's offer together with the knowledge that she was down there, alone and starved in a decrepit dungeon filled with bones, waiting for his return and desperate to be free, finally became too much to bear.

He didn't want her hurting people... but he couldn't stop thinking of what his father had said, that she was *his* responsibility, and he didn't want her to suffer, either, and so, when he finally went to see Ankou, he gave her a clear set of instructions.

"You may only leave to go to the forest," he told her firmly, just the way he'd practiced. *"You may kill whatever you want in there, but you're not under any circumstances to touch any... students. Adults only."*

She'd hissed her displeasure sharply. *"I musssst cleanssse, I mussst—"*

"No. You will obey."

She wasn't pleased with him, and Klaus wasn't certain if she'd do as he told her, but for the second time, she let him leave the chamber unscathed.

And as the year went on, and the only person to go missing was Muggle Studies' Professor Horn, Klaus' grades steadily started to pick back up.

His father didn't write again.

Mum was quieter than usual over the next break, and neither she nor his father uttered a word of the missing Professor.

But on the second evening of being home, when his father caught him in hallway on his way to the bathroom, he gave him a smile and a brief pat on his shoulder as he'd passed.

And Klaus— he should've seen it coming. The signs were there. But over that break, he had tunnel vision locked onto his own problems, was so distracted by the thought of the witch who'd died because of him, was so focused on considering what to do with the basilisk long-term and on the thought of what working for his father after he graduated would be like, that when Mum finally snapped, it took him entirely by surprise.

He woke at the break of dawn to the sounds of fighting.

It wasn't bickering, wasn't merely an exchange of sharp words, but full-blown *fighting*.

Loud thumping and the sounds of smashing echoed up to his bedroom from downstairs, and Klaus tumbled out of bed. Groggily, he stumbled over to the door and poked his head out, and after seeing the tell-tale flashing of light spilling in from downstairs, he fetched his wand and barrelled down towards it.

He took the stairs three at a time and burst into the living room, finding it in tatters.

His father was amongst the mess, over by the windows and he didn't have a wand in hand, but despite that, he was maintaining what looked to be a solid shield charm while coloured curses came at him from all angles. He looked murderous.

"*What's going on?!*" yelled Klaus.

He couldn't see her, but he heard Mum yell, "get back!", right at the same time as his father's eyes locked onto him.

He would've done as she said had he been fast enough. Instead, he all of a sudden *couldn't breathe*, like his throat had closed over, and was now refusing to open back up.

He started to claw at his neck, and his father snarled out harshly, "*come out, Hermione.*"

Klaus tried to gasp, to make any sound at all, but it was as though his throat had been sealed over.

All of a sudden, Mum appeared on the other side of the room, popping up out of nowhere, and her eyes darted between Klaus and his father in horror. "Stop it!" she yelled. "Stop it, and I'll give it back!"

Unable to do much else, Klaus stumbled over to Mum, gripping onto her when he reached her to stop himself from falling, and she tossed her wand over the tattered couch at the ground toward his father.

But though she'd relinquished her wand, the spell he was under didn't let up, and pressure steadily built in his skull, ear drums pulsing.

"*You've made your point, stop it!*" Mum screeched.

"Oh. I don't know that I have," his father growled out viciously. "Or else you wouldn't keep doing this."

Klaus barely heard him, ears ringing.

Mum clawed at him, trying feebly to help him. "Please, I'm s— he's *suffocating*, Tom—"

"No more," his father hissed. "This is the last time. Swear that you're *done*, or *he will be.*"

"I—" Mum made a high-pitched whine, "Yes, yes, okay! Please! It's yours, I won't touch it again, I —"

"Swear it."

"I promise, I won't touch it, please, *Tom*, just—"

"*You will get on your knees and swear to it!*"

His father had yelled, entirely unhinged, and Mum moved beside him, shouting something else back at him, but Klaus felt like he was underwater and couldn't make any of it out anymore.

He buckled, falling to his hands and knees, and his body was giving out, giving into the blackness —

Klaus gasped desperately when his throat abruptly opened back up, he collapsed to the ground in relief.

He didn't see his father storm out, but there were the sounds of heavy footsteps on the stairs and then Mum pulled him into her lap, stroking over his cheeks.

"Klaus?" she was saying, "*Klaus?* Are you okay? Please talk to me, please, honey, are you—"

"I—fine," he managed between breaths, blinking heavily as his head spun with the rush of oxygen. "m'fine."

"I'm sorry," she was saying, running her hands over his hair. "I'm s-so sorry, I thought I could— I didn't mean for you to get involved, I didn't think he would—"

"I'm... okay. I'm okay," he mumbled, and using the back of the couch, he pulled himself up and out of her hold. His skin was clammy and his vision lagged a bit, but he was all right. He, Rabastan and Selwyn did worse to each other in the dorm all the time. "Fine. See? It's—no harm done," he told her, and then he asked, "what happened? What did you do?"

"I—*what?*"

"What did you do to push him like that?"

Mum straightened as her eyes widened. "What did *I* do—?"

"Bloody hell, Mum. You know what he is. Can't you just— would it really be so bad?"

Her features fell. "Would... would what be so bad?" she asked, voice small, breaking at the edges.

"To just... to turn a blind eye," he said. "To just be here with us, to just be together. I hate being between the two of you."

Mum blinked quickly, like she was having a hard time meeting his eyes. "I-I only ever wanted to protect you, I just—"

"Yeah, well, fat lot of good that's doing me! I don't remember ever asking for your protection," he snapped. "And thanks for keeping me in the loop, by the way. But I suppose that's my own fault, after all this time, expecting that you might think to tell me the truth for once and tell me he's the fucking Dark Lord."

She blanched. "Klaus—"

"Yeah, whatever," he mumbled, brushing her off, and he knew he wasn't being very fair, but he'd just been suffocated to an inch from unconsciousness because of her, so Klaus just shook his head and left her there.

Christ, he thought, rubbing at his neck. *What a fucking family.*

He leaned on the hand railing for support as he headed back upstairs, and he was about to go back to his room when he stopped and changed direction mid-way. Instead, he followed the hallway down to the end, down past his parents room and down to the library. He edged the door open, poking his head in, and knocked quietly.

His father was in there, sitting crookedly at the table, breathing heavily with his head in his hands, and at his Klaus' intrusion, he glanced up with eyes aflame and snarled out, "*what?!*"

"I—" Klaus fumbled his words at the electric feel of his magic prickling in the air, and he quickly eyed the carpet. "I'm sorry. I can come back later, if you want, but I just... I was wondering if..."

well, maybe if you had time, would you mind showing me that spell?"

His father scowled. "What spell?"

"Um... you know, the one that you— the one that made it hard to breathe," Klaus said sheepishly. "I've... read about it. Arcturus' Asphyxiation, right? I've tried it out, a few times, but it's never... I've not been able to get it work for me. Especially... not without a wand."

His father's blood-red eyes narrowed.

"I mean, it was... really impressive, what you did down there," Klaus added for good measure.

The sharpness of the magic in the air slowly started to settle. "...Why?" his father asked slowly, suspiciously.

Klaus rubbed at the back of his neck. "There's, um. Don't tell Mum, but there's a kid at school I'd really like to... show it to."

He fully expected a no. He still remembered the first time he'd asked him to show him dark magic, all of those years ago.

But Klaus wasn't a kid anymore. He was almost of age, he'd been promised a place at his side, he'd controlled the basilisk, and he'd killed, too. He'd proved himself capable. He was *ready*.

And so, instead sending him on his way, his father's scowl very slowly transformed into a smile, and he gestured with a nod of his head for him to come in.

"Close the door behind you."

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