

Smart Girls Are Easy (and Other Humiliations)

by JA Lowell

Death comes by a thousand little cuts, and there are few who can bandage such wounds. When the days have gotten lighter, do you even notice your world collapsing? Hermione-centric AU, very mildly canon-compliant.

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 2

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Author's Note: I'm in the process of massively revising this tale; what follows here is the revised version, published as I get the chapters tidied up. The older version is still up at Ashwinder, but will be replaced by these chapters in due time. I'd caution against reading ahead there when I say substantial, I **mean** substantial.

M'dears, I would also very much appreciate if you could take the time to leave me a few words -- amateurs don't pull paycheques for this kind of thing; comments are the currency of fandom. S'okay if you want to leave criticism, I'm totally open to that, too.

Prologue

Cissy set the paper down with one of the delicate sniffs that heralded moral indignation. Her own morality, to be sure, but when something stood in contravention to her finely honed perceptions of the Wizarding World, that sound, accompanied or not by the faint moue of her lips, was a blazing signpost of her aesthetic and philosophical discontent.

"Darling?"

"This Skeeter woman. I'm not convinced the *Prophet* isn't taking a cut of those books. Surely these never-ending reports of her slumming with the Muggles simply *cannot* be popular enough on their own to boost subscriptions. I really can't see any circumstance under which we'd need to know what she's *wearing* every day of her latest book signing tour.

"And a half-page photo, no less. She's had her nose charmed, it looks like. And a bit of a lift. At least she's dressing rather better. Those foul shoes made my eyes ache."

"They say enough money will improve anyone's wardrobe."

"That's surely true. If you haven't any taste, you had better be rich. It's so tawdry. Do you know, Lucius, I always admired Augusta Longbottom. That woman has enough conviction to stand by her deplorable fashion sense, in spite of her Gringotts vault. But Skeeter. So... nouveau-riche." She *tsked* in apparent dismay.

He could always trust Cissy to be upset about the things that mattered: Never mind that Rita had largely deserted the Wizarding World after the Triwizard Tournament, only to reappear as a Muggle children's author, laden with a heavily embroidered tale largely cut from whole cloth. Never mind that said books were presently flying off bookshelves as if someone had cast *Wingardium Leviosa*. Never mind the ongoing libel suits (he had one pending), which were being tied up in the Wizengamot by investigations into the very real danger of her violating the ICW Statute of Secrecy despite all the embroidery and bullshit. No, Cissy was upset because the *Daily Prophet* was treating their former all-star investigative journalist as a celebrity. Little people should know their place.

To be completely honest (he tried not to be as a general rule), he subscribed to her general thesis whole-heartedly. But on the other hand, this was *her* Rita. For all that she was unsuitable, gauche, and Gryffindor, they had enjoyed a rather amusing flirtation of some standing. He slightly regretted the need to Teach Her A Lesson, because on the whole, he appreciated how utterly ruthless she'd been in carving out a Muggle empire on the backs of a world still stumbling from socio-political turmoil. It wasn't elegant, but you couldn't deny that she'd been effective.

He doubted Cissy could be persuaded of that, however. For Cissy, the ends certainly could justify the means, but only if both evidenced a modicum of class, and a proper understanding of the appearance of decorum, if not respectability. Which reminded him, "Have you decided if you're going to Dumbledore's memorial?"

"Do you know, I think I shall. I've that lovely new Chanel. The bodice cut is just daring enough that the society pages are apt to question its propriety. But what better way to honour a Muggle-lover than Muggle high fashion?" She fluttered her eyelashes.

"Chérie, one day being blonde and beautiful will fail to cover that incorrigible sense of humour, and you'll be the downfall of us all."

"Don't be silly Lucius. No one credits a beautiful woman with more than a smattering of brain cells. And I've no intention of ever losing *these* looks." She affected a pat at her elegantly coiled hair, "Do you know, that's one of the best arguments in favour of clever witches inviting premier potioners over as often as we do." Because an occasional dinner party advertised that you were a client, whereas cocktails, card games, and a midnight lunch hinted at social equality, and kept down any speculation that a dewy visage might be augmented with a little help from one's friends. He smirked at her, and wondered, briefly, how she'd have coped if Snape *had* lost his trial and been tossed back to Azkaban. She'd weathered his own incarceration phenomenally well, but then he couldn't brew a skin tonic if his life depended on it, so one could argue that she'd only had to suffer social embarrassment, not inconvenience.

"Speaking of our duplicitous, back-stabbing little friend, what do you think of this Lily Evans rumor that Rita's putting about? You probably knew Severus better in school than anyone else, is there anything to it?"

"Oh, I shouldn't think so. They certainly couldn't have been childhood friends the way Skeeter would have it - he had that horrid northern accent when he first came to Hogwarts, don't you remember? And Evans was from Milton Keynes. I'll always remember that, it was so typically bourgeois and Muddy, and she was so terribly *proud* to have come from a New City, which I do think showed a deplorable lack of taste. Marked out was she was in an instant. If she'd only known to keep it quiet, she might've passed, she looked well enough, and had, oh, a certain rude glamour I suppose. I'm not really surprised she attracted male attention, by all account she wasn't exactly, ahem, *restrained* with her affections.

"Still, I always did credit Severus as having a good deal more pride than to sniff after... well. But then we all thought the same of James Potter, and that was a good family, once. So I suppose you never know."

"Well it unnerves me, to be frank."

"Hmm? Well I agree it would be rather unsavory if it were true..."

"No, no. Well, yes I mean, that's a given. Moreover, it's more than a bit pathetic, don't you think? I mean, can you really imagine our Severus moping about, angsty over some dead witch for twenty years? It just beggars belief. Double agent doesn't surprise me, I've always pegged him as a grasping, uppity, shifty little sod. Granted, I *did* think it was more in the vein of healthy self-interest, and that he was planning to double-cross *us*, not Riddle." He took a bite of toast as if it had personally offended him, chewed rapidly, and swallowed the remains of his diatribe along with the marmalade. "But that's neither here nor there. What I meant, Cissy, was that it's... hmm. Disconcerting, not quite knowing how someone's strings are arranged. I don't *like* waking up to find that I haven't the faintest idea how best to make someone dance to a more pleasing tune."

"And do you think Severus Snape ever danced for you, love?"

"Oh, well, no, but I did feel that I understood which way the wind blew in that quarter. Now. Now!? I mean, if you'd asked me to lay odds, there isn't the slightest chance I'd have credited him with returning to Hogwarts, for instance. He hates teaching with a passion. And yet where is he?" He could feel a frown tugging his eyebrows and consciously relaxed his face. It was no good letting Snape get under his skin. Equanimity, that was the key. Good to keep in practise, good to always keep the bastards from realising just how perfectly *annoyed* they, or in this case, Snape, made him. No one feared a man who couldn't keep control of his emotions, after all. It was probably where Riddle had gone so terribly wrong. Poor misguided idiot.

"I don't think it's necessarily a bad thing, though. His being back at Hogwarts, I mean. I do worry about Draco." Cissy sighed. It did interesting things to her slim chest. Which in turn did interesting things to his trousers. Which interesting things were promptly deflated by further musings about poor sweet Draco, and how would he cope, and perhaps it would be a mistake after all, sending him back.

"Cissy, sweetheart," he tried a stab at salvaging the morning, "He's a splendid, brilliant lad. He went a bit astray, but I do believe that with a good showing of public remorse, his housemates will forgive him his lapse in judgement. Yes, he wallowed shamefully in the shadows of Bella's avaricious pandering to that megalomaniac, but better sense did eventually prevail."

"I do wonder where we failed him, though. From the outset, it really does look too much like what it was: a rebellious child who can't discern the difference between insane fanaticism, and our paying lipservice to a political movement that Riddle *betrayed*." She'd pursed her lips, nostrils delicately flaring. This was an old, deep wound, one that was rarely salved by the knowledge that many of their peers had also fallen into the madman's tangle before realising that his early rhetoric of 'visions of a unified Wizarding World' hid a snarl of mental instability, hunger for power, disregard for convention, ruthlessness, sociopathy, and obsession. Which, it had to be said, were not necessarily bad things in a political figurehead... except for the mental instability. It ultimately made figureheads intractable to manipulation, and when it translated to maiming and torture, well, there went any veneer of respectability. Particularly when none of it had benefited them a whit. They'd signed up with Riddle to remake their world, and by the end of it found themselves branded terrorists - inept terrorists, just to make the sting worse. It was rather like the fine print on a slightly dodgy contract: Slytherin House expected you to be the one *writing it*, not belatedly discovering that oh, this wasn't quite what you thought you were getting into.

"I think the fact that the scales did eventually fall from his eyes is a credit to the way we raised him. With a little judicious spin-doctoring, he'll be able to recoup any loss in social standing he suffered. And his very public defense of Potter-*files* during the fracas at Hogwarts can be made to work in his favour. I shouldn't worry about him, love, he's got to make his own way in this world." He leaned towards her, and placed a gentle kiss on the angle of her jaw. She sighed, and tilted her head. By his reckoning, he had a full three hours 'til the governor's meeting, and the sunlight glinting on the china had a particularly hopeful cast. "Shall we take a turn about the roses, love?"

She smiled, a covetous promise lurking in her eyes. It was just enough to make him wonder, as he offered her his arm, if she hadn't had a bit of a dalliance in mind from the start. Manipulated, or manipulator? He mentally shrugged. A spouse was a nice sort of possession to have, and they'd long ago settled on mutual ownership.

"All the scum's come creeping out of the woodwork today, looks like." Ron nodded his chin towards an elegantly robed wizard, who was casually stroking his beard while posing for a photographer. "Everyone's favourite novelist. Did you like the way Skeeter wrote him up? Shame she didn't tell the truth on that one, really. Can't believe that perv was a teacher here, even if it was just Muggle Studies."

"Lockhart? Watch out if McGonagall sees he's here." Harry smirked.

"I've half a mind to tell her. And he brought *her*, too." Hermione looked like she'd bit a lemon. She'd been like that a lot, lately. "I can't believe they'd be so tasteless as to use Dumbledore's memorial as a photo-op. And coming back to Hogwarts!"

Ron snickered, and hastily turned it into a cough as Hermione glared at him. He elbowed Harry, and they fell back behind her, "They probably wanted to try out the Library, or maybe a table in the Great Hall. 'Cos a broom closet just isn't the poshest place to be caught with your pants down."

"Shame, really," Harry opined, "It's almost too bad we couldn't have got rid of more teachers that way."

"What, would you have done the honours with Umbridge, then?"

"Ugh."

"Still, might've done for Snape. When I think of all those years that miserable fuck tormented us... we should've just had Hermione show up to his office in her knickers."

"That's sick, Ron."

"Well, she's the one who won't shut up about the greasy bastard. I swear she's been crushing ever since the trial. And if he'd pulled a Lockhart years ago, Dumbles might have actually lived through it all."

He realised his error almost immediately: Harry's eye were narrowed, and his harsh whisper was pure venom, "Goddamn it, Ron, I told you, the last thing I want to talk about is *fucking Snape*." Harry quickened his pace to catch up to Hermione.

Ron kicked at a clump of grass, sighed, and lengthened his stride. Between Hermione canvassing for Snape like he was a bloody house elf, and Harry steeped in whatever bizarre combination of guilt and malice he was nurturing, he'd gotten thoroughly sick of it all. And he damn well didn't believe that Dumbledore had gotten it so badly wrong, and he doubted if Harry believed it either. If you couldn't trust *Dumbledore* to know his way around magic... And they *had* tracked down and killed all the Horcruxes, hadn't they? Well, with help. But it stood to reason that if Dumbledore hadn't really killed the thing in the ring, his instructions for doing in the rest of them shouldn't have worked either. Snape had pulled a fast one over the Wizarding World, and the half-year he'd spent in Azkaban didn't even begin to approach justice. Euthanasia, my ruddy arse, he thought again, for perhaps the thousandth time since the slimy git's trial.

"You're pissed to the gills, aren't you." He might have been commenting on the weather. Cloudy with a chance of photographers, breaking in the afternoon as the speeches got underway.

"Hardly. Just up to my pectoral fins." She pulled the flask from her pocket, and reached to press it into his hand. It was the first time she'd touched him since That Night. "You look like you could use a pull. How're you holding up, Severus?"

He glanced about, tipped back the flask, and coughed a bit. "Fine, just fine. Had a lovely little holiday on an island in the North Sea. Very restorative." His old flippancy was lacking, the words fell like ash. She put her hand on his arm, and he positively twitched, before straightening and squaring his shoulders. She didn't know which reaction pulled harder at her heartstrings. He'd never forgive her if she succumbed to the sudden longing to fold his gangly frame into a hard embrace.

"But enough about me, how are you?" All false cheer and sarcastic joviality. It hurt.

But she could take a hint; they were Hogwarts Staff, after all, and Staff understood about presenting a united front of unflappability. They'd made it through everything else, they were certainly going to make it through this dog-and-pony memorial. She took another swig of scotch for good measure. It was, after all, going to be a long and tedious ceremony. "Tired. Furious. Mostly tired."

"Why furious?"

"Rita Skeeter's Muggle muck-raking. I don't know how much you've heard about it, have you read any of her books? No, I suppose you wouldn't have done."

It's one thing here, where everyone knows she's writing pure trash, but out amongst the Muggles? I've had the most damnable time with the Hogwarts visits this year, trying to convince parents that no, we haven't had any Tolkein-esque battles on the school grounds, no, there have never been any Muggleborn concentration camps, no, Riddle never did have any influence in the school, no, the Headmaster wasn't murdered in a hostile terrorist take-over..." She trailed off, realising that her tongue was taking them in entirely the wrong direction.

"No, he was just a bumbling idiot, who couldn't bear to keep his fingers off obviously Dark objects." His lips had thinned to a repressive line. He turned away from her, looking out across the lake, but probably, she thought, not seeing it.

"It was important, what you did." She said it softly. "I think, even towards the end, he must have known what it would cost you."

"Bollocks, Minerva," He lowered his voice, his eyes flashing dangerously. It was the most expression she'd seen since they'd dragged him, screaming, into the boat. "You and I both know he fucked around with Riddle's Horcruxes for years, he courted disaster every step of the way. Was he even sane, was he even Albus, when he lowered the goddamn wards? *I looked in his eyes, Minerva*. It was," He swallowed hard, "I didn't have a choice."

"I know that." She gave in to poor judgement, and put an arm around his shoulders. After a moment, she felt some of the tension dissipate from his muscles.

"Do you know, I can still smell him? Those last few hours, when we should have been after those fucking artefacts, instead of trying to bring him back. It would have saved us all a year of misery if I'd just strangled him with his goddamn beard. Or if I had just levelled a Killing Curse at him."

"Severus, we didn't know why they were on the grounds, we didn't know Albus even had those foul things-"

"I knew. I guessed."

"No one would have believed you. You know that. And we thought he might recover, none of us realised that he'd brought the wards down himself. Well, yes, Severus, you said, but obviously, none of us were listening to you, I didn't even think to check the Ward Crystals, and then Potter was chasing after the Death Eaters, and Draco Malfoy was bleeding out, and by that time..."

"By that time, it was obvious to the meanest intellect that whatever was in Albus Dumbledore's body wasn't Albus Dumbledore. And none of you lot were going to do a fucking thing about it."

She gave his shoulders a squeeze, released him, and passed him back the flask. "We should go and find seats."

"Because heaven forfend we don't appear devoted to the Late, Great Dumbledore and his Final Sacrifice."

She rewarded this effort towards his usual sarcasm with a weak smile. "At the very least, we should go and ensure that Gilderoy Lockhart isn't fornicating with students across the tomb," she tucked the empty flask back into her robes, "And the sad thing is, I don't even think I'm joking."

They walked in silence across the scarred Quidditch pitch. She noted that new grass was starting to erupt from the furrows where Rolanda and Hagrid had plowed down the craters and gashes left by spells that missed their marks. By the time term started, there wouldn't be any physical reminders left of blood soaked dirt, of strewn entrails,

of Lucius Malfoy's own son, screaming as his muscles were torn from his bones under the Cruciatus curse, of the Creevey boy sobbing while he cradled his brother's corpse, of that Hufflepuff boy, Macmillan, drowning in his own blood and vomit, of green flames lighting up the desecration of the Ravenclaw Patil twin's face as her features popped and sputtered, melting off her skull-

"I said, are you finished with the Hogwarts visits, then? Minerva, you're a million miles away."

"Thinking. I think too damn much. Remembering Riddle making examples of our students."

There was a long, taut silence, and their progress slowed. She could hear the distant din of so-called mourners, as they gathered near Dumbledore's tomb; the sound was preternaturally loud, and the sweet drift of early clover suddenly cloying. "Min. Min, it wasn't your fault, you have to know that." Thin, cold fingers twisted around her own, and she swallowed hard, squeezing back. That Severus, so broken, so damaged, should be trying to comfort her was almost too much.

"I know. I do know that. *I know* more people would have died had we resisted, *I know* our losses would have been heavier. But they're still dead, they're still...Severus, I was Headmistress, it was my *duty* to protect this school, and I stood aside, I would have thrown open the doors of the Great Hall for that madman, anything-"

His fingers tightened. "Shhh. He knew what would make you hurt. You did the only thing you could."

She pressed her lips firm against incipient hysterics. She knew these things, she did.

"He wanted into the school, and nothing could have stood in his way."

A long, shaky breath. Another. "Except the Order."

"Except the Order. More by luck and stupidity than anything else." There was a dark current of bitterness there, one she had no intention of probing the depths of.

They resumed their progress towards the memorial. It seemed garish, overdone. There were photographers and reporters flitting everywhere, popinjay Ministry officials preening about; even amongst the Order members there were cracks marring the solemnity: there was Nymphadora Tonks, twitching her hair a shade lighter, while Remus Lupin smiled indulgently. The Weasleys were subdued, though. Molly and Arthur always stood so that their bodies touched, when she saw them anymore. Their eldest kept his face down, or turned aside. There was an obvious hole, where two of the other boys should have been standing, and the twins' faces were rigid and somber. She took a deep breath, and started to look away. Potter and his compatriots were approaching the group; a smile lit Ginevra's face, a small answering grin blossomed on Potter's. Life went on, she supposed.

Severus' reluctance to move any closer to the Order was palpable. His shoulders had hunched again, and he was gazing up at the castle with a studied nonchalance she'd come to interpret as the height of affectation. Lull him into the notion? She followed the line of his gaze, "I was surprised, in the end, you know, that the school didn't sustain much damage."

"Riddle was insane, not illogical."

"Well it's obvious he wanted access to Hogwarts without a firefight, but what do you mean 'illogical'? Albus always said Riddle intended Hogwarts as the seat of his power; what does logic have to do with that? You don't think... A Horcrux, Severus? Could he have stored one here? But Albus said there were only seven, we accounted for all of them... Severus?"

His narrowed eyes glittered, and he gave a nearly-imperceptible shake of his head. She turned, and saw that the Minister was approaching. "Were I you, Minerva," he said out the corner of his mouth, "I might want to carefully consider the source of my assumptions."

Author's Note: Please leave me a few words, even if it's just that you read it and didn't click away after the first paragraph or two.

Chapter the First

Chapter 2 of 2

Death comes by a thousand little cuts, and there are few who can bandage such wounds. When the days have gotten lighter, do you even notice your world collapsing? Hermione-centric AU, very mildly canon-compliant.

Moaning Myrtle's bathroom was hardly a popular locale. It was cold, the walls perpetually clammy, and the floor more often flooded than not. There was also a decided aroma of decay. The damp was a perfectly hospitable clime for mould, and it mottled the corners and recesses. The paint had flecked off of the stall doors in many places, and where rust had failed to accomplished this, vandals had.

Had Hermione been in the mood for introspection, she could have searched out prophetic patterns in the grey and black fungal blooms. Or she might have contemplated the nature of being while gazing at her reflection in the cracked mirror. Perhaps she could even have dwelt upon the injustices and prejudices of the Wizarding World whilst meditating upon the ever-illustrative '*Mudbloods Suck Cock*' that someone had scratched into the fourth door.

Hermione was not, however, in the mood for deep introspection.

'*Mudbloods Suck Cock*'. Maybe it was advice: find a place for yourself in the world, get ahead through the only avenues available. That seemed a Slytherin ethos, though, and Slytherins didn't give unsolicited, helpful advice to obvious inferiors, did they?

That was bordering too close to thinking, which was edging onto the no-man's land of introspection. She'd come down here with the express purpose *of not thinking*. She'd done alright in the carriage ride up from the Hogsmeade Apparition point: she'd carefully watched the elegant thestrals, memorizing the play of light from the dying sun, which threw their twisting vertebrae into sharp relief. And when that palled, she'd concentrated hard on the hem of Professor McGonagall's russet travelling cloak, which she kept in her field of view all the way up to Gryffindor Tower. There'd been a bad moment when she'd been changing back into her school robes, and Lavender and Parvati had burst in, all rapid-fire questions, wide eyes, and gasps. But she'd pushed past them, clattered down the stairs, and finally fetched up here, huddled beneath the cracked sink.

She was very definitely in the mood for a spot of hiding.

It was cowardice, pure and simple, and admitting to it never bothered her. It was easy, she'd found, to work yourself up to bravery when surrounded by the garish, almost violently cheerful reds and golds of the Gryffindor common room. Easy to cast aside cares and consequences when you could convince yourself that you were special. She was a Best Friend of the Boy Who Lived, wasn't she? It was easy, too, to be brave if there was someone around to be disappointed, or worse - laugh - if you were craven.

On the other hand, it wasn't actually that difficult to be cowardly, either. Perhaps it would be worse if there were witnesses. But here and now, sitting in Myrtle's dank domain, cowardice seemed a nice, safe alternative to facing the other students in Gryffindor Tower.

Besides, look where heroism had landed her. Maybe she could have her own entry in *Hogwarts, A History*. 'Hermione Granger, A Cautionary Tale'. This line of thought was trending rather perilously in the direction of Courtroom 7.

She refocussed her attention on the door of the fourth stall.

'Mudbloods'.

She'd thought they could have spared a bucket of paint or two while they were busy tidying away all evidence Voldemort's Second Rising. Why just lop the vegetation off and leave the roots of the problem behind? Surely once, in the entire year Hogwarts had been shuttered after the battle, someone had come into this room and seen the state of it? '*Mudbloods Suck Cock*' had been there back when she was brewing Polyjuice, for godssake.

'Mudbloods'. She still wasn't really offended by the term itself. Dirty blood, because the few genes linked to a propensity for magic had been laundered through Muggles for a few generations? Alright then, moving on. She reckoned the other Muggle-born students had about the same reaction, the first time they'd encountered the slur. It was the sort of thing that just didn't have teeth if you lacked insight into the cultural context.

Even now, she'd still rather be called a Mudblood than a cunt, a whore, a bitch... Her blood status wasn't *her*, personally, was it? Anyone with a reasonably healthy sense of their own value wasn't likely to be brought low by reference of mere genetics. In fact, she rather doubted Harry's mother by all accounts a clever, well-liked witch - could've had such a violent reaction to the term itself. Harry-filters were dangerous things to view reality through.

Ron-filters weren't all that much better if she were completely honest with herself. At the crux of it, 'Mudblood', whether used as a slur or the Pureblood tendency to use it as a casual category, was a word that imposed second-class personhood on someone. Ron would hurl himself, teeth gnashing, hexes flying, at anyone who called her a Mudblood, but even the night of the Hogwarts battle, it had been all 'Here, Hermione, you're not that good at defensive spells; why don't you run off and deliver the diadem to McGonagall whilst Harry and I sort out these pesky Death Eaters'. In the year since, through St Mungo's, through mourning, through the press, through Rita Fucking Skeeter, through countless attempts to bully them into actually showing up for their last year of schooling *prepared for once*, now that they were Heroes... through all that, it had only gotten worse. To the boys, now that the Wizarding World no longer hung in the balance, she was just Good Old Hermione, source of answers, source of nagging. Second-Class Citizen, least of the triumvirate, even less valuable than Mighty Neville Snakeslayer, who still practically wet himself in Potions.

Too much thinking. She scraped the tip of her tongue over her chipped tooth. She'd considered fixing it, but in the end, the combination of Dente-Gro and spellwork seemed more effort than it was worth. Besides, she wasn't exactly a model daughter. Why look like a model patient? In all the ways she'd failed her parents, surely a chipped tooth was the least of them. And then, deep down in the well of 'things better left alone', there was a little spark of pleasure in the knowledge that Professor Snape thought she was worth something, worth protecting at least. Granted, Snape hadn't done it heroically...he'd just flung her to the floor, out and away from the blast of heat and light that swelled as McGonagall destroyed the Horcrux. But still, mere pragmatism or not, she'd ended up half-under his sprawling body and undamaged unless you counted the tooth. It was pretty much the nicest thing that had happened that night. That entire week.

The bathroom door creaked open, mercifully interrupting that line of thought.

"Hermione! There you are, we were wondering. Y'see, someone's gone and let a troll into the castle." Harry offered her a tentative smile and a hand up.

"I, uh... I needed some time alone. A lot to think about, you know?"

"A lot to sulk about, you mean." Ron was scowling.

She straightened her skirt and picked her bag off the floor. "That's not fair."

She watched Harry glance between her and Ron, and could have almost pinpointed the instant when he concluded that it wasn't his affair. "Well, I'm sure there are comfier places to think, 'Mione. Besides, it's nearly dinner. I think I heard that it was veal cutlets tonight."

"No, it's shepherd's pie; we had veal last Thursday," Ron corrected.

Harry laughed and chuffed the back of Ron's head. "You and Hermione are a pair, alright. You've got the meal schedule memorized, and she's got lists of potions ingredients floating around in her head." He seemed to have appointed himself Chief Arbiter of the foundering relationship she and Ron had stumbled into over the last year. Ron laughed dutifully, and she managed a lukewarm smile. Harry's summary was apt, but she wondered if she was the only one who thought that he wasn't describing a matching pair at all.

The Great Hall was warm and cozy, and as the warmth flooded over her, she realized that she'd been chilled to the bone. Acclimatization was a funny process, she mused as she slid in between Lavender and Parvati. Take the boys, for instance. For years, she'd blithely traipsed along behind them, convinced that being their friend was the most important thing she could ever do. She had been quite thoroughly acclimatized. And now? She shook her head slightly, trying, again, to dislodge inconvenient thoughts.

"Where were you, earlier? I had a question about the homework Flitwick set." Lavender pouted out her lower lip. Hermione blinked. Why on earth was Lavender using that come-on pout on her? Maybe her face had finally frozen that way.

"And you missed Potions, too," Parvati's shrill voice managed to carry down the table, and the younger forms glanced up, "Didn't think you could stand being separated from your One True Greasy Love".

Hermione bit back a sharp retort. You were supposed to make allowances for Parvati, these days. And maybe from an outside perspective it did look a bit questionable: anytime a reporter had chased after her with a Dicto-Quill, she'd gone to great pains to refocus the interview on the travesty of Snape's indictment. She usually got written off as a 'bad interview', though. She rather thought she'd ultimately garnered less cumulative attention than one of Harry and Ginny's date nights.

"Oh, get your head out of the incense, Parvati. Doesn't take Divination to guess she was out in the broomshed; we were experimenting as to whether it's possible to touch the ceiling with your heels!" Ron Weasley, saviour of every witch's reputation. His proclamation was met with a roar of laughter, and Hermione waited patiently for the floor to open and engulf her. At least the prattling socialites on either side of her stuck to insults that were unlikely to be believed by the rest of the table. Oh well, perhaps it was for the best if they were diverted by considering her potential as a trollop, she might not have to explain about her afternoon in Courtroom 7.

The table had begun to fill with serving platters, and Hermione breathed easier until she noted the contents of the casserole dish in front of her. Ron had been right after all, it was shepherd's pie. She lifted out a small, unappetizing portion, and proceeded to poke at it with the back of her fork. Even if despair wasn't settled cold and hard in her stomach, shepherd's pie nights took moral fortitude to get through. She glanced up the table. Ron had gravy on his chin. Eeew.

She pushed her plate back and rummaged in her bag for a book. It really wouldn't pay to draw attention to herself by being the first person out of the hall. *Altamont on Concealment Draughts* was interesting the first time she'd read it, but she found *Breckinridge, Burbank, and Karr* to be a more authoritative source. She drummed her fingers idly on the tabletop and wished she'd taken the time - perhaps in between bouts of last night's panic - to find some new reading material in the library. That was the problem, though. There just wasn't anything new in the library. Oh, that wasn't to say she'd read every single tome such a claim would have been arrogant, preposterous,

and moreover, a lie. But she had read far and wide, and deep, too, in the fields that interested her. It was difficult, now, to wander through the dusty stacks and find a new friend between some mouldy covers.

Books really were like people, and better substitutes too, in most ways. Unlike people, they kept their opinions about you to themselves. Just like their authorial counterparts, however, books had opinions. And the more you read of them, the more quickly you realized that you couldn't be friends with absolutely every book they didn't all get along with each other, after all. And some of them, Hermione would be hard-pressed to spend time with. *De Laure's Treatise* was utterly pompous. She idly wished she could hear Professor Snape's opinion of De Laure; it was sure to be wonderfully vitriolic.

She glanced up at the high table, but once again, the Potions master hadn't condescended to join them. Maybe he didn't care for shepherd's pie, either. She wondered if professors could request meals in their rooms. If so, that was surely what he'd been doing. She'd only seen him in the Great Hall a handful of times since term had started, and somehow she couldn't see him raiding the kitchen after hours. It would be undignified. Hopefully he had some method of procuring nourishment; she'd have to go and see him about the missed class and his temper was not likely to be improved by low blood sugar.

Even if his person were absent from the hall, his name, it seemed, wasn't. She could hear the first and second years complaining about his class. She gritted her teeth and vowed to keep her opinions to herself. Professor Snape didn't need her defending his teaching methods, too. Besides, they weren't really worthy of defense. He was callous and mean. On the other hand, he did know what was best, and if the puling brats couldn't listen to an authority figure, they deserved to be insulted. Better to have their feelings hurt than to lose a limb.

She drew in a deep breath and tried to force her concentration away from their conversation. She was almost successful.

"... that's what I heard, anyway. You know he's tight in with the Malfoys, and nothing ever sticks to them long."

"Must've been traumatic for the git, Azkaban. I hear they sluice 'em down once a week whether they need it or not."

"Shite, then Old Snapey must've had more baths in gaol than any other time his entire life!"

"They can't have used soap the bugger didn't melt, did he?"

"What? Oh, Muggle joke? Speaking of, did you read Rita's latest?"

"Blillrrg. *Projectus vomitus*, eh?"

"Angst-ridden Snape in luvuuuuurve, forever pining for poor Harry's dead mum? I'll say!"

Hermione put her book down, sick of pretending, and sick of being surrounded by ingrates, morons, and simpering fools students, in a word. She shoved *Altamont* roughly into her bag and stood up, ready to give the little brats what-for.

Harry beat her to it: "Wish you lot would just shut up about my mother! She didn't have a damn thing to do with Snape outside of Slughorn's class. Who the fuck knows why he turned? You can take his so-called testimony or leave it, but the upshot of it is, he made an Unbreakable Vow to Dumbledore. And that's got nothing at all to do with me or mine he hated my parents! So I'll thank you to keep your grubby noses out of my life, and my history!" He was gripping his fork too hard, and there was a slightly manic gleam in his eyes. It wasn't the principled defense Hermione would have mounted, but at least they'd shut up. It was the result that mattered, she told herself, and like hell was she going to say anything that would get Harry even more wound up.

She realised she was still standing. *Excellent going, Granger, way to keep your head down and not call attention to yourself today* She swung her bag to her shoulder; she supposed she might as well head up to the common room and fetch her Potions journal.

"Oi, 'Mione! Aren't you staying for pudding?" Ginny looked up from the whispered conversation she and Harry had resumed. She seemed to be petting his leg beneath the table, which certainly explained some things.

Hermione shook her head and turned away. She had taken two full steps before she gave in to the impulse to say something. "You're Head Girl, you know. It's your job to stop things like that," she told the redhead.

Ginny screwed up her face, affronted. "People talk, Hermione. And it was Harry's place, not mine."

"It's your responsibility to ensure that students are behaving! You can't just let people slander Hogwarts Staff. Perhaps if you paid more attention to your job than your boyfriend..."

"Don't be a cow, Hermione. First off, no one likes Snape anyway, and second, it's not my bloody fault you're not Head Girl; I'm not the one who told you to go and get yourself a criminal record!"

And there it was. Her face flaming, Hermione collected the tatters of her dignity and strode out of the Hall. Her heart was pounding in her ears, in contrapuntal rhythm with the furious click of her shoes against the flagstone of the hall. Her anger carried her all the way back into Myrtle's toilet where she collapsed against the sink. There was a sharp ache beneath her ribs; could guilt and sorrow physically hurt?

"Stupid, useless thug, idiot! Why, why the bloody hell did you ever think you belonged here? Cleverness! Cleverness got you into this mess, and you just couldn't keep your mouth shut, worthless dunderhead!" She stuffed a fist up against her mouth and bit down on a knuckle as tears flooded her eyes. "Oh shut up. Just shut up, you self-pitying fool. You're being so ridiculous."

"That's right, why *don't* you shut up?" Myrtle's hollow voice echoed from the porcelain. "You haven't got anything to be gloomy about. After all, you're *not* dead." The ghost gave a loud, artificial snuffle.

Once Myrtle got started, it took her a very long time to stop. Hermione gasped in a breath and scrubbed hard at her eyes. *Stop it*, she told herself, *try for some maturity. You can't run off and cry in the jakes every time you embarrass yourself. In through the nose, out through the mouth, get a grip on yourself.*

"Bye, Myrtle. I'm sorry to bother you."

"That's right! Run away. No one ever, *ever* has time for Myrtle. Just their own stupid pr-prob-problems!" The ghost had progressed into full-scale sobs. Hermione bit her lip and wracked her brain for something to say. There wasn't anything, so she quietly worked the doorknob, ducked out, and smacked flat up against a masculine torso.

"Easy there, Hermione. Christ, did you have to set Myrtle off?" Ron pulled the door shut. It didn't marginally reduce the volume.

"Look, let's go and walk down by the pitch, no one's practising out there tonight." Harry kept his voice low, and gestured obliquely back towards the Entrance Hall. Ron nodded fervently and tightened his grip around Hermione's waist. How he expected her to walk, she had no idea, but just then it made her feel marginally better. He did really care, maybe.

"I'm sorry about this morning, Herm, if that's what's got you so upset."

She couldn't see his face, but he sounded contrite. Still: "Her-mi-o-nee. And no, that isn't it at all!"

"Well, well, good, then! Because you can't be skipping classes just because we've had a tiff, now, can you? I mean, you won't let us skive off Potions..."

"Lord, Ron, is that why you think I wasn't in class?"

"Well, what else am I supposed to think?"

She pulled away from him, slumped against the wall, and gently beat her head against the stone. "Maybe. You. Could. Listen. For once in your self-absorbed little life. London? Ministry hearing? Sentencing? Any of that ringing any bells?"

"Oh, hell, Hermione," Harry looked appalled, "I forgot all about that!"

"Fuck me, I did too. I'm an utterly shite boyfriend, aren't I?"

"Don't make me answer that, Ronald."

"I'm really sorry, Hermione." He pulled her close to his chest, tucking her head under his chin.

Her eyes were still burning. She squeezed them closed, breathed in the melange of sweat, laundry detergent, and broom polish. Here, nestled into the comfortable prison of his sturdy arms, she almost felt safe. If she didn't think about the utter *Ron*-ness of him, for just a few moments she could revel in the feeling that somehow things would come out right. Someone strong, someone adult, could just sweep in and fix everything.

"Let's all just go back up to the Tower; Hermione, you can tell us what happened. We're here for you, no matter what."

They were such entrancing little lies. Funny, she only remembered Professor McGonagall coming down to London with her. She sighed and pushed away from Ron's well-meaning embrace.

"It's alright. I'll tell you all about it later; I have to run, right now, if I want to make it to Professor Snape's office hours in time."

Harry was rolling his eyes. "Seriously, Hermione? He'll just set you an essay; you can ask for it tomorrow."

She rubbed her tongue over her chipped tooth again and made a valiant effort to curb her frustration. "Harry, *leally* can't afford any toes out of line this year. I haven't got Kingsley Shacklebolt or Rufus Scrimgeour worshipping the ground I stand upon; I've barely got McGonagall on my side. It's all well and good for you and Ron to swan around the school without a care in the world. Everyone bloody well loves you, don't they?"

"Hermione, they're not *not* on your side."

"You really think, Ron? Wish you could've seen them, today, then. Listen, I'll tell you about it later. I have to go; I have to gønow. I definitely don't need Professor Snape throwing a wobbler at me, on top of everything else."