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**Iacta Alea Est**

_by EliMorgan_

**Summary**

When Luna is approached by ancient magicks for help with a particularly pesky problem, she sets in motion a prophecy involving a Werewolf, an irate Goddess and four marauders that will turn the Wizarding World on its head.

Otherwise known as: How Luna tore apart the fabric of reality so that her friends could get decently laid, and accidentally saved the world in the process.
"Time Travel. Could there have been anything worse? After the past thirty years of war? It was finally over, but no. Not for Hermione Granger! Hermione Granger has to deal with space-time anomalies and causal loop theory and the consequences of others’ actions."

Time-Turner, EWE/AU, Wolf!Mate fic with all that follows in its wake.

Previously named The Prophecy That Should Have Been.

Notes

Hello! And welcome to my new fic, which I've been working on for a while. It's partially written, a true Work In Progress, and I'm quite fond of it. I've posted it here and on FFN, but this is the first time I'm ever posting here so I apologise for any mistakes in formatting etc.

I'll probably be updating this one As and When, and the tags/relationships will be updated as the story wears on. I'm hoping this one will be a long, slow burn.

So, please try not to be too hard on me for this one, as it has been a while since I've written and I'm without a Beta.

Love,
Eli x
When I am out there, in time, I am inverted, changed into a desperate version of myself. I become a thief, a vagrant, an animal who runs and hides. I startle old women and amaze children. I am a trick, an illusion of the highest order, so incredible that I am actually true.

Audrey Niffeneger, *The Time Traveler's Wife*

Light filtered through the half-open curtains, sending patterns in orange and red dancing across the desk, highlighting the specks of dust that flit through the air from the recent disturbance. The shape slumped over the desk – a pile of silks, scarves and a hideous amount of paisley – groaned miserably, the sound reminiscent of a dying man; one who realises that all they have done has been for nothing in the long run. It was a sound of utter failure, and it was heart-wrenching – not that there was anybody around to feel its effects.

One long-fingered, over-ringed hand reached out across the surface to clutch at a glass of water as though it were the only thing keeping the pile alive, and big, insect-like eyes shone out from behind thick, round glasses as the assortment of cloths that had just been revealed to be a female slurped eagerly at the liquid. Another distraught sound echoed from her throat as she slammed the glass down.

"Why?" She asked nobody in particular, her voice broken. "Why do this?" She glanced upwards as though expecting a response from the Gods themselves, and then rolled her eyes in exasperation when no response was forthcoming.

She pushed herself up to stand, bringing the glass with her and contemplating it in the shaft of sunlight. "All of this… for nothing."

She laughed bitterly, looking around the room she had holed herself up in. It was a nice room; or, it had been, in a past life. The walls were adorned with vibrant tapestries, the floor covered in fringed rugs that were a little worn down with age, but no less beautiful for it. All of the furniture in the room was covered in one way or another – chairs and the singular chaise draped with more silk, whether it be scarves or cloaks or throws. The surfaces were cluttered by knick-knacks of various kinds – crystal balls, abandoned tea cups, tins of tea leaves and sugar, various shiny items of indeterminate origin and one beautiful quill and parchment set. All of these things were covered in a fine layer of dust; the occupant not having come to this room since her last prophecy in 1994. She was back here now, though, along with a nice, new, shiny glass ball filled with an unidentifiable white mist.

The woman took a moment to glare at said sphere, her face a mask of disgust and rage. "After everything we've lost," she hissed as though it could hear her, "you dare to come to me? No. No. This is not going to occur."

She turned back to the window, peering out over the Scottish hills as she seemed to come to a decision. "If it is not heard…" she murmured to herself, a flash of determination coming into her eyes. It was a difficult decision, to be sure – she was a Ravenclaw through and through, merciless in
her pursuit of knowledge. Her abilities as a Seer were all the more valuable for this, and she'd never considered holding back before… but this was different. If she registered this with the Ministry, then they'd know, and she was not about to condemn innocent girls to this fate. Not after the last time.

With only a moment's hesitation, the woman span and grabbed the prophecy, her usual ethereal movements abandoned in her desperation. With a flick of her free hand, the window was open and in another second she let out a wild cry of rage. The ball she threw span in the air, glinting in the sun as it sailed. It collided with the rocks beneath the window at full speed, shattering and releasing its contents into the air. The tightness in the Seer's chest dissipated slightly as her own voice floated up to her, and she let out a sigh of relief. *Safe.*

*Loud,* was Hermione's opinion of this pub. The last one had been *stifling,* the one before that *unclean.* She was creating quite the list of establishments she'd rather not frequent on this trip, and it didn't look like it was going to end any time soon as it was barely ten in the evening and Lavender was barely even tipsy. To be honest, she was surprised she had even been invited on Lavender's hen night, because Merlin knew they weren't exactly close, but Ginny had insisted that it was an olive branch – the only one she would be extending, at that, and that she should take it and be bloody grateful.

Hermione wasn't certain that she *should* be grateful. Sure, Lavender had gone to a lot of effort to be pleasant to her this evening, and she hadn't been left out of any of the jokes or games – as evidenced by the small fortune in shot-glasses she had accumulated – but Hermione could not shake the feeling that something was wrong; that something about this whole evening was *off.* At present, she was crowded around a booth with what she supposed were her closest female friends; though she wasn't all that close to any of them except Ginny, and her female friendships definitely paled in comparison to her relationships with the men in her life. What she would *give* to be at Grimmauld Place with the boys right now; sitting in the study sucking back firewhiskey and laughing about Percy's various exploits at the Ministry, while Harry and Ron make a right mess out of a drunken game of Wizard's Chess. But, she was here, and she was *trying,* for Merlin's sake, which is more than she'd ever done in her six years of rooming with Lavender and Parvati at Hogwarts, so surely that must count as some weird girl-political victory.

The niggling feeling at the back of her mind wouldn't go away however hard she tried, though, and it was making her anxious. Absentmindedly she lifted a hand to her neck and fiddled with the pendant that had lay there for almost a year now, nestled between her collarbones.

"What's that?" Parvati asked suddenly, drawing the group's attention to Hermione. "You keep touching it."

Ginny turned big, brown eyes on her and let out a barking laugh. "Oh, don't bother, love. She won't tell you." She looked between the table's occupants and leaned forward as though to tell them a secret. "She's an *Unspeakable.*" The last word was drawn out and spoken in hushed tones, and when it was spoken the other girls' eyes widened in understanding.

"Oh!" Lavender cried. "How exciting! Do you love it, Herms?"

Hermione fought back an automatic shudder at the vile nickname Lavender had taken it upon herself to give her at the start of the evening and pasted a sort-of-genuine smile on her face. "I do, *Lav,*" she divulged. "But as Ginny said, I can't tell you. It's kind of in the name, though you shouldn't know that either…"
Ginny looked suitably chagrined at the glare she received, and muttered an apology under her breath. Hermione rolled her eyes but let it go, knowing it wasn't worth it. Ginny was too shrewd for her own good, sometimes. As calculating as any Slytherin, she had spied and schemed until she'd uncovered the truth, and Hermione didn't have it in herself to Obliviate a harmless friend.

A shiver forced it's way down her spine at this thought, but she shoved the accompanying emotions behind her shields immediately. She wouldn't be very good at her job, otherwise.

Luna turned her large, lamp-like eyes on Hermione then, her gaze unnerving. "It's very pretty," she observed, though she wasn't watching the necklace. Instead, her eyes bore into Hermione's as though trying to pass on a message. These few moments of lucidity from the usually loopy girl were something Hermione usually viewed as a gift, but right now, not so much. "A pretty trinket." She continued, gaining intensity. "Quite useless, though. What will be, will be, you know that." A small smile played on her lips and she leaned forward, tracing a finger down the chain to the shirt's collar. Hermione stayed still, frozen under her attentions. "Quite useless," she murmured again, and then leaned back, returning to her previous game of animating the ash in the tray on the table to play in the candlelight. She had been working on wandless magic, she'd informed Hermione quite matter-of-factly earlier that evening, stood outside the bar as they waited for Parvati to arrive. She'd dressed up in typical Luna style for the evening, with a bright yellow summer dress over an orange jumper, and an eerily familiar clutch at her side. 'What is that?' Hermione had asked, pointing it out. 'Is that my bag?'

Luna had frowned. 'Is anything anoyenes?' She'd responded. 'What does it mean, to belong?'

Hermione had given up after that.

The girls had moved on from the earlier conversation easily, returning to their game. Simple, it consisted of the girls listing 'facts' about Lavender's intended – one Ronald Weasley – and Lavender calling out whether they were true or false. Every time she was right, the person giving the fact took a shot; every time she was wrong, Lavender did. It had been discovered quite early on in the game that if they were to play then Lavender would stay disappointingly sober, as the pair were sickeningly lovestruck, so she'd started taking what she dubbed 'sympathy shots'.

"Ron has a scar on his wrist from a failed Unbreakable Vow," Ginny told them, swilling her shot with a challenging quirk of the eyebrow to Lavender. The blonde sighed exaggeratedly, and picked up her own glass.

"Ronald is perfect in every way," she announced to the table, "but I'm afraid that is true."

Hermione rolled her eyes as the girls linked arms and threw back their shots. Ridiculous game.

Parvati saved them from another round by scraping her chair back and standing. "I'd better go. I promised I'd be back by midnight and it's getting late." She took two steps and wobbled, her arms flailing out from her sides. Ginny and Hermione jumped up to catch her and deposit her back into her chair with a laugh.

"Alright, Cinderella, we'll walk you to the apparition point," Ginny smirked, a hand on Parvati's shoulder. "Come on, all. Next bar!"

A cheer rose up and soon all of the women were out in the cool night air once more.

Things went a bit downhill from there.

The werewolf attack, to be fair, was unanticipated. The full moon that hung in the sky should have
been a sign, but having lived through hundreds of them, none of the girls expected anything different this time – except that this one was the first that Lavender Brown had been in public, intoxicated and leaving her scent everywhere she wandered. They were unsuspecting and unprepared, except for Luna. Luna’s eyes, upon hearing the creature’s growl, lit up in a way that was vastly inappropriate for the situation, as was the corresponding grin. You almost expected that she'd kneel on the floor in her delight, and start saying "here, puppy, puppy".

As the mass of muscle and fur leapt from the trees onto Lavender, the girls all drew their wands – all except for Luna, who danced over to Hermione's side. Hermione, distracted as she was by the furious need to protect the girl, didn't notice the blonde's machinations until after the job was done. The werewolf growled, ripped into the soft flesh of Lavender's neck, and howled victoriously through a blood-spattered muzzle as he stood in the midst of the multi-coloured curses the women were shooting at him. And then he was gone, and all four girls fell upon Lavender, crying out in fright.

"Shit, shit, shit, Lav, keep breathing, keep breathing!" Ginny commanded the blonde, ripping cloth from her shirt to staunch the bleeding. Parvati screamed hysterically from Hermione's left at the mutilation of her best friend, and Hermione herself grabbed onto Lavender's arms.

"Everyone, grab onto me!" She commanded. As Parvati lunged for her, though, Luna threw her away from them with impressive strength. Hermione, already in the midst of Apparition, barely noticed the movement until Luna's fist impacted with her sternum and the glass of her necklace shattered, and the world began to spin.

"So sorry, Hermione," Luna breathed in her airy way, as the world spun out into a kaleidoscope of colour... and then it was gone.
Chapter One: The Orchards

Chapter Summary

A dying Lavender Brown, a furious Ginny Weasley, a concerned Hermione Granger and a suspiciously overprepared Luna Lovegood all arrive in 1979 and, predictably, are a little on edge.

The girls landed with a thud in the middle of nowhere, it seemed. The light-show that was their transportation died out all at once, leaving starbursts in Hermione's eyes as she desperately tried to make sense of what had just happened. There was a damp spot on her chest, her shirt sticking to her uncomfortably. The ground was soft and damp beneath her knees.

They were, in fact, stood in a meadow; green, lush grass underfoot and twinkling stars in the sky. They all released their hold as one, staggering backwards as they aimed to get some understanding of their surroundings. It was an orchard of sorts, Hermione thought before her brain clicked quickly into battle mode; Summoning her wand to her hand and automatically shifting until she was back-to-back with Ginny in preparation for any threats. The trees were flourishing in the early-spring heat, tempered though it was by the nights breeze. They were set in a perfectly symmetrical ring around them, thick and almost entirely impenetrable from their perspective. The air was clear, only the scents of flowers and dirt on it.

Satisfied with the lack of immediate danger, Hermione fell to her knees beside Lavender, her hands scrambling over her clothes to check the wound. "Oh, Gods," she whispered as her eyes fell on the sodden shirt Ginny had wadded into the bite. It was soaked through, the previously light blue material black with blood. Lavender wasn't conscious, but as Hermione poked and prodded at her, a pitiful moan escaped her mouth.

"Here," A calm voice said, and suddenly vials were being pressed into Hermione's palms; Essence of Dittany, Silver Paste, Werewolf Saliva to seal the wound, and Blood Replenishing Potion for afterwards. Hermione nodded gratefully even as something in the back of her mind screamed at her to pay more attention, she was missing something big. Instead, she leaned over Lavender and set to work. She removed the wad of cloth with a sympathetic wince; the blood had started to clot around it and the removal was not at all clean. The wound itself was horrendous. The werewolf seemed to have made no bones about whether she lived or died from his bite - he had torn the chunk of skin out entirely, leaving Lavender's remaining skin ragged and the wound inches deep. By Hermione's estimation, Lavender was lucky to survive.

She bit back a sob as she worked the paste and saliva into the mangled flesh that would certainly scar. The sometimes vapid Gryffindor had more than enough scars from Greyback, her classically beautiful face had been ravaged by his claws and teeth during the last battle, leaving puckered and malformed skin from her hairline all across the left side of her face down below her neckline to her hips. The brunette could remember the werewolf's feral glee as he'd munched away at her, his face covered in Lavender's lifeblood as he cackled around a mouthful of human flesh. "Aw, my pretty girlie," He had hissed into what had been left of her ear, and the fear in the still conscious girl's eyes had had Hermione launching herself at him in a protective rage, despite the two girls animosity.
Hermione hadn't been the hero that day, though. Sybill Trelawney, instead, had rounded the corner in a blaze of righteous fury, her eyes flashing as she'd screamed at the man murdering her favourite student in a way no person deserved. Hermione had run to join a different fight at the sound of the woman's approach and so didn't see the end of it, but Bill Weasley had informed her afterwards with an uncharacteristically manic glee in his eyes that Greyback had been unrecognizable by the end. Lavender, after all of this, hadn't even been infected. Hermione had been awed by the blonde's hitherto unseen strength of character in the months that followed, and the brunette remembered this, now, trying to pass this comfort on as she quietly begged her antagonist to live. She hadn't survived one monster only to be the victim of another.

Behind Hermione, Ginny had no such distractions as she advanced on Luna, who seemed to be inspecting the woodland that surrounded them. She glanced at Ginny once, took in the heated anger in her eyes, and her mouth twitched upwards. "I hope you weren't too terribly attached to Harry," she mused, not even twitching as Ginny drew her wand.

"What did you do, you crazy bitch?!" The redheads venomous tongue lashed out as she took a few steps toward her friend, who chuckled.

"I didn't do anything," Luna said serenely, eyes wide and innocent. "Fate did something, I merely facilitated. There's no going back now."

Ginny growled and went to lunge, Luna dancing out of the way with a tinkling laugh.

"Girls." Hermione snapped, her attention still on her patient. "Stop. Ginny, some wards, if you please." Ginny looked like she was considering mutiny, but Hermione snarled. "Now."

Ginny flew into motion mostly on instinct, because this was what Hermione was good at after seven years of wrangling her boys through this adventure and the next. Probably, Ginny thought with a smirk, this is just another Tuesday for her. She looked calm and determined, weathering the storm as always, making the best of a bad situation. Ginny admired her; for all of her faults, Hermione was her best friend and sister and had always been the rock upon whom Ginny could lean for support. This situation, whatever it was, would likely be no different.

"Protego Totalum, Fianto Duri, Cave inimicum..."

Hermione sighed when it seemed she had done all she could for Lavender, whose colour had returned slightly in the time that she'd been healing her. She felt for her pulse and the rush of relief upon feeling it thrumming was nearly overwhelming. With a huff, she leaned back onto her hands and glanced up at Luna, who was watching Lavender with a small smile playing on her face. "Lu," she began, only to be cut off by a flick of Luna's hand.

"Fate sent us here, Hermione. It wasn't me."

"I know what I felt, Luna. You punched me, right here. You were wearing a Time-Turner to the Pub? How irresponsible can you get!" She stomped around the warded area a few times, desperately trying to get a hold on her burning fury. "Are we in the past? Is that where we are?" She collapsed to the ground, her hands clutching at her chest desperately.

"Merlin, of course we are, of course, it just makes sense, doesn't it? Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck fuck-"
"Ginny," Hermione reached out, hiding her hurt when the redhead recoiled from her hand. "We don't know that. It could have just… knocked us off course?"

Even she didn't sound convinced, but it didn't stop her from shooting daggers at Luna when she decided to chip in in her usual carefree manner, "Nope, we're in the past. 1979, in fact."

"If you know so much, Luna, then where are we?" Hermione snapped, the weight of the situation crushing her. It barely even occurred to her to argue with Luna, not when she was cradling a savaged Lavender Brown in her lap and Ginny appeared to be having a nervous breakdown. The redhead had curled up in a ball, her hands fisted in the remains of her shirt, shaking and sobbing incoherently.

Luna's eyes widened as she pointed at the treeline, excitement vibrating off her as three shadows worked their way out of the darkness. "Oh, brightest witch of our age," she sighed happily, "figure it out."

The three silhouettes made their way into the moonlight, preceded by an ominous growling that rippled through the air and raised the hairs on all of their necks. Ginny dove to cast more wards, quickly, as the possibility of a new threat occurred to her. Luna was giggling quietly to herself as she watched Hermione stare in the newcomer's directions, a frown-line on her brow as her brain worked frantically to decipher the situation.

There was an obvious hierarchy to the mismatched shapes – the largest in the front, a vibrating tonne of sandy fur; a slightly shorter shape so black it almost blended into the trees at his left flank, and behind them both a towering stag. There was no other thing it could be, not with its antlers twisting up towards the heavens, standing out against a background of stars.

All three girls seemed to forget how to breathe as the largest form prowled closer, stopping every few feet to sniff the air and let out another rumbling growl. It was truly massive, made of shadows and teeth and glinting golden eyes that rang a bell, distantly, in Hermione's mind. She squinted a little, but it was only when the eyes of the creature swung over their hiding place and touched on where she was for a moment that she remembered.

"Padfoot!" Professor Lupin hissed, reaching out to slap Sirius' hands away from his plate for the third time. It was the day of the full moon, and Hermione had been watching him get more and more on edge as the week wore on. There was an electricity to the air, an expectation, and it seemed that some of the more anxious adults had been holding their breath around the werewolf for the past few days, eyeing him warily as they moved through the house. Hermione had never quite understood this fear of the man, not the wolf – though she would admit that his snarls were intimidating, and she wouldn't dare to do what Sirius was doing now. Contrary to popular opinion, she had quite good instincts for self-preservation, thank you.

Molly had cooked up a full English breakfast for them all before another long day of cleaning (or, as Ron liked to say, "slave labour") and had set aside a plate of extra bacon for the Professor, who only ever seemed to eat meat in the run-up to the moon. Sirius, being Sirius, had taken offense to what he called 'blatant favouritism' and had spent the last twenty minutes trying to steal his food in more and more ridiculously blatant displays. After this most recent, he let it be for a few minutes, but Hermione was no fool. She watched closely for the slightest movement and-

"Damn it, Sirius, fuck off!" came the snarl as the Black heir dove across the table, both hands out in front to snatch the plate away. The lid on Professor Lupin's temper flew off and he tackled the other man to the ground, both releasing constant grunts and growls as they struggled for dominance. Sirius released that barking laugh of his as the two grown men wrestled in front of the table of wide-eyed children, and eventually lolled his head to the side in the most impertinent display of submission any wolf had ever seen. Hermione had to viciously strangle down the sudden and intense jolt of
arousal she felt as Professor Lupin had leaned over to trail his teeth along the Pack mark the other man wore. He bit down, but not before his eyes flicked up to meet Hermione's chocolate brown ones, and the girl gasped quietly. They were the bright gold of the wolf.

Hermione sucked in air desperately, coughing and gasping. Tears filled her eyes but she couldn't even blink them away, fixated as she was by the scene. She could recognize, now that the dots had been connected, the giant shaggy dog as Sirius Black, and the stag – well, that barely bore thinking about right now, not if she intended to survive the night. A swift check on Luna showed a strange expression that Hermione recognised as Luna's kind-hearted version of smug immediately: slightly vacant, drifting, with the corner of her mouth twitched up and her usually massive eyes softened slightly as she met Hermione's.

"What have you done?" Hermione gasped out, arms tightening protectively around Lavender's shoulders causing her breathing to stutter a little.

Luna might have replied, but that was the moment the wolf they had once known as Remus Lupin decided to pounce.
Chapter Two: The Sunrise

Chapter Summary

Four witches wait out the night, three Animagi stand uselessly in the dark, and one werewolf desperately seeks his treasure.

It was chaos. Ginny was screaming, all three of them were frazzled, and Lavender was still unconscious. Hermione was desperate to check her vitals, but alas; there appeared to be a giant fucking werewolf attacking them for the second time that night!

Hermione calmed herself down with the promise that were they to escape this situation alive – alive being a very important part of this promise – she would let herself murder Luna. Probably quite violently.

The various fantasies of how this would occur ran through her head alongside the incantations to every ward she had ever come across. Ginny worked alongside her, though they lost some of her wards every time their attacker leapt at them because of her screams. It's difficult to speak incantations if you're screaming, after all, but as she was still doing a relatively good job of walking and breathing Hermione tried to write it off as simple panic.

Outside of their bubble she could see James Potter – James Potter! – and Sirius Black in their animagus forms, watching anxiously with helpless expressions on their animal faces as their wolf threw himself on her wards. Hermione tried not to use harmful wards, but there was little she could do to try to stop him from coming to harm if he insisted on trying to breach her protego.

When her wrist was weak from casting and her throat was sore and her magical core severely depleted, Hermione collapsed onto the floor next to Lavender and Ginny. The thud – thud – thud of Remus' – Moony's – attack was muffled by the foot-thick protective spells, and other than the breathing of her companions, she could hear nothing. Even Ginny had stopped screaming; there was a periphery worry that her friend was going into shock, but the brunette was too exhausted to deal with that at that moment.

She scanned the area, ignoring her girls and the people outside who were supposed to be dead, Hermione curled up in a ball and sobbed.

Time Travel. Could there have been anything worse? After everything they had been through, everything they had lost over the past thirty years of war? It was finally over, but no. Not for Hermione Granger! Hermione Granger has to deal with space-time anomalies and causal loop theory and the consequences of others' actions. Bitter thoughts swirled and taunted from the darkest depths of her brain, damning and cursing everyone who had brought her to this point in time - Harry, Ron, the bloody troll, Quirrell, Lockhart, Ginny, Remus, Sirius, Pettigrew, Albus fucking Dumbledore and his shitting lemon drops. She honestly would not have been surprised had this all turned out to be some manipulative scheme of the old goat's from beyond the grave.

They had to find a way back to their time, obviously. But without her Time-Turner, she didn't know where to start. They'd need contacts, and money, and the next twenty years of time-travel theory. They would need resources and a place to research and to hide from the world because nobody must see them, it was the number one rule, after all.
Bad things happen to those who meddle with time.

She considered all of this as she huddled in the darkness, barely paying attention to her companions. Luna was somewhere behind her comforting Ginny, though it didn't seem to be doing very much from the sounds of her hyperventilation. Hermione's scattered thoughts raced around her almost tangibly as she attempted to string together enough coherent reasoning to assemble some sort of solution to their problem - she wished that Harry and Ron were here, if only for a sounding board. Ron was pretty good with strategy, after all, and Harry had brilliant instincts. These thoughts were also shoved ruthlessly away lest she break down; Hermione had a strict one-breakdown-at-a-time limit, and that breakdown currently belonged to Ginny. In the meantime, everything she knew about 1979 and the years that follow was sorted into a box in the corner of her mind marked 'in case of emergency', and she prayed quietly that this was not that sort of emergency.

The hours dragged by sluggishly, with a routine of trying their hardest to forget about the werewolf and occasionally standing to strengthen the wards. Luna would mutter to herself occasionally, and dug through the beaded bag she had stolen from Hermione over and over for no discernible reason. "What are we going to do?" Ginny asked finally as the sky began to brighten and Hermione was reminded of the impossible strength her friend could summon when it was necessary. She'd been silent for a while, Hermione would have been sure she had been asleep if it hadn't been for the occasional whimper as the wards shuddered around them, but looking at her now you could barely tell that she had been in pieces minutes before. Her eyes were red-rimmed from the tears and Ginny's frantic wiping away of them, but otherwise her face was set in a mask of steely resolve. Somehow, Hermione didn't think the other girl was referring to the werewolf, and she wasn't addressing Luna.

Pulling herself out of her mind and back into the real world, Hermione sucked in a lungful of air and went back over the thoughts of the last few hours. Hoping to give off an aura of confidence, she scrambled to her feet and put her hands on her hips.

"Well," she began, and all three of them endeavoured to ignore the way her voice wobbled, "we need to find a way back, of course."

Ginny nodded as though this was obvious, and Luna blinked slowly before moving to Lavender's side to check her wounds again. Hermione took this as a sign of acquiescence and her confidence rose up a notch in response. "Naturally, we will need to find a place to research. The Ministry, perhaps. If I can get into the Department of Mysteries I should be able to explain myself to someone. They will understand the importance of the matter, offer their assistance, no doubt we'll be back in 1999 by Sunday." She huffed and nodded again, pasting a bright smile on her face and simultaneously loathing herself for being unable to come up with a less pathetic plan.

Luna was watching her like she was a kitten that had performed a particularly amusing trick. "Oh, Hermione," the girl sighed, her head tilted to one side and smiling pityingly. "Don't ever change."

"Shut up, Luna," came weakly from Ginny's direction. "At least she's trying to help. What do you suggest?"

"I think we should talk to these gentlemen once the sun rises, explain our situation." Right on cue, agonized howling started in the clearing as Moony reformed into Remus. Hermione flinched, but grit her teeth – it wasn't the first time she had heard it, nor the second, nor even the twentieth, she wouldn't break under it now. Ginny, who had never picked up Hermione's habit of waiting on the basement steps to make sure Remus was alright in a morning, started shaking in earnest as the howls rose in pitch. Luna gazed out over the clearing, her eyes flickering between Remus and Lavender, her face torn between guilt and sympathy as she watched the transformation. "They will help us."

"That's out of the question." Her voice was firm and steady, to her relief. "The first rule of time travel
is that you must not be seen."

Luna sent her another of those pitying looks again, the ones that seemed to be doubting her intelligence. "You just suggested the Ministry."

"That's different!" was snarled in return. "They are *civilians*, who will never understand the importance of this being kept a secret. Gods, Sirius Black is out there! This will be a pub story for him by the end of the day! Plus, you *know* they will ask questions. Questions we *can not answer.*" If there was ever anything that triggered Hermione's infamous fury, it was someone doubting her intelligence.

"Why not?" This one came from Ginny, whose big brown eyes were fixed on Hermione as her brow furrowed in thought. Outside of their bubble the howls were changing to human screams, which tore at the girls' hearts and put them more on edge than they were before and tempers heated.

"Because we just *can't*, Ginny, I don't expect you to understand." Hermione sniffed. "Time-travel is an extremely complicated concept with many delicate considerations to be made when you travel."

Ginny's face went stony and blank, but her eyes showed fire. "In other words, you have no good reason why not. I have a good reason why, though. We *can end the war*, 'Mione! Twenty years earlier! Lily and James won't have to die, Harry can grow up happy, Fred won't die, Tonks won't die, Remus won't die, *Sirius*."

"That cannot be guaranteed, Ginny. We might all die. We might just make things worse, in the long run." Hermione wiped a hand over her face tiredly, and turned to face Ginny head on. "We have a future where everything is fine and we are all happy. Why would we risk changing that? Because we can't be bothered to take the hard road? We could be killing Harry in trying to save him." Her tone had softened to pleading by the end of her speech, and Ginny was wavering, but the air was cut through with a shout from outside of the wards.

"Sirius! Take Remus back to the Manor. Pete, go with him, tell Mum I need her."

"You alright, Prongs?" Sirius asked cautiously, suddenly in human form and facing the black-haired boy opposite him. Ginny and Hermione were staring, struck dumb by the sight that confirmed what had until now been little more than idle suspicions. Sirius Black was barely recognizable to them, being young and fit rather than weathered, exhausted-looking and more than a little bit mental. Lightly curled black hair fell sleek past his ears to hover just above his shoulders, bright grey eyes fixed on the other boy, looking every inch the attractive young playboy he had told Harry and Ron stories about. James Potter, on the contrary, was not the mirror image of Harry everybody had told them he was – he was taller, bulkier, with longer hair that was just as messy and a completely different nose. In her defense, Hermione hadn't been the one to notice the nose. That had come from Luna who had whispered 'that nose!', in shock. Ginny snorted indelicately at her outburst.

"I want to see who's behind the wards," James explained quite reasonably. "Remus shouldn't be caught in the crossfire if they turn out to be dangerous."

Sirius considered this for a moment and then nodded his head from side to side. "You need back-up?" He asked. At James' denial, he scooped Remus' body into his arms and strode back through the trees, a little rat running by his feet. The girls all watched him retreat, and then glanced at each other.

"If Lavender were awake she'd tell you to stop drooling before she drowns," Luna observed, chucking Ginny's beet red face gently with a giggle.

"If Lavender were awake she'd understand," Ginny volleyed wryly, smirking lightly.
All three of them chuckled for a moment, before sobering and turning back to the single boy who remained outside their sphere. "I'm waiting," James Potter called, before sinking down to sit opposite them with his legs crossed. "Take your time!"

"What do we do now?" Ginny asked, half turned towards the boy who looked so much like the love of her life. Her face was the picture of grief, and Hermione's heart broke in turn as she recalled the loss of her best friend.

"I don't know," She whispered back, torn.
Chapter Three: The Waiting

Chapter Summary

Our girls make an ally, and Lavender finally gets some assistance.

James was making a show out of braiding grass together with nimble fingers while humming the tune to a Black Sabbath song he'd probably heard from Sirius. The three conscious girls had huddled together in the centre of their wards, arguing quietly about what to do next. Every five minutes or so James would call out to them as though to remind them that he was still there – like they could forget. Ginny had firmly entrenched herself on Luna's side of the argument after a few minutes, and Hermione was tearing her hair out to try to get them to understand her position. The redheaded girl was stubborn, though, and now that she had her allegiance she was all in.

"Come out, come out!" James called from beyond the wards as the five minute point passed, his gaze unsettlingly knowing as he gazed just over Luna's head.

"We can't!" Hermione cried as Ginny went to raise her wand. "It would destroy the timeline," she hissed frantically, begging the other two to understand.

Ginny rolled her eyes exasperatedly. "What do you suggest we do, stay here forever? That's ridiculous, Hermione. Lavender needs to be someplace warm and dry, someone with experience to check her wounds. Plus, she's probably a werewolf now, she'll be scared and confused, and the only person who could possibly help her in a humane way is out there!" She violently stabbed the air in the direction Sirius and Remus had left.

"The timeline is already destroyed just by us being here, Hermione, face it. There's a reason we were sent here as opposed to elsewhere." Luna chimed in, somewhat unhelpfully in Hermione's opinion. The brunette witch fought to suppress the fear and hysteria clawing its way up her throat as she cast around desperately for information that might help. "Your research will not help you here," Luna told her, not cruelly, but it felt like a slap in the face all the same. "This is magic, pure magic, unpredictable and unexplainable in the truest of senses."

"No," Hermione choked out, her fingers tightening on Ginny's wrist. "What about paradoxes? When we're born? Will we just blink out of existence?" She zoned in on Luna's momentarily blank expression with triumph. "Ha! There! See, our best option would be to get out of here and find a way back!"

"There is no back, Hermione! Don't you see? The second those four laid eyes on us the future winked out! We're carving a new one now, an entirely new one with new rules! Time will find a way to include us, but you must understand, there is no going back. Harry, Ron, Neville, Parvati – they're all gone, now. We will never be born, because we are already here!" Luna was panting after delivering this uncharacteristically long speech, and shot a glare at her friend as if to chastise her for making her break type. "You claim to understand how time works. I make no such claims. I do, however, understand our Gods, the nature of magic and the Fates much better than you ever will, and you must listen to me now before we leave you behind. We are going out there."

Hermione glanced at her friends and the stirring Lavender, a tightly knotted ball of anxiety in her gut tightening as she took in each of their determined expressions. "Fine," she snapped, not feeling like it
was fine at all. It seemed as though the other two thought it would be easy; seamless; to blend into a new time and a new world all the while trying not to step on any butterflies. Because Hermione definitely wasn't going to be stepping on any butterflies. The future was good, Voldemort had been defeated, the Light had triumphed, and that was all that mattered. They needed to preserve that, and that meant being as unobtrusive as possible. Coming across as normal – just four girls lost in the woods, nothing to see here. She knew the other girls would put up a fight about that later, but right now she was hoping that her agreement would forestall any action until they had a chance to talk properly.

"Mum!" James cried suddenly, and all of the girls shot up as the leaves rustled where Sirius had left.

To the shock of all the women in the wards, the shadows in the trees parted and a woman strolled out. She was an intimidating sight; not because she was overly scary looking, far from it, with her bouncy dark blonde curls that were liberally streaked with grey, eyes of the same shade, full lips quirked into what could pass as a serene smile she could easily be a random passerby. Of a vague age that could be anywhere between thirty and seventy, she was shorter than James by a few inches, but she seemed to fill all of that space and more with an aura of such overwhelming command that the girls took one collective step back, and Hermione found herself debating whether the proper protocol would be to curtsey or not.

The newcomer joined James at his vigil outside their barriers and took up a position at his side, facing the group of women with one hand on her hip and her eyes narrowed. "Are you alright, James?" She asked in a voice that immediately brought to mind warm hearths, hot tea and the worn old armchair Hermione used to occupy in the Black library. He nodded, and the woman reached up to run a hand through his hair affectionately. "Do you want to fill me in? Your brother ran back to the house rambling something about wards and intruders. Naturally, one finds oneself a little concerned."

James grinned up at his mother, pure love shining out of his face. Hermione felt the hole in her heart where her parents had lived for seventeen years of her life split wide open once more, aching and torn in the presence of such familial devotion. From the look of the tears newly streaming down Ginny's face, she was thinking of the family she had left behind too. She caught Hermione looking and schooled her features back to the determination from before, and the brunette couldn't help the stab of hurt she felt at that action. Did Ginny think she'd use her loss against her to meet her own ends? Hermione wasn't that bad, was she?

The woman, Mrs Potter, looked over their wards with a calculated gleam in her eye. "Behind there, are they?" She stood to her full height once more, her son standing proudly behind her, and addressed the girls directly. "Please, do come out. We mean you no harm, for it is truly an honour that you have graced our property – whoever you are."

Hermione's brow furrowed in confusion, but Luna was glowing with self satisfaction. There was something Hermione was missing here, she knew it. All the same, it seemed this was their only choice for the moment. Hermione walked forward, a little wobbly, and summoned her patronus to pass through the wards and give them her message.

The little otter scampered across the grass until it stood on two paws about a foot from their two observers, and opened its mouth to speak.

"Before we leave the wards, we ask for safety on your land. Our friend is in need of urgent medical assistance."

It was odd to Hermione to hear her voice reflected back to her so eerily, but she pushed that aside and stood as confidently as she could while she awaited their response.
"How were they harmed?" Mrs Potter asked, a steely undertone in her voice as she exchanged looks with James. James shook his head and the older woman looked a little mollified, but not by much.

Hermione took a deep breath before taking a chance on the woman stood in front of her. After all, if they refused to let a newly changed werewolf into their house then it was one less thing standing in the way of Hermione's plan – which was to remove them all from this time as soon as humanly possible.

The otter opened its mouth again to tell the woman "she was bitten by a werewolf before our arrival. She appears stable, but we are as yet unsure how to proceed." Ginny rolled her eyes at the rigid formality in Hermione's voice, and prepared to bring down the first layer of wards. Mrs Potter nodded firmly as though coming to a decision.

"We will happily host your convalescence until your friend is ready to be moved. May I ask how many of you there are?"

Luna and Hermione had joined Ginny at the wards now, bringing them down, and with a negligent flick of her wand sent a reply of "four". They could tell the second the outsiders could see through the wards as Mrs Potter let out a shocked little gasp, and James' eyes widened. All of the girls took a moment to consider how this looked – they were all four covered in dried blood, and Ginny's clothes were torn from the fight. Luna and Hermione were dishevelled, though not harmed, but their skins were sallow and they had blackening rings under their eyes from magical depletion, fear and utter exhaustion.

"Oh, girls," Mrs Potter sighed sympathetically, before clapping her hands together in a way that reminded Ginny of her mother were she more elegant. "It looks like you all need a cup of tea and a long night's rest before we chat. Would you mind terribly telling me your names, first?"

Hermione paused, but Luna didn't bother. "Luna Lovegood, this is Ginny Weasley, Hermione Granger, and Lavender Brown." Unholy rage flamed through the air around them as Hermione picked up on her game, but Luna could care less, smiling dreamily at the Potter Matriarch.

Mrs Potter, to her credit, didn't react to the names despite the fact that she was quite close to both the Lovegoods and the Weasleys, and neither had a daughter – as yet. She simply smiled gratefully and nodded. "My name is Dorea Potter neé Black, you can call me Dorea, and this is my son James Charlus Potter. If you are willing, I'd like James to carry your friend to the Manor so that my elves can have a look at her. They've become quite skilled with werewolf-inflicted injuries, over the years." She gave them a secretive smile and chuckled at James' huff. Hermione was confused – who was this woman who was already treating them like they were a part of the family? Why didn't she have more questions? Dorea must have seen the look on her face because she shot her a sympathetic glance. "Muggleborn?"

At her nod, Dorea continued; "there are some things that they leave off the Hogwarts curriculum, much to my distaste, that could come in handy every now and again. I'm sure you have questions, and do not make the mistake of believing that I do not, but they would be better served if asked in a warm living room with a cup of tea after a few hours sleep, yes?"

Hermione nodded dumbly again and Dorea beamed before taking them all in again. "Well then, James, if you don't mind." The boy strode forward and we parted to let him past. He gathered Lavender into his arms gently, then moved back to stand beside his mother. Dorea gestured for them to follow her and began to walk through the woodland at their backs. Hermione started forward before she had even realised she was doing it, and considered for a moment that she could have been imperiused for the willingness she had to follow this woman, and then brushed it off.
Behind her, Luna took Ginny's hand to pass her some much needed strength. The redhead eyed her best friend for a moment, eyes narrowed as she remembered the events of the evening. The girl had held her through most of the night as she had panicked at the werewolf's attack, and helped her fight through the clawing flashbacks to the war the younger girl still suffered through on occasion. Images of Lavender's attack had assaulted her with every bang of the werewolf hitting their wards. Ginny hadn't been as terrified as she was that night since first year, and it had reverted her to that shaking eleven year old she had worked so hard to separate herself from. Luna was the only person who understood what she was dealing with on a regular basis, and for her to go and do this... it was an unbelievable betrayal.

She had agreed with Luna in the argument because it had only made sense, and that had forged an uneasy truce between the two, but she felt she had to make her position clear one more time.

"I'm still mad at you," Ginny threw over her shoulder at Luna as she passed by to follow the group through the trees. Luna smiled and squeezed the redheads hand, "I wouldn't expect any less."
Chapter Four: The Discourse

Chapter Summary

Hermione gets an explanation she feels like she doesn't need. Ginny and Luna strongly disagree.

Chapter Notes

Hello, readers! A quick note here to say I borrowed the idea of sentient magic [1] from corvusdraconus's fic One Step Forward, Two Decades Back which I read on FFN. It's not used in the exact same way, but is, admittedly, inspired by their idea.

Lots of long winded explanation here, please bear with!

The drawing room of Potter Manor was an elegantly decorated space just off a lush entrance hall. There were plush couches dotted around the room, coloured to match the light gold walls and darker mahogany floors, covered in antique rugs made of a tapestry-like fabric. An ornately gilded mirror hung in the space between two doors on the western wall, opposite a fireplace on the other, which was sandwiched between bulging shelves of books. Dorea situated Ginny, Luna and Hermione in this room and called for a grouchy house-elf called Bell to bring them some tea, before bustling off to see that Lavender was well tended. The girls fidgeted awkwardly on the immaculate furniture, Ginny and Hermione feeling out of place with their dirty clothes. Luna, on the contrary, was settled quite happily on a pink armchair, cuddled back into the upholstery with her newly bare feet up on the cushion and her knees tucked to her chest, even in her mud spattered and torn dress and hair which, even more than Hermione's, seemed to have reached out to collect leaves and twigs as they had passed through the woods. She stared around the room with a little smile, while the other two's eyes were continuously brought back to the family portrait on the mantel.

In the portrait Dorea sat, poised and perfect with her hair in ringlets around her heart-shaped face, bringing attention to her signature Black cheekbones and full lips. Her forest-green robes flowed to the floor in sculpted waves, her hands clasped together on her lap. Behind her stood James, his hair tamed into some semblance of order, hazel eyes bright with some sort of mischief. Beside him, Sirius stood also, tall and proud, lips quirked into a proud smile. In the back of the picture, taller still than both boys and Dorea, a man who looked the spitting image of Harry stood with a grin and tenderness in his expression. *Charlus Potter*. Hermione had heard very little of him over the years, less even than she had heard of Dorea, whose name would have often inspired Sirius to lock himself in his mother's bedroom with Buckbeak for days at a time.

"What happened to this place?" Hermione wondered aloud, pulling her gaze from the happy family to inspect the crown molding. "I mean, I've never heard of Potter Manor, have you?"

Ginny shrugged, still looking subdued under the events of the past few hours. Luna picked at a loose thread on her dress as she replied; "Lost, like so many other things. War. So terrible, don't you think?"
Her tone was neutral, but there was something leading there that had Hermione sighing exasperatedly and shooting her a quelling glance. "We've been over this, Luna."

"Ah, I recall. Your word is law, now." Luna replied amiably. "Though I fear I must have missed the vote on that…"

"This is about what is best for the-"

Brittle, mocking laughter from Ginny cut off her words mid-sentence. Ignoring this, Luna turned her lamplike eyes on Hermione with a steeliness the brunette had never seen, and didn't appreciate. "Dorea was right, you're muggleborn, which means you cannot possibly understand the significance of this evening's events, yet. I, however, do. If we are to do anything in this situation, the purebloods -" Luna gestured between herself, Ginny and somewhere above where she assumed Lavender was resting "- would, by virtue of having the most expertise, be the best options for consultation on the matter. It takes a lot of nerve for you to declare your superiority here. Were Lavender awake, she would have slapped you."

Bristling, and having ignored the majority of Luna's words, Hermione scowled. "Oh, so I'm lesser because I'm a muggleborn, now, am I? I cannot possibly understand? How dare you, Luna?"

"Don't get your knickers in a twist, 'Mione, she's right!" Ginny snarled in defense of her closest friend. "It's not about racism, it's about integral knowledge. We landed in the Potter's Ritual Space." She smiled smugly at the lost look on Hermione's face at the words. "See – this is our point. You don't even know what a ritual space is for!"

"I hardly see the relevance-"

"Exactly!" Burst out in a tide of frustration from the other two girls, and Hermione collapsed back into her chair, shocked and chastened. "It's not an insult, love," Luna explained gently, though it was without some of the warmth one had come to expect from the girl, "it's old customs, histories, we hold onto like lifelines in these modern times, when our culture seems to be draining away from us. Hogwarts doesn't even allow the celebration of the solstices any more, you know, and we're losing other such customs as courting and covens, too. It's scary to us, and it's all part of why the Dark Lord was – is – so popular. They watch this happen, blame people like you, because muggleborns and muggle-raised have no clue of how to act in our world. Exacerbating the problem is the isolation of your kind and Dumbledore refusing to teach these newcomers about their new world. You don't understand, and that's not your fault and usually it would hardly matter – but here, now, it does."

Luna heaved a great sigh, eyes wide and looking mildly startled by her own actions. Letting out a nervous little giggle, the oh-so familiar glaze settled back over her glowing blue eyes and she flopped gracelessly back into her chair. Apparently realising that he capacity for coherency had run out, Ginny pulled herself to the edge of her own chair and intercepted Hermione's pointed glare with the ease of a person making use of their years of practise. "She's right, you know. Really right. And I'm so sorry, I feel like I've failed you, my family and I both, by neglecting to teach you these things." Regretful eyes met Hermione's, which softened for a moment before she seemed to realise that someone had been keeping a vast amount knowledge from her – from her, Hermione Granger! – for years, and they hardened instantly.

"Explain it to me then," Hermione demanded. "How am I to know if you refuse to let me learn?" Then she looked at them exasperatedly and growled out – "and why has no-one mentioned it before?!"

"Well, because nobody expected any of this," with a wave of her arm, Ginny indicated the manor. "Plus, there was the whole war thing, which, you must admit, is not the most appropriate time to be
teaching muggleborns pure-blood lore. I think it should be taught in History of Magic, personally, but it probably is and I haven't noticed. Damn Binns." She sighed deeply, and then sat up straight, going into lecture mode and looking delighted about it.

"So," she began, pinning Hermione with a stare eerily similar to Professor McGonagall when she thought you should be making notes. "This is all about Magic. That's magic with a capital 'M', rather than the layman's magic. Magic as a sentient force, though some people don't prescribe to this theory and instead ascribe the actions of sentient Magic to Gods and Goddesses, but in the Weasley family we believe in sentient magic." A glance at Luna, in case she wanted to step in, showed that she was now turning her attention to manipulating the dust mites in the sunlight with wandless magic, and seemed entirely uninterested in the conversation.[1]

One long fingered hand swept strands of hair from her face as Ginny continued, really getting into her stride now; "we believe that Magic as a force is sentient, omniscient and omnipotent because throughout history there have been events that have occurred as evidence to this fact. Aside from run-of-the-mill incidents that we typically attribute to 'Fate', as it were, such as Harry Potter and Tom Riddle having brother wands, or perhaps Harry coming back from the 'dead' several times, there have been occasions that have been utterly and undeniably orchestrated by Magic itself."

"In order to understand the significance of these occurrences, you must first know that Purebloods worship pure Magic in all of its forms, be it dark, light or grey, in the same way that Muggles worship their own assorted Gods. Magic provides, protects, and blesses us as a race. We wouldn't be where we are today without these blessings Magic has lavished on us over the years – us Weasleys with our fertility, the Blacks with their beauty, the Malfoys with their charisma – none of this would exist were we not avid devotees of Magic. This is a respect we attempt to pass down to newcomers, in classes and outside, subtly, but when you have these lessons contrasting with teachers talking about 'controlling' Magic, 'using' magic, 'manipulating' magic… well, as you would say, wires get crossed.

"Theoretically, the more powerful a person is, the easier it is to ensure they understand our ways and respect them. Of course, there are always exceptions – you, Hermione, have always been powerful, but you have this habit of forgetting that magic is real. Not everything will fit into your narrow understanding of the world we are in – a problem all muggleborns and muggle raised face, though certainly very few of them are as stringent in their beliefs as you are. Most newcomers see their first unicorn and that some things are not understandable, but you do yourself a disservice in looking for the reasons why. This is even before you've encountered many of the things our Magic has to offer – you've never run into Predestined Bonds, for example. You don't have a familiar. You owe no life debts, you are not an animagus… Godric, in a world of magic you've barely dipped your toe in the pond!" Level explanations had steadily declined into a rant, and Hermione had the distinct impression, as Ginny panted through the pause in her speech, that this had been a long time coming. She still didn't really get it, though – what was so wrong with attempting to know as much as possible? Knowledge was power, after all, her entire existence up until this point had proven that. Her research wasn't for nothing – it was a very rare occasion that her searching didn't provide usable results. With almost everything there was to know about magic written in books, surely it followed that if it were worth knowing, or true, then it would have been written down at some point?

"I can see you doubting me." Ginny snapped, bringing Hermione back to the present. "I know what you're thinking. Let me ask you this, though – do you believe everything just because it is written in a book?" Hermione opened her mouth to respond, but a slash of Ginny's hand cut her off. "No! This is not a debate. How much time, exactly, have you spent researching pure-blood lore, anyway?"

When the brunette wrinkled her nose, Ginny felt a surge of victory and rode this surge all the way through her next words. "Exactly. Look, listen to me. You can research this later, carry out a study, interviews, write one of those bloody books you're fond of if you want to, but right now, just keep an
open mind.

"The reason I'm telling you about this is to explain why families have ritual spaces. They are naturally occurring places that show up when a family is formed or relocates. Nobody is quite sure how they come to be, only that they do. They're mostly circular, connected to the element the family is closest to – our ritual space is in the paddock, and it's where we host our solstice celebrations. As a rule, it's a sacred space to be used for celebration, and most of us keep the space well-tended just in case Magic will visit a miracle upon us.

"And now we come to why we are here," A hundred mega-watt smile lit up Ginny's face at this point, blinding Hermione. "You'll have noticed I talk about 'magical occurrences' and 'miracles'. There have been dozens of these throughout recorded history, always listed after-the-fact, by the families that were so honoured. As a child, pure-bloods are told these fantastical stories about the innate magic of the land on which we dwell, and the provisions Magic will bring us through it. These have dated back to Merlin himself, and often follow the same path – something had happened in the area that threatened the life of a person, or people, or even things who would later be important. For example, I know that one of Neville's favourite tales is thus:

"In 1849 the North of England was haunted by a mysterious poison. It only affected women of an age to bear children, and gave them horrific pains and sickness. Over the course of months those who were affected would seem to get better, until they were somehow dosed again. Children were lost, and it seemed that nobody in the area could get pregnant – up until six months after the phenomenon began. The Longbottom circle brought to the moors a recently deceased pixie ring. The healers that had before been at a loss as to how to tackle the condition were suddenly enlightened, and immediately set about distributing the cure that had fallen into their laps. The wings of the pixies, when deposited into the reserves, counteracted the active agents in the unidentified brew that had been emptied into it, thereby saving the women of the surrounding areas from becoming barren. In the years since, three groundbreaking Masters have been provided by the descendents of the affected women, including one Damocles Belby." Hermione jolted at the sound of the familiar name, and Ginny nodded gravely. "So you see? There are so many more stories – the Delacours and their Alpine Opalwings, the Prewetts and their reservoir – that we would be here all night were I to continue on this path. The point is – this is what we think has happened to us."

A long silence followed, punctuated by much frowning on Hermione's part and off-key humming from Luna.

"You think we have been sent here?" Hermione clarified quietly, no trace of what she was thinking on her face.

"Quite frankly, yes. It makes sense. You would never have been able to apparate us to the Potter ritual space whether you had knowledge of it or not. The Time-Turner could hardly have sent us back simply because it smashed, that's ridiculous. It would also explain the Potters' reaction to finding us – they think the same thing! And consider it, for a moment. They send back the Brightest Witch of Her Age, chock full of knowledge about Horcrux destruction;" she waved at Hermione, "a girl with a built in Horcrux, Dark Magic and Voldemort detection mechanism;" here, she gestured to herself, "a girl with an uncanny ability to read the signs and provide solid strategy when in need, among other things;" Luna gave a brilliant grin, "and a clever, charismatic woman who happens to also be a werewolf. If you ask me, those are the perfect people to take down a Dark Lord."

Luna tuned back in to nod along with a very serious expression on her face, and Hermione pondered this information for a moment. Once she had a handle on her thoughts, though, she let rip.

"So, what you're trying to tell me, is that we are a time-travelling dream team, hand-picked by either
'Magic' – here Hermione employed the use of air quotes, rolling her eyes at Ginny's offended expression – "or some nameless, faceless Goddess of 'Fate'." Warily, the younger girls made noises of affirmation. Hermione regarded them for a moment, waiting for someone to crack and scream 'gotcha!', but it seemed they really believed what they were saying. How odd. Did they not hear themselves? "You two understand that what you're saying is impossible, right? It makes no logical sense. You cannot possibly expect me to suddenly subscribe to some mental, pure-blood rhetoric because a myth –" ignoring groans, she soldiered on, "- might provide an explanation. I already have an explanation for this – Time-Turner malfunction. And, I accept that this is my fault, which is why I will fix it. You needn't make things up." She ended her speech with a little laugh, smiling out at her friends, mentally begging them to give this up as a bad job. Their story made no sense, there was no empirical evidence (folk stories, regardless of the class status of those telling them, are still folk stories and have little to no basis in fact). Research, evidence, proper scientific method; they had set her in good stead in her years in both the Muggle world and the Magical, and she was not about to throw them out of the window at first chance. Sensing, however, that the room's occupants were not to be swayed, she threw herself into her fallback argument (and it was quite infallible, if she did say so herself):

"It doesn't matter, anyway. This is all rubbish – fact is, when using a Time-Turner to travel, it's strictly forbidden to change anything. It's the law." With a smug smile, shoving all of what they had said behind a door in her mind for later disproval, she relaxed, certain the battle was won.

Ginny gaped at her for a long time before snapping her mouth shut with an audible clack. Hermione could pinpoint the exact moment that the girl got tired of dealing with her arguments, and braced herself for her response. However, instead of an angry, vengeful Ginny, she got a quite reasonable one, who shared a long look with Luna that ought to have made Hermione very nervous, turned full on to Hermione, and said rather pleasantly that "There is so much wrong with that sentence that I'm not sure where to begin."

Luna nodded along, her face also mild. "In the interests of saving you a fair bit of embarrassment, Hermione, we're going to pretend you didn't say that. It was the wrackspurts." She winked, and Hermione was disturbed by their sudden, uncharacteristic pleasantness.

That was until, with a laugh, Ginny added, "Instead, we're going to pretend you said 'you two are so clever! I see your point, now. Let's stop the war!' and do what we were going to do anyway."

Any further protests were cut off by the sly use of a silencing charm to fight Hermione's sudden surge of panic, and the two younger girls settled back into their chairs, looking sweetly satisfied.
"Ron?" Lavender mewed, her eyes fighting the darkness as she attempted to make out the features of the man moving about the room. She had woken twice over the past few hours, but both times had been alone and quickly sucked back by the lulling comfort of sleep. The presence of a new person was a novelty, though it occurred to her that it was strange that it would be Ronald Weasley, of all people, to be by her sickbed.

"It's me, Lav," came his voice, soothing and strong as he climbed into bed beside her. "How are you feeling?"

"Weak. What happened?" She struggled to sit up, gasping with pain and suddenly becoming aware of how much of her body was aching and sore. Her face felt curiously tight, also, like she could barely twitch an eyebrow. She could see a bare slip of the room through slitted eyes, but didn't seem to have the energy to hold them more open. "How long have I been out?"

A weighty pause hung in the air, crushing her lungs and stinging her eyes. She choked on a sob as Ron rustled the sheets, plumping her pillow. "I don't want to stress you out, love," he replied quietly.

Lavender had never been accused of being a push-over, no matter what pet names were employed (and why was he using pet names, anyway? That was something she'd have to address later) and she wasn't about to start now, no matter what situation she had landed herself in. "Tell me," she demanded with all the steel she could muster in her tone.

Ron sighed deeply. "Let me get Poppy."

"How long?" Lavender snapped, then whined pitifully as the words tore up her sore throat in punishment for losing her temper. Her mother's voice ghosted a scold through her mind, but she shoved it aside. It was nice to know some things didn't change.

Trying to see what was going on bore no fruit as it seemed the light just wasn't strong enough. Stubborn determination built in her chest. "Ron, please," she breathed.

The redhead's large, warm hands encompassed her own, and that more than anything told her that she wouldn't like the answer – Ron was a great many brilliant things, but never all that considerate. "Two months..." came the words, and Lavender's eyes widened. "We didn't know if you'd make it
He was still talking, but Lavender was stuck thinking through the repercussions of what he had just
told her. Two months? That couldn't be possible. How had she gotten that badly injured? She
remembered very little of the battle, she found, as she scoured her mind for hints as to her fate.
Bright lights, dark corridors, warm fire and cold corpses. Lavender had always worked well under
pressure, so she'd sprung into action the second the warning had come through via Ariana – she
had corralled all the younger students and led them out of the castle with other choice members
of the DA at her side, and then thrown herself into the fray with all of the voracity of a true Gryff. It
was easy to push the horrifying sights out of her mind at the time, concerned as she was by
protecting others and herself. She remembered white-hot, burning fury as people she had worked
with over the years, sat across from at lunch, were killed and killing others, and that had carried her
through the first half of the Battle.

Then, a haze seemed to lift from her brain. Images that had been blurred and faint threw themselves
into painful clarity, and she could see and feel, again, herself running across the courtyard and
down the stairs towards where the elder Creevey boy was battling one of the Lestranges. She'd
managed to shove him aside, tackling him with her body, just in time for him to miss a green bolt
from the older wizard's wand. Creevey had scrambled up and ran after the retreating man, after
cursing Lavender for standing in his way. She'd been so distracted by the shock of his reaction, this
determined little boy, that she'd not noticed him until it was too late.

Rotting, putrid breath on her face. Sharp, jagged teeth grazing her neck. The sharp tearing of his
claws – for they were no longer human nails – as they ripped into the soft flesh of her stomach.
Finally, the terrifying, paralysing feel of his excitement pressed against her thigh as he drank of her
blood…

She was hyperventilating, Lavender realized blurrily. There was something wet on her face. Warm,
watery – she was there again, trapped in the memory, screaming for help and nothing was coming.
Fighters witnessing the atrocity but giving her up for dead, and then the blessed void where she
didn't have to feel, or taste, or hear, or see.

The absence of this void, odd as it sounds, made her feel bereft. Returned senses were suddenly
cloying, disturbing her and suffocating her. The bindings on the bed were now restraints she couldn't
defeat, struggle though she might. Dimly, she recognized Ron's voice screaming for the nurse, but
she was too far gone. Bursting into tears, she collapsed in on herself in the bed.

Lavender came to consciousness in fits and starts. Her senses returned sluggishly, but detectably, and
they seemed oddly strong to her – even considering that she'd been existing with werewolf senses for
the past few years. One by one, the elements of her environment made themselves known, almost as
though they didn't want to overwhelm her. Why thank you, she thought dazedly to the gods, how
very kind. First, the scent of fresh, country air filled her lungs, soothing a dry burn in her nose and
throat. Next, the sweet chirping of birds came from a distance, and Lavender amused herself by
attempting to identify them from the limited knowledge she had collected from her aunt in her youth.
In the following minutes, she became aware of the taste of apple blossoms and iron on her tongue,
followed by lightening of the darkness behind her eyelids, and finally she choked on her own tongue
as she was assaulted by a desperate thirst.

"W… wa… ter…" Her voice was barely recognizable, and she would have grimaced at the rasp had
she time for her own vanity at that moment. As it were, she did not. She could barely think past the
thirst, but on the back of it she could feel vicious, stomach grating hunger, and knew that if she didn't
drink now then she would throw up and that would not be cute.

 Luckily, something thin and cold touched her lips, and she latched onto it with vigour. Slaking her thirst took a long time, but once she had had enough she figured that she might as well try to open her eyes.

 Everything was blurry at first, reminding her of the last time she'd been in prolonged unconsciousness – no, don't think about that, Lav – but after a moment what had been a smudge of gold coalesced into an ornate light fixture on the ceiling. She frowned at it for a moment, she'd never seen something so regal in her life, and it was just a light. Widening her gaze, she took note of the crown molding – delicate carvings of imps dancing across the top of the walls, interspersed by flowers, telling some sort of story, and her easily distracted mind entertained itself attempting to decipher the tale until a delicate cough called her back to herself.

 "Miss Brown, isn't it?" A feminine voice to her right side asked. The tone immediately brought to mind Padma Patil and Hannah Abbot, delicately effeminate. She sounded about Lavender's age, but when she tried to turn her head to investigate a searing pain ripped through the tissue of her neck and she cried out. "Oh dear," the disembodied voice said, and there was a rustling of fabric. "Don't move, love, just relax. You've got a nasty bite, it won't heal unless you stay still."

 A nasty bite? Memories of her last time in this position battered at her Occlumency shields, but she thrust them back into the depths ruthlessly. What had bitten her? The last thing she remembered was the shots, but she didn't think she had drank that much… Lifting her head only slightly, so as not to pull at her neck, she glanced at the foot of the lavishly decorated room to see her favourite pink pumps by the door. Yes, then, she had definitely been on her hen night. Parvati had been there, her faithful best friend, as well as Ginny and Luna (who she had never really gotten along with, weird as she was, but when drunk she was a blast) and even Hermione. It had been touching when she'd appeared, unexpectedly sweet, and it was nice that she had made the effort to attend. She had never liked Lavender, that much was obvious, and Lavender had given up on trying to gain her approval years ago, but the fact was that she was Ron's best friend and a big part of his life so it would be nice if they could get along – or even just be in a room without the older girl sneering at her.

 Speaking of Ron…

 "Where's Ron?" Lavender croaked, not smelling her faithful fiancé on the air, only cleanliness and delicate lavender and spice that she assumed came from her companion. Worry shot through her for Ron – had this happened at the house? No… her shoes were dirty. But then, where was her Ron? He'd be here if she was injured, she knew. Unless… Unless Molly was angry at her for being sick and told him to stay away? It wasn't like the motherly woman to take offense on matters like that, but she had been a bit insane about the wedding over the past few weeks…

 "Who's Ron?" The voice asked, and Lavender crimped her brows in frustration.

 "My fiancé. Where is he?" There was a gasp from the other side of the room, and Lavender growled, her wolf-instincts that had been latent beneath her skin since the Battle rising to the surface. "What are you keeping from me?" She demanded again, ignoring the voice in her head noting the similarities between her two attacks.

 "Miss, please…"

 Luckily, she was saved from answering by another person slipping through the door. "Oh, Lavender!" Ginny Weasley choked, before the blonde's vision was entirely obscured by vibrant red hair. "We were so worried! I'm so glad you're okay." She pulled back and pinned the other girl with a ferocious glare. "Don't you dare do that again, do you hear me? No more! You spend too much
time in bed." Chucking her chin, the girl climbed in bed beside the blonde. Lavender noticed that she had changed, and she smelled of the same spices as the woman who still stood by the bedside – the same shampoo, if she had to hazard a guess. Her arms were wrapped around Lavender's shoulders as if she feared that to let go would mean that she'd fall apart, and Lavender rubbed Ginny's hands absentely.

"Gin," Lavender began, but was cut off by chatter.

"Sh. Don’t stress yourself. Dorea says that you're fine, but that we aren't to stress you overmuch – hence why Hermione isn't here, ha! She's sulking down the hall, but you don't need to know about that yet. It's a long story, anyway, and none of us have had enough sleep for this-"

Thoughts swirled through Lavender's brain, questions upon questions. Ginny was nervous, that much was obvious, for she only went into blabber-mode when she was hiding something. The woman who had been in the room was still there, still breathing rhythmically, but so quiet that it was almost like she didn't want to be noticed.

The doors opened before anything more could be said, and this time Lavender could see the intruder. It was a woman she had never seen before in her life, though she felt like she should remember her from the society parties she'd attended since she could walk for she was tall and regal in the manner of only the most formidable Matriarchs. She dismissed the woman who’d been keeping watch with a warm smile and a nod, then moved to perch on the end of the bed; head held high, soft ringlets flowing down her back. Turning slate grey eyes on the girl lying in the bed, she offered a sympathetic moue. Lavender fought back against the emotions the look of motherly concern stirred up inside of her desperately, but it had been too long since her own mother had cared enough to sit at her bedside, and by the time the newcomer reached forward to brush strands of hair behind Lavender's ears, she was lost.

"Oh! Don’t cry," the woman begged, looking to Ginny. "Ease yourself, child. You're in a delicate situation, and you've yet to hear the whole story."

Wrinkles. She'd get premature wrinkles from frowning this much. Lavender had no idea how to respond to that, other than to lift her – thankfully responding – limbs and wipe at her eyes. She'd barely noticed the tears, but it seemed she'd rained a veritable torrent when this woman had touched her. "Who are you?" She asked hoarsely.

"Dorea Potter," she declared, adding a soft smile to the end of that sentence. "You're in my home, and well taken care of, if I do say so myself. Lily has been keeping a watch over you while you slept, and it has been a pain to the rest of us attempting to keep your friends from storming your room in concern." With a little laugh, she shared a significant glance with Ginny. "You've only been asleep for ten hours, or so, by their count, but you've missed a great deal."

"Story of my life," Lavender groaned, dragging a giggle from Ginny's lips. Then, remembering the last time she had been laid up and the reluctance of everybody to tell her anything, she added, "If I promise not to stress myself out, will you explain what is going on?"

Another of those looks were exchanged, and then Dorea nodded. "We'll probably have to," Ginny murmured. "Hermione is on a rampage, and I think only your consensus on the situation will relax her."

Nodding, Lavender sighed. "That sounds about right. Well, go on then. I'm ready."
Interlude: Luna

Chapter Summary

Luna Lovegood has a heart of gold. Honestly. She loves animals, volunteers at orphanages, and would do anything for anybody - so really, she definitely would not create a universe-destroying paradox for no good reason.

...Right?

Chapter Notes

A break from the usual action to bring you Luna's POV from the day they went back in time, in order to fill in some gaps.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

For a person that spends most of their time chasing 'imaginary' (unicorns are real, live creatures that glow and give life and only like virgins but you can't believe in a Blibbering Humdinger?) creatures, a surprising amount of people would describe Luna Lovegood as a wise person. Neville Longbottom, for instance, always listened carefully whenever she spoke, for he believed that she was connected to the world in a different way than he was, and that this connection allowed her to say things like 'don't worry, Neville, you can kill the giant snake' and be right about it. In his humble opinion, more people should trust Luna Lovegood blindly. Unconditionally.

However, while Luna Lovegood can be described as 'wise', she can also be described as a bit… devil-may-care in her attitudes, and this gets her in trouble. For example, the day of Lavender Brown's Hen Party, Luna did a whole bunch of things that might have Neville questioning his judgement – were he ever to find out, which he won't, due to the very nature of Luna's plans.

When Luna Lovegood woke up on the day of Lavender Brown's Hen Party, she was full to bursting with self-righteous determination; the sort of determination only brought on by a mission from the Gods. She stood from her bed with her usual zeal, performed her morning ablutions with typical excitement, dressed herself with enthusiasm and sat down to breakfast with her doting father. He smiled absently as the scent of lemons and sage wafted past him, served her a mug of thorn tea, and asked her what she would be doing that day.

"I'm going to rob Hermione Granger, daddy," she replied, beaming at him.

He nodded.

"Have fun."

She set out, that morning, and watched as Hermione set her wards before striding off to the Ministry with purpose. Two minutes, a muggle lock-pick and a slightly out-of-tune hum of Ride of The Valkyries later and Luna was stood in a cosy living room scattered with books and cardigans. Ten minutes after that, she was gone again, the only evidence she visited at all being the sudden
emptiness of most of the drawers, cabinets and trunks in the flat.

Later, while sat with Theodore Nott for lunch, Luna mused, "Does it count as seeing the future if all I see has passed?" She pushed a carrot across her plate to line it up next to a green bean. She beamed, suddenly. "Or, will pass, only before now." The carrot in place, she moved onto another green bean. "Time is so terribly confusing, don't you think?"

Theodore raised an eyebrow and closed his book, finally giving her his full attention. "What did you do?"

Smiling vacantly, Luna replied; "I suppose it's all technically illegal, so I won't give you the details." Theodore stared at her for a moment, frowning so hard that Luna had an odd urge to stroke his nose, like a displeased toddler that needs a nap. "Are you alright, Theo? You really do look quite distressed."

"Illegal?" He asked, his face newly closed off behind that typical Slytherin mask.

Luna nodded frantically. "Oh, quite so, I'm afraid."

Theodore had the unpleasant sensation in his stomach that he often got around Luna, nowadays. The one that warned him that he was too far gone, and she was about to ask him to do something outrageous, like that time he found himself running naked across the grounds of Malfoy Manor as Draco tried to beat him with a broomstick. He winced at the memory, and looked up to head her off at the pass with a firm no, thank you, you crazy –

She had those giant eyes fixed on him, their depths burning with some infernal light, a lock of blonde hair twisted around one slender finger and one side of her mouth tilted up teasingly. Cue the other sensation he often experienced around Luna Lovegood, and the one that had him throwing caution to the wind and assisting her in her ridiculous schemes.

Shifting slightly in his seat, Theodore rolled his eyes. "What do you need?" came on the end of a defeated sigh.

"Oh, Theo," Luna reached over and patted him on the wrist soothingly. "I'm going to miss you."

Luna, upon arriving at the pub later that night, was pleased to be greeted by a stressed-looking Hermione Granger. A stressed looking Hermione Granger was a Hermione Granger that wasn't at the top of her game, and that was how Luna needed her. When she'd received the owl earlier – a note from Theodore that simply stated late for dinner, darling, problem at work – she hadn't been sure that her plan would succeed, but by the look on Hermione's face, it had. She smiled a little, checked her watch and settled in to enjoy the next... three hours?

Luna, contrary to popular opinion, always knew exactly what she was doing. Her brain simply worked a little differently to everyone else's – she saw most of the world in colours; purples, reds and golds for her loyal friends, a russet for her lovely Theodore, shiny silver for Draco, royal blue for her father. She heard the nuances in people's speech, saw the interconnectedness of people's actions, the consequences of these actions that still have yet to come.

What she'd never done, until the day before, was See. Her mother could See, and her mother's mother before her could See, but Luna had only ever had a vague notion of things – her natural intimacy with the magical world and all of its workings could hardly be classed as Seeing, after all, only logic that the regular mind is too closed to consider. The day before, however, Luna had been overtaken by some strange, cloudy, imperius-like daze that was simultaneously the best and worst experience of her natural life. And when that was gone, her head had swam with unfamiliar words
and directions and she knew – *knew* – that she'd have to make this happen. It was her duty to the Goddess, after all. Her mother had raised her to have faith in the Goddess and she would do just that.

It made her sad, of course, that in order to do this everybody had to be put in danger. And Lavender, poor Lavender, would have the worst fate of all; certainly nobody else would willingly step up to the plate and say "you know what, guys? I reckon I'll take one for the team here. Bring on the werewolf!". But it was the path the Goddess had chosen for her, and now that she had the information, Luna could see the wisdom in it, so she had diligently spread the other girl's scent around with astonishing neutrality.

She felt a little regret when she thought of the fact that Ginny would lose Harry, and Lavender would lose Ron. They'd forgive her in the long run once they saw who they were meant to be with, though. Even Hermione would get her Happily Ever After, probably, if she opened her mind a little bit. Her constant reliance on dull things like *evidence* and *research* was really quite irritating.

Yes, that small amount of regret Luna harboured was there, but it was easily swept away under the tide of, as mentioned earlier, self-righteous determination.

Luna loved her friends, that small circle she'd surrounded herself with, and they had her undying loyalty and devotion, but she was tired of watching them make life-altering mistakes. Hermione, for example, though she loved her job, was simply floating along in the aftermath of the war with no purpose. She was barely connected to the world around her and rarely went anywhere but Grimmauld Place and the Ministry, slowly wasting away. Luna had no doubt that she would revolutionize the way they practiced modern magic, but there would always be something missing, a great loss she didn't realize she'd experienced that led to this introverted husk of a woman.

Lavender had collapsed in on herself the first day she saw her scarring in the mirror, two months after a long recuperation from the savage attack she'd suffered at the battle. Upon viewing her drastically altered visage and hearing the damning words '*there's nothing we can do*', she had fallen into Ron's arms as the only man she thought could ever see past her disfigurement – little did she know – and was now firmly dedicated to what, if she continued on this path, she would find to be an unsatisfying life as a housewife as her natural gifts eroded. She needed challenge, not unconditional acceptance, for no one would deny that the girl was spoilt and shrill. There was someone out there for her, if she made the necessary sacrifices.

Ginny, too, was headed on a downward spiral. Unhealed scars from her experiences with Tom Riddle at eleven still dug deep in her psyche, and an ongoing emptiness leading her to more and more reckless acts in an attempt to fill the void she felt in her soul. She was determined to marry her childhood sweetheart for some semblance of an anchor, but Harry had different priorities, and it was unlikely that together they could have the happy, relaxing Weasley family he craved, or the stimulating thrills Ginny felt she *needed*. Harry was tired of excitement, an old man at eighteen, and while he could probably be happy on this course, Luna was determined to find the best outcome for everyone.

Luna knew the cure for all of these ills, and it didn't reside in this incarnation of the world.

"*It'll be fine,*" she had assured Theo sweetly when he'd expressed his doubts. She was sure it would be, too. Visions of curly haired children and laughing friends flashed through her mind at full speed as she set out on her mission, and keeping all of this in mind; she robbed Hermione, caused a major disturbance in the DoM, had Lavender attacked by a werewolf, smashed Hermione's Time-Turner, and sent them all tumbling through the oceans of time without a mooring; humming, all the while.
I like to think that it would be more important to Luna to ensure that she wasn't consigning her friends to misery than to simply blindly follow the whims of Fate, but only slightly.
Chapter Six: The Meetings

Chapter Summary

Hermione struggles with self-image when she meets a (newly) living legend, and Luna inadvertently hits on everyone.

After the argument that morning, Hermione had ended up curled up and silenced for less than a quarter of an hour before Dorea had appeared in the drawing room, blustering apologies for her prolonged absence. Upon seeing the scene, Ginny and Luna complete with angelic grins and Hermione with a mask of fury, she'd paused. The woman was quick, Hermione had to give her that, because only seconds later she had burst out laughing. "Oh!" she had exclaimed, waving a hand around the room. "It feels like I'm back home with the Blacks!"

She'd moved to sit down next to Hermione, making no move to release her from the spell, and smiled widely. "At least I know that life with you girls around will never be dull. Now, tell me, what is this all about?"

Ginny took it upon herself to fill the woman in, Dorea looking less amused and more pitying by the second. At the end of the tale, she nodded and called Bell again, as if none of them had spoken. "You all need to shower, dress, and take a few hours to relax. We will discuss the situation, as promised, after we are all more comfortable."

They had all been ferried off to different guest rooms, each as opulent as the last, and fulfilled Dorea's orders. All except for the last, for as soon as Hermione had dried her hair her mind was straying back to Lavender and her situation. She was a werewolf now – there was no doubt in Hermione's mind as to that. The poor girl, so much of her life had fallen to pieces because of the dark creatures, and now she was condemned to being one. It was bound to take a toll, and this was why Hermione found herself stalking the corridors to find the girl.

Potter Manor was, in Hermione's opinion, unnecessarily huge. She could easily get lost searching for something she needed, like, for example, Lavender. Hall after hall stretched out in front of her, decorated by portraits that seemed to laugh at her as she passed once, twice, three times. She reigned in the urge to snarl at jovial, round cheeked Potter men and women who seemed, in her frustration, to be sinister caricatures of their actual state – no, Hermione, that's just the lack of sleep talking, snap out of it.

Eventually she heard a door close and hurried in that direction to find a redhead wandering down the corridor. "Ginny?" Hermione called, and then gasped when the woman spun around.

It was not Ginny, that was obvious, though why the appearance of Lily Evans should hit Hermione so hard when James Potter had barely affected her she did not know. This woman was venerated in her time, deified. In her head Hermione had always held an image of Lily Evans as unbearably beautiful, perhaps lit from within by some heavenly light that made her irresistible to all men. That was not, however, what Lily Evans looked like. (She did have Harry's eyes, though, at least that was right).

Harry had always jealously guarded pictures of his parents, and Hermione had only caught a glimpse of one twice in her life. Once, in first year when Hagrid had gifted Harry with the photo album
initially, and again in fifth year, but this picture was shown to her by Remus and Sirius. She remembered that occasion because she had been fighting against irrational jealousy at the wistful longing in Remus and Sirius' voices when they spoke of her, this mysterious enchantress that birthed her best friend. It was in bad taste to be envious of the dead, she had told herself – all of her beauty didn't prevent her murder, after all. And she had looked beautiful in that picture; radiant and glorious in the sunlight as she was twirled around on James Potter's arm. But Hermione had never had a clear picture of her face, which is what stunned her now.

She wasn't perfect!

Granted, that seemed a silly, self absorbed thought to be having at this moment in time, but Hermione was filled with relief – so much so it was making her quite light headed. Her rational brain was telling her that she had bigger problems than the relative beauty of the women of this time, but her ego was singing. Lily Evans, while no doubt quite pretty, was also very ordinary. Freckled, creamy skinned, redhead, the most beautiful and extraordinary part of her was her eyes – and Hermione had grown up with those eyes staring at her, begging her, chastising her, so they weren't as effective as they would be to anybody new, she supposed. Hermione experienced an odd sense of duality, then, staring at Lily Evans' increasingly bemused face like an idiot in the hallway of Potter Manor, as her image of the past as it was attempted to align itself with the new past, as it is. Nightmarish, gorgeous Lily Evans drifted over likeable, ordinary Lily Evans and settled in, and suddenly Hermione was grinning as though all of her worries had drifted away on the wind.

"Hello, you must be Lily!" Hermione prattled, riding the delightful airy feeling that women got when they realised they were equally pretty or prettier than a perceived enemy all the way down the corridor to offer the witch her hand. "Honestly, I've heard so much about you!" It didn't cross her mind until quite a bit later that she was being manic, but Hermione surrendered to her vanity so very little in life, and what better time than when your friends have deemed you surplus to requirements in a crisis?

"Eh, Hermione, right?" Lily asked in the lilting voice of middle-class Mancunians. "The other muggle-born," she added with an uncertain smile, as though she wasn't certain of the reception she'd get for this assumption.

"Yes, yes I am. Forgive me if I seem flustered, only…" Hermione blushed red, and Lily seemed to become suddenly wary. "Well, I've heard about you all my life, so I feel a bit obligated to hero-worship you!"

Lily blinked blankly, then burst out laughing. "Oh my!" She cried, her giggles tinkling bells in the deserted wing. "And here I thought I would accomplish nothing in life. That's a big 'fuck you' to pure-blood society, isn't it? Lily Evans, muggle-born idol!" She laughed more, and the more the sound rang out the heavier Hermione's limbs became until suddenly she was Hermione Granger, awkward, plain know-it-all once more in the face of this woman's glory. She beamed, said something about Lavender and indicated a door, but all Hermione could think was well, there's that heavenly light.

Suddenly, she was a little bit in love with Lily Evans too.

She hated her for that.
promising and pulling the strings, seemed unfathomable – then she might have melted a little under his speculative gaze. She didn't, though it might have been nice to have been able to; her Happy-Ever-After was by far the most tenuous of all, her heart was hooked to lives that would soon flicker out unless she acted quickly and without doubt when the time came (and wasn't time such a flexible thing, anyway, as this whole adventure showed, so she'd have to pay close attention to the Signs as the year wore on). Loyal was Luna, however. She would not betray the possibility of love and happiness, not when she hadn't been certain that she would have it in this time. Such beautiful, delightful opportunities she had Seen for her girls but in her own mind and heart she had been so sure of her own loneliness in this time.

Seeing their deep brown eyes, offered to her as a reward by the Goddess for doing Her bidding, no doubt, when she had landed in this time had almost made her weep, and Luna was not prone to tumultuous waves of strong emotion. Her heart, soul and hormones were usually on a level with her laid-back, calm personality. Except for anger, of course, but that particular feeling was so rare that mostly she could push it into a box in her mind and forget it existed. Arousal, also, barely factored in – Theodore could always stir her, with his dark eyes and thoroughly buttoned-up persona she enjoyed peeling back the layers and pushing him to his limits, but that required more effort on her part than was sustainable, no matter how lovely he was. Very few others touched her in that way, though she thought perhaps Sirius Black could have been one.

She had met him only once, in the future, though as a dog she'd often left him treats during her second year when she'd gone to visit the Thestrals in the Forest. He'd recognised her immediately at the Department of Mysteries, though, and paid back her kindness with his own act of putting himself in the way of a particularly nasty hex. His shield had dissipated it harmlessly, and the two of them had exchanged a nod before he ran off to his death, and Luna ran to help Hermione. Sometimes she thought it would have been nice to know him better, to help him heal, but that was not her place and she knew it. She was not the girl who brought him tea in the parlour while he mourned his estranged brother, and she was not the girl who he longed for on cold, lonely nights without knowing why or who he was searching for. Luna did not have the matching darkness he needed in a mate, for Dark Magic is all about intent, and Luna's intent was always pure, despite how she languished in the grey areas.

Still, he was pretty, so she took a moment to look him over – broad shoulders, narrow hips, leather-clad thighs, feathery, black hair kissing his cheeks like a lover.

His mate was luckier than she could imagine.

Shaking her head, Luna brought her eyes up to meet his knowing ones, and grinned. "It's almost worth the centuries of inbreeding, isn't it?" she pointed at his bare feet and giggled girlishly – "my, even your feet are sexy!"

His eyebrows had disappeared into his hairline, leaving him looking like an incomplete sculpture. Still hot, but just a bit off. Well, he had a right to be confused, probably he'd come out to the orchard in the hopes of being alone to gather his thoughts because though he didn't travel twenty years into the past with a werewolf victim, the feistiest Weasley and 'Miss Hermione Granger: The Self-Proclaimed Spirit of Ministry Propaganda!' he had still had a bit of a big night, what with discovering four women in the woods.

Luna checked in briefly with her mouth, which appeared to be giving a lecture on the correlation between pure-blood interbreeding and the resurgence of webbed toes and daddy thinks they bred a grindylow into the Black line, do you know anything about that? Generally, when Luna gets into this sort of thing, her mind goes off on a tangent and she can use that time for other things until they inevitably break in with their own thoughts or leave.
Sirius Black, it seemed, was up for the challenge. He sat through the lecture on grindylows, though his eyes were slightly glazed. He seemed to be using this time, Luna's lack of expectation towards him, in order to organize his own thoughts. That was fine; Luna was happy to help, and only lectured more voraciously.

"You're Pandora's daughter, aren't you," It wasn't a question that cut through Luna's words decisively so much as a statement of obvious fact. The boy-man sitting in front of her was watching her with laughing eyes. "I can usually tell a member of her family from miles away, but you caught me on a bad morning." He chuckled, and Luna favoured him with another luminous smile. "I'm Sirius Black, but I think you knew that."

"I did," Luna confirmed, laying her hand in the one he offered her and watching him lay a chaste kiss on the back of it. "We've met. It wasn't as nice as all this, though-" she indicated the gardens, flush as they were with the colours of spring, the morning air heavy with dew and the scent of pollen. Her eyes glazed slightly as she continued on, "much darker, for a start. More cursing."

Sirius looked as though he might like to respond to this with a question, but James Potter broke the moment by skipping down the steps from the house and shouting for Luna. "Your friend is awake!" He called.

"Thank you!" Luna shouted back, smiling her farewell to Sirius as she walked. "Do you know, your nose was rather off putting at first, but I think it looks distinguished." She assured the other man as she passed.

James blinked, and Luna floated back into the house, followed by Sirius' barking laughter and James' plaintive "what's wrong with my nose?".
Dorea has has enough.

The door Evans (she called her Evans, now, as part of a new scheme to distance herself from the inhabitants of this time that she had decided upon in the fifteen seconds since she had left Evans' illustrious presence – the girls wouldn't like it, but Hermione was determined that they would return to their own time and it mattered not that they had themselves convinced that this was fate or whatever, it just wasn't logical) had indicated led to a guest room where Dorea and Ginny surrounded a healing Lavender. The patient looked pale and strained, but not too awful, for which Hermione was glad. It would be just their luck if she'd suffered complications.

Ginny glanced at her upon entry, but immediately turned back to Lavender. Dorea spared her a warm smile. "Miss Granger. We were just explaining the situation to Miss Brown."

Hermione eyed the new werewolf and frowned, "do you think that's wise?" She asked, moving closer to inspect Lavender. "She looks a little tired."

"I'm right here, Hermione," Lavender rolled her eyes, still bright despite the events of the past twelve hours. The girl was still ridiculously pretty, even with half of her face disfigured and the tension of a patient hanging over her. More so, Hermione had to admit, for now she had an aura of wildness that gave her previous nymph-like looks some grounding in the reality, like she might run out into the woods at any moment and be one with the land, free of all mortal constraints and happy about it. Hermione had never known a person before their change into a werewolf, so she had never had the chance to compare the befores and afters in her mind – Remus' (Lupin's!) feral nature was always there, humming under his skin, but in her naivety Hermione had assumed it was simply a part of him – some dark, masculinity she had never experienced. It didn't occur to her until now that one of the things she found most attractive about him was the very wolf he loathed.

Shaking herself, she moved to stand on the other side of Lavender's bed. "Are you well?" Hermione asked.

"I'm fine. I'm ready to hear everything – besides, it's hardly fair to keep me in the dark, leaving me out of the big decisions, is it?" Lavender feebly twitched a finger, which Hermione thought might have been her attempt to gesture something. "After all, I think I'm the one most in danger, don't you?"

Not wanting to think about this, Hermione grimaced and turned to Ginny. "How far have you gotten, then?"

"Only about where Luna smashed the Time-Turner," Ginny replied promptly. "We were about to explain how and why we got here."

Hermione scowled at the redhead, ignoring Dorea and Lavender. "You couldn't have called for me?" she demanded of the redhead unrepentantly. "I should have been here to help."

Ginny snorted. "It's not all about you, Hermione. I thought that Lavender could use a friend." The
last word was emphasised almost cruelly, as Ginny glared at the brunette. Hermione opened her mouth, then closed it, chastised. "Besides, we didn't need you causing an argument while we tried to sort things through."

"Lavender deserves to see the whole picture, not just your airy-fairy pureblood superstitions," Hermione snapped.

Dorea suddenly loomed up in the space between the two younger women, her face thunderous. "Ladies," she all but growled, "please step outside for a moment."

A whipcord of magic shoved them towards the door just in case they were hesitating, and they found themselves in the corridor facing a livid Dorea Potter. Her eyes aflame, her face tight, Hermione could see with great clarity the Black in her blood, and it cowed her. "This is my home," Dorea hissed, looking between them. "That is my patient," her voice was laced with magic, bearing down on them and summoning their shame in a way Molly Weasley could only hope to achieve. "You will not cause a disruption to her healing, or you must find somewhere else to stay." Pulling herself up to her full height, her features set and haughty, she added – "and sort out this enmity before you come back. How you expect to complete your mission while acting like children, I don't know."

The guest room's door slammed behind her before they had even realised she moved, and then they were stood staring at each other.

"Nice one, 'Mione." Ginny sighed, sending a bolt of rage through Hermione's veins.

"Oh no, don't you start that, Ginevra. I've been doing my best to make a bad situation better, all you've been doing is Lording it over me at every chance!"

Sucking in a deep breath, Ginny's face turned almost puce as she geared up for a reply – before suddenly she deflated and smiled a little sheepishly. "This is what she was talking about, isn't it?"

Hermione shook herself. "Yes… I think so." With a sigh, she scrubbed her hands over her face. "You know I love you, right, Gin?"

"I know," the redhead grinned. "I love you too, you great hairball. You're my best friend and I don't know what I'd do without you."

"But…” Hermione tilted her head to one side and eyed the other girl cautiously. "You don't need me right now?"

She was visibly dithering over the answer. It seemed to cause the girl actual pain to try so hard to make her answer politic, Hermione thought amusedly as she watched Ginny's face scrunch up in concentration.

"It's not that we don't need you, we do." She finally said, taking the older girls hand in her own. "We need your research, knowledge, organization skills and power. We need kind, loving Hermione who makes dumb jokes and comforts us when we're down. We need strong, in-control Hermione who doesn't take shit from no person." They shared another grin that spoke of their years of familiarity, love and family. "The last thing we need is discontent, though. Dorea is completely right - we can't do what we need to do if you're tugging the reins in the other direction. I know you don't want to believe us about the reason we are here, and I didn't expect you to take us at face value in the first place, but we need you to stand by us either way. It's us four against the world, you realise." Warmth oozed through her words, though her eyes were steely as she continued, "And we will rip apart the fabric of reality, with or without your help. It's just that with you we might be a little more successful."
"Oh, Gin." She wasn't sure she could do this. It went against every bone in her body to even try, to cast aside the rules and tear their way into a new future. Hermione didn't even know if it was possible – Ministry research on Time-Travel was often contradictory on the subject of alteration, what with Eloise Mintumble as the main example of changing the timeline, and then evidence of causation triggers elsewhere. There was a whole grey area of mumbled stories and folk tales where you couldn't tell which was real and which was fake and which had been embellished over the years for entertainment value and they probably would never solve those mysteries. It was against every rule the Unspeakables had, every law the Ministry upheld, but something was tugging at her mind, begging her to give in.

She could tell what that was, too. It was her instinctual brain, her emotional brain, the bit she kept cut off and safely locked away since the end of her sixth year and that heart breaking scene in the Hogwarts Hospital Wing - "Dumbledore would have been happier than anybody to think that there was a little more love in the world", what a feeble excuse on which to latch desperately – the bit that had shattered, broken irreparably at the end of the battle, looking down into sightless green eyes. That area where she stored her curiosity, her amusement, her love and desire. Curiosity was scratching at the door, demanding to know, to take on this experiment. Why not? It asked, demanded. Why not?

Desire was not far behind, whispering what-could-be into her ear where it wormed insidiously into her soul where it could hook, if she let it, and stay until... well, until it was broken again, she supposed. And that was the terrifying part. She could remember the split-second glances, the soft dance of his lips over hers, the dark other side of her that she had released and allowed to run wild the second she'd smiled that fateful day. The echoing snap in her soul when he was struck down, the pain, the never ending sorrow, the weeks of intermittently crying and cursing him for what he had turned her into. Finally, swearing that she'd never do it again. Learning Occlumency. Becoming as blank as Professor Snape had been. Not touching a single man since.

*Second chance*, this one moaned.

But it wasn't a second chance for that, Hermione decided, quashing her desire firmly. He'd never wanted her in the first place so she wouldn't moon after him now. That didn't mean she couldn't pursue the knowledge, though, the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. The side of her that had always been a little more green than red perked up, smirking in the back of her mind. If they were stuck here, as everybody seemed to believe, then why not? Who would know except for them three? They couldn't hold the sins of the others against them for they were in it together, were they not?

"Us four against the world?" Hermione chuckled, her decision made. "Merlin help them."
Chapter Eight: The Revelation

Chapter Summary

Lavender gets some bad news.

Chapter Notes

General Warning: Some dark themes, but mainly it's angst of the Lavender Brown variety. I'm so happy she's awake!

As soon as the decision had been made, Hermione flew into planning mode. While her preference would always be to return home, such as it was, exactly as it was – to a familiar place where she knew the ins and outs like the back of her hand, where things rarely changed and she was in full control of her little corner of the world – she acknowledged their ability to do good here, and the animation that had come to Ginny and Lavender as a result. Something they had, of late, been missing. She perched at the foot of the bed on a Louis XV armchair of powder blue with a notebook and pencil Dorea had rustled up from one of the adjoining rooms as Dorea, Ginny and Luna (who had skipped up the stairs seconds after Hermione and Ginny had finished their conversation with a blithe smile and vaguely approving nod) filled Lavender in on the finer details of their situation. Lavender was holding up remarkably well, she took the news of her new condition with Gryffindor courage beyond compare. McGonagall like, she'd given a regal nod as she filed away the information for later perusal, recognising that this was not the greatest problem here – she wasn't stupid, she recognised Dorea Potter from her portrait at St Mungo's in the boardroom (died 1979, during Dragon Pox research). Died 1979. None of them had said the words at that point but Lavender would have gotten an Outstanding in Deductive Reasoning were they to teach it at Hogwarts.

It seemed odd to her that for once she was the one participating in a wacky, impossible adventure – that was an area usually reserved exclusively for Weasleys, Potters and their muggle-born sidekicks (see: Lily Evans Potter and Hermione Granger). At Hogwarts, everybody had known and expected that the Golden Trio would be at the centre of any mysteries, and the rest of them mere bit-players, collateral damage. Not now, though. Now, it seems she had found herself at the heart of the action with no training for this sort of thing. She was an extra in their lives and had always known that – Hermione's roommate, later Ronald's fiancée. Not Lavender in her own right, no. She was the action/adventure equivalent of "always a bridesmaid, never the bride" (Lavender had always adored Muggle films, she and her father had watched Die Hard together every Christmas for the last eight years despite how it made her mother fume). So, you can understand how everything felt a little distant to her, a little unreal at the moment as she realized that she had in fact been chosen by a higher power to go back in time and win the War. As a werewolf (don't think about that right now, Lav). Anyway, the crux of the matter was that now she was thrown into the craziness that seemed to follow Hermione Granger and her friends around, and she felt woefully underprepared, but she was determined to ride it out with dignity.

While Lavender struggled with these thoughts, and Ginny and Dorea tried their very hardest to help
her, and Luna hunted down stray Wrackspurts, everything Hermione knew about the Wars was deposited into her book. Protected by the strongest charms she could remember, the book held a comprehensive timeline of all the events of the Wars against Voldemort, and anything else she may find useful, as found in her mind and added to by the other girls. Lists of horcruxes, Death Eaters, deaths and births, the ages of people they know and the current Hogwarts class were all inked in. Even Dorea assisted, elaborating on certain sections and filling in blanks with dates and other pertinent information. The only thing she wouldn't do was violate the privacy of her boys, which the girls could appreciate given their lives in the nineties.

"What date is it?" Hermione asked finally, realising they had not bothered to ask this question so far.

"18th April 1979," Dorea hummed. "My James and his Lily are due to get married in two months," she added with a proud smile for the girls. Hermione nodded, scribbled that at the top of her book, but was cut off from vocalising her next question by Ginny grabbing her arm and staring at her, wide-eyed.

"Regulus," she breathed, and Hermione understood. Regulus wouldn't be dying until the end of this year – that meant that they could feasibly come up with some way to save him. Ginny had always loathed Regulus' death because it had contributed heavily to Sirius' guilt laden insanity once he had returned to Grimmauld Place at the end of Hermione's fourth year. It wouldn't be easy, though. They would be in need of more allies, people who could inform them as to Regulus' activities, or even just inform them when Kreacher disappeared (as that would be their cue to move in). They would be in need of insiders, and they'd need to begin movements quickly.

"It would be worth it," Ginny said vehemently, obviously thinking along the same lines as Hermione. Her eyes burned with her old Weasley fire as she leaned over the bed as though they could set off to save the boy now. "So worth it."

Luna reached over and traced a finger over Ginny's chin. "Family is so very important, don't you think?"

After that, where was only the one occasion on which Ginny and Hermione butted heads again, and that was when the redhead was informed of Hermione's brilliant plan to ensure they focused on the mission without distractions – such as the man her best friend had had a crush on for four years.

"But, Sirius-"

"Not Sirius, Gin. You'll get attached, and they are not the same men. He's Black. No-First-Name Black." Hermione snapped, jabbing her pencil in the air.

"So Remus will be No-First-Name Lupin, then?" Ginny retorted acidly, her eyes narrowing.

Forcing the lump in her throat back, she nodded firmly. "Yes."

Ginny scoffed. "Yeah, that's likely. Don't be a fucking hypocrite."

The brunette blinked a few times before a smirk broke over her features. "Why, hello, Ronald, and here I thought I had left you in the nineties."

Ginny leapt to her feet, looking like she'd love nothing so much as to wring Hermione's throat, but was caught off guard by a hand on her shoulder. "Hey, stop it." Lavender groaned from the bed. "Honestly, if I wanted to spend my wedding day arguing, I'd have let Molly plan it."

The two girls stopped blank, suddenly realizing what they had been saying.
“You're right, that was out of order. Sorry, Gin. Lavender.” Guilt burned a path up Hermione's throat as she realized exactly how this had fucked with Lavender's life plans – she had never really considered it before, past the worry for her newly-infected acquaintance, but Lavender was right. Had all things been normal, she would be married by now. To Ronald. She would be Mrs. Lavender Weasley. They would all be sat around a marquee in the Weasley orchards watching the happy couple shove their tongues down each others' mouths, trying to control their gag reflexes. Now Ron wasn't even born, nothing more than an idea of an egg, yet to be fertilized.

"This is the worst day of my life," Lavender laughed, a single tear glistening on her eyelashes even as she tried to make light of the situation. "No wedding, no husband, no family, and I'm a werewolf. Could things get any worse?"

Luna perked up immediately as though this had been a cue she was waiting on. Leaning forward, she took Lavender's hands in her own and trapped her in her luminous gaze. "Well," she grinned, "at least you get a Mate!"

Silence reigned, as this information sank in all around – Werewolf mates were things of legend, but Hermione and Ginny knew Lavender idealised that relationship because of the romance novels she'd had stuffed under her pillow for seven years. It was a bit insensitive, sure, to bring it up so soon after her life had collapsed – but this was Luna, and Luna could do these things without consequence. It was just part of her charm. What response they were expecting, they weren't sure, it seemed like maybe they wanted a positive reaction to this news? Lavender always had been fickle…

It wasn't to be.

"Seems life can get worse," Lavender growled, yanking her hands away from Luna and glaring around at the rest of the group with surprising vehemence considering she was bed-bound. "Get the fuck out of my room."

Lavender stared at her reflection, one finger tracing the curving, vicious scars on her face down towards her collarbone, where they joined neatly with the half-moon bite that had poisoned her. Poison, a word chosen deliberately, of course, to reflect the disease mutating her cells as she stood there in her underwear to watch. She had been poisoned. It had been easier to deal with the first time, ridiculously, as then it was like a trade – she traded her beauty, her vanity, her eternal weakness for strengths such as enhanced senses and a more fulfilling diet. The weight gain from the meat had been a relief for a girl built to be curvy like her, especially when it came with a ready-made excuse that even her mother couldn't argue with (the werewolf infection). But now she got the consequences of these perks. One day a month where she would lose her mind, her treasured body, be torn apart from the inside and reshaped into something not-human.

Something animal.

What she didn't realise the first time she had been attacked was how very lucky she had been, not to have been turned. She had been focused on her survival, of course, and later the damage to her face and chest. She chastised her past self now, as she looked at the body that seemed the same but was so strange now. Poisoned. How dare you, Lavender, she screamed in her own mind at the part of herself that still applied lipstick in a morning and bemoaned the way her largest scar cut across her cheekbone, sending the angle all wrong and leaving a mangled lump of flesh in the hollows of her cheek. How dare you be so ungrateful.

For she blamed herself, of course. This was her karmic retribution for being so self-obsessed about the scars. For not appreciating the chance she had been given when the last attack had spared her.
She was a werewolf.

For a girl who had only known three werewolves in her life, two of whom had tried to kill her, the reality of the situation was all too terrifying. If you add to that the fact that the Wolfsbane potion wasn't available to the public yet in the 1970's, and Hermione had never learned to brew it due to 'personal concerns' – a pitiful excuse from someone who suffered from a persistent case of know-it-allitis – well, it seemed that her life was some sort of cosmic joke.

And now the girls had reminded her of that other consequence – the one she had forgotten, the benefit, if you can call it that, of lycanthropy she had not gained with the first attack. Her Mate. Her primal brain seemed to purr at the very idea, but the rest of her was revolted. She didn't need a mate. Until this morning, she had had a perfectly wonderful man, she was getting married, she was in love. He brought all of her senses alive in a mostly pleasant way, and she could have happily spent her life curled up on his chest listening to his breathing. Sure, Ronald wasn't a clever man, nor was he the most handsome of men, but he was a loving, loyal man and she had adored him.

She had lost him.

Angrily, she shoved her arms into her robes and threw herself onto the bed, barely noticing the sting of her tears as they came.
Chapter Nine: The Morning After

Chapter Summary

Hermione reminisces, and James makes a mistake.

"Hermione-" Gasps, incoherent prayers, swear words both too comfortable and unfamiliar tripped off his tongue as he grazed his teeth across her collarbone. She hissed, her head falling back against the mismatched walls of the Burrow behind her. Her bare feet barely brushed the overgrown weeds where they wrapped around his waist, and both were too involved in the moment – sweating, groaning, loving – to notice the gnome stealing her dress with big, gleeful eyes. They would notice later, though, and he would laugh until he cried as she stood, naked in the grass aside from her shoes, scowling harder for every second of his mirth through her mane of just-fucked hair. He would keep her like that, if he could, he claimed in soft tones as he pulled his transfigured shirt around her shoulders. Keep her, ensconced in nature, safe somewhere only he could find her.

She smiled, peering up at him from under her eyelashes, coy even with her relative lack of experience. She treasured these moments, even though she knew it was ridiculously naive of her to do so, they just felt right. A surge of rebellious fury washed through her, though, shortly after as he regarded her fondly in the afternoon sun before checking his watch. She knew what he was thinking right then – she could see the guilt in his eyes, a pale shadow of an emotion but still there. He was on the brink of doing something about it, she knew – pulling away from her, most likely. She didn't want him to leave her, to be hidden away. She wanted to be by his side, always. She wanted to be his partner, not her. The impossibility of it fuelled her rage.

"And what of your wife?" she threw back at him, acidly, enjoying the flash of hurt across his features, glad that he felt for one moment what she felt every time he touched her, hugged her, kissed her; whenever someone told them how perfect they were together....

Hermione gasped herself awake, sucking in great lungfuls of fresh spring air and vainly attempting to regulate her heart rate back to normal. "Fuck," she whispered into the empty air. It was a nightmare, only a nightmare – that man was dead and gone, and she had yet to meet the new one. This one would probably never cheat on his wife, trade her in for a younger model, feed the young one scraps of his affection on the heels of massive guilt trips, hot and cold tendencies wrapped around passion shared, and then crush her. His lover would probably never be left to co-parent the evidence of his love for another woman, simultaneously lifting her heart and breaking it every morning – because he would never have the lover, probably. Right, she scoffed.

Logically, Hermione knew that Remus was a good person. At the time it had been lovely, passionate, and had felt so right that she had never questioned the wrongness of their actions until later, when she'd be lying in bed alone, and he was back with Tonks. His mate, she assumed, though that didn't seem to add up when you considered his ability to cheat on her. Yes, Hermione, cheat. At the time they had never used those words – cheating, affair, unfaithful – but she had to face up to that reality now that she was in this new place with a younger him, yet to meet his one true love, yet to commit that sin.

Hermione shoved these thoughts – useless, melancholy thoughts – aside in favour of reviewing the
four main principles of Time-Travel as she showered and attempted to wrest her hair into submission. The group had broken up shortly after Lavender had thrown them out of her room yesterday in favour of returning to their rooms for what would hopefully be a full night's sleep. They had barely been in 1979 for forty-eight hours, and yet it felt as though they had been here for weeks already, so even a night of tossing and turning and waking from nightmares every three hours was gladly accepted, especially when aforementioned restless night took place in a bed that felt like a cloud. Dorea, however, ran her household like a ship and politely requested (see: demanded) that they convene for breakfast at eight in the dining room which didn't ask terribly much considering that they all retreated to bed at about four in the afternoon. In fact, laughably easily done for the girls, especially since Luna had revealed that she had packed Hermione's beaded bag full of enough essentials to make the year. Upon seeing the girl drag each of their Hogwarts trunks from the depths she had been eyed with an angry sort of suspicion, but in honour of the new peace treaty that information had been filed far, far away.

Dressed in a soft navy jumper Hermione had pilfered from one of the boys – it was unclear which one, though it did smell ever-so-slightly of Fleetwood's High Finish Handle Polish – and some ratty jeans she chose for their comfort and expedience more than anything, she followed the hallways back to the foyer. She was vaguely irritated to realise that she wasn't the first one there, but didn't dwell on it as Ginny shot her a shy smile. It took a moment before why she might be uncertain clicked in Hermione's head, and suddenly she was hurrying over to give her closest girlfriend a hug. "I'm so sorry," she whispered in her ear as they clung together, with sincerity that came with a good night's sleep and a clear head. Hermione was a girl without illusions of herself, so she knew that the last few days weren't the only challenges their friendship would face and she'd probably get back into her defensive mindset at some point, but right now she was regretful from the bottom of her heart for causing Ginny pain.

"I know, you bitch," Ginny laughed tiredly. A quick perusal of her face showed that she still had bruising under her eyes, but it wasn't as bad as yesterdays and would probably clear up quickly. The perils of pale skin, Hermione guessed, then sent a quick nod of thanks to the Powers-That-Be that she had a natural tan (see, Ginny and Luna, I'm open to the existence of a higher power! She thought immediately after her prayer, which ruined the effect a bit). "I guess we're all a bit strung out," the redhead continued, "Luna too, even. I don't think I've ever seen her this stressed.

Hermione did a double take as she looked up to watch the girl skip down the stairs, her tread light and a beaming grin on her lips. "This is stressed?" she whispered quietly, and got a nod in return. "I think she feels guilty, about Lavender, you know?" Gin replied in her own whisper. "She never meant for her to get hurt."

Privately, Hermione thought that while Luna really should feel guilty, that was as likely as them finding a Crumple-Horned Snorkack in the back garden dancing with Kreacher. She just wasn't a guilty person, and not because she was innocent of all crimes, but because she was very good at rationalising them to herself – and others. Once she got around to telling Lavender exactly how the poor girl had ended up being turned into a werewolf, a tidbit the others had glossed over in their explanation, she would probably put it in such a way that the other girl would end up thanking her. Most of the time with Luna, Hermione just thanked Merlin that she was (to all appearances) on their side.

"Good morning!" Luna chirped as she bounced her way across the hall to their side. "Were you talking about me?"

"Err…” Hermione had never quite learned the skill of dealing with Luna when she was being direct.
"Shall we go in, then?" Ginny trilled over the top of Hermione, and linked arms with Luna after shooting a warning look in Hermione's direction. "I don't think Lavender will be down for breakfast, but miracles can happen, so we'll save her a seat just in case." Luna seemed to have a sixth sense for the manor they were in as she guided them unerringly down a corridor to large, shiny double doors. They seemed to be the apple of some little House-Elf's eye, as they looked freshly waxed and cleaned, impeccable like everything else in the manse. They swung open silently when Ginny reached forward to touch a finger to the ornately carved handle, so quickly that Hermione barely had the chance to register the pattern – antlers, intermixed with a tree and maybe apples? Something she would have to look up later when she had the chance. Often she had thought that the stag was a James Potter thing, but she had been noticing certain things in the paintwork of the house that may suggest differently.

Speaking of James Potter, he was there as they entered the room, sat close to the head of the table with his own head down in deep conversation with Sirius Black. The two of them were alone for the moment, though the pulled out chairs at either side of them suggested that they wouldn't be for long.

Ginny cleared her throat, and Luna, in keeping with her oddly exuberant personage for the day, cheerily shouted "Hello!" so loud it echoed, and followed it up with a giggle.

James sprung from his seat like a knight of olde, grievously offended that he had been sitting upon the entrance of the fairer sex – or whatever, but that's how it came across. "Good morning," James said with a smile, striding forward with his hand out for them to shake. "We haven't met properly yet. I'm James Potter, and this is Sirius Black."

Hermione shook his hand, unsurprised that his handshake was perfect – warm, not too firm, with a subtle twist. Hermione was a fan of handshakes as a way of judging people. "Hermione Granger," she said, taking Sirius' (Black's!) hand when offered. "Luna Lovegood," Luna chirped, "we met yesterday, sort of."

"Nose girl," Potter nodded thoughtfully, "you know, I never did find out what's wrong with it. I asked Lily, and she said I have a perfect nose." His eyes took on a sort of defiant-but-besotted look as he smiled rather distantly. "So I suppose it doesn't matter, though it's quite rude to insult your host, isn't it, Padfoot?"

Black shrugged fluidly from where he stood next to Ginny, watching her intently. "She's a Lovegood, mate. Hang on-" realization flooded his face as his eyes flitted from Ginny's freckles to her red hair and brown eyes. "Are you a Prewett? I bet you're a Prewett. You look just like Molly, you do."

Ginny blushed under the weight of his grey eyes, but straightened her spine. "No, well, yes. I'm a Weasley, actually."

"That's impossible!" Sirius (oh bloody hell – Black!) exclaimed proudly. "I know my Purebloods, and the Weasleys have never produced a female."

Haughtily, Ginny threw him a coy smile and flicked her hair back over her shoulder. "Well, Mr. Black, I am one-of-a-kind."

Hermione rolled her eyes and smiled at Potter politely. "So, who are we waiting on?"

"Right, well, Mum has gone to help Lily with your friend – the flower one – what's her name?"

"Lavender."
"Yeah, that's it. I'm terrible with names, me. Anyway, Remus was still in bed when I last saw him but he might be up now. It's been a bit busy around here so we haven't had time to fill him in, but he'll be fine. And Dad is in the orangery, but should be through soon."

She frowned sceptically at that – she knew her Remus rather well, and didn't think even at thirty-eight he would have been okay with suddenly having a newly-turned werewolf sprung on him, especially not after a full moon he can barely remember during which he had sustained mysterious injuries that nobody had yet explained, but obviously James (POTTER) knew him better. She fixed him with a look anyway, before asking him where she should sit. He led them to seats closer to the door, but before they could sit down Lavender and Evans appeared, clutching each other and laughing.

"Honestly, he was a right idiot," Evans was saying as she pulled Lavender closer to navigate her towards Potter. "But soft as a pup, really. I don't know if anybody could resist that level of devotion in the end." She looked up and grinned at James, who grinned back delightedly.

"Talking about me?"

"Bitching, more like," Lily responded playfully. "Do you know, he leaves his underpants everywhere. A messier person I've never known."

James laughed as he took Lavender's other arm to lead her to a seat. "She only says that because she never had to live with Peter."

They didn't seem to notice the cold silence that fell over the four newcomers when he mentioned that name, only continuing his banter with his fiancé. The other girls exchanged significant looks, though - there was a problem they would need to solve, and quickly. Thudding in the hallway cut across James' monologue, though, and they turned as one towards the door.

"Prongs, I was just talking to your mum, and she said we have guests-"

Footsteps gave way to a young man of about nineteen, who appeared in the doorway and glanced around at the group, looking a little bewildered. "What…” he began, only to cut himself off and take a deep breath. His nose wrinkled, face set in a mask of confusion, and then suddenly his eyes darted upwards to zero in on one of their group. Hermione waited, her breath held, for the moment he would look at her and she would feel that familiar pull…

But instead his eyes were drawn to Lavender, still stood at the back, looking a little wobbly where she hung precariously off of Evans' arm. His eyes flowed over her, his face growing whiter by the second, before he settled on her face and his mouth dropped open in horror.

"Moony!" Potter shouted, but it was too late and he was already gone.
Chapter Ten: Moony Melodrama

Chapter Summary

Remus, Sirius and James have a quick chat.

The two marauders flew out into the hallway, almost knocking over an approaching Dorea. "Goodness, what's happened?" she asked the girls, who shrugged sheepishly. Lily sat Lavender down and smiled up at her soon-to-be mother-in-law.

"I don't think they thought to warn him," Lily said, running a hand over Lavender's shoulder as the other girl tried to catch her breath. While she was on the repair, she was not in brilliant shape, but had insisted that she would be present at breakfast. "Those boys, you know – so very clever, but so very dim when it comes to things that matter."

Dorea shared a soft smile with her future daughter-in-law. "I don't know where they get it from."

"Not me," came from the doorway as an older man of about sixty strolled into the room, immediately drawing their attention. He was a handsome man, in a comfortable way – the angles of James' face that gave him some mystery had obviously come from his mother, as Charlus looked very much the dependable boy-next-door with sparkling eyes and a cheeky grin that would last generations.

"Perhaps the elves?" He suggested, pressing a kiss to his wife's cheek. He turned to survey the other inhabitants of the room with a smile. "Now, come on then, fill me in. What has brought so many lovely ladies to our doorstep? Sirius been at it again, has he?"

James came upon Remus hyperventilating in an alcove just above the kitchen. He had apparently assumed he wouldn't be found here, and had sank to the ground with his head in his arms. The other boy heaved a great sigh at the state of his discovery, sent out a shrill whistle to alert Sirius, and curled himself up on the floor beside his second-oldest friend in the world. "Bit of a nasty surprise, I suppose," He said, his words teasing but his voice apologetic. "I should have warned you. My mistake."

Remus didn't move from his position, but his breaths had evened out a bit, which James took as a good sign, and an invitation to keep talking. "Her name is Lavender, and Lily seems to think she's alright, but Lily's a god-awful judge of character. I mean, remember all that fuss with Snivellus? Better if I withhold judgement until I know her better." He observed his quiet friend with a lopsided grin. "I would have thought the other blonde would be more your type, but that's just me making assumptions."

"James."

Remus' voice sounded like he hadn't used it in years, all rusty and gravelly. "Yes, dearest Moony, mine?"

"Shut up."

Faking affront, James puffed himself up in preparation to deliver a suitably scathing speech to Remus on the importance of proper consideration in ones furry friends (he'd had that one written since third
year, and it always had Remus in fits) but Sirius came barrelling around the corner, rudely destroying
the moment and providing a helpful new target for the non-existent wrath James had conjured up.
"Oi, mate, way to ruin a moment, yeah?"

"It wasn't you!" Sirius rushed out, completely ignoring James and plopping himself down on his
haunches in front of Remus. He gasped a little to get the words out, which caused a little bubble of
masculine pride to rise up in James' chest. He had never been as fit as James – one of the reasons
why James had been Quidditch captain and not him – but it was an area they still competed in for no
real reason other than the comraderie of it.

"What?" Remus squeaked. It was definitely a squeak, and not a manly growl or anything like that.
A squeak.

Sirius grinned rather manically, leaning his forearms on Remus' knees and pushing their faces
together as if physical proximity (and exposure to Padfoot's morning breath) might make him seem
more trustworthy. "You didn't bite her!"

This was exclaimed with great pomp, as though it was news that ranked up there with Peter's
acquisition of a girlfriend and Lily's acceptance of his proposal last year, which it wasn't, because
Moony had never bitten anyone and probably never would, and besides, what were the other
Marauders for if not to stop that from happening? Did he not trust them to do their job? "Well, I
would have thought that was obvious." James drawled, leading the other two – even grumpy Remus
– to gaze at him like he had something particularly disgusting on his nose. "Or… not?" he added, as
the penny dropped. He'd, sort of, thought it was a Moony Melodrama™, not an actual reason that
sent Remus away… It had been so long since Remus had had an adverse reaction to his more animal
side that James had, with the use of his famous selective memory, ignored that it could happen.

"I don't understand…” Remus was saying now, turned deliberately back to Sirius as though the very
sight of James might confuse him more. The look in his eyes... James could never forget that look,
the look that was two parts resignation, two parts grief. Remus' eyes, fixed on Sirius, seemed to
regard the other boy as Judge, Jury and Executioner, and James could understand why. Sirius was
the one that understood Remus best out of all of them, the one that Moony liked the most, the one
that could always talk him down from a ledge. While he was securely James' best friend in the whole
world, and James was the same to Sirius, Sirius and Remus shared a bond beyond anything the other
Marauders could build.

Sirius flopped across the floor to Remus' side, arms flailing theatrically so that even Remus had
managed a weak smile. Once in position, Sirius looped an arm around the sandy-haired boy's neck
and pulled him close in a way James would never have been able to do with his masculinity intact,
but for Sirius just seems to be normal. "Best that I can tell," he began in his favourite story-telling
voice, often heard coming from behind the closed curtains of his four-poster as he regales the boys
with his latest conquest, "though we haven't had the full story yet, so I might get some things
wrong." he pulls a face here, as though extremely offended that anybody was doing anything
without consulting him first. "Lavender – that's her name, right? – was bitten somewhere else, before
they arrived on the grounds. I think-" here he pulled his patented Sirius Black thinking-is-
painful face, bringing a grin to James, "-the bite was how they ended up here in the first place? Too
stressed during side-along, knocked off course, all that stuff they warn about in Apparition Lessons.”
He shook his head violently, a left-over from his time as Padfoot, his hair swishing out over his
shoulders. James' mum was forever asking him to let her cut it, but he was too proud for that. Of
course, James had stopped letting his mum cut his hair in third year (it was really fifth year, but he
has a reputation to maintain). "They definitely didn't come into contact with Moony, Remus, I
promise. We were there the whole time."
"You're certain," Remus pushed, but his voice had stopped oscillating between a high-pitched elf squeal and the sound of tyres on gravel, so it was obvious he was recovering.

"Absolutely, positively," Sirius chirped, reaching over to ruffle Remus' hair fondly. "Moony's just a playful pup, right James?"

"Oh, yes," James agreed solemnly. His position in these conversations was clear, most of the time he just had to agree with Sirius and then break the tension when things calm down. The last time he'd tried to comfort Remus alone, he had been banned from the Shack for a month. Empathy was not what he was best at. To illustrate this point, he continued talking. "Moony was in a bit of a mood, but he didn't hurt anyone."

Moss green eyes appeared over long, folded arms, narrowed slightly in the 'caught out' expression James was so very familiar with. "A bit of a mood?" Ah, that tone of voice was dangerous…

James shifted his weight slightly, suddenly uncomfortable. "Yes?" Sirius was shooting him a death glare. "You know Moony, all… growly and… playful… you know, hunting…"

"Hunting what?" James could barely see Remus' eyes anymore, so narrow were they, but he could tell they were still blissfully green. Moony was staying out of this fight, then. "Hunting, like rabbits, or hunting, like…" He pressed his lips together, his whole face drained of colour.

"He didn't catch anything!" Sirius pointed out, desperately trying to pull James out of the hole he'd dug himself into. "They were warded in!"

"Oh gods!" This moan came from deep within Remus' tangle of limbs, where he had buried his head as Sirius spoke. All that was left of him was this vibrating ball of self-loathing. James and Sirius exchanged exasperated looks over his head, their stomachs roiling with guilt – this scene could so easily have been avoided…

"Look, Remus," James thought that maybe the only reason Remus looked up was because he used his actual name, which he usually didn't bother with. "I'm sorry we didn't tell you sooner. It was stupid, and we were too wrapped up in running around trying to figure out what was going on to even realise the oversight. We shouldn't have forgotten about you. All's well that ends well, though, right?"

Remus rolled his eyes, relaxing slightly. "I can't believe you forgot about me," he accused them with a smirk.

"Peter was there!" Sirius blustered, attempting to cover their tracks. "He said he'd stay with you the whole time. Speaking of, where is he?"

Remus stretched out his legs, almost taking up the whole width of the hall. "He left yesterday. Got an owl and dashed off, so I told him we'd catch him up when we see him next."

"Good call, Moony," James grinned, and took a second to watch his face. The anxiety was still there, but it seemed he'd let the subject go for now, so James checked his watch. "We should probably get back, before we miss it all again. Do you think you'll be alright?"

Remus was already on his feet, pushing them back the way they came and dodging the question. "So the blonde is Lavender,"

"Lovely girl, apparently." Sirius said, "haven't met her myself, though. The other one is Pandora's daughter, if you can believe it!"
"No!" Remus faked a gasp. "They look nothing alike!"

"Yep," Sirius nodded as though Remus was perfectly serious, and the other boys exchanged a look over his head. "But I don't know anything about the others, so you'll just have to hope they don't think you're an arse for running off like that."

"If they can put up with you, they'll love me," Remus laughed as Sirius punched him in the ribs, and the two tussled their way down the corridor, James trotting behind.
Chapter Eleven: Talking it out

Chapter Summary

A vaguely nonsensical chapter where they all finally end up in one room.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ginny hadn't realised how little she had been thinking about Harry until the moment she looked into Lily Evans' face for the first time. Seeing her boyfriend's eyes staring back at her had been a shock, sending a bolt of lightning through her gut and turning her insides to granite.

Was she a bad person?

she asked herself. Didn't normal people react like Lavender to finding out their lover was gone forever? Hermione was fine, of course, but she secretly thought Hermione might still be a virgin for all the interest she showed in the opposite sex, and Luna was also delighted to find herself in this new world, but Theodore (who Luna adorably seemed to think none of them knew about, for how perceptive she is she misses a lot) was never more than a good sidekick in all of her kooky schemes, and apparently an even better shag. Harry had always been more than that. A partner.

Though, her reaction – or lack thereof – to his loss seemed to give lie to that thought.

"I'm Lily Evans," the woman with Harry's eyes said, as though Ginny wouldn't know. Instead of snapping, though, Ginny gave a warm smile and shook her hand.

"Ginny," she replied, and then looked over her head to Hermione in order to avoid the woman's stare. "Shall we sit?" Her voice was so perfectly polite and empty of emotion that Ginny hardly recognised it as her own, but it was. She'd not used this voice in years, not since before the war when she had had to play nice with all the other little pureblood boys and girls. Then, as now, she had let her lips form words as though given from a predetermined script, pretty words that mean nothing – 'shall I pour', 'what a lovely gown' – though now it was her gliding to a seat next to Hermione, avoiding Lily Evans' oddly accusatory eyes – or maybe that bit was just her imagination.

They surrounded the table like a war council when the boys returned, facing off against each other over the perfectly polished mahogany. Presenting their first united front since their arrival in 1979, the four girls sat with their hands linked and shoulders touching on one side, with Hermione taking the middle spot by unspoken agreement. She may not know the science of what had brought them to this year, but she was the most organized of the four, and definitely the most able to handle the logistics of re-fighting a war they had already lost. She faced straight forward, one hand on Ginny's jean-clad thigh, the other holding a pen over her newly ever-present notebook. If there had been a certain stiffness about her since the Marauders had returned to the room, no one mentioned it, though Ginny planned to ask about it later.

She was sat opposite Dorea, who seemed to have been happily handed the 1979 leadership mantel, and wore it with pride. She had her husband to one side, and her son to the other. Charlus sat opposite Luna and beside Sirius, who was still wearing his foppish grin and running his fingers through his black locks compulsively. Charlus and Luna seemed to be having some sort of conversation with their eyes, parts of which Ginny understood, but on the whole discarded. It was the height of foolishness to spend too much time trying to read Luna, she had spent her entire life becoming unpredictable and wasn't about to turn on that now.
Ginny herself sat opposite James and beside Lavender, who was tucked under Ginny's arm and had one hand stretched over the table and interwoven with Lily Evans' fingers. Since she'd woken up it seemed that Lavender was the new Queen of casual physical contact, something Hermione had eyed with interest – Ginny could already imagine her leaned over the textbooks in her bed later that evening, attempting to find an answer. Whichever it was occurring, the fact remained that it was still occurring. When Ginny had sat down, Lavender had slipped herself beneath her arms almost without realising she was doing it, and she and Lily hadn't stopped touching since they'd walked in the room. It was the only point at which the two sides met in any physical way, the table may as well have been miles wide for the others. Lily herself was sat at the far side of the table with Remus, subtly distanced from the rest of the Potters, as though she was recognising that her opinion was no great matter in these negotiations. For Ginny, that lit a flame of feminist anger in her gut, but she let it go for the sake of the team. And people said she would never grow up.

Remus had stayed on the edges since he'd appeared in the room. He'd been friendly, yes, but nothing at all like the Remus they'd known in the nineties – civil but withdrawn, this Remus was, and his eyes seemed to linger on Lavender perhaps a bit longer than was polite.

Dorea cleared her throat delicately, causing an automatic flinch to run through Ginny's body. Another of those awful pure-blood habits she'd been exposed to as a child – it took real effort to push the image of Posy Parkinson and her shrivelled lips leaning over a table with evil in her eyes as she scolded a younger Ginny for laughing too loudly from her brain so that she may focus on the matter at hand.

"You've come from 1999?" Dorea asked, though Hermione must have reiterated that at least three times already before they had sat down. There was scepticism on the faces of the other group, not that they didn't believe us, but that natural scepticism you get when something is so wildly outlandish you can barely imagine it. They couldn't imagine 1999, and therefore it added doubt to their perception of the girls.

Hermione soldiered on, though, in that naturally Gryffindor way of hers. "Yes, 1999. November 28th, or 29th if it was after midnight." Her voice had turned into that detached clinical lecturer's tone she used when tutoring the boys, and her eyes were fastened on Dorea's forehead. If she didn't move them, the poor woman would probably get a complex. Ginny rolled her eyes and took a sip of the elf-made wine she'd opted for when Dorea had taken the drinks orders. It may only be breakfast time, as evidenced by the croissants decorating their makeshift cabinet table, but if she was going to have to relive the past eight hellish years of her life, she would be needing alcohol. Sirius and Lavender also nursed glasses of the red stuff, but everybody else had gone for tea. Fair enough, more for her. "We were out for Lavenders…" Here she bit her lip and glanced down at her hand where it dug into the flesh of Ginny's thigh. Ginny hadn't said anything, but the real reason she could tell that Hermione was so stressed was because she had lost all feeling in that area ten minutes ago.

"My hen do," Lavender spoke up, clear as a bell, though her words had a rusty purr to them that only added to her enviable sex appeal. Remus even jumped when she spoke, as though he'd expected her to have lost that ability and was pleasantly surprised. Honestly, Ginny thought, only Lavender could get sexier after being mauled by a monster. And it was true – though she was obviously tired, her eyes bruised and skin pale, her hair still shone like a gold-spun halo around her head, and she wore a low-cut summer dress that showed off her creamy cleavage to perfection. Even the continuous lines of puckered flesh that stood out against her otherwise unblemished skin seemed to add to the effect rather than detract. She was more striking now. "I was getting married." Sorrow rang through the last sentence, but her strength never wavered as she lifted her eyes to meet Dorea's sympathetic ones defiantly.

The men at the table seemed to fold in on themselves automatically at this news, as though they
didn't want to get dragged into her emotional maelstrom. Lily squeezed her hand, Ginny hugged her tighter, and Dorea sent her a sympathetic smile. "I'm very sorry about that, dear," she hushed gently. Turning back to Hermione, she asked, "and why would you be sent back from 1999 to win a war in the seventies?" Because if there was one thing they had all agreed on, it was that the presence of the four girls was to do with the War against Voldemort.

"I assume it would be because the war only ended in 1998," Luna chimed in with a smile, "and we were the ones who won it."

Shocked faces from the other side of the table. Hermione laughed nervously. "I wouldn't say that, Luna…"

"No, I wouldn't either. It was Harry that won the war," Ginny spoke up, sending a glare in Luna's direction.

"Harry, Hermione and Ron." Lavender nodded vehemently.

Dorea seemed to have recovered a little because she leaned forward to push in on their circle. "If it was this Harry who won the war, then why isn't he here instead?"

That stopped the girls in their tracks, and they exchanged puzzled glances. Lavender was the one who said what they were thinking, though. "We don't know," frowning, she crossed her arms. "Maybe we were in the wrong place at the right time, or something. Hermione was supposed to be with the boys that night, and she was the one with the time-turner, so maybe it should have been them but we knocked fate off-course by insisting she attend my party?"

Luna was already shaking her head halfway through this spiel, her eyes practically glowing in her vast amusement. "Not so, Lavender. I Saw this occurrence, and I Saw a coven arriving in the past, not a trio. Even had Hermione gone to Grimmauld Place that night rather than out with us, the outcome would have been the same."

"But how-"

"Sorry to interrupt," came a drawl from the left, and they all swung around to face Sirius Black looking not sorry at all, and entirely unrepentant. "Did you just say Grimmauld Place?"

His icy grey eyes were set on Luna, who was undaunted. "Yes. That's where Ginny lives."

Ginny had to choke back a groan as Sirius' eyes glided over to rest on her. Those eyes, though. She had never been able to resist them, even when she was fourteen they had melted things low in her body in the most pleasant of ways. Having lusted after the man for so long, it was basically habit to let him get to her now, as she felt the old heat rise into her cheeks and her breathing go shallow. Yes, she had lived at Grimmauld Place, though it always felt like a betrayal; wrong to live in the house of the dead man she'd loved with his godson – her fiancée. To have sex in his bedroom, his kitchen, his library (don't tell Hermione). It didn't stop her, of course, because Harry might have suspected something and Sirius had long been dead, but doing it had fed that dark place inside of her, and she hadn't liked that at all. The guilt pooled right next to her lust, and in the confusion it became anger. "Problem, Black?" she snapped in her frostiest tone.

His face hardened even more, if that were possible, until it was an impenetrable aristocratic mask. "Yeah, actually," he hissed, "if you were the good guys, why were you living in the Black Family Home?"

Ginny leaned forward, dislodging Hermione's hand and sending the wine sloshing precariously in
her glass. "Maybe I lived with you," she spat back, "ever think of that?"

He snorted. "You're about twelve, love, I think not."

The swirling blackness at the centre of her soul gave a great kick, then, throwing itself forward while she was vulnerable, clawing at the good parts of her and trying to spread. She was panting, she realised, and shaking, and Hermione was watching her worriedly and Luna was half-out of her chair. Swallowing down the defensive fury she felt at his statement – I wasn't twelve, I was fourteen, and I loved you, and you left me – she instead forced out the words 'perhaps we should start at the beginning' in as steady a tone as she could manage, and huddled back in her chair. This time she turned to Lavender for comfort, and the older girl obliged with a hug, even detaching herself from Lily to do so. It was warm, and lovely, but the look on Lavender's face was daunting – she'd have to explain herself later.

"Right, good idea, Gin," Hermione said, turning back to the other group, though she'd rather curl up with Ginny. She wasn't the only one having trouble with the ghosts of the past-future, as evidenced by the fact that Hermione had barely moved in the time she'd been sat at the table, not even to drink her tea, which she regretted now that she felt in need of it and it was tepid. Instead she reached out and took a swig of Ginny's wine, closing her eyes to feel the sting of it on her tongue and in her throat. She couldn't stand red wine, thought it tasted like vinegar, but it seemed right. "Well…" Studiously, she avoided looking at Remus.

Clearing her throat, she looked across the table at James Potter, imagining him as Harry, and praying for some sign as to where to start. She wasn't, after all, just dredging up the dark and dingy past. She was illustrating their future. "In July 1980, James Potter and Lily Evans gave birth to a baby boy."

Smiling, she glanced down at the glass she'd drained without noticing. "He was my best friend," Hermione continued, slowly, savouring the words. "My only friend, sometimes. We all loved him," here, she gestured at the other three girls, who smiled sadly. Ginny sniffled and buried herself in Lavender's chest. "His name was Harry James Potter.

"In 1979, however, the war against Voldemort had still been going strong, and one night a Seer named Sybill Trelawney attended an interview for a position at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry at a Hogsmeade pub." Her eyes were faraway now, and everybody was watching her as she half-whispered the words. James and Lily held each others hands, pale. "Half-way through the interview, when the outlook seemed bleak, Sybill fell into a Seers trance. She spoke a prophecy, then, to Headmaster Dumbledore and one other person, who listened at the door and took it back to his Master – for this prophecy spoke of the downfall of the Lord Voldemort." Here, she turned to Luna, ignoring the flinches of those who belonged to this time, who nodded and smiled.

"I don't know if it'll be the same this time around," she said apologetically, "but where we come from, the prophecy was thus:

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies... and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not... and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives... The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies..."

There was a thick tension in the room in the wake of this revelation, which the girls used to gather themselves a little. Ginny left the circle of Lavender's arms and instead slung an arm around her shoulders and summoned the wine-bottle with the other, topping up her glass. Luna swayed slightly,
ending with her shoulder pressed against Hermione's, passing on strength for the coming discussion. Hermione wrinkled her nose, sucked in her breath and took a mouthful of her tea, wincing at the sweetness of it before remembering a heating charm and rolling her eyes at herself.

In the end it was Charlus who broke the silence, looking slightly dazed. "Are you telling me that my currently-non-existent grandson is to defeat He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?"

"Of course not!" Luna smiled, reaching over to put a reassuring hand on his. "We're telling you that he already did."

Chapter End Notes

Hi!

I'm popping this here because social awkwardness translates onto the internet, sadly. I'd just like to thank whoever nominated this story for the 2017 Marauder Medals (Best WIP), I honestly cannot convey how much it means to me that you found my twisted, confused tale good enough to be up there. Just seeing people read my story continues to feel unreal!

I'm up against some amazing pieces of work, so please go over there and check them out, really, I won't hold it against you (but that is why I put this at the bottom, rather than the top, so you don't get led astray) ;)

Love always,
Eli x
Chapter Twelve: Unwelcome Truths Part I

Chapter Summary

Hermione and the girls start getting to the nitty gritty of future/past events. James and Sirius are not appreciative.

Lily wasn't taking this well. James could just tell. They'd never actually spoken of children, it was just assumed that it would happen sometime, but hopefully after they'd had some time to build up their careers and such first. Privately, James had always hoped they would wait until Sirius had settled down and then they could raise their children together, like siblings (brothers, he corrected himself quietly), and he doubted that would have happened in the next year and a half. Sirius' longest relationship had been those three months with Mary McDonald in third year, and that had mostly been hand-holding and stolen kisses behind tapestries, broken when Mary had found him kissing Marlene McKinnon in the Quidditch cloakrooms. It seemed silly now, looking back - they hadn't even been using tongues, for Merlin's sake - but it did seem to set a precedent for Sirius' future relationships.

Glancing around the room, James saw that his parents still seemed to be in shock. Fair enough, he supposed, it wasn't everyday you found out that your grandson had been destined to rid the world of a Dark wizard. There was an odd feeling in James' stomach as he thought about it – something like pride, which was ridiculous, who felt pride for someone who had yet to be born? Though now he was thinking about him being born, stealing glances at Lily's belly, imagining it swollen, her glowing with –

"James Charlus Potter, are you listening to me?" His mothers strident tones cut through his daydreaming. He realized that he was grinning like a lunatic, and tried to hastily rearrange his expression, but the knowing smirk on Lily's face as she rubbed a hand across her flat stomach told him he wasn't fast enough. She was looking happier though, it seemed being on familiar ground – teasing him – was helping her get his bearings.

"I think he's getting broody!" Lily laughed her little bell laugh, causing James to grin again as the sound warmed him inside-out. "It's like Frank and Alice's proposal all over again – just mention a baby and suddenly he can't wait to get his hands on one."

The women sat at the other side of the table displayed an interesting array of emotion, James realised, looking across at them. It had been a joke, of course, but the leader – Hermione – looked pained, as though they had stabbed her, her eyes appearing to flicker to the corner of the room every-so-often, though it was so subtle he might have imagined it. Ginny, the one Sirius didn't seem to like, had guilt written all over her, which had all of James' protective instincts riled. Luna was laughing along with his family, if a little maniacally – it wasn't that funny, after all, but she had her head thrown back and tears streaming from her eyes. Lavender was blank-faced, though she shuffled along a bit, as if to put distance between herself and the cackling blonde. "Oh, Lily, so funny!" Luna sobbed out, "Now I see where Harry got it from!"

James thought she might have continued with this terrifying display of humor but Hermione reached out and clasped her around the wrist, yanking her attention back to her. A single eyebrow was raised, millimetre by excruciating millimetre, and as it rose Luna seemed to compose herself by inches
before lounging back in her seat, giving the impression of a satisfied cat, despite her scolding.

"That's impressive," Lily murmured quietly.

"I'll teach you," Hermione said, equally quietly, her eyes flicking to each of the Marauders in turn before returning to Lily. They exchanged looks filled with understanding – the 'poor women responsible for corralling their unruly lads' look that Dorea wore at the holidays, and Marlene used try to use to express her displeasure before she wandered off to find trouble to cause elsewhere (it didn't work for Marlene, as she had a habit of disappearing just before trouble arrived, and therefore never had to take responsibility for anything). James would have been offended if he wasn't so proud of his mischief-making abilities.

"That's all very well and good, Miss Granger," Dorea drawled from her position at the centre of the table, leading their family, as she always had done. She was a force to be reckoned with, Dorea Potter neé Black. "Though I believe there was a story you were telling us."

"Not a story, Mrs Potter, but the truth. Our history, actually." Hermione took a deep breath, and closed her eyes for a second, before returning her gaze to a spot just to the left of Dorea's head.

"Though I suppose you could look at it as the story of Harry Potter, if you like.

"It's difficult to listen to, I must warn you now. Nobody here has a happy ending, in our-" she flicked her eyes to Ginny, who twitched her lips, and sighed. "-version of the future," she continued through gritted teeth. "Though we won the war, it wasn't without more than our fair share of loss."

There! James couldn't have possibly made it up. She had most definitely looked away then, seemingly suffering some sort of great grief. James glanced over to see Remus – his Remus, sat in a chair slightly pulled out from the table, stiff with the aches and pains and overwhelming sensation that followed a bad moon. The poor man was probably only just hanging in there. They'd have to see how much he actually took in later.

"Ginny and Luna think that's why we're here – to save you, and change the outcome – so I hope that by telling you all of this it stops it from happening. All the same, though, please be prepared for an uncomfortable few hours." Hermione smiled here, though it was such a weak, pitiful thing that it might have been rather better if he had just left it off. She reminded James of his first tutor, a woman called Elia his mum had hired from the local village, who had been hopelessly in love with Father Grissom from the church. Elia had been a lovely woman, kind and smart, but always haunted by her lost love. It was not a life he would wish on anyone, as all the village knew and pitied her, but she could not stop. James felt warmer towards the new woman for all of this, and wondered how he could help her avoid that fate.

"Harry was, by your own accounts, a happy, loving child for his first year of life. He learned quickly, was walking and running even faster than that. His first word, I'm told, was…" she frowned. "That hardly matters, please excuse me for getting carried away..." tears began to slip from her wide eyes, but she didn't seem to notice. Next to him, Lily reached across to wrap an arm around his waist, as though to prepare herself for what was to come, some mysterious womanly instinct telling her it was about to get bad. He enfolded her in his arms without thought, though his attention was fixed on Hermione Granger and her terrible, terrible tale.

"Harry was raised this year in a secret-kept location, with only Dumbledore, Lily, James, Sirius, Remus and Peter knowing the location. I hear that you visited often, Sirius, and Remus also, though less frequently as Dumbledore had you out on secret missions across the UK. He forbade you from telling anybody of what you were doing, though, which…" She coughed, to clear her throat, and though she seemed to be talking to each of them in turn her eyes didn't stray from their position. It was like she wasn't even there.
Ginny picked up the story here, her hands reaching out to grasp Hermione's. "You know what it's like now. There's a spy in the Order, everybody is under suspicion. Who can you trust but those closest to you, but when they start pulling away, you panic. And what better scapegoat than a dark creature, of course? Everybody latches onto that, the most probable answer." She did look at Remus then, whose eyes were wide with panic and pain.

"I would never -"

"I know," she replied, tiredly, as though she had had this discussion before. She gave him a cheeky smile, though, with such warmth that it looked like Remus was a close friend of hers, full of the love of people who have known each other for years rather than hours. Remus seemed taken aback by her blatant show of affection and for James it suddenly hammered home the fact that these people did know them, after all, and they were in fact from the future, sent back to save them. Another blow was struck when he realised what this meant for him, and Lily – that these people grew up with his son, lived in Sirius' house, knew Remus so very well, and yet looked stunned by him, dazed by Lily, never mentioned the parents of their friend. Frozen by terror, he listened on. "So, you were a tight knit group, but even inside of your bubble tensions were rising, Remus was far away, Peter was distant, Sirius was…" She stopped there, frowned, then let out a little laugh. "A model godfather, if I'm honest.

"Anyway, so you might understand the climate of the situation. Because there is a spy in the Order, and he committed a most despicable crime."

Hermione took back over here, possibly because she had collected herself, possibly because Ginny was starting to sound like the narrator of a bad crime novel. Whatever the reason, she carried on. "Halloween, 1981, Voldemort landed in Godric's Hollow, thinking that Harry was the prophecy child, and gained access to the Potter cottage. Once inside, he killed you, James, as you defended Lily and Harry to give them time to escape. Once you had fallen, he went after Harry.

"Lily was given a choice – to step aside and be spared, or to die. Lily chose to die to save her son, but not before she had worked some ancient, powerful magics. She used the love from this sacrifice to protect her son from Voldemort, blood magic, potent stuff. Voldemort cast the killing curse, and it rebounded upon him, and his body was obliterated until all that was left was a shade. To the outside world, Voldemort had been defeated by an infant boy." Her large, brown orbs blinked once, twice. "Harry James Potter, the boy who lived."

James remembered that moment for the rest of his life. The moment his heart broke, so painfully he could almost hear it. From the outside, you could hardly have told, for he neither flinched nor cried, but inside he felt it tear itself apart and remake itself. A new determination bloomed from its ashes, a fierceness born of the lion that was his House's emblem, and took over him without fight. It took only a half second, but after he felt like a new man.

Feeling his heart beat again as though it were the first time, he laid a kiss on Lily's head where she quietly cried against his chest – stoic, the tears just sliding out as though there would be no stop to it. "That's not the end."

"No." Hermione nodded. "It was the beginning."

"Sirius Black arrived at the house shortly after, to see a smouldering wreckage where you had once lived. He ran in, and found a sequence of bodies – fallen Death Eaters, James, then Lily. Amongst the wreckage was little Harry, crying and confused. Sirius would have taken him to safety, I think, but Hagrid arrived soon after and took him away. 'The 'eadmaster ordered me to fetch 'im', was what he said, and so Sirius in his blind grief gave him away without a fight. Then Sirius realized what had
led to this moment – who the traitor had been, who the spy was – and gave his motorbike to Hagrid also, saying that he wouldn't be needing it. Later, this whole scene was recognised as ill-advised. Hermione sent a stern look to Sirius, who didn't seem to notice, so immersed was he in her tale. She barely cared, for she was in her element here. Scolding was something she could easily do, without feeling too much.

"He confronted the traitor, who blew up a Muggle street, killing twelve and allowing himself to escape. All that remained behind was a finger, which Aurors on the scene later used as evidence to imprison Sirius for the murders."

There was a breath, during which James was shell-shocked and Dorea's eyes filled with tears. Charlus' hand flew reflexively to Sirius' shoulder, but Sirius himself had pasted an impassive expression on his face. "Go on," he encouraged without really moving his lips. Ginny, Luna and Lavender all seemed to brace themselves here, knowing what was coming next, and thanking the Gods that Hermione was there to do it for them. A bit cowardly of them, they knew, but it was part of Hermione's strength that she would always be the bearer of bad news, just as Ginny would always be the first of them to a fight and Lavender would be the first to try new things. It didn't occur to them that Hermione's responsibility here was rather less gratifying than their own.

Hermione sucked in a deep breath. "I have to tell you, and I know it will come as quite a shock, but… Peter Pettigrew was the traitor."

"No!" James cried, then looked suddenly surprised, as though he couldn't believe it had been him that made that noise.

Sirius growled deep in his chest. "You're lying." He gritted out. "You must be lying."

Ginny let out a sob and took Hermione's hand. "I know it's hard to hear, but it's the truth. He confessed to me himself." Hermione gave a full-body shiver, then looked into Dorea's eyes, for they were the only clear ones at the table. Everybody else on their side seemed to have been seized by protective fury, and James was still hyperventilating in the background. Remus had joined in with the low growling, now, and Lily looked furious. "He was a Death Eater, Mrs Potter, one of Voldemort's most faithful. I have the memories, if you need them."

"Liar! Peter would never do that, he would never hurt James," Sirius was hissing.

Dorea looked at her two sons, not both birthed from her body but loved just the same, and then back at the stranger standing across the table. This was the problem with Fate, she thought to herself. You need an awful lot of faith in it when it moves you into its path, or it can tear you apart. Her family was heartbroken, and she could tell that this was hardly the worst revelation to come that day. She herself had never been too fond of Peter Pettigrew; who was quiet as Remus in his way but as prideful and brash as Sirius in his worst moments. She'd watched him cower behind the bigger boys for seven years, egging them on in their escapades, almost getting poor Severus Snape killed, Sirius imprisoned, James infected and Remus expelled. No, she didn't care for the boy, but it was a big jump from being a sneaky little brat to being a Death Eater, torturer, murderer, and worse.

Hermione's eyes, they were so sincere, though. Luna was serene in her honesty. Lavender and Ginny had shrank back a bit in the boys anger, but didn't back down.

"That would be most helpful, my dear." Dorea nodded, ignoring the tantrums her boys were throwing. Lily nodded along from behind James as she stroked his arm in the hopes of calming him down. "Perhaps we should adjourn to the Study, just you and I, so that I can ensure there is no tampering, and then we can show some things around."
Hermione let out a great sigh of relief and smiled, a true smile this time, her eyes sparkling as she relaxed. Standing from her chair, she indicated the door. "After you."

Dorea nodded, and patted James on the shoulder. "Don't you worry, my boy," she murmured so that only he could hear her. "We'll get to the bottom of this."
Chapter Thirteen: The Pensieve

Chapter Summary

Hermione and Dorea view a memory, and Dorea is an emotional rollercoaster.

Chapter Notes

Hi!

Right, this is a long one, mostly because I've used text from chapters 17, 18 and 19 of Prisoner of Azkaban, mashing it all together into one long scene. Honestly, I'm pretty certain it makes very little sense at all.

Most of the dialogue here comes straight out of the book, as well as a fair chunk of the text, though it has been intermingled with my own writing and editing in order to make it a bit more Hermione/Dorea-esque. The memory itself is also written differently in order to change it from Harry's perspective to Hermione's, though many lines remain unchanged from the book.

Excuse the mental italics. I spent ten minutes trying to figure out how to organize this thing - how do I denote what is book text and what is my own?! - but I just left it in the end. Do let me know if there's a better way to do things.

I haven't forgotten about the second part of Unwelcome Truths, either, it just doesn't appear here.

I hope you're all enjoying my twisty-turney-tale, it brings me joy to write and more to share, so I hope you get something out of it too!

Love, Eli x

They were submerged in silvery liquid, the scene swimming in front of them as it fought to coalesce into something recognizable. Dorea glanced around, recognizing dirty floorboards and haphazard wooden walls, boarded up windows and ratty curtains. Hermione had seated herself on the floor already as though all of her energy had disappeared, and was waiting for Dorea to get her bearings before beginning the memory.

"This is the Shrieking Shack, you say?" Dorea asked in that smooth, cultured voice of hers.

"Where Remus spends his transformations, yes," Hermione responded, her eyes flicking over the scene. It was stuck at the point that Harry had kicked the door open, him stood there looking comical with one leg raised and a fierce look he hadn't yet perfected on his youthful features. Hermione
herself stood slightly behind him, mid-flinch at the racket he was causing. Ron was mid-scramble on
the bed, and Sirius was in the corner. Oh, Sirius.

"When was this?" She was inspecting Sirius' spectral form, his ragged prison robes, the lines on his
face and his knotted overgrown hair. His eyes held that madness that Hermione was accustomed to
in him, none of the clarity of this new Sirius, who in turn had none of the frustration and manic
humour she had eventually gotten so fond of.

"1994."

Dorea's mouth fell open wide in shock. "What?" She demanded, getting even closer to the frozen
figure. "But he's only thirty-three!"

"Twelve years in Azkaban, Mrs Potter," Hermione told her, gently, moving up from her position to
touch her arm. "He wasn't the Sirius you raised anymore."

There was a grateful glance exchanged when Hermione acknowledged Dorea's motherly concern
and affection for the boy, and then they both stood back. Dorea pointed at the figures in the door.
"You and…"

"Harry Potter,"

"My grandson." She nodded. "I can see James in him, and dear Charlus. He got the Potter hair, I
see," she let out a little chuckle. "Bane of my existence, that Potter hair."

Hermione smiled, and drew Dorea back to a safe observation point. "Mine, too. You'd think he
didn't own a comb."

They settled in slightly, and Hermione flicked her wand. Motion returned to the world.

_Harry and the other Hermione dashed over to the bed on which Ron lay, Crookshanks next to him
looking relaxed._

"Ron – are you OK?"

"Where's the dog?"

"Not a dog," Ron moaned, the pain in his voice sending prickles down the older Hermione's spine.
"Harry, it's a trap-"

"What –"

"He's the dog … he's an Animagus …"

_Harry spun around, young Hermione on his tail. The door swung closed to reveal Sirius Black to the
rest of the room, and the trio all tensed with fear. "Expelliarmus!" The wands swung through the air
from their owners to Sirius' hand, and he took a step closer._

"My goodness," Dorea muttered from next to Hermione. "He looks unhinged." Hermione stifled a
startled laugh at her cavalier attitude – she could see from the lines of tension on Dorea's face that she
wasn't as unaffected as she made out, but it only seemed polite to play along with the charade. It was
so very British of her, though, to take this in stride and carry on as though it was just one of those
things. Hermione would need to ask her for tips later.

"I thought you'd come and help your friend," Sirius' voice came out, wretched and raspy, and
Hermione remembered all over again her feelings when she'd first heard that – pity being foremost, then anger at herself for pitying a murderer. She’d been so very conflicted, and it showed on the young one's face. "Your father would have done the same for me. Brave for you, not to run for a teacher. I'm grateful… it will make everything much easier…"

"He didn't do a very good job of sounding innocent," Dorea said. "But then that must be simply habit, for in my experience he never had been before."

It seemed to help her to talk it through, so Hermione let her, as it distracted her from the pain of the memory. It was like she was living it all over again from the outside – watching Harry lunge, herself and Ron catch her, Ron's moan of pain even as he stood up for Harry and demanded that this strange man kill him first. From this angle, and this position of spectator, she could notice things she hadn't before – the concern and guilt in Sirius' eyes as he told Ron to lie down, regretting hurting the boy. The hatred that crossed his face when he looked at Ron's arms – where Peter hid.

"There'll only be one murder here tonight," Sirius grinned.

"Why's that?" Harry struggled against the two holding him back to get to Sirius. "Didn't care last time, did you? Didn't mind slaughtering all those Muggles to get at Pettigrew … what's the matter, gone soft in Azkaban?" He ignored Hermione's whimpers and put on a burst of strength. "HE KILLED MY MUM AND DAD!"

And then there was a fight, if you could call it that, with Hermione screaming and Ron yelling from the sidelines. Harry pounced on Sirius, and Dorea tensed as though she could help but wasn't sure exactly who needed it.

"Stop it," she was whispering, as though she knew they couldn't hear but needed to say it anyway. "Stop it, stop it, stop it…"

Now Sirius' hands had reached Harry's throat, and they were both growling, and Sirius hissed words at him that they couldn't hear properly. Hermione watched herself cross the room, determination in her features, and reel back a leg, and Ron dove out of nowhere-

Harry was free, and Crookshanks was fighting him now, as Hermione and Ron struggled to detain the older man. Harry reached his wand and turned on the others. Dorea's nails were digging into Hermione's arm, just above her scar, and she felt them cut through the fabric and into the skin like butter. "Get out of the way!" Harry screamed, and the other two took their wands and retreated to the bed. Harry stood over Sirius' broken, shrivelled body like a conqueror, wand directed at his heart.

"Going to kill me, Harry?" Sirius whispered.

Dorea was crying, no longer being flippant, her eyes glued to the scene. "You killed my parents," Harry's voice shook, but the rest of him was solid.

"I don't deny it," Sirius said, and Dorea shook uncontrollably. "But if you knew the whole story -"

"The whole story?" Harry was shouting, and Hermione and Ron exchanged concerned glances. Dorea's eyes were riveted to the scene, as though it was her favourite film and she knew that the scene coming up was unbearably tragic, but she had to watch it anyway. "You sold them to Voldemort, that's all I need to know!"

"You've got to listen to me," Sirius said, and there was an undeniable note of urgency in his voice now. "You'll regret it if you don't … you don't understand …"

"I understand a lot better than you think," said Harry, and his voice shook more than ever. "You never heard her, did you? My mum … trying to stop Voldemort killing me … and you did that … you
did it …”

Dorea gasped, falling to one side until Hermione had to lunge to prevent her hitting the floor. "Lily?" She asked, and Hermione nodded. Dorea was crying now, the tears forging tracks through her makeup, setting the facets of the powder to twinkling in the low light, reminding Hermione of the images of the angels' fall from grace she'd seen in her Bible as a child. Sobs were catching in Dorea's chest as she turned her head back to the scene, at Harry's broken-hearted fury, at Sirius' bedraggled state, at Ron's state of injury – she was too much a mother to be able to stand by as a child was in pain, Dorea, and she suffered that inability to help now. Hermione was smiling fondly, if a bit sadly, at the ensuing scene – Sirius attempting to dislodge Crookshanks from his chest to no avail, as the protective Kneazle glared Harry down.

Slowly, Harry was raising his wand, face conflicted and hurting. There was movement down below, and suddenly, Hermione was shouting – "WE'RE UP HERE! WE'RE UP HERE – SIRIUS BLACK – QUICK!"

Footsteps thundered up the stairs, and the door of the room burst open in a shower of red sparks. Remus hurtled into the room – Professor Lupin, as he was then, ragged robes and everything – his wand raised and ready. His eyes flickered over Ron, lying on the floor, over Hermione, cowering next to the door, to Harry, standing there with his wand covering Sirius, and then to Sirius himself, crumpled and bleeding at Harry's feet. Dorea made an anxious grab for Hermione's hand as Lupin shouted, "Expelliarmus!"

Wands flew to Remus from every direction – Harry's from his hand, the two Hermione held – and Remus caught them all deftly before moving to stare at Sirius, who was still protected by Crookshanks. Then Remus spoke in a voice that shook with suppressed emotion: "Where is he, Sirius?"

All three of the children's heads whipped to look at Remus in confusion, but Sirius' remained the same. For a few seconds, he didn't move at all. Then, very slowly, he raised his empty hand, and pointed straight at Ron. Ron's face was a mask of bewilderment, and Hermione and Harry showed the same as they looked back at him. The older Hermione, where she lay on the floor with Dorea, was transfixed. Remus was already talking again, slowly, staring down at Sirius. "… why hasn't he shown himself before now? Unless –" His eyes widened, and Dorea's head was suddenly dislodged by Hermione's fierce nodding, as though she was egging Remus on towards his conclusion. Dorea frowned up, but she couldn't possibly understand that for Hermione this was the first time she'd remembered this scene, properly, since it happened. It had been too traumatising at the time, but now she was simply frustrated by the slow pace of it. She wanted Remus to figure it out, Sirius to shout his innocence, Pettigrew to show, and them all to be safe. If they had done this twenty minutes faster, they would all have been safe, she remembered.

And then she flinched, colouring, as she recalled what happens next.

"– unless he was the one … unless you switched … without telling me?"

Sirius nodded.

"Professor Lupin," Harry interrupted loudly. Hermione stifled a chuckle at Dorea's shocked twitch. "What's going-?"

Remus walked to Sirius' side, seized his hand, and pulled him to his feet so that Crookshanks fell to the floor, and embraced Sirius like a brother.

Hermione could pinpoint the exact moment the betrayal became real for her younger self.
"I DON'T BELIEVE IT!" Hermione screamed, at the exact moment the older Hermione whispered "forgive me," into Dorea's ear. The older woman glanced up at her war-worn companion and then back at the scene, without a word or a movement to indicate that she might. Remus had let go of Sirius and was turned to Hermione, who was on her feet now and pointing at Remus, wild-eyed. Something flickered in Remus' eyes, and he raised his hands placatingly. "You – you -"

"Hermione-

"-you and him!"

"Hermione, calm down -"

"I didn't tell anyone!" Hermione shrieked. "I've been covering up for you -"

"Hermione, listen to me, please!" Remus was shouting. "I can explain -"

But Hermione was too far gone, and she was enraged now, with Harry right beside her. The older Hermione shifted away from Dorea, guilt and shame welling up inside of her at the look on her own face, at Remus' expression. "I trusted you," Harry shouted, in that terrifyingly broken voice he had, "and all the time you've been his friend!"

It was worse watching the scene as an adult, Hermione realized, and not just because she was in essence watching children risk their lives when they should by rights be in bed, asleep and untroubled. Of course, she could see all of their teenage heartbreak, their anger, their desperation. They had only been children, to be shoved into such situations – she remembered feeling important, and proud, when all of this had occurred originally. Not at the precise moment they had been watching, of course, but later, when they were running around with the time-turner, saving lives. She remembered thinking that perhaps this had been what she was born to do; to look after Harry, and save lives as best she could. When had she lost that determination, that will, she wondered now. When had she turned from this feisty, righteous child into a pale image of a woman who was too scared of breaking the rules and getting hurt to do what was right? She was older now, and smarter, but she'd lost the purity of purpose she'd had in those younger years. She looked up into Remus' scarred face and remembered the younger man sat down the hall, tired but living, alive. How could she think to let him suffer this again, die again? She saw Sirius, the ravages of twelve years of Azkaban on his face, and the wave of shame crashed down over her, heating her skin until it felt like it would crawl off. Gods, how could she be so selfish?

"You're wrong," Remus was explaining, his voice level but fevered. "I haven't been Sirius' friend for twelve years, but I am now… let me explain…"

"NO!" Hermione screamed, and her older self flinched back, stuck in her own spiral now, of shame and guilt and self-loathing. Dorea glanced back at her, fire in her eyes. "Harry, don't trust him, he's been helping Black get into the castle, he wants you dead too – he's a werewolf!"

Famous last words, Hermione thought, as she watched Dorea's perfectly sculpted eyebrows rise up to rest in her fringe.

There was a ringing silence. Everyone's eyes were now on Remus, who looked remarkably calm, although rather pale.

"Not at all up to your usual standard, Hermione," he said. His eyes held a chastisement she'd thought she'd imagined the first time around, as though she'd disappointed him in some unfathomable way. "Only one out of three, I'm afraid. I have not been helping Sirius get into the castle and I certainly don't want Harry dead …" An odd shiver passed over his face. "But I won't
deny that I am a werewolf."

Ron made a valiant attempt to get up again, but fell back with a whimper of pain. Remus made towards him, looking concerned, but Ron gasped, "Get away from me, werewolf!"

Remus stopped dead. Dorea let out a whimper at the blankness of his face. He turned to Hermione and said, "How long have you known?"

"Ages," Hermione whispered. "Since I did Professor Snape's essay…"

"He'll be delighted," said Remus coolly. Both Hermione's winced, this time – the younger because she was so used to being adored and doted upon by her teachers that this attitude from anyone but Snape was unaccustomed, and the older because she hated to see that disdain set towards her on such a kind and gentle face. Both regretted causing him pain. "He set that essay hoping someone would realise what my symptoms meant. Did you check the Lunar chart and realise that I was always ill at the full moon? Or did you realise that the Boggart changed into the moon when it saw me?"

"Both," Hermione said quietly.

Remus forced a laugh.

"You're the cleverest witch of your age I've ever met, Hermione." His words were an empty echo of the fondness he would later hold for her.

Dorea turned to Hermione, her face pale. "You…" she whispered.

"I know," Hermione agreed, features set. "I don't think he ever really forgave me for that."

Harry was shouting behind them, but they were in their own bubble now. "You were, what, fourteen?"

"Yes."

"I don't suppose I can hold a grudge against you for that now," Dorea said slowly, watching Hermione's face. "That's assuming that you learned your lesson."

Affronted, Hermione huffed. She may have been in the wrong, and she could accept that, but she still had her pride. "Of course I did!" She snapped back, then reeled it in when Dorea looked less than impressed. "I adore Remus. I did then," she nodded to where he had begun monologuing behind them, all overgrown hair and scars and patchwork robes, "and I did four years later, too. I still do now, if you must know." She tilted her chin up stubbornly. "I've never regretted anything more than this mistake, Mrs Potter. If I'd known then what I know now, I would never have opened my mouth. But I was a child, and I did, and I cannot undo that."

"I've seen you with Lavender – you care about her, but you're distant. How do I know you don't still have these prejudices? How do I know you're not a danger to my boy?"

"I mean no offence, Mrs Potter," Hermione replied icily, "but I show you this memory of my own free will, in order to help Remus. You questioning my motives will not help either us, nor them. I volunteered for this, and I'm doing it. My problems with Lavender are with Lavender, not her lycanthropy, and they're really none of your concern either way."

"I have to protect my boys."
"So do I!" Hermione hissed back. "I have to protect everyone, whether I bloody want to or not! You don't have to believe me, but I will tell you this once – nobody here wants harm to come to Remus less than I do. Nobody wants Harry to have a normal life more than I do. And nobody, but nobody, knows the War like I do, so you'll just have to deal with it!"

She folded her arms across her chest, aware that she was pouting like a child but unbothered enough to do nothing about it. Dorea watched her calculatingly for a few more minutes, and then turned back to the scene.

Harry had visibly warmed towards the two men, now, and Hermione had left her corner to listen more intently. She looked as if she'd like to be making notes, for Professor Lupin always had given a good lecture, and he's bewitched her again. Ron was still whimpering softly, not so quick to warm to the would-be murderers of his treasured pet rat. "Severus was very interested in where I went every month," Remus was telling them now, rolling his eyes at Sirius' grumpy antics behind him. "We were in the same year, you know, and we – er – didn't like each other very much." Dorea and Hermione snorted in unison, then blushed as they glanced at each other coldly. "He especially disliked James. Jealous, I think, of James's talent on the Quidditch Pitch ... anyway, Snape had seen me crossing the grounds with Madam Pomfrey one evening as she led me toward the Whomping Willow to transform. Sirius thought it would be - er - amusing, ("all this editing," Dorea whispered, chuckling quietly to herself. Hermione privately agreed – how he got away with hiding his Lycanthropy for so long with such abysmal lying skills, she didn't know) to tell Snape all he had to do was prod the knot on the tree trunk with a long stick, and he'd be able to get in after me. Well, of course, Snape tried it - if he'd got as far as this house, he'd have met a fully grown werewolf - but your father, who'd heard what Sirius had done, went after Snape and pulled him back, at great risk to his life ... Snape glimpsed me, though, at the end of the tunnel. He was forbidden by Dumbledore to tell anybody, but from that time on he knew what I was ...

"So that's why Snape doesn't like you," said Harry slowly, "because he thought you were in on the joke?"

"That's right," sneered a cold voice from the wall behind Lupin. Severus Snape was pulling off the Invisibility Cloak, his wand pointing directly at Lupin.

"That's James'!" Dorea gasped in outrage. "You get your filthy paws off of my family heirloom, Snape!" James' attitude was, just like that, no longer a mystery.

"I found this at the base of the Whomping Willow," said Snape, throwing the cloak aside, careful to keep this wand pointing directly at Remus's chest. "Very useful, Potter, I thank you..."

Snape was slightly breathless, but his face was full of suppressed triumph. "You're wondering, perhaps, how I knew you were here?" he said, his eyes glittering. "I've just been to your office, Lupin. You forgot to take your potion tonight, so I took a gobletful along. And very lucky I did...lucky for me, I mean. Lying on your desk was a certain map. One glance at it told me all I needed to know. I saw you running along this passageway and out of sight."

"Severus -" Remus began, but Snape overrode him.

"I've told the headmaster again and again that you're helping your old friend Black into the castle, Lupin, and here's the proof. Not even I dreamed you would have the nerve to use this old place as your hideout -"

"Severus, you're making a mistake," said Remus urgently. "You haven't heard everything - I can explain - Sirius is not here to kill Harry -"
"Two more for Azkaban tonight," said Snape, his eyes now gleaming fanatically. "I shall be interested to see how Dumbledore takes this...He was quite convinced you were harmless, you know, Lupin...a tame werewolf -"

"You fool," said Remus softly. "Is a schoolboy grudge worth putting an innocent man back inside Azkaban?"

Cords suddenly burst from the tip of Snape's wand, twining around Remus's limbs, gagging him neatly. Hermione let out a whimper of protest, but Dore was turning purple. When Sirius started to attack and was stopped, she let out a growl.

"Give me a reason," Snape whispered. "Give me a reason to do it, and I swear I will."

Black stopped dead. It would have been impossible to say which face showed more hatred.

Ron was attempting to desperately hold onto Scabbers, and Harry looked more confused than ever. Hermione, however, took an uncertain step toward Snape and said, in a very breathless voice, "Professor Snape - it wouldn't hurt to hear what they've got to say, w-would it?"

Dorea glanced back at the older version. "Hmph," was all she said, though a new glimmer of respect was shining in eyes that were almost black with suppressed anger.

"Miss Granger, you are already facing suspension from this school," Snape spat. "You, Potter, and Weasley are out-of-bounds, in the company of a convicted murderer and a werewolf. For once in your life, hold your tongue."

"But if - if there was a mistake -"

"KEEP QUIET, YOU STUPID GIRL!" Snape shouted, looking suddenly quite deranged. "DON'T TALK ABOUT WHAT YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND!" A few sparks shot out of the end of his wand, which was still pointed at Sirius's face. Hermione fell silent.

"Vengeance is very sweet," Snape breathed at Sirius. "How I hoped I would be the one to catch you..."

"The joke's on you again, Severus," Sirius snarled. "As long as this boy brings his rat up to the castle" - he jerked his head at Ron - "I'll come quietly..."

"Up to the castle?" said Snape silkily. "I don't think we need to go that far. All I have to do is call the Dementors once we get out of the Willow. They'll be very pleased to see you, Black...pleased enough to give you a little kiss, I daresay...I -"

"You prick!" Dorea shouted, all of a sudden.

What little color there was in Sirius's face left it.

"You -you've got to hear me out," he croaked. "The rat - look at the rat -"

"Come on, all of you," he said. He clicked his fingers, and the ends of the cords that bound Remus flew to his hands. "I'll drag the werewolf. Perhaps the Dementors will have a kiss for him too -"

Harry was suddenly by the door, blocking them in. Snape narrowed his eyes menacingly. "Get out of the way, Potter, you're in enough trouble already," snarled Snape. "If I hadn't been here to save your skin-"
"Professor Lupin could have killed me about a hundred times this year," Harry said. "I've been alone with him loads of times, having defense lessons against the Dementors. If he was helping Black, why didn't he just finish me off then?"

"Don't ask me to fathom the way a werewolf's mind works," hissed Snape. "Get out of the way, Potter."

"YOU'RE PATHETIC!" Harry yelled. "JUST BECAUSE THEY MADE A FOOL OF YOU AT SCHOOL YOU WON'T EVEN LISTEN -"

"SILENCE! I WILL NOT BE SPOKEN TO LIKE THAT!" Snape shrieked, looking madder than ever. Dorea was practically vibrating out of her skin at this point, itching to take a swing at the man that was so abusing her grandson, and it only got worse with his next words: "Like father, like son, Potter! I have just saved your neck; you should be thanking me on bended knee! You would have been well served if he'd killed you! You'd have died like your father, too arrogant to believe you might be mistaken in Black - now get out of the way, or I will make you. GET OUT OF THE WAY, POTTER!"

"Expelliarmus!" Voices suddenly chorused. There was a blast that made the door rattle on its hinges; Snape was lifted off his feet and slammed into the wall, then slid down it to the floor, a trickle of blood oozing from under his hair. Snape's wand soared in a high arc and landed on the bed next to Crookshanks.

"You shouldn't have done that," said Sirius, looking at Harry. "You should have left him to me..."

"We attacked a teacher...We attacked a teacher..." Hermione whimpered, staring at the lifeless Snape with frightened eyes. "Oh, we're going to be in so much trouble -"

At the same time, Dorea was looking at Hermione with new pride. "You attacked a teacher," she echoed. Hermione nodded tiredly, and Dorea's hand was back on her arm. The two women huddled together to watch the scene play out with unspoken forgiveness humming between them.

Sirius bent down quickly and untied Remus, who straightened up, rubbing his arms where the ropes had cut into them.

"Thank you, Harry," he said.

"I'm still not saying I believe you," he told Remus.

"Then it's time we offered you some proof," said Remus. "You, boy - give me Peter, please. Now."

Ron clutched Scabbers closer to his chest.

"Come off it," he said weakly. "Are you trying to say he broke out of Azkaban just to get his hands on Scabbers? I mean..." He looked up at Harry and Hermione for support, "Okay, say Pettigrew could turn into a rat - there are millions of rats - how's he supposed to know which one he is after if he was locked up in Azkaban?"

"You know, Sirius, that's a fair question," said Remus, turning to Sirius and frowning slightly. "How did you find out where he was?"

Sirius pulled a crumpled piece of newspaper from his robes with one clawed hand, and smoothed it out to hand to the others. It was the photograph of Ron and his family that had appeared in the
Daily Prophet the previous summer, and there, on Ron's shoulder, was Scabbers.

"How did you get this?" Remus asked Sirius, thunderstruck.

"Fudge," said Sirius. "When he came to inspect Azkaban last year, he gave me his paper. And there was Peter, on the front page on this boy's shoulder...I knew him at once...how many times had I seen him transform? And the caption said the boy would be going back to Hogwarts...to where Harry was..."

"My God," said Remus softly, staring from Scabbers to the picture in the paper and back again. "His front paw..."

"What about it?" said Ron defiantly.

"He's got a toe missing," said Sirius.

"Of course," Remus breathed. "So simple...so brilliant...he cut it off himself?"

"Just before he transformed," said Sirius. "When I cornered him, he yelled for the whole street to hear that I'd betrayed Lily and James. Then, before I could curse him, he blew apart the street with the wand behind his back, killed everyone within twenty feet of himself - and sped down into the sewer with the other rats..."

"Didn't you ever hear, Ron?" said Remus. "The biggest bit of Peter they found was his finger."

"Look, Scabbers probably had a fight with another rat or something! He's been in my family for ages, right -"

"Twelve years, in fact," said Remus. "Didn't you ever wonder why he was living so long?"

"We - we've been taking good care of him!" said Ron.

"Not looking too good at the moment, though, is he?" said Remus. "I'd guess he's been losing weight ever since he heard Sirius was on the loose again..."

"He's been scared of that mad cat!" said Ron, nodding toward Crookshanks, who was still purring on the bed.

"This cat isn't mad," said Sirius hoarsely. He reached out a bony hand and stroked Crookshanks's fluffy head. "He's the most intelligent of his kind I've ever met. He recognized Peter for what he was right away. And when he met me, he knew I was no dog. It was a while before he trusted me...Finally, I managed to communicate to him what I was after, and he's been helping me..."

"What do you mean?" breathed Hermione.

"He tried to bring Peter to me, but couldn't...so he stole the passwords into Gryffindor Tower for me...As I understand it, he took them from a boy's bedside table..."

"But Peter got wind of what was going on and ran for it." croaked Sirius. "This cat - Crookshanks, did you call him? - told me Peter had left blood on the sheets...I supposed he bit himself...Well, faking his own death had worked once."

"And why did he fake his death?" Harry said furiously. "Because he knew you were about to kill him like you killed my parents!"

"No," said Lupin, "Harry-"
"And now you've come to finish him off!"

"Yes, I have," said Sirius, with an evil look at Scabbers. Dorea let out a groan and shook her head, now looking rather amused. Hermione thought she'd heard her murmur 'silly boy', but she might have been mistaken.

"Then I should've let Snape take you!" Harry shouted.

"Harry," said Remus hurriedly, "don't you see? All this time we've thought Sirius betrayed your parents, and Peter tracked him down - but it was the other way around, don't you see? Peter betrayed your mother and father - Sirius tracked Peter down -"

"THAT'S NOT TRUE!" Harry yelled. "HE WAS THEIR SECRET-KEEPER! HE SAID SO BEFORE YOU TURNED UP. HE SAID HE KILLED THEM!"

He was pointing at Sirius, who shook his head slowly; the sunken eyes were suddenly over bright.

"Harry...I as good as killed them," he croaked. "I persuaded Lily and James to change to Peter at the last moment, persuaded them to use him as Secret-Keeper instead of me...I'm to blame, I know it...The night they died, I'd arranged to check on Peter, make sure he was still safe, but when I arrived at his hiding place, he'd gone. Yet there was no sign of a struggle. It didn't feel right. I was scared. I set out for your parents' house straight away. And when I saw their house, destroyed, and their bodies...I realized what Peter must've done...what I'd done..." His voice broke. He turned away.

"Enough of this," said Remus, and there was a steely note in his voice. "There's one certain way to prove what really happened. Ron, give me that rat."

"What are you going to do with him if I give him to you?" Ron asked Remus tensely.

"Force him to show himself," said Remus. "If he really is a rat, it won't hurt him."

Ron hesitated. Then at long last, he held out Scabbers and Remus took him. Scabbers began to squeak without stopping, twisting and turning, his tiny black eyes bulging in his head. "Ready, Sirius?" said Remus.

Sirius had already retrieved Snape's wand from the bed. He approached Remus and the struggling rat, and his wet eyes suddenly seemed to be burning in his face.

"Together?" he said quietly.

"I think so", said Remus, holding Scabbers tightly in one hand and his wand in the other. "On the count of three. One - two - THREE!"

A flash of blue-white light erupted from both wands; for a moment, Scabbers was frozen in midair, his small gray form twisting madly - Ron yelled - the rat fell and hit the floor. There was another blinding flash of light and then -

A head was shooting upward from the ground; limbs were sprouting; a moment later, a man was standing where Scabbers had been, cringing and wringing his hands. Crookshanks was spitting and snarling on the bed; the hair on his back was standing up. Dorea was having an amusingly similar reaction.

He didn't look very good, probably worse than Hermione had remembered, balding and shrunken and grubby. He hyperventilated madly.
"Well, hello, Peter," said Remus pleasantly, as though rats frequently erupted into old school friends around him. "Long time, no see."

"S-Sirius...R-Remus..." Even Pettigrew's voice was squeaky. Again, his eyes darted toward the door. "My friends...my old friends..."

Sirius's wand arm rose, but Remus seized him around the wrist, gave him a warning took, then turned again to Pettigrew, his voice light and casual.

"We've been having a little chat, Peter, about what happened the night Lily and James died. You might have missed the finer points while you were squeaking around down there on the bed — "

"Remus," gasped Pettigrew, sweating now, "you don't believe him, do you...? He tried to kill me, Remus..."

"So we've heard," said Remus, more coldly. "I'd like to clear up one or two little matters with you, Peter, if you'll be so -"

"He's come to try and kill me again!" Pettigrew squeaked suddenly, pointing at Sirius with his middle finger. "He killed Lily and James and now he's going to kill me too...You've got to help me, Remus..."

"No one's going to try and kill you until we've sorted a few things out," said Remus.

"Sorted things out?" squealed Pettigrew, looking wildly about him once more, eyes taking in the boarded windows and, again, the only door. "I knew he'd come after me! I knew he'd be back for me! I've been waiting for this for twelve years!"

"You knew Sirius was going to break out of Azkaban?" said Remus, his brow furrowed. "When nobody has ever done it before?"

"He's got dark powers the rest of us can only dream of!" Pettigrew shouted shrilly. "How else did he get out of there? I suppose He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named taught him a few tricks!"

Sirius started to laugh, a horrible, mirthless laugh that filled the whole room.

"Voldemort, teach me tricks?" he said.

Pettigrew flinched as though Sirius had brandished a whip at him.

"What, scared to hear your old master's name?" said Sirius. "I don't blame you, Peter. His lot aren't very happy with you, are they?"

"Don't know what you mean, Sirius -" muttered Pettigrew, his breathing faster than ever. His whole face was shining with sweat now.

"You haven't been hiding from me for twelve years," said Sirius. "You've been hiding from Voldemort's old supporters. I heard things in Azkaban, Peter...They all think you're dead, or you'd have to answer to them...I've heard them screaming all sorts of things in their sleep. Sounds like they think the double-crooser double-crossed them. Voldemort went to the Potters' on your information...and Voldemort met his downfall there. And not all Voldemort's supporters ended up in Azkaban, did they? There are still plenty out here, biding their time, pretending they've seen the error of their ways. If they ever got wind that you were still alive, Peter -"

"Don't know...what you're talking about..." said Pettigrew again, more shrilly than ever. He wiped
his face on his sleeve and looked up at Remus. "You don't believe this - this madness, Remus -"

"I must admit, Peter, I have difficulty in understanding why an innocent man would want to spend twelve years as a rat," said Remus evenly.

"Innocent, but scared!" squealed Pettigrew. "If Voldemort's supporters were after me, it was because I put one of their best men in Azkaban - the spy, Sirius Black!"

"How dare you," Sirius growled, sounding suddenly like the bearsized dog he had been. "I, a spy for Voldemort? When did I ever sneak around people who were stronger and more powerful than myself? But you, Peter - I'll never understand why I didn't see you were the spy from the start. You always liked big friends who'd look after you, didn't you? It used to be us...me and Remus...and James..."

Pettigrew wiped his face again; he was almost panting for breath.

"Me, a spy...must be out of your mind...never...don't know how you can say such a -"

"Lily and James only made you Secret-Keeper because I suggested it," Sirius hissed, so venomously that Pettigrew took a step backward. "I thought it was the perfect plan...a bluff...Voldemort would be sure to come after me, would never dream they'd use a weak, talentless thing like you...It must have been the finest moment of your miserable life, telling Voldemort you could hand him the Potters."

Pettigrew was muttering distractedly; words like "far-fetched" and "lunacy," drifting through the air.

"Professor Lupin?" said Hermione timidly. "Can - can I say something?"

"Certainly, Hermione," said Remus courteously.

"Well - Scabbers - I mean, this - this man - he's been sleeping in Harry's dormitory for three years. If he's working for You-Know-Who, how come he never tried to hurt Harry before now?"

"There!" said Pettigrew shrilly, pointing at Ron with his maimed hand. "Thank you! You see, Remus? I have never hurt a hair of Harry's head! Why should I?"

"I'll tell you why," said Sirius. "Because you never did anything for anyone unless you could see what was in it for you. Voldemort's been in hiding for fifteen years, they say he's half dead. You weren't about to commit murder right under Albus Dumbledore's nose, for a wreck of a wizard who'd lost all of his power, were you? You'd want to be quite sure he was the biggest bully in the playground before you went back to him, wouldn't you? Why else did you find a wizard family to take you in? Keeping an ear out for news, weren't you, Peter? Just in case your old protector regained strength, and it was safe to rejoin him..."

Pettigrew opened his mouth and closed it several times. He seemed to have lost the ability to talk.

"Er - Mr. Black - Sirius?" said Hermione.

Sirius jumped at being addressed like this and stared at Hermione as though he had never seen anything quite like her. The older version smiled nostalgically, and made a note to do this in the future to gauge the younger man's reaction.

"If you don't mind me asking, how - how did you get out of Azkaban, if you didn't use Dark Magic?"

"Thank you!" gasped Pettigrew, nodding frantically at her. "Exactly! Precisely what I -"
But Remus silenced him with a look. Sirius was frowning slightly at Hermione, but not as though he were annoyed with her. He seemed to be pondering his answer.

"I don't know how I did it," he said slowly. "I think the only reason I never lost my mind is that I knew I was innocent. That wasn't a happy thought, so the Dementors couldn't suck it out of me...but it kept me sane and knowing who I am...helped me keep my powers...so when it all became...too much...I could transform in my cell...become a dog. Dementors can't see, you know..." He swallowed. "They feel their way toward people by feeding off their emotions...They could tell that my feelings were less - less human, less complex when I was a dog...but they thought, of course, that I was losing my mind like everyone else in there, so it didn't trouble them. But I was weak, very weak, and I had no hope of driving them away from me without a wand...

"But then I saw Peter in that picture...I realized he was at Hogwarts with Harry...perfectly positioned to act, if one hint reached his ears that the Dark Side was gathering strength again..."

Pettigrew was shaking his head, mouthing noiselessly, but staring all the while at Black as though hypnotized.

"...ready to strike at the moment he could be sure of allies...and to deliver the last Potter to them. if he gave them Harry, who'd dare say he'd betrayed Lord Voldemort? He'd be welcomed back with honors...

"So you see, I had to do something. I was the only one who knew Peter was still alive... It was as if someone had lit a fire In my head, and the Dementors couldn't destroy it...It wasn't a happy feeling...it was an obsession...but it gave me strength, it cleared my mind. So, one night when they opened my door to bring food, I slipped past them as a dog...It's so much harder for them to sense animal emotions that they were confused...I was thin, very thin...thin enough to slip through the bars...I swam as a dog back to the mainland...I journeyed north and slipped into the Hogwarts grounds as a dog. I've been living in the forest ever since, except when I came to watch the Quidditch, of course. You fly as well as your father did, Harry..." He looked at Harry, who did not look away. "Believe me," he croaked. "Believe me, Harry. I never betrayed James and Lily. I would have died before I betrayed them."

Harry nodded.

"No!"

Pettigrew had fallen to his knees as though Harry's nod had been his own death sentence. He shuffled forward on his knees, groveling, his hands clasped in front of him as though praying.

"Sirius - it's me...it's Peter...your friend...you wouldn't -"

Sirius kicked out and Pettigrew recoiled. Dorea was cheering as though her favourite Quidditch team had won the World Final.

"There's enough filth on my robes without you touching them," said Sirius.

"Remus!" Pettigrew squeaked, turning to Remus instead, writhing imploringly in front of him. "You don't believe this - wouldn't Sirius have told you they'd changed the plan?"

"Not if he thought I was the spy, Peter," said Remus. "I assume that's why you didn't tell me, Sirius?" he said casually over Pettigrew's head.

"Forgive me, Remus," said Sirius.
“Not at all, Padfoot, old friend,” said Remus, who was now rolling up his sleeves. “And will you, in turn, forgive me for believing you were the spy?”

“Of course,” said Sirius, and the ghost of a grin flitted across his gaunt face. He, too, began rolling up his sleeves. “Shall we kill him together?”

“Yes, I think so,” said Remus grimly. Dorea stopped dead, and watched the scene with a disapproving look on her face. Hermione could imagine her ranting in her head — “I didn’t raise murderers!”

“You wouldn’t...you won’t...” gasped Pettigrew. And he scrambled around to Ron.

“Ron...haven’t I been a good friend...a good pet? You won’t let them kill me, Ron, will you...you’re on my side, aren’t you?”

But Ron was staring at Pettigrew with the utmost revulsion.

“I let you sleep in my bed!” he said.

“Kind boy...kind master...” Pettigrew crawled toward Ron, “You won’t let them do it...I was your rat...I was a good pet...”

“If you made a better rat than a human, it’s not much to boast about, Peter,” said Sirius harshly. Ron, going still paler with pain, wrenched his broken leg out of Pettigrew’s reach. Pettigrew turned on his knees, staggered forward, and seized the hem of Hermione’s robes.

“Sweet girl...clever girl...you - you won’t let them...Help me...”

Hermione pulled her robes out of Pettigrew’s clutching hands and backed away against the wall, looking horrified. She had never quite enjoyed being called sweet and clever the same way after that, her older self realized.

Pettigrew knelt, trembling uncontrollably, and turned his head slowly toward Harry.

“Harry...Harry...you look just like your father...just like him...”

“HOW DARE YOU SPEAK TO HARRY?” roared Black. “HOW DARE YOU FACE HIM? HOW DARE YOU TALK ABOUT JAMES IN FRONT OF HIM?”

“Harry,” whispered Pettigrew, shuffling toward him, hands outstretched. “Harry, James wouldn’t have wanted me killed...James would have understood, Harry...he would have shown me mercy...”

Both Sirius and Remus strode forward, seized Pettigrew’s shoulders, and threw him backward onto the floor. He sat there, twitching with terror, staring up at them.

“You sold Lily and James to Voldemort,” said Sirius, who was shaking too. “Do you deny it?”

Pettigrew burst into tears. It was horrible to watch, like an oversized, balding baby, cowering on the floor.

“Sirius, Sirius, what could I have done? The Dark Lord...you have no idea...he has weapons you can’t imagine...I was scared, Sirius, I was never brave like you and Remus and James. I never meant it to happen...He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named forced me -”

“DON’T LIE!” bellowed Sirius. “YOU’D BEEN PASSING INFORMATION TO HIM FOR A YEAR BEFORE LILY AND JAMES DIED! YOU WERE HIS SPY!”
"He - he was taking over everywhere!" gasped Pettigrew. "Wh-what was there to be gained by refusing him?"

"What was there to be gained by fighting the most evil wizard who has ever existed?" said Sirius, with a terrible fury in his face. "Only innocent lives, Peter!"

"You don't understand!" whined Pettigrew. "He would have killed me, Sirius!"

"THEN YOU SHOULD HAVE DIED!" roared Sirius. "DIED RATHER THAN BETRAY YOUR FRIENDS, AS WE WOULD HAVE DONE FOR YOU!"

Remus and Sirius stood shoulder to shoulder, wands raised.

"You should have realized," said Remus quietly, "if Voldemort didn't kill you, we would. Good-bye, Peter."

Hermione covered her face with her hands and turned to the wall.

"NO!" Harry yelled. He ran forward, placing himself in front Pettigrew, facing the wands. "You can't kill him," he said breathlessly. "You can't."

Remus and Sirius both looked staggered.

"Harry, this piece of vermin is the reason you have no parents," Sirius snarled. "This cringing bit of filth would have seen you die too, without turning a hair. You heard him. His own stinking skin meant more to him than your whole family."

"I know," Harry panted. "We'll take him up to the castle. We'll hand him over to the Dementors...He can go to Azkaban...but don't kill him."

"Harry!" gasped Pettigrew, and he flung his arms around Harry's knees. "You - thank you - it's more than I deserve - thank you -"

"Get off me," Harry spat, throwing Pettigrew's hands off him in disgust. "I'm not doing this for you. I'm doing it because - I don't reckon my dad would've wanted them to become killers - just for you."

Dorea began to cry again, quietly, her face shining with pride as she nodded along to what Harry was saying. Hermione slipped an arm around her shoulders, watching the men lower their wands.

"You're the only person who has the right to decide, Harry," said Sirius. "But think... think what he did..."

"He can go to Azkaban," Harry repeated. "If anyone deserves that place, he does..."

Pettigrew was still wheezing behind him.

"Very well," said Remus. "Stand aside, Harry."

"I'm going to tie him up," continued Remus when he hesitated. "That's all, I swear."

Harry stepped out of the way. Thin cords shot from Lupin's wand this time, and next moment, Pettigrew was wriggling on the floor, bound and gagged.

"But if you transform, Peter," growled Sirius, his own wand pointing at Pettigrew too, "we will kill you. You agree, Harry?"
Harry looked down at the pitiful figure on the floor and nodded so that Pettigrew could see him.

"Right," said Remus, suddenly businesslike. "Ron, I can't mend bones nearly as well as Madam Pomfrey, so I think it's best if we just strap your leg up until we can get you to the hospital wing."

He hurried over to Ron, bent down, tapped Ron's leg with his wand, and muttered, "Ferula." Bandages spun up Ron's leg, strapping it tightly to a splint. Remus helped him to his feet; Ron put his weight gingerly on the leg and didn't wince.

"That's better," he said. "Thanks."

"What about Professor Snape?" said Hermione in a small voice, looking down at Snape's prone figure.

"There's nothing seriously wrong with him," said Remus, bending over Snape and checking his pulse. "You were just a little - overenthusiastic. Still out cold. Er - perhaps it will be best if we don't revive him until we're safety back in the castle. We can take him like this..."

He muttered, "Mobilicorpus." Snape was pulled into a standing position, head still lolling unpleasantly, like a grotesque puppet. He hung a few inches above the ground, his limp feet dangling. Remus picked up the Invisibility Cloak and tucked it safely into his pocket.

"And two of us should be chained to this," said Sirius, nudging Pettigrew with his toe. "Just to make sure."

"I'll do it," said Remus.

"And me," said Ron savagely, limping forward.

The scene began to fade out as Sirius conjured heavy manacles from thin air. Hermione had decided to leave it here – the rest could easily be explained, which she did as Dorea watched the group disappear down the tunnel. The whole thing – Remus transforming, Buckbeak, Snape and Fudge, the Dementors. At the end of it they were stood in an inky blackness, though Dorea was still easily visible to her. "That's quite a story," the older woman said, and Hermione released a bitter laugh.

"I can show you, if you like?"

"No, thank you, I've had quite enough of the pensieve for one day."

Nodding her agreement, Hermione held out an arm for Dorea to grab onto, and they ascended through the waters.

"Best if we don't let the boys see that one," Dorea said as soon as they landed, drawing herself to her full height and brushing off her robes. The roses of her cheeks were drained, and her eyes were suddenly much older than they had ever seemed before. "But listen to me, Hermione Jean Granger, and listen well – I will not let that happen to my boys. I don't care about your morals, or your laws, or your experiences. Your excuses for being willing to let this happen again – and I know that's what you've been arguing about – do not matter to me in the slightest. This is not the future I want for my sons, and I will not let it happen."

She stalked forward, pushing Hermione back against the hard wood of the desk. "You're either with me or against me on this," she said, slowly, so that the words had a chance to sink in. "And mark me, my dear, you had better be with me." Staring up into grey eyes, Hermione watched the play of what she would once have called the Black Madness across the older woman's face. She wouldn't call it that anymore; no. Madness was irrational, warm, dangerous but not terrifying. What Hermione saw
here froze her in fear, for she could see her own life and death in this woman's hands. Calculated, cruel, cold. She would do anything for her boys, and that included disposing of threats.

Hermione vowed not to become a threat.
Chapter Fourteen: Unwelcome Truths Part II

Chapter Summary

The Marauders are very moody bears, Luna takes her turn at story telling (complete with underhanded hijinks) and Lavender confronts the big purple elephant in the room.

Chapter Notes

Gosh, chapter fourteen already???

A quick note to say that we confront some troubling themes in this chapter, with mentions of childhood abuse, neglect, past bullying, alienation, violence and threatening behaviour. It's not as Dark as it sounds, most of it is merely mentions, but if you have a problem with that you shouldn't read the last third of this chapter.

Also, this is where the Dumbledore Bashing tag kicks in; I don't like him and I freely admit that I might have gotten a bit carried away, but I tried (tried) to keep it at least touching canon Dumbledore. It'll whizz off into the other direction, hopefully, as he gets a bit darker and we learn more about WarGeneral!Dumbledore, but my lead in is gentle. Sort of.

That bit also lives in the last third of the chapter; we have some lovely sections from our dear Remus and Luna first that I tried to keep a bit lighter, so enjoy those! If you don't want to read the other bits, run at the first sign of Lavender! (Incidentally, a pretty good rule of thumb if you want to avoid most of the dodgy bits in the first two dozen chapters or so. Poor Lavender, so downtrodden, ageing phoenix of mine - when will you reincarnate!).

Love,
Eli x

Remus had closed himself off from the rest of them, and now rested on a chair in the very corner of a room. He could see all of the entrance points from here, plus out of the great windows that lined the walls, and his wolf was grateful for it – it calmed them both immeasurably. He was tired, so very much so, and weak beyond human imagining. His legs would barely support him if he went to stand, so he sat instead, and watched the goings-on with half an eye. James and Sirius had retreated to sit beside him, but he would have barely noticed they were there if not for the rippling waves of fury that flowed from them, tinging the atmosphere with an acrid, bitter taste. They didn't like to hear news like that about their best friend, they were firmly settled in for a long road of denial. Remus would probably have joined them, but he just didn't have the energy, if he was honest.

Besides that, the fact that they had guests down from the future paled in comparison to his current dilemma, which was the blonde girl across the floor, huddled in between Ginny and Lily, who had stayed with the new girls despite James' bristling and growling. Her face was lined with claw marks, almost perfectly split down the middle – a disgusting before/after tableau of surviving werewolf
victims. The eye on the scarred side was pulled down a little as the flesh melded into scar tissue, which cut into her vision, but she still watched Lily intently as the woman talked vigorously with her hands. This one, Lavender, was the only one that showed any visible evidence of going through a war on the outside – Ginny stank of Dark Magic to the point that the first wave was so intense, he could smell nothing else, and Luna appeared sweet enough, and something about her made Moony want to curl up in a ball and nap, but neither of them looked particularly like warriors. Lavender, despite her current submissive position, looked the strongest of them all.

He was intrigued by the oldness of the wounds – all he had heard was that she had been attacked the night of the full moon, two days ago now, and in his panicked state at first glance he had assumed they were new. Looking at them now the haze of terror had retreated, he could see that they had in fact been inflicted at least a year ago, and quite purposefully – no werewolf could cause that much damage in a frenzy, not without killing the girl. She was comfortable with them now – as comfortable as one could be, at least, with half of their body having been torn apart – which begged the question of how she had only been infected yesterday.

It wasn't by his Alpha, anyway. He could tell that much, even with such limited experience with werewolves other than himself. Moony recognised her as Pack, but other than that, her bloodline was a mystery. She was a complete mystery, though she looked nice enough, and Lily certainly adored her. In fact, she had barely left the injured girl's side once. They were laughing easily, now, at something the other blonde said.

Remus hadn't spoken to any of the newcomers yet. Pretty girls had always intimidated him a little, and that was what they all were, just in different ways to one another. Luna was a waif, like the ludicrously skinny women you see in the magazines, with their countable ribs and sunken cheeks. Ginny was like Marlene, fiery and fierce, her hair the colour of spun copper and eyes like chocolate, the sort of girl a man would be challenged by, every day for the rest of their lives. Lavender he could barely be impartial about, because whenever he looked at her all he could see was his own pain and fears reflected back, but he knew that she must have looked like the posters Sirius had stuck to his walls at one point.

And the other girl – Hermione – was a tempest.

Hair constantly held in a halo by her own sphere of power, rosy cheeks like she should be pleasant and cheery, but haunted eyes like she had lived through her own nightmares. They were all surrounded by an aura of sadness, a bone deep sorrow that would never fade, but while Luna shined through it, and Ginny fought it, Hermione used it like a shield. Protecting her from the hardship of her situation, from the truths that lay just beyond.

He wasn't sure when he became so poetic, and put it down to the lack of sleep.

Charlus, who had left the room shortly after his wife had left, led Dorea back through now. She looked pale, wan, and everybody came to attention immediately. Hermione slipped in behind them and send a short nod to her companions, who straightened up expectantly as she rejoined them.

"I have examined the memory Hermione provided as evidence," Dorea pronounced, seated back in her throne-like chair at the centre of the table. "There is no doubt to be had, they tell only the truth."

James was cut off by a preemptive strike from his mother, who gazed at him with regret on her features. "I am sorry, my son," came, in little more than a whisper. "I observed the scene myself – Pettigrew was the traitor. He may be, even now, handing information to the enemy. I should like to doubt this myself, but I heard it from the horse's mouth, so to speak."

"And there's no way she could have been lying? Have made this up?" James snapped back, shaking.
"Oh, my dear, I do so wish." Dorea smoothed out her skirts and leaned in gently to Charlus, whose arms swung around automatically to pat her hair. "I did the requisite spells on the memory, and watched closely as it played. The only signs of tampering were when the images opened and closed. Truly, it is a dreadful truth, but it is the truth indeed." She sucked in a breath and gestured everybody closer, pushing Charlus back as she moved into business mode. "And if this is the truth, then we have a problem."

"Pettigrew," Hermione said, carefully avoiding Dorea's eyes. Remus wondered vaguely what had happened between them, how bad the memory could possibly have been to elicit this sort of reaction. "He knows we're here."

"Yes. No doubt he would have related your arrival to his Master by now, and they will be ruminating on the possibilities already. Luckily, I doubt that they will think you are witches, or even that you are from the future – it is not how the Gods work, usually. This must be an extreme circumstance indeed to warrant the displacement of humans through time…"

"We have told you, many are dead. Research delayed. Education disrupted. A war lasting over twenty years can have a lasting effect for many generations," Ginny pointed out, leaning forward. "And as you are now, you are no closer to killing Voldem- He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named than you were five years ago, when he first rose to power."

"We are here because we have the answers, of course. We've done this all before."

"If I had not just seen what I had, I would wonder why our Fates had been put in the hands of four children," Dorea remarked, her eyes blazing into Hermione's head.

"You have, though," Hermione retorted. "So you have some understanding, you're only being difficult."

Dorea waved a hand negligently, her eyes closing. "You understand why I am. I feel that your harshest truths are not yet told, and I attempt to save us some of the pain." She looked purposefully in Sirius' direction, leading Remus to frown and look at him also. What could Dorea possibly know that was worse than what they had been told already?

It wasn't something she knew, of course, only something she had overheard by chance in Lavender's bedroom. Ginny and Hermione were paler now, looking a little shell-shocked. "You misunderstand us," Ginny said slowly. "Not all we have to say is bad news. Yes, some of it is worse, we do not deny this, but…"

"Our lives were not all darkness, just as life before Tom Riddle was not all light," Luna sang, smiling. "We still had love and joy and music. Births to counter the deaths – Ginny is the youngest of seven, you know. We had lives, after the War ended." Here, she stuck her arm in to Hermione's funny little purple purse, diving up to the elbow and pulling back with a sheaf of papers. She began to toss them across the table to the Marauders and the Potters as she spoke. "Ginny Weasley, Order of Merlin; Second Class, was a Chaser for the Holyhead Harpies, first string. She wrote for the Prophet sports section occasionally, and was expected to move to the England team should she not get married first." A flyer landed in front of Remus, and he glanced over it. The glossy paper featured a picture of a jovial redhead with her head thrown back, laughing loudly at something the cameraman had said. After a second, she turned directly to the camera and winked saucily. It was undoubtedly Ginny, only less worn than she appeared now, with full cheeks and a sly smirk on her face. She wore the robes of the Harpies with pride, her broomstick clutched proprietarily to her chest.

On Remus' left, Sirius let out a low whistle. Before anybody could look to his lap, Ginny, across the table, snatched back the page Sirius had received and gasped, before blushing profusely and shoving
it into her pocket with a growl. Hermione chuckled, gaining herself a punch on the arm from her redhead friend.

"Oh, and she also posed for a Playwizard centrefold," Luna chimed merrily.

"Lavender Brown, Order of Merlin; Third Class, held a seat on the board of the Godric's Hollow War Orphanage since she awoke from her coma, as well as being a hands-on mentor for victims of the War with permanent disfigurement, and a vocal supporter of Magical Creature rights among the Old Families," Luna continued, handing out more papers, this time newspaper clippings featuring pictures of Lavender with small children, or standing behind a podium in the Ministry foyer. One showed her shaking hands with an older Minerva McGonagall, another of her leaving a shop with an ecstatic, but middle-aged, Molly Weasley. "This while preparing for her wedding to Ronald Weasley, Order of Merlin; First Class."

"What's your point?" James asked, a bit nastily.

"Well, to tell you what they've given up to come here, of course." Luna said, frowning at James like he was a petulant child. "They were quite happy where they were, thank you, but answered Fate's call anyway. Aren't you grateful?"

Sirius snorted. "You haven't done anything yet."

Luna grinned sunnily, and the room suddenly appeared much brighter. "Don't be silly, of course we have. We've prevented you from going to prison, for a start. Saved James and Lily's lives, too." She looked over at Remus directly, now, a pondering light in her eyes. "I mean, we haven't started on you, yet, but I'm sure we'll get around to it."

Luna was having the time of her life, if she had to be honest. She loved this bit, the explanation, telling people what was to come and what couldn't happen. Moving her pawns into place, watching things unfold. She was about as opaque as a freshly-washed window, though, so she didn't see it as a betrayal. How could it be; if when you tell people to do something and they do it, that's their choice. Smoke and mirrors wasn't her thing – upfront action, that was what she liked.

Well, except for the odd things she was doing to help out their sex lives, that was entirely sneaky and sly. It titillated her, to be honest, to mess around in this way. It wasn't everyday she could manipulate circumstances exactly to her liking, but the Gods were smiling on her today. Some people might think her way of doing things was a bit heavy handed, that picture of Ginny, for example, but Luna didn't see it. Ginny looked great naked; especially in that particular photograph, and besides all that Luna had never quite understood modern witches' weirdly Christian attitude towards nudity – it was all very staid and dull, if you asked her.

Ginny obviously disagreed, from the way her cheeks were burning, but Luna hardly cared about that. Remus was getting all in a flap, and she always had enjoyed ruffling his feathers. They were so delightfully adorable when he was dishevelled.

"Me?" He was squawking, blinking his eyes confusedly. Luna gave him a nod, a little slower than she might have usually, giving him the impression she thought he also was a little bit slow. "What about me?"

Well, he didn't look excited at all to have Luna there playing his fairy godmother. How very ungrateful of the boy. Oh well, he'd learn.

"Pretty much everything," Luna said in the interim, bluntly. "In the future, you're really rather dim
for such a clever man."

And now Hermione looked mad. Luna didn't see why; it wasn't like she had been the one insulted. Besides, Luna would get away with it. She always did. After so many years of being an outcast, she had figured out the perfect formula for making people like her, whether they liked it or not – three parts dazed lunacy, two parts adorable doe-eyes, and one part painful truths. Plus, she had a step up with this lot, what with them knowing her mother so very well. It was like Christmas come early, except with friends.

Remus, for example, seemed to be struggling to find the willpower to be offended. She decided to help him out. "It's not like you're him yet," she told him, kindly, with a smile. Hermione stiffened next to her, and Luna held back from laughing. It amused her that she got to say out loud what the other girl was thinking, and Hermione would wonder how she knew. Luna always knew – they weren't exactly discrete with their affair in the first place, it was magically impossible for them to have been, what with his growling and snarling whenever someone touched her, and Hermione leaking hormones and tears whenever the man was around. The rest of it was just a thorough knowledge of Hermione's personality.

"You may never be that man, now, if only because I've just told you that you grow up to be an idiot. It's not your fault," Luna gave a vaguely Gallic shrug, and smiled again, "it was everybody else's. Didn't your parents ever teach you not to give in to peer pressure? Tut, tut."

Everybody was eyeing her like she was mad – and she was, just a little bit, but it was the madness that shaped her, made her who she was. Looney Lovegood.

"Right, well..." James cleared his throat, seeming a bit thrown. "If you tell us exactly what happened, then we can fix it, and you can go home. Is that right?"

Luna shot him a pitying look. "Of course not. I don't think you've properly grasped the situation. We," she encompassed herself and her friends with an arm gesture, "have been picked as the 'Voldemort-Defeating-Dream-Team'. You can't do it without us."

"Then shouldn't you be talking to Dumbledore? No offense, but we're not exactly warriors." James nodded at his family.

"Nonsense. Some events in time are fixed – the Potters always defeat Riddle, it's a rule. Just like my mum will always die, and the Weasleys will always have seven children, and people's soulmates will always be the same. They're set in stone. Nothing we do can change the main points of your fated tapestry, only edit the journey. We're just here to help you along, you understand?"

"Tapestry?" James blinked. He looked at Hermione.

Hermione blinked back.

Luna folded her arms across her chest in a near approximation of a huff. Everybody – bar Dorea, who seemed to understand perfectly – was looking at her again, like she was a loon. Looney Lovegood. "Besides," she snapped, her dreamy voice falling away so that she suddenly sounded like her father, "Dumbledore cannot be trusted."

That caused a reaction. Hermione scowled at her as Luna pulled her legs up to her chest, a sign that she was done talking, passing on the metaphorical baton. Served her right for rarely listening to a word Luna said, in Luna's mind. She wasn't a vindictive person, and she knew it wasn't fair, but even she could only take so many askance looks before she broke. Happy to be the mental one, yes, but suddenly it wasn't so fun when eight people – three of whom were your friends – were looking at
you like you'd taken too much pixie dust.

*Looney Lovegood.*

She raised an eyebrow at the other girls and smiled a little to show that she was fine. Hermione took a deep, calming breath, and turned back to the other side, who were waiting for an explanation. Bickering, yes, but that was just another form of waiting, as Luna saw it. Let the other three deal with this mess, Luna thought, gazing into the distance, her fingertips dancing patterns on her knees. There was nothing telling her that she needed to be a part of the discussion for a while yet, the desperate feeling in her chest having dissipated after her speech, lurking in the shadows waiting to be called up again. Hermione could handle it, she was a smart, diplomatic girl. She would be fine.

"But, Dumbledore-

"-defeated Grindelwald!"

"-most powerful wizard-

"If any of you say that he's the only wizard Voldemort fears, I will cut out your tongues."

Silence.

The words had been said completely deadpan, emotionless, empty, but they cut through the bickering like a hot knife in butter. Heads turned to where Ginny snuggled up with Lavender, the two of them almost wearing the same skin. Usually, they weren't this affectionate, but Lavender had had this clawing need for human contact in her skin all day, like if she didn't touch someone, her skin would wander off and do it for her, and it only calmed when she had skin-to-skin contact.

They were all looking at Ginny, which made Lavender want to laugh. Apparently, she wasn't seen as a possibility, she couldn't possibly have said that, she's too nice. Only Hermione seemed to realize it was her, because even Ginny looked shell-shocked.

It wasn't like her, really, to say things like that. She would think them, yes, a lot; but she'd never really crossed the line into saying them or doing them, and probably never would. The looks of horror, though, on their faces. It was almost worth it.

"I mean it," she said again, looking from face to face, still cuddled in beneath Ginny's arm. "You don't know him like we do, and besides, that statement has always been an out and out lie."

Ginny went to pull away, but Lavender tightened her arms around her waist, sudden panic shooting through her veins. "No," she whimpered, almost without realizing it, and then hated herself for it afterwards. She didn't seem to be adjusting well to her new condition, though it wasn't as awful as she'd thought it might be. Her inner wolf filled a position in her brain where before there was just primal instinct, and it settled in like an old friend, as though it had always been there. Generally, it was angry when she was angry, and happy when she was happy, so they got along together quite well. The amber of her wolf's eyes brought out the bronze streaks in her hair, which was also an advantage. It was just these new needs – most food tasted like ashes now, or perhaps it was just the salads she had been requesting. She'd tried to take a bite out of a tomato yesterday and had immediately vomited, which wasn't pleasant, but the chicken had been fine.

Cuddling wasn't *her*, either, and it made a part of her extremely uncomfortable even as it made another part settle down contentedly. Being both resentful and grateful was a difficult mix of emotions to cope with when it came to her friends. Plus, these pathetic *noises* she kept making – very unladylike, to say the least. She felt like she'd given these new people – Potter, Black, Lupin, Evans;
she didn't have trouble at all being disconnected, as she'd never met most of them and had only been taught by Lupin for a year. That had been awkward – she distinctly remembered herself and Parvati gossiping over him night after night, *such biceps, such a sweet man, lovely hair*, and then the night that the truth came out turning to Parvati and saying 'well, that's a shock!', and Parvati scrunching up her face and replying, 'ugh, I know, and to think I fancied him! Gross! Werewolves are disgusting'.

It just came to Lavender to remember that the next day Parvati's shampoo had been switched with superglue, and she'd cried the day away in the ensuite with her fingers locked into her lovely blue-black hair. That whole day, Hermione had looked particularly pleased with herself. Vindictive little cow, Lavender had thought, before chastising herself and settling with being pleased that she had showered the night before, instead. The correlation hadn't occurred to her at the time, but now…

Anyway, she didn't feel attached to them, but that didn't stop her from wanting to make a good impression. Unconscious and covered in blood, she could do nothing about, but this morning she had worn her nicest peasant blouse and skirt, along with some three-inch heels that she'd had to discard before even leaving the room they were so painful to walk in. They'd not noticed. Pity, was what she saw when they looked at her. It made her mad, but nice girls don't snarl at new acquaintances, so she'd stewed in it. Until now, at least.

She was quite sure she wouldn't really cut out their tongues, but the wolf liked the idea, so she said it anyway.

"Albus Dumbledore is a great wizard," one of them was saying now, and Lavender tried not to laugh, she really did. It was just – they didn't know what Dumbledore had done to them all. Leaving the students without protection in a school that was just a poor front for a torture chamber, because he was too arrogant and curious to check for curses on a ring. Giving them nowhere to run when things got bad. Letting dangerous creatures live in the castle – Fluffy the Cerberus, a DADA teacher with Voldemort in his head, a basilisk in the walls. She was lucky to have survived her childhood, overseen as it had been by his criminal negligence. Sure, he'd been close to Harry Potter, but nobody else had ever even met him. Lavender had certainly never spoken to him, except for that one time at the Yule ball when Seamus had spun her into his back, and he'd said 'excuse me, young lady'.

Lavender had read that book – Skeeter's book, though she had learned over the years not to trust what she had to say – and had found it informative. Speaking to Harry after the war had also been informative. Leaving a little boy in the care of abusive relatives simply because you wanted to ensure he had 'strength of character'? Lavender's childhood had been by no means a cake-walk, but even she could hardly imagine the scarring he had faced at the hands of his Uncle. It was a risk, too, that could easily have backfired – turned the Boy-Who-Lived into a weapon against muggles. After all, wasn't that what had happened to Riddle?

"Yes, but that says nothing of his character - rather, his magical prowess," she replied in the end, having discarded several more profanity-ridden options. "He sees people as collateral damage or weapons, there is no other option in his world. He is drunk on power, and greedy for more. Prejudiced, cruel and insensitive is how I would describe the Headmaster – and I haven't even seen the worst of him.

"Ask Luna what she thinks of his greater good, when it means leaving a girl to suffer abuse at the hands of her own housemates. Ask Ginny what she thinks, when it means blaming a lonely child for her own possession, for being unable to withstand the might of a much greater wizard, and being alienated from her own family for the rest of her life. Ask Hermione what she thinks of his cause, when it meant that she had to spend years of her life being bullied and degraded for who she is, and him not stepping in to stop it – even encouraging it, at times." She was gasping now, great lungfuls of breath. Her wolf was stretching in her head, claws at the ready, and she knew that her eyes were
amber. Lavender was vibrating with rage.

Hermione was nodding along now, and picked up the trail in a deeper, more even voice. "Ask every Slytherin to walk the halls of Hogwarts under his tutelage, who have to work twice as hard at everything for any recognition. The Evil House, hated by everyone but their own, and left with no place to go but the Dark."

"We really need a Hufflepuff," Ginny whispered quietly, almost to herself. Lavender could understand – their side of the table was in turmoil, a black hole of anger and frustration. A Hufflepuff would really balance them out, right now. But all they had were Gryffindors, and one Ravenclaw, neither of whom were known for being even-tempered.

"Albus Dumbledore is a great wizard," Hermione said now, glaring at the assembled Marauders, "but he is not a great man."
Chapter Fifteen: Dorea

Chapter Summary

Dorea considers her current circumstances, and news of the Potters’ miracle reaches He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

James was sulking, after being shouted down for the third time by the assembled women. They were all rather fired-up over the discussion of Albus Dumbledore's character, and Dorea rather wished the girls could have left it alone. If only they hadn’t let their tempers get the better of them…

Dorea and Charlus owed Albus a debt, which they were obliged to repay in any manner he might choose. Were he to learn of their visitors, no doubt his favour would come in the form of knowledge and assistance; bringing them to his side. If he asked, Charlus and Dorea would be magically bound to tell him everything they knew – including the girls’ less than stellar opinions of the older wizard, and that would only bring trouble. As far as protection went, it was simply wiser that Dorea didn't know so very much of their personal lives - and that they keep the coven secret for as long as possible.

Dorea wasn't blind, or deaf, or otherwise impaired in any way, and she had known from childhood that what appears too good to be true generally is so. She was a Slytherin, after all, and Slytherins in general didn't have the weakness that was unconditional trust. As such, she'd never entirely trusted the man – he'd not made an effort to beguile her, either, what with her being a Black and a Slytherin; two very bold marks against her in his book. Had she had the choice, they would never have become indebted to the man, but Charlus was a sweetheart with a familial obligation to Dumbledore, and so she inherited his oath. Loyalty was important to her, and she stood with her husband, but if she'd had her druthers she would have discharged the debt years ago and never let him near her son.

"Why don't you continue your story," She said, finally, in a calm voice, carrying over the heads of the occupants of the room. There was a suffocating cloud of dark emotion hanging about, and she didn't particularly want it to break into a storm – especially not one that would further endanger her children and guests. Her dining room hadn't seen this much action since James was a toddler. With his particular brand of accidental magic it had been torn apart, and they'd had to redecorate it then. The argument over colour schemes had lasted into the summer of ’63, and while she would jump at the chance to finally have gold damask wallpaper, she didn't fancy cleaning up.

Hermione looked at her first, clever girl that she was, and sat back down in her chair. It didn't seem to have occurred to her until then that she was on the edge of climbing over the table and launching herself at poor James, who had said the sentence they had all reacted to so badly. Dorea wanted to avoid that – her son was everything to her, and she would have to kill the person who harmed him, even if it was a mystical time-traveller from the future here to save his life.

Sirius was pouting, which endeared him to Dorea greatly, for he looked so like a young Pollux. Remus was near asleep, so he wouldn't cause any problems; but Lily was torn. Dorea didn't particularly like that – she usually stood firmly with Dorea’s son in all important matters. It was a matter that would have to investigated later. The bond her future daughter-in-law seemed to have
formed with the new arrivals was concerning to say the least - magical bonds were tenacious and often unpredictable, and their closeness had the stink of wild magic all over it. As if to emphasise Dorea's point, Ginny chose that moment to curl around Lavender like she was her favourite Crup puppy, which the other girl didn't seem to mind at all.

"Where were we?" Hermione asked, shaking herself a little. Something passed behind her eyes, and her lower lip trembled slightly. "Oh, right… Peter Pettigrew had framed Sirius for his murder, by cutting off one of his fingers and leaving it in the wreckage as he escaped to the sewer as a rat… the Aurors arrested Sirius and took him to Azkaban without a trial…"

Dorea couldn't prevent her fist from clenching as she listened to Hermione recite the facts – twelve years in Azkaban without a trial, James and Lily dead, Remus without any sway in the Ministry or society and left to fend for himself. Nobody to fight for the innocence of her lad, the one she'd raised from a frightened and cowed, if arrogant, eleven-year-old to the (semi-)mature man that sat before her today. You could read the regret in Hermione's voice, as though she was responsible for these atrocities, but it did nothing to assuage Dorea's fury. She was able to read between the lines, you see. To see where the failures had occurred, exactly who was responsible for these actions being committed. The hidden anger in Hermione's voice as she spoke about Sirius' struggles told the Potter Matriarch that the younger girl knew where the blame lied, also, and was planning to fix that.

At least she was planning to do something, now.

Dorea could respect her a little more for it – she'd been a bit hasty in her grief to throw the blame at Hermione's feet, but she couldn't stand the idea that this little slip of a girl was going to stand by and let Dorea's family die without lifting a finger. It wasn't her way, to pretend helplessness in the face of a foe – even if that foe is time and reality itself. Dorea would take on all of the Gods to keep her family safe, rip a hole in reality, tear strips from time until nothing was left except her boys. For Hermione to have looked at the situation and given up immediately…

It was an unforgivable offense.

But she was working on it now, trying to help, even if she had been cajoled into it. Dorea could see that she would be a helpful ally, full of power and morality, knowledge and plans. If the Potters were in a position to forsake Dumbledore and follow this little coven to the ends of the earth, they would.

But, they were not.

Lily was taking notes, bless her, in a little moleskin journal she'd found in her luggage a few weeks before. James had hidden it there, because he had a propensity for buying Lily expensive gifts only for her to turn them down, but James couldn't help himself. He had such a generous nature, that boy. He was kind and loving, and if he were to live no doubt he could do brilliant things…

Dorea looked down at the sensation of wetness on her hands and was startled to see that she had been crying.

"…Harry was moved to live with his only living relatives, his Aunt Petunia and her family." Lily's squeak had jolted Dorea back to the present, where Lily had abandoned her notetaking and was staring wide eyed at Hermione.

"Petunia?" James said, looking between the two of them. "As in, Lily's sister Petunia?"

"…Yes?" Hermione's tone was markedly more wary. She looked between the two of them and then Luna, as if to ask advice. Luna wobbled her head vaguely and looked away.
"You've got to be joking, right?" James demanded, his fist gripping Sirius' shoulder tight. Sirius had an eye on his best friend, but most of him seemed concerned with the deteriorating state of Remus' health. Dorea felt guilty that she'd not noticed earlier, but then it had been a stressful few hours. "We'd never let our child go to Petunia, and she'd never take him in!" James was riled up now. It was very odd, because he'd always been such a jolly boy, and didn't usually have that much of a temper, but ever since he'd been told…

Ever since he'd been told that he'd be murdered along with his wife and his son would grow up the Chosen One, and an orphan, he'd been on edge. Dorea almost rolled her own eyes at her own stupidity. No wonder he was in such a black mood.

Hermione chewed on her lip for a moment, and wrinkled her nose. She didn't seem to know when to stop, which anybody else would have done upon seeing the look on James' face. "I don't think it was a matter of choice, so very much as Petunia was blackmailed into it." When they went to open their mouths, Hermione waved a hand in the air. "I don't know all the details, only that Petunia was forced to take him in, and that was later reinforced when she learned that Harry was to be expelled – and that's a story for later!"

She was glaring around the room, daring someone to challenge her on that, but everyone had retreated. Once she was satisfied that she wouldn't be interrupted, she continued. "Right. Of course, Remus asked to be given custody of Harry – as the next closest friend of the family, with Petunia having disowned Lily, but he was informed in no uncertain terms that the Ministry would not honor the adoption of a small child to a werewolf, for 'safety reasons'."

What saved her here was the exaggerated air quotes and drawling sarcastic emphasis she put upon the excuse. Otherwise, it was highly likely that the whole of Dorea's family would have launched themselves at her over the table, as on edge as they were. Her disdain for the words broke the tension a little, though, and some of the doom-cloud dissipated. Unfortunately, or perhaps, fortunately, this prodded Hermione to look at the boy in question. Upon seeing his face her whole demeanor went through the most startling transformation - a second ago she had been flushed, her eyes sparkling, her lips set and stern. Now, it seemed she'd been replaced with a greyed down version of herself.

"What's wrong with him?" She asked in barely a whisper. Remus gave a low moan, and all eyes swung in his direction. One real look at him had Dorea jumping out of her seat and calling for an elf. "Send for a healer," She ordered, already hurrying to the boy's side.

What she'd before cast aside as mere tiredness seemed to have escalated. His eyes were half-mast, his mouth lolled open. There was no colour to him at all, and as she watched Sirius lifted an arm and it fell limply back to his lap. Remus let out another pained moan in response. She locked eyes with Sirius' worried ones, and tamped down her panic.

Well, until Lavender started to howl.

Cold, dark, empty. The Lestrange Manor had once been a place of great beauty, so the stories said, but today it was just the opposite; cold, dark, empty. For all of the warm bodies that filled its halls, there was nothing of personality in it. The portraits were silenced and scowling, the elves fearful and scurrying. It had been such for the years since the Dark Lord had taken residence here, Rabastan had told people, in whispers, one summer day. He'd been melancholy that day, mourning the loss of his mother's giddy laughter, so long missing from his life. He wasn't one that leaned towards misery, Rabastan, but it had been the anniversary of her death and both of her sons had been granted some freedom to cry for their losses that day.

Not that the Dark Lord was aware that two of his most ruthless warriors had taken time out in the
memory of their gentle mama, of course. Bellatrix had been active, and he had assumed that where she went her loyal husband followed.

A shadow slipped through the halls, which emptied quickly when the call was sent out – He was waiting.

Today, everybody gathered in the ballroom, which sent a zap of fear through their hearts. The ballroom was saved for special occasions, and what was special to the Dark Lord was often painful and humiliating to his underlings.

On the threshold, the cloaked figure took but a few seconds to adjust to the darkness in the room, and then he could identify those that surrounded him – Lucius up in the front, his delicate face twisted in demonic pleasure as he faced his chosen Lord. Bellatrix a pool of petticoats and lace at the Dark Lord's feet, looking a mixture of mad and content to be in such a prized position. She looked outwards from her position as chosen pet as though she were a queen. Rodolphus stood quietly to one side, his expression calculatingly neutral. The newcomer took his position in the second ring with grace, beside a young lad of just over seventeen, whose Occlumency shields kept careful reign on the terror that would be coursing his veins. The lad flicked his eyes nervously at his neighbour, but remained silent.

"My friends," the Dark Lord began, his voice a purring rumble. He was unfairly attractive for such an evil man (if that was what he was, any longer…), all floppy hair and dark, brooding eyes. Even knowing the man was getting old – coming up to fifty-three at the end of this year – didn't stop his people from seeing him as a handsome man of only thirty, so accomplished was he with his glamour. "We have much to celebrate." He stood from the chair he had chosen as his throne, moving gracefully, like a cat. He leaned one hand down to smooth Bellatrix's rumpled hair, and the woman gazed up at him in adoration.

"Our spy has brought me information. It seems the Potters have received a gift…" he said gift derisively, but his tongue licked over the other words and made them silky smooth in the air, like you could reach out and stroke them. "Three nights prior to now, on the full moon, ritual magic was activated in the Potter's orchards…"

A swell of muttering burst through the crowds, and people shifted uncomfortably on either side of the newcomer. The cloaked man frowned at the new information, thinking hard beneath his mask.

"The Potter matriarch believes that they have received a blessing from the Gods, something to assist them in the coming War…" the corner of his mouth ticked up almost imperceptibly. "This is the news my spy brings me. What was given by the Gods is a mystery, but I doubt it will remain so for very long." He was grinning now, though the joy one would associate with a proper grin was replaced by bloodthirsty malice. It sent a shiver down the spine of all those present, to see such an expression on his face.

There was a cough from the front row, and the Dark Lord's head swung around to face the perpetrator. A tall man stepped forward, shrouded in his cloak and mask but still unmistakeably Avery's blundering mass. "My Lord…" he began, bowing deeply, almost prostrating himself before his Master. The Dark Lord nodded and twisted his fingers to encourage the other man to rise, and speak if he so dared.

"My Lord, I beg your pardon, I mean no impertinence…" Avery grunted out, his words correct and proper but his tone wheedling. He seemed uncertain, afraid, and as well he should, questioning his Lord. "But, I ask… why is this news something to celebrate? If the Order has a new weapon, blessed by the Gods themselves…"
"Silence." The command was sharp and quiet, and seemed to stop all sound in its tracks. The Dark Lord raised a hand to caress Avery's chin like one would a child you were rather fond of, but there was nothing fatherly in the gesture. "You have always been dim, Avery, but surely even you can see what this means for us." Disappointment and disgust rang from each syllable. He glanced around, his face set into an imperious sneer, expecting something from the assembled crowd. "Does anyone here?"

Nobody answered, all were silent and still, not brave enough to rise to the bait. There were very few Gryffindors in this crowd.

"It means," the Dark Lord hissed, impatience dripping from his acid tongue, "it means, they were to lose. That we are stronger than they are, more powerful. They panic, and they pray, and the Gods may have answered, but what they could not win without divine intervention is hardly likely to be beaten by a few more imps, or flowers, or the like. You all know the stories. You know how the Old Magic works."

He scoffed, smirking, pushing Avery back from him. Those who stood closest to the discarded man backed away, as if his incompetence were contagious – which it was not, but often the Lord's fury spread wider than its original target. "What use is a tool of the Gods, if Dumbledore is too old, too kind, too bumbling to make use of it? And we know well that none of his lackeys will move without him…"

He strode around his throne, one pale hand out to stroke the whorls and divots in its wood. "Our enemies are weak where we are strong. The time to move on them is coming soon… sooner than we expected, I think…” He whipped his robes out and they swirled around his legs as he sat, giving him the impression of great power moving across his skin, keeping his garments in motion. "Keep on with your assignments, we will meet again soon to discuss the next move. Until then…” He made a sign with one hand, and Bellatrix leaped to her feet, feral grin in place.

"Crucio!"

Most of the Death Eaters had made a study of appearing unaffected by these displays. They stood tall, a solid mass, watching dispassionately as their comrade flailed in the dust and dirt. Lucius wore his mask of disdain. Rodolphus looked vaguely disgusted. Bellatrix was cackling gleefully.

The cloaked figure stared at the creature on the floor, a sneer on his lips, his mind in turmoil.

Chapter End Notes

Hello!

I hope you're enjoying the story so far - I've been working hard on it, but my muse is like a hummingbird, and it hops from one plant to another with no discrimination. One minute I'm writing the next chapter, the next I'm suddenly inspired to write Lavender's first meeting with her mate - which happens in January 1980, so it's a bit far off.

That being said, I have a rough plot/time-line in my head, and it definitely has things happening in the eight months between this chapter and Lavender's date with humiliation, so I hope I can keep up with the chapters!

This was a quick note, in essence, to remind readers that I may have the attention span
of Luna Lovegood but the ambition of Tom Riddle, when it comes to this story. It comes off vague sometimes, but there is a greater plan in motion!

Love,
Eli x
Chapter Sixteen: Lycanthropy in the Library

Chapter Summary

Remus naps, Hermione reads, Lavender learns.

Chapter Notes

Hi!
Bringing in some super-fun sub-plotting! It's totally relevant and I'll probably not forget about it in later chapters, maybe.
Lavender is my fave, I don't know why I make her suffer, honest.
Love,
Eli x

Remus had been removed to his bedroom, and was closeted in there with Dorea, Lily (who had earned that privilege by being the only person not to start shouting/howling when Remus went down) and a handful of House-Elves. Charlus had disappeared into his study to search for Healer-trained allies who could be trusted not to report the circumstances to St. Mungo's, or the Order, but he hadn't held out much hope that such a one could be found. Remus himself had slipped into unconsciousness shortly after leaving the dining room which Dorea had assured them was much better than him lingering in the creepy half-state from before, but that news did very little to soothe the gaggle of young adults crowded in the hallway directly outside.

James and Sirius, thoroughly shocked and deflated by Remus' sudden unexpected deterioration, had abandoned their sulking at their time-travelling guests and instead sat slumped together directly opposite the door. James, though pale, had pushed aside his own distress in favour of offering Sirius his strength and comfort, for it appeared that for reasons yet unknown to the girls Sirius was handling Remus' sickness much worse than James himself. He had his legs drawn up against his chest, arms draped across his knees, head tilted back to rest on the wall. Slate grey eyes were fixed unblinkingly on the door that obscured his friend from view, as though he could burn through it with gaze alone. Sirius' face showed no real expression, but there was a vibrating aura of barely restrained panic in the air around him that manifested so strongly it kept the others back a few feet.

Well, all except for Luna, who seemed entirely unaffected and simply wandered back and forth between the two groups; her face typically serene, though it had an edge of solemnness that the other girls from her time suspected quietly was pretended for the sake of the remaining Marauders.

Later, looking back, the others would see that what they had perceived as a cold-blooded lack of caring on Luna's part was in fact her certainty that this sudden sickness would be resolved, but at the moment it was simply irritating and rather offensive, so they busied themselves elsewhere instead.

Hermione had had a momentary anxiety attack when Remus had fallen, quickly treated by Lavender's no-nonsense hand entwined through the back of her bushy hair shoving her head between her knees. Bent double, staring at her feet, things had slammed into perspective. Her panic
at her ex-lover (who wasn't even aware she existed beyond being some untrustworthy creature from the future)'s sudden collapse had passed, leaving in its place questions, paragraphs from books, quotations from her DADA literature – things she could deal with right now, if she kept her sanity. Plus, there was that feeling; like she knew the reason, the illness and its treatment, and it was just out of reach.

After a quick search of her metaphysical self - something she'd managed to isolate through meditations in her sixth year, in order to better understand her own magic - for that spark that had always, for her, represented 'Remus', and finding it flickering gently, emanating a feeling of peace, she took charge once more. They had followed the boys up the stairs and to Remus' room, where she had flicked through the library in her mind in order to follow the feeling to its conclusion. After a few minutes investigating, appearing lost inside her own head, her face lit up and she turned to Lavender.

"How do you feel?" She asked, a bit abruptly, for Lavender looked taken aback.

Recognizing the look on Hermione's features, though, Lavender obediently began cataloguing her aches and pains – the better not to stand in Hermione's way when she had that 'I've got an idea!' shine.

The look of pleased surprise she wore seconds later spoke volumes, but Lavender confirmed it out loud as well – "Fine! I feel fine! A bit achey, but my arm is alright." She grinned delightedly, but wilted a little upon catching Hermione's distant expression. "What? Isn't that good?"

"It's great, Lav," Ginny soothed, shooting Hermione a significant look. "Right, Hermione?"

Hermione mumbled a non-committal, and began to drift in the opposite direction, frowning thoughtfully. It wasn't a new thing - often when she was on the trail of an idea she'd be as spacey as Luna, though not nearly as reliable. Lavender opened her mouth to ask, but was saved the effort by Luna, who popped up between them with no warning like a nymph-in-the-box. "Come on, then!" she trilled, a hand on each of their backs to push them up the hallway after their erstwhile friend, ignoring Lavender's panicked shriek. Lavender resisted for a moment, frantically beating her chest to restart her shocked heart as she scowled in Luna's general direction. Luna smiled back. "I've told them we'll be back."

"Back from where?" Lavender asked, looking more than a little put-upon as she was dragged onwards by a surprisingly strong Luna. Noone particularly blamed her - of the three girls, she was the least used to Luna's peculiarities, and after years of calling her 'Loony', she'd only recently cracked the habit.

"Library," the girls said as one, in two markedly different tones (Ginny was distinctly long-suffering, which wasn't surprising, given that since they'd arrived it seemed they'd only got to do things Hermione considered fun - lecturing, learning, research. When would she get to play Quidditch, or tell bawdy jokes, or hex someone?). Lavender scowled again and rolled her eyes, submitting to Luna's pushing with a distinctly irritated air. Being a werewolf had changed many things, but her aversion to all things leather-bound and inky was as strong as ever.

A half hour later, Hermione was situated somewhat-comfortably on the edge of a hard-backed chair she'd snaffled from one of the desks at the back, surrounded by books on lycanthropy like a Queen before her loyal subjects. Some volumes were open to specific pages, weighted down by various knick-knacks recovered from shelves around the room, others were closed with torn pieces of newspaper marking the places she wanted, but all were strewn across the gigantic table that formed the centre of the room, reminiscent of an ancient warlord's office.
When the girls entered after Luna’s wild-goose chase around the manor house ("but down here there's a genuine 16th century dressing table – with original mirror! Don't tell me you don't want to see that, Lavender!") her hair was held out of her face only by one or two weak sticking charms and what looked like the feathered end of a broken quill. Her hands were smudged with ink from frantic note-taking, the finished article accumulating behind her feet.

Luna glided off again in the direction of the bookcases, leaving Ginny and Lavender to take places in Hermione's sphere. Ginny snatched an armchair from an alcove and dumped it on Hermione's right, and Lavender curled up at her feet. Noticing this, Hermione bit her lip and reached for one of the closed books, flicking though the pages desperately.

"Can we help?" Ginny asked, and Lavender was glad she did because her question sounded much more genuine than it would have coming from Lavender's own lips. She was very much of the do-it-yourself-and-then-do-mine-too school of homework. Luna might have had the pleasure of Nott's sexual prowess, but Lavender had benefitted from his brain on a monogamous basis since fifth year.

"I think I need to ask Lavender some questions," Hermione replied absently, shuffling through her papers. Lavender's eyes widened, and automatically she started scanning for escape routes. "Oh, stop it, Lav!" Hermione scoffed. "I'm not going to test you, it's just questions about yourself – your magic, how you grew up, etcetera."

Lavender shifted on her bottom, suddenly uncomfortable. "I'm not sure…"

"It's completely necessary, unless you want Remus to die," Hermione snapped, but Lavender could see the desperate light in her eyes then, and didn't take it personally. Who knew she wasn't an ice queen, after all? Though if it had to be someone, no surprise it was their Professor. Nil points for guessing that one right, Parvati. Still, Lavender hated to talk about her childhood – her mother said complaints were unbecoming in a lady, and besides, it hadn't been so bad as all that; she had had a loving father, after all. Everything else seemed a bit ridiculous when she said it out loud.

She didn't reckon Hermione would be very happy should Lupin die for her lack of cooperation, though Lavender did quite doubt his sickness had anything to do with her – an almost complete stranger in both times. He hadn't even been that fond of her when she was a student (though that may have had something to do with the short skirts, abundance of eye-makeup, and predilection for speaking out of turn, she reflected now).

With a sigh, she relented, waving Hermione on. It probably set a good precedent to appear helpful from the start, so she couldn't be blamed for anything that might go wrong in the future. Why Hermione chose to pick on her of all people was blindingly obvious, of course – she was a werewolf, and Lavender imagined that Hermione's thoughts went something like 'Remus is a werewolf. Lavender is a werewolf, therefore, Lavender is to blame!', and then that quote from the Muggle scientist about simple answers.

Personally, Lavender thought this situation was more about Murphy's Law.

But she sat patiently and answered Hermione's questions – some sensible, like what subjects was she best at, for example, with the answer of Charms. Some a bit more left-field - "Are you a cat person or a dog person?" she'd asked, like it made sense. Naturally, Lavender had responded with "all things considered, I'd prefer an owl". Where her family's ritual space was, which Lavender found surprising, considering the arguments of the past few days. Ginny had raised an eyebrow here, and Hermione had flushed bright red, but soldiered bravely onwards as Lavender responded with 'in the lake'.

Finally, Hermione looked satisfied, rustling her papers and smiling across the table at Lavender.
"Right, final question," she said, with all the gravity of a quiz show host. Lavender likened her to Bob Holness for a few amusing moments, complete with thinning hair and jowls, then dragged herself back into the present. "How do you like Lily?"

Startled, Lavender stared back at her. "Evans? She's alright, I guess, though I don't really know her."

Hermione nodded, adding a note to her near-dissertation. "But you've been all over her all day."

Lavender shrugged easily. "She's nice. She's been helping me, and no offense, but she's much cuddlier than you two."

"We're not offended." Hermione responded, a sly smirk on her face. "I think that might even be the nicest thing you've ever said about me." She gave a little chuckle, her mood seeming suddenly light.

"You've figured it out, then?" Ginny asked, her voice husky. Looking up, Lavender could see that she was curled over the arm of the chair, her eyes half-mast and hair tousled, like she'd been sleeping. A glance at the clock above the mantel told Lavender that they had been here for hours, and hadn't noticed — even Luna had come back, now laid on her front beside the table, big blue eyes gazing guilelessly up at Hermione.

Hermione nodded again, her hair bouncing behind her like its own entity. Lavender found herself watching it, amused, for far longer than was probably sane. Gods, she must be tired. "It's a werewolf thing," she said, with no small amount of satisfaction. Rumbling a growl, Lavender flopped backwards. Of course. Because it hadn't fucked her up enough already. "The good news is that Remus will be fine. The bad news is, we couldn't go back to the future now even if we wanted to."

"Why not?" Luna chirped, though it didn't sound so much like a question as like she was leading Hermione to a conclusion she'd already reached.

"Because Lavender would die."

Gods, it wasn't nearly as easy to hear when people were talking about you.

"Why am I going to die?!" She squawked, flailing in her attempt to rise to her feet. "You can't just say that!"

Shrugging, Hermione blew a curl out of her face. "Well, it's true. You're a weak wolf – bottom of the pack, even. Like, in werewolf terms, your strength is that of a newborn baby. Your scenting instincts are slightly off, your change is elongated, and your magic a bit skew-whiff." She avoided Lavender's gaze as she spoke, probably feeling the sting of it on her head and not brave enough to take that on. If looks could kill... "It'll be like constant puberty, but werewolf-oriented. Mood swings, susceptibility to magical weakness, etcetera, etcetera. You can read my notes, if you like?"

"But why?" Lavender thundered, smacking the hand that held the sheaf of paper away. "I'm a good witch, a strong woman, and a pureblood. I've never had so much as a cold, for Merlin's sake – I've never even heard of a weak werewolf before!"

"Well, you wouldn't," Hermione said calmly, but that didn't help as she still refused to look at her. "Generally, the weak wolves stay at home, out of trouble – and True Alphas, like Fenrir, would have the good sense not to change them at all." She nibbled her lip as she searched for something, though Lavender thought that perhaps she was just looking for an excuse to pretend Lavender didn't exist. "Probably, in the wild, the weak would be abandoned or killed-" a furious whimper from Lavender "—but werewolf packs are linked through magic. It's a responsibility to the maker, once they've bitten the young, to care for them. When the weak are injured, magically depleted, or emotionally harmed
the bond drains the needed resources from the Alpha, to make up for your own lack of personal stores.

"You were bitten by a lower-ranked wolf, so the bond couldn't form with him or his alpha, but when we landed in this time your magic must have called to Moony and linked with him to keep you alive – he's an alpha, with his own pack, though only just. Given your state of injury, you must have called on more magic than he could handle – hence the collapse! It's all very simple, really, once you know!"

"Oh yes, how did we not guess?" Ginny countered, drily, and Hermione looked.

"I'm sorry, it's just so fascinating. I remembered writing about the Pack Bond in my essay, third year, but the books hadn't gone into as much detail as these ones do…"

"This is not a book, Hermione, it's my life! What am I supposed to do?" Lavender wailed, her golden locks whipping through the air as she dropped to the floor, burying her face in her hands.

"Oh, oh Lav!" There was a great deal of rustling, and then Lavender was wrapped in warm arms and the scent of ink and toothpaste surrounded her, with an undercurrent of jasmine. "I'm so sorry, really, I am. I didn't think-well, I did think, it just wasn't-you know what I'm like, useless at this stuff! It's really not such bad news though – ow, Ginny! Cut it out! Right, Lavender. Sorry again."

The blonde was shaking now, and Hermione must have taken it for tears, for she tightened her grip. It wasn't tears, though – it was laughter, if a bit hysterical. Hermione being her usual chatterbox self seemed to have struck a cord inside of her, burying her under a tide of comfort and familiarity, making her feel oddly safe and at home even if Hermione wasn't at all that comfortable to cuddle. She'd lived with this girl for seven years, had grown up with her, and the hug felt like the sort she'd be given by an irritating older sister, if she had one. She reached out a hand and laid it on top of Hermione's, who gave up her apologies immediately and rested her chin on Lavender's head. In the cocoon of body heat Lavender let go of her reservations about Hermione, their long-standing rivalry, and didn't think of the bond she had unwittingly thrown herself into against any of their will. She didn't think about how Black, Potter, Lupin and Evans would react to finding out she'd infiltrated their secret little group.

She just relaxed into Hermione's arms, buried her nose in the other girl's neck, and breathed in the comforting smell of the library, the future, home, and… pack.
Chapter Seventeen: Conversations Part I

Chapter Summary

Ginny and Luna chat, sort of. Hermione and Lavender chat, definitely. James and Lily chat, awkwardly.

Chapter Notes

Hi!
This is Conversations Part I, most of which I wrote in the reception area of my doctor's office. They don't appreciate calling your name and hearing a groan of disappointment because you "really got into the Lavender flow", just for future reference. My ability to write conversations is... not great, to be honest, and I do work my arse off to try and get something believable out to you. All good practise, and all that. Gosh, I'm just really trying to build up these relationships. Slowly, but surely... Enjoy! Love, Eli x

Ginny and Luna had put in a request to share a bedroom with Dorea on the first day – more out of habit than anything else, for when Fred had died and the Burrow had become a stifling house of misery, Ginny had fled to the Lovegood's where she had stayed until three months ago, when she'd moved in with Harry. Luna made the ideal roommate, tidy and efficient, though not in any way uncluttered - she did have a habit of collecting odd things and leaving them lying across any empty surface area that was available. Ginny had once come home to a terrarium balanced upon the headboard of her bed, filled with the oddest pink and green frogs. It had disappeared the next day, and she never got an explanation...

Now her friend was emptying her pockets of bark and dirt, which she had presumably been carrying around since earlier that morning when she'd slipped out of the house before dawn. She laid her discoveries out on her bedspread reverently, heedless of the scattering of soil she spread with each movement. Ginny watched quietly from her position sat cross-legged on the other bed, listening to her friend's soothing hum as she sorted them into various conjured jars.

"Lavender will be well," Luna said, almost so quietly that Ginny didn't hear her at first. Their eyes locked, and Luna smiled sadly. She'd always known Ginny better than Ginny had herself, since they had first met, and it was to be expected that she'd notice what Ginny didn't realize – her quietness was attributed to the whole day's events, but the majority in concern for Lavender. She'd looked so pale when they'd left, stunned by the news. She was with Hermione; who was capable, if not the most demonstrably sympathetic person in the world, and when last Ginny had seen them they had curled up on top of the counterpane on Lavender's bed. Ginny should have been able to leave her concerns alone for now.

"Will she though?" Ginny asked, collapsing backwards to sprawl across her mattress. "It's a lot to take in. I'm not even sure I understand it, really."
"She's a child of water," Luna said, having stacked the jars to one side and now climbing into bed. "Children of water take offense to being limited within an opposing element. Were she a were-fish, perhaps we would not be having this problem."

Ginny watched Luna for a moment more, but apparently she'd said all she had to say, for she was now snuffing out the candles and burrowing into her sheets. Sometimes Ginny wondered whether Luna worked from a predetermined script, and her answers only made so little sense because nobody was asking the right question at the right time. She knew from experience that if she asked anything else now, Luna wouldn't respond. She'd sleep until the morning, and then probably come out with something irreverent at breakfast, to start the day off on the foot that she wanted it to.

Luna could disappear for months at a time, and yet still be right there beside you the second she was needed. What were those things the muggles had, the ones they talked to in their heads - Angels? That was what Luna was, a guardian angel, Ginny thought, looking at how the remaining candles spun her hair into gold on her pillow. A loyal but somewhat tricksy guardian angel, perpetually on the brink of falling.

"Hermione…” Lavender's voice came drifting out of the darkness, and Hermione stifled a sigh. They were curled up on the four poster in Lavender's room, with Hermione leaning against the headboard and Lavender snuggled against her side. Their legs were intertwined beneath the duvet, and until that moment they had been silent. Hermione, for one, had been enjoying the tranquil quiet of the night; only sporadically broken by the hiss and spit of the fireplace. Their conversation in the library had been difficult, and she hadn't been looking forward to the possibility of a repeat, but when discussing the sleeping arrangements with the other girls Lavender had been insistent that she couldn't be left alone. Further, she had confided, she'd not felt better than she had when she'd been close to Hermione, despite the energy rush she got off of Lily, and if she was so very volatile then surely it was only good sense for her to stay with the person that had her feeling the most steady?

Whether or not the effects were because of some odd metaphysical bond, Hermione had to admit that she could see the physical changes in Lavender, and if her presence helped the girl get better than she couldn't in good conscience abandon her – especially not when Lavender's health was in direct correlation with Remus'. Even though he was a different person now, and probably nothing at all like the man she had known, there was something inside of Hermione that balked at being even a little to blame for his suffering.

All this said, it had been a relief when Lavender had just changed in pyjamas and climbed into bed. They had a lot to consider – this new revelation was both unwelcome and unexpected, and no doubt would change a lot of their plans. Lavender could no longer take active part in the fighting; though she wasn't brilliant at defensive charms in the first place, every wand was needed in a war. Hermione would need to assess her condition regularly, begin training her up, find something to balance the other girls magic, all to ensure that she stayed in the peak of health.

In the morning, she would need to talk to Luna and Ginny about this. Dorea, too, would be helpful. Even Remus, if he was better, would need to be fully informed of the situation…

"Hermione?"

Hermione shook her head a little and glanced down at Lavender, whose eyes glowed purple in the dark. To give the other girl her due, she'd not referred to Hermione by one of her god-awful nicknames, like she usually would to capture her attention. In deference to this, Hermione kept her sleep-deprived, distracted irritation from her voice. "Yes, Lavender?"

There was a pause, and she blinked, fully disappearing for a second before her eyes were back. "Do
I… Will… Will I get better, do you think?” Her voice was wobbly and thin, and Hermione bit her tongue. It was difficult – so difficult – for her to do the sympathy thing with other women. So easily could you offend them, or set them off. In school she'd gotten away with sad smiles and a hug, but now it was different.

Two different responses were possible, from what she saw: a comforting response, or an honest one. After a moment of deliberation, Hermione cast the first one aside – Lavender was asking her, Hermione Granger, the question, so it was very unlikely she expected pretty lies. All the same, Hermione chose her words carefully.

"There is… every possibility that you will find your balance," there, that wasn't too callous. Though Lavender was still staring at her, so apparently not enough… "I shouldn't think that you're so very weak, despite your natural aversion to the condition. You have, after all, had a year to adjust to your lycan senses – that's an advantage most new wolves don't have. And you have us, Ginny, Luna and I. You know I'll do anything I can to help you, Lavender. Luna probably has something up her sleeves already."

Lavender let out a wet noise – it might have been a laugh – and nuzzled her nose into Hermione's shoulder. "And I suppose you'll get Lupin to help," she said, smiling against Hermione's shirt.

"If he wants to," Hermione conceded, though in her head she was certain he'd help, whether he liked it or not. "I'll have nothing to do with that, though. That's a pack thing."

"But you are pack," Lavender grumbled lightly. "I can smell it."

Hermione smiled a little too, reaching up to stroke Lavender's hair, the petulance in her voice warming her heart. "I think that's just because we're friends," she corrected, and then grinning at Lavender's responding chuckle.

"We're not friends, Hermione," Lavender sighed, sounding amused. "We've never been friends."

Rolling her eyes, Hermione tucked the other girl back under her arm. "We're friends now," she told her firmly, tapping her on the cheek. "We have to be, there's nobody else. Besides, do you think I'm the type of girl to climb into bed with complete strangers? I'm offended, Lavender, really."

Laughter vibrated through Hermione's ribcage, and it was not unpleasant. "No, Hermione, not you." There was a pause, and then: "Alright, then. Friends." Her weight shifted on the mattress and then a limb was laid across Hermione's stomach. "Parvati would never believe this," she murmured softly, her voice still laced with lightness, though there was an undercurrent of something warmer.

Hermione shuffled down the bed until her head was on the pillow, and gazed up at the ceiling. "Let's not tell her then," she whispered, listening to Lavender's breathing getting deeper. "I've never liked her, anyway."

Then Lavender was out like a light, and Hermione followed not long after.

"How is he?"

Lily squeaked, startled, her hand flying to her chest. "Sorry," the same voice said, from behind her, tired sounding but sufficiently penitent. She span around to face the offender. James was lolling against the opposite wall, his clothes rumpled and hair almost on end. He'd obviously been out there for an age – it was nearly one in the morning at least, and she had been tending to Remus for hours. His eyes were still bright, though, that spark of intelligence still present. When he opened his arms, Lily fell into them gratefully.
"He's fine, perfectly well. Woke up for a second, then went straight back under, but it's a natural sleep now. Your mother thinks he'll wake up in the morning like nothing ever happened."

James nodded, she could tell, though she only just felt it through the muscles at the top of his chest. "Do we know what it was?" And that was the reason she'd jumped.

An elf had deduced the reason for Remus' sickness, being experts as they were on the Wild Magics, and given them direction for his recovery, so she knew that he was okay and it was no-one's fault... but would James see it like that? Dorea thought that they should keep it quiet until the morning, just in case, but maybe she was referring to their guests, and not James - it was so hard to tell, sometimes.

Lily bit her lip – really, she shouldn't tell him; he'd only get upset and it wasn't her place. But then, he did have a right to know, and she was never very good at keeping secrets anyway. Maybe if she only told him a bit – found a middle ground? Surely Dorea couldn't argue with that, and it wouldn't trouble the new girls all that much either. They had disappeared earlier, but Lily knew they'd gone to the library and then bed, though how she knew that she wasn't quite sure. It came from the same place as the warning not to tell James the whole truth, which made her suspicious. Dorea had been watching her closely all day, too – maybe she had been cursed? Why they would curse her, of all of them, she wasn't sure, but it was feasible... sort of... what did she really know about them, except that they apparently came from the future? Why was she suddenly willing to trust them, to the point of lying to her fiancé? It was a lie, too, that's what her parents had taught her.

Surely, though, telling him everything she knew – which wasn't, by any means, all there was to know – would just cause undue hassle? And, it would break the tentative trust she'd formed with the newcomers, which, surely, as the only person from this time that had formed any sort of a bond with them, it became her duty to maintain it?

Oh, how difficult it all was.

She wrapped her arms around his back, pulling him closer to her, burying her face in his chest and breathing deeply to catch the scent of James – cotton, broom polish, just-turned leaves and a little bit of sweat. Her James. Her James that she loved, who could be killed. Who might die, if not for the help that these girls could give him, despite the unintended consequences of their arrival. And she knew that Remus would be fine – better than fine, probably, now that he had Lavender to play with – but there was no such guarantee for James.

"He was just tired, I think," Lily said, finally looking up at him with a smile. It was partly true, of course, which was probably what made James believe her. Before her conscience could attack again, she looked down at the floor and said quickly, "I'm tired, though, James. Can you take me to bed now?"

She didn't look at him, and therefore couldn't tell what he battled with – though she knew he battled with something, inside, for it took him a few minutes before he responded – but eventually, he tightened his grip on her and pressed a kiss to her hair. "Of course, Lils. Let me just check in with Sirius first, yeah?"

"Sure," Lily nodded, going practically boneless in her relief. "Sure. I'll meet you upstairs."

She ran an affectionate hand through his unruly hair, watching the strands slip through her fingers and thinking about what Hermione had said about her son's hair. Her son, Harry, who she'd keep safe. Her son, who would no doubt look exactly like his father, who she never wanted to lose, no matter what the cost. It had taken them years to get to this point, and she wasn't letting go now. "You hurry," she added as an afterthought, meeting his sparkling eyes and flashing a coquettish smirk. "Wait too long, and I might fall asleep."
With one last lingering look from beneath her eyelashes, she swanned off down the corridor.
Remus woke to a new knowledge, and he didn't particularly appreciate it.

He had accepted, quietly, that his life had changed with the arrival of the new girls. He had been sort of okay with that. After all, if they were going to help them defeat Voldemort, then it would be petty to be irritated at their arrival.

It helped that he'd known his friends would still be there, by his side, the whole time.

It had taken many years for him to get to this point; comfortable enough with himself, surrounded by friends and family, not having to hide his secret. He'd even lost his virginity last Spring with minimal anxiety, once he'd gotten over the terror of being too rough, too violent, or – dear god – changing. Logically he'd known that wasn't possible, but sex called for a certain amount of… letting go, and he'd been irrationally terrified that at that point, when he let go, Moony would take the reins.

That hadn't happened, so he was fine. Happy. In a good place – the best place he'd experienced that he could remember.

Naturally, this meant that something had to ruin it.
Laying in the bed with his eyes still closed, he tried to come to terms with the revelation. It was better that he did so now, by himself, than if he wallowed in his sulky confusion until he spoke to James and Sirius, who would no doubt take it worse than him and need mediation. That was his job, so he needed to get over his issues now. Besides, they would be outraged on his behalf, which was always a much nicer feeling than being angry alone.

Really, though, it was like he'd accidentally adopted a child. Or, rather, Moony had. Moony was napping now, quite satisfied with the turn of events, enjoying the growth of his pack. Of course, he didn't have human concerns, so it was alright for him. But Remus… Remus was a wizard, who now had responsibility of a fully grown witch, perfectly capable of looking after herself. Not in werewolf terms, though. If she got in trouble, he would be the one to pay for it. He'd have to be strong enough for the both of them, in case she got into trouble. At least, until she bound her magic – and the possibility of that happening was minimal. It was just luck that meant he wouldn't have to follow her around guarding her from paper cuts – he was strong and she wasn't excessively weak, just weak enough to merit protection.

He might have been okay with that – even have volunteered for the responsibility – if it wasn't for the fact that he hadn't been given a choice. Her wolf had simply latched onto his, and damn the rest of him. Didn't he have enough to deal with? He pressed his pillow across his face, stifling a groan. His life just seemed to be one disaster after another, lately.

The cords of power that tethered him to his pack were almost visible that morning, as he climbed out of bed and made his way to the shower. Three strong ones, Lily, James and Sirius; two fading ones, for Peter and Greyback; one bright but insubstantial one, for Lavender, and then –

Remus stared down at his chest, where the magical wires seemed to meet. One, two, three four five six – Seven?

It was only a shadow, which was why he missed it the first time, but there was no doubt that it was Pack. Not confirmed Pack, so they can't have been a werewolf… maybe Lily was pregnant, which would cause an uproar, or Lavender, or…

He didn't think much further than that as the obvious solution scared him a little, or, a lot. He blinked his eyes and shook his head a few times until the glowing dissipated, and set himself to showering with new vigour. It was so good to have energy again, that he determined to forget about the phantom bond and focus on the present.

The morning sun gilded everything with a pale golden light, making the dew sparkle like jewels on the grass. It was only early – the elves were fussing in the kitchens, and Charlus was in his office, but Dorea was still sleeping, and there had been no signs of life from the wing the boys occupied either. The second the sun had risen, however, Luna had woken the rest of the girls up and dragged them into the grounds, despite their complaints. Now she danced easily across the lawn to a tune only she could hear, Hermione, Lavender and Ginny following behind her.

"What are we doing, Luna?" Ginny called out as the other girl skipped through the trees on the edge of the orchard. Luna shot her a grin and darted into the trees, singing louder so that they could hear her. Ginny and Hermione exchanged a look and followed forward. Lavender, bringing up the rear, had stuck to her scowl since she'd been unceremoniously woken up earlier, and had realized it hadn't yet passed six. "But why do we have to do everything that nutter says?" She'd complained loudly when Hermione had pushed her out of bed, and had continued to complain, over and over, as they had left the house. Nobody had bothered to respond to her, but she suspected that it was more to do with them not knowing the answer than the stupidity of the question.
Now, like obedient little lambs, they all swerved into the woodland and followed the sound of Luna's humming until they reached a clearing, finding their friend sat cross-legged in the centre. For Hermione, it was too eerily reminiscent of the night they had arrived, and she scoped out the area hesitantly.

"Don't worry, Hermione, the ritual space is at least a hundred feet east of here," Ginny murmured, then bent down to take off her shoes. Generally, Ginny had the deepest and most reliable insight into Luna's actions, so it only seemed right for Hermione to remove her own, and then look at Lavender expectantly.

Lavender, who had spent twenty minutes scouring Hermione's bag for something not-hideous (in Lavender's world, which meant over-the-top-and-a-bit-slutty to everybody else -- or at least, that was how Hermione saw it) to wear, looked distinctly unwilling to remove her three-inch heeled platform clogs. "What are we doing?" She repeated Ginny's earlier question, her arms crossed over her chest. "I'm not taking off my shoes if it means I'll have to take everything else off, too." She pointed an accusing finger in Luna's direction, her face scrunched up suspiciously. "I can guess her idea of 'communing with nature', and I've been through enough already without having to see your tits." This last bit she aimed at Ginny, apparently even in her bad mood still attempting to hold up the peace she and Hermione had formed the night before. Hermione, who had been rather proud of her own breasts since they had developed at the late age of fifteen, appreciated her diplomacy.

Ginny tossed her hair forward and brought it back, gathering it into a ponytail on the top of her head. "Ignore her," she shouted at Luna, as though perhaps Luna might have been offended, which was highly improbable, "she's not a morning person!"

Hermione and Ginny then left their shoes underneath the tree where they had found Luna's, and tripped delicately across the grass to join Luna, who looked unperterbed by events. Lavender dithered for a moment, then made a show of stomping across to the other girls belongings. "Fine!" She cried, deliberately loud enough for the others to hear. "But I'm not getting naked!"

"Thank Merlin for small mercies," Ginny muttered under her breath. Hermione snorted, and Luna's lips twitched up, but they were back to neutral by the time Lavender had made her way to join them.

"Well?" She demanded, flopping somehow gracefully to the ground. Hermione marvelled at how truly awful she was of a morning – at school she'd always slept right up until breakfast began, and had silently spent the next hour applying make-up, so this attitude was an unpleasant surprise. Except -- no, there was that morning in fourth year that the fifth-year prefect had come in to wake them up, and Lavender had crushed her wrist because the older girl had somewhat unwisely attempted to yank her covers away. That was something Lavender and Ron had had in common after the war – their sleep all day/party all night mentality.

Luna let out a humming breath, as though she had been interrupted during her meditations. "Hermione said something yesterday about having to keep you in shape, Lavender, to ensure you're the strongest you can be."

"Did I?" wondered Hermione aloud, but Luna pressed on.

"What with you being so weak and all, and your magic being unreliable, you'll need training up. It seems a waste for only you to be training, so I thought, we've all lost a bit of our war-toned skill, why don't we work on it together?"

Ginny blinked. "What war-toned skill? You spent the war in the Malfoy Manor dungeons. Hermione was so starved, she looked like an inferi. I don't think she wants that emaciated look back -- so not hot."
"I'm not a violent person, but I know some self-defense, and Ginny's a scrapper." Luna was doing that thing again, where she ignored everybody else's existence until it suited her. "She's also the fittest of us all," – "Mirror, mirror, on the wall," Ginny whispered so that only Hermione could hear, and they both fell to giggling. Naturally, Luna ignored them, and Lavender eyed them suspiciously. – "- which means she can help us work up an exercise regime, keep us on our toes. If we work at it every day, we should be up to scratch in no time."

"That sounds fair, I suppose," Hermione said, nodding sagely. She wasn't sold on the idea that she had actually suggested anything along these lines, but memories of running from the Snatchers and none of them being fast enough encroached, appealing to her logic. With a lopsided smirk, she tried to bring back her earlier good humour. "But – and I mean this – who are you, and what have you done with our Luna?"

Luna blinked. "I am Luna."

Tutting, Hermione shook her head. "You can't possibly be Luna, I'm afraid. You said something entirely too sensible, and it broke your cover. Our Luna would never do that."

Raising an eyebrow, Luna said, "Just like our Hermione would never make a joke?"

"She has you there," agreed Ginny with a wink. Then, apparently realising that this was the answer to her prayers, suddenly she perked up. "I think it sounds like a brilliant idea, Lu. Shall we start with a jog? See how everybody measures up?"

"No, no, no!" Lavender squeaked as everybody climbed to their feet. "I didn't agree to exercise! No way! I'll just meet you all inside for breakfast, shall I?"

She made for the trees, but Ginny was faster, fastening her hand around her bicep. "See, that was rubbish. You'll need plenty of training," Ginny scolded her, smiling, as she all but pulled her back into the circle.

"But I'm a werewolf! I'll burn everything off anyway – have you ever seen a fat werewolf? No." It was astounding how easily she drew out that information, with nary a flinch, when it might mean she got her way.

"Lavender-"

"Plus, I'm perfectly healthy and I like the way I look – voluptuous, Ron called me, like the Bottle-cherry ladies!"

Wryly, Hermione smiled. "Boticelli, do you mean?" She tapped her chin sardonically. "Gosh, I do wonder where Ronald got that from."

Unfortunately, her stopping to stick her tongue out at Hermione gave Ginny the chance she needed to shove Lavender into position. "I don't give two figs about Bloody Bottle-whosit. You shut your face, Hermione! I know that's not how it's pronounced! I don't care. I care about keeping us all alive, and Lavender, that includes you. In fact, you're the one it applies to most! Now, you'll train with us whether I have to imperius you or not." Her fierce look seemed to quell Lavender for a moment, until she took note that Hermione and Luna appeared to be stretching. Panicking, she cast about for a feasible excuse.

"I don't have a sports bra," Lavender announced, smugly, with all the airs and graces of a Prisoner on Death Row who had suddenly been pardoned. "I don't know about you, Miss 32B," here she looked pointedly at Ginny's pert, but hardly large, bosom, "but these need at least three layers of
fabric before they stop smacking me in the face."

Ginny quashed this delight quickly. "Are you a witch, or not?" She snapped, and then flicked her wand at the other girl's chest. There was a spark, and suddenly Lavender seemed to be unable to breathe, her torso malformed into an odd sausage-shape. Her redhead friend looked carelessly self-satisfied. "There. Now you can run."

It was amazing how quickly Ginny's generally laid-back demeanour could switch into Drill Sergeant mode, truly. In less than ten more minutes, she had Luna and Hermione doing laps in their bare feet around the clearing - when Hermione asked to put her trainers back on, she had Luna on one side going on about disturbing the natural magics of the area with nasty man-made material, and Ginny on the other grinding on about all-terrain preparation, so she'd given up in short order - and Lavender lagging behind them. Hermione and Luna had lapped her twice before she gave up her complaining to Ginny about some back problems she'd mysteriously conjured, and was now doing the most pathetic excuse for a jog any of the girls had ever seen.

"Knees up, Lav!" Ginny barked, clearly enjoying herself.

"She needs a better nickname," Hermione puffed out as she and Luna started their fifth lap with Ginny's less-than dulcet tones in the background. "Lav is – (pant, pant) – revolting."

Luna did an odd running shrug. "I don't think her mate is much of a one for nicknames," she threw back, then sped up out of Hermione's reach, ending the conversation. Hermione shook her head, expecting that Luna was playing one of her games again, for she couldn't possibly know who Lavender's mate was when she had been a werewolf for all of three days - could she? It was preposterous, and entirely unlikely to boot.

By the time Lavender had made five laps, she looked ready to collapse, so Ginny called a halt to proceedings and they all met in the centre of the clearing again for a cool down. Lavender attempted to flop onto the floor, but Ginny stopped her with a sadistic baring of her teeth. "Oh, no, missus. You'll seize up if you do that."

"I've already seized!" Lavender cried, using one arm to wipe sweat from her forehead, though it looked like an effort. "I can't do this, really, I can't do it! Go on without me!"

And she dropped to the ground, spread-eagle, her limbs limp as spaghetti and splayed out uncomfortably. Even Luna stopped to look at her quizzically.

"I think she's more Rubens," the blonde girl murmured, turning her head on an angle to better observe Lavender's form. It took a moment for Hermione to pick up the train of thought, not least because she hadn't realized Luna had been listening earlier. "Mars und Rhea Silvia," Luna remarked obliquely, sending Hermione a smile, before waltzing off into the trees to be at one with the dryads, or something.

Ginny finally agreed to end the session on the promise that the girls would jog together later that night, though nobody except for her was very excited by the prospect. In contrast to the other three, who all looked pale and sweaty and all-round exhausted, Ginny was invigorated by the exercise, skipping her way back to the Manor and calling back suggestions for what to do next.

"We need Kreacher, at least." She hollered, turning on her heels to walk backwards, face glowing. "If we can't get to Regulus by any other way."

Hermione wrinkled her nose with distaste, remembering the elf's disgusted whispers about her. For
all that she had taken on the role of House-Elf Liberator, she had still been glad to see the back of him when he'd decamped to Hogwarts. "That's nigh-on impossible to do," she replied, "considering he's a Black elf, and look at us – no Blacks."

"I'm a Black," a voice said, sending Ginny into a twirl. She tripped on her own feet, yelped, and fell. Above her, Sirius Black was looking vaguely amused, having exited through the kitchen door that almost melded into the stone. "Alright, love?" he drawled, sending a blush across Ginny's face. It took her a moment to remember that she didn't like him, and curse herself for acting like a silly child. Forcing a scowl, she scrambled to her feet and brushed at her knees.

"Fine, thanks," she snapped irritably, pressing her chilled hands to her cheeks to banish the glow of her embarrassment, which further fed the flames of anger in her gut. She sent a betrayed glare back at the girls for not coming to her rescue. None of them had the grace to look chastised, the cows. "What do you want?"

He loomed over her, at least twice as broad, or perhaps she imagined he was because his mere presence had such a claustrophobic effect. His wide mouth twitched at the corners, the grey of his eyes warmed. Apparently, he'd forgotten that she was an untrustworthy child, and that he didn't care for any of them. "This is my home," he reminded her, looking even more entertained when she took a step back – so that she wouldn't get a crick in her neck looking at him, not because he intimidated her; oh no, Ginny was never intimidated by men. "You're the visitor – the loud visitor, screaming her little head off at eight in the morning. I thought you might be in trouble."

Sirius looked faintly disgusted, probably at the prospect of being awake at such an uncivilized hour. He was still in his pyjamas, lending credence to the idea that perhaps he'd rushed downstairs in a fit of goodwill, but Ginny wasn't the sort of girl who would buy whatever guff he decided to sell her without a fight. "Oh? And you thought you'd rush to rescue the poor damsel in distress, did you? Thought we might need your help? I can take care of myself, you know!"

A shadow crossed his face, and he scowled. "Actually, I was going to ask if you could keep it down. Get murdered if you like, just be considerate enough to remember that people are sleeping in here, yeah?"

Then he disappeared back inside, slamming the door behind him. Lavender let out a low whistle, her normal personality having apparently been bolstered by the sight of her torturous personal trainer landing on her arse in front of a fit lad. "He really doesn't like you," she informed Ginny, matter-of-factly. Ginny snarled at her, then at Luna and Hermione, before letting out a frustrated huff and yanking at the kitchen door, intent on making an exit.

Locked, of course.

She caught the barely-restrained laughter on Lavender's smug face, let out a shout of fury, and flounced off.
The girls had mostly forgotten to be worried about Remus – except, of course, Hermione, for whom he was never completely absent – and it was with relief mixed with varying levels of guilt that they saw him at the table that morning. He was pale but present, which loosened the knot of worry in Hermione's gut, the one that always doubted whether she'd gotten her answers right, be it in an exam or on a Horcrux hunt. James and Sirius were also in a much lighter mood, probably caused by Remus's regained health, and neither seemed willing to take a jab at their presence and risk ruining the light atmosphere. Rather, they ignored the girls' appearance and chatted amongst themselves.

Breakfast had been laid out on a sideboard on the back wall, opposite the windows. Carafe upon carafe of pumpkin juice, orange juice, apple juice, pots of tea, one pot of coffee were lined against the wall, and on trays in front were glistening sausages, perfect eggs, griddled bacon, toast – even those little ramekins of marmalades and jams at one side. It was a haven of delicious breakfast foods, all kept in stasis by the subtle fizz of elf magic. Unused to such a plethora of options, Lavender dithered over it, gobsmacked and starry eyed at the many different types of meat and fat she could eat in one meal. Eventually, her stomach let out an embarrassingly loud grumble that even the boys took notice of. She raised her chin stubbornly and sent them a challenging look; but it didn't stop Ginny laughing from where she was piling her plate with protein. In retaliation Lavender dived forward, nicked her dish out of her hands, and sauntered back to the table with a sassy 'thank you!' thrown over her shoulder, the whole action taking less than a second. Ginny, left staring at Lavender's pitifully empty plate, rolled her eyes and began again.

Hermione lingered there for a few moments after the other girls had taken their loads to the table, as they had commandeered the opposite corner to the boys, and this was the closest part of the room to Remus without her looking odd. It might have seemed suspicious that she spent so much time inspecting the apricot chutney, but she didn't care about that too much. He was well, she could feel that, his presence an inviting heat against her occlumency shields. If she dropped them, then she would be able to inspect his health more thoroughly, but she'd not done that since sixth year when she had just discovered the link in her meditations, but hadn't been sure what it was.
She wasn’t sure what it was now, even. Remus had promised he’d explain everything later, after the war, when she’d last seen him. He hadn't seemed overly blown away by the discovery, nor surprised, but had refused to answer her questions, so she’d turned to her refuge. Books. Bonds weren't widely written about, though it had been enough that she knew it was a bond. Werewolf literature was even vaguer, and harder to get her hands on. She'd thought perhaps they were Mated for a few weeks, until he married Tonks. The wedding had crushed that possibility efficiently enough, plus the fact that none of her research mentioned this sort of metaphysical connection between Mated pairs.

It was something, though. Mating with him, with the capital 'M', and them being together forever, had been a child's dream. Her constant awareness of him, her intimate knowledge of him despite their lack of speaking, that was a reality – and finding the answers had become more pressing a responsibility, because now she didn't know him, they were strangers, and he was likely to notice the magic soon and demand an explanation. An explanation she didn't have.

There was a low hum of conversation in the air, but it stayed light, nothing about the future or the war. The Marauders were talking about some party they had gone to the other week, their mutual friends, some names came up that Hermione vaguely recognized but wasn't overly interested in. She'd add the new information to her book later, just in case. Conversation was delicately structured to avoid mention of Peter, which added tension, but otherwise they might have been having breakfast any other day.

On the girls' side, where Hermione finally retreated with no notion as to what she might have put on her plate, Luna was braiding her hair while nodding along to Ginny, whose energy was, if anything, growing after their earlier run. Her fitness regime, she told them, took up about three to four hours every day, starting with a jog at dawn and ending with a jog before bed. Leaning closer, her eyes alight with excitement, she lectured that because people ate large meals in the evening, they had too much excess energy in their system which wasn't being used. "Eat more in the morning," she advised sagely, pointing at her loaded plate of protein.

Lavender, who wasn't listening at all, leaned back in her chair to make a scornful face at Hermione behind Ginny's back. Normally Hermione would have been resolutely on Ginny's side, but she was a happy size 14 and fit enough for it in a way that Luna and Ginny couldn't empathise with. In the interests of preventing a civil war - which seemed highly possible, from the dangerous look on Lavender's face as she pointedly shoveled food into her mouth - she summoned her notebook and dropped it on the table with a smile, the thud attracting the other girls' attention to her.

"We need to talk about the situation," she said, pointing at her book. Luna nodded, but the other two looked a bit lost. "You know, the one that brought us here?"

"The War," Ginny said slowly, seeming concerned about Hermione's lacking mental state, "we know. What about it?"

"It occurred to me that the Potters and friends all expect us to guide them through the war," Hermione began quietly so that the boys wouldn't overhear, a little bitter about having to break the light atmosphere, but mostly determined to get the issue sorted. "We haven't done anything to convince them otherwise, either. Yet, we don't have a clue what's going on so far, or how to start getting things in order. While they think we're some magical miracle solution, we need to remember that we're not, and it's going to take a lot of work on our side to get anywhere near success."

Hermione scrunched up her face, not liking the sensation pressure on her shoulders. She wasn’t a leader, had never asked to be. At best, she was an efficient second in command – she followed instructions well, and could boss people about with the best of them, but lacked that essential spark that led to the creation of new spells, new curriculum, new governments. Her work in the DoM had
consisted of finding problems and solving them, which was what Hermione was best at, but she was useless at solving problems that didn't exist, at poking holes where they didn't belong and filling them before anybody noticed. Since being dropped in 1979, however, it seemed the responsibility of the War lay squarely on her shoulders. The other girls may have had a pop about her lack of pureblood knowledge, and they may be determined that they fix the wrongdoings of the war, but none of them had actually started to do anything.

Truthfully, the way they had won their war was through trial and error. It had been a cluster-fuck of epic proportions, complete with underfed dragons destroying ancient Wizarding metropolis and strokes of luck to cover up their lack of any actual plan. To be expected to collate all of that into an actual, workable strategy to unravel history from the start… it was an immense challenge. She felt like Lachesis, stood over the tapestry of life, with all this power and knowledge and ability at her fingertips, only Hermione was suddenly realizing she didn't know how to weave.

Ginny seemed to understand what she was thinking, or it was written all over Hermione's face, for she reached out to take the notebook and frowned at the pages. It was open to the rough timeline Hermione had sketched, from the first thing she knew about the first Wizarding War – the Bones family deaths – all the way through to Voldemort's defeat at Hogwarts. On the next page, glamoured invisible to those who did not know it was there, was the list of Horcruxes. It was obvious the second Ginny noticed it, for she froze – genuinely froze, like a deer in headlights, from her toes to her eyes – before nodding as though she'd come to a decision and putting it down again. Then she looked at Luna.

"You pack anything useful in that bag, or is it all just naked pictured of me?" She joked, her smile somewhat sincere, though the effect was spoilt by her sudden paleness.

Luna nodded, munching on a strawberry. "Old Prophets, books on the war, the entire backdated Quibbler archive from 1976 to 1999. They're in there, if you look."

The brunette looked vaguely surprised, but accepted that explanation easily. "Then I'll do research, straight after breakfast. We do need to focus more on the task at hand though, so to speak."

"Lavender's health is just as important as the War," Ginny scolded, but didn't object.

When it seemed the others were on board, Hermione explained her idea for their part of the war, first checking the boys weren't paying attention. "We can't cross the Order, not yet. Saving lives is fine, but we'll need to find a way to do that which doesn't put us in the path of..." here she glanced around furtively, as though paranoid that the man in question would suddenly appear for jam and scones, "Dumbledore. Preferably, we wouldn't want to draw attention to us from Riddle, either, so we'll have to be quiet and inconspicuous."

"Right, but if we're not fighting, we're sneaking about in our saving lives, and we're not coming out, what are we doing?" Lavender asked, though it was a bit muffled as it came on the end of a bite of sausage.

Hermione passed her a scathing look at her lack of manners. "You aren't doing any of that, anyway, until we're sure a) that your magic isn't a ticking bomb, and b) that you getting a paper cut isn't going to exsanguinate Remus. And to answer your question, we'll be looking for these." She tapped the list with a fingernail, ignoring Ginny's flinch. "Of course, first we'll need to find somewhere safe to keep them, then figure out where they all are right now, before we even think about bringing them back and destroying them, but their destruction is our ultimate aim. At the same time we'll need to be looking out for fixed points in time, and watching how they've changed – that will give us an idea of how much we've changed time, if at all. We've got a lot to do and not much time to do it in."
Lavender, still not looking pleased, pouted up at Hermione. "And what will I be doing, if I'm not allowed to be hunting for horcruxes?" she demanded.

Hermione, returning her notebook to her bag as the thrill of research began to tickle across her skin, gave a grin to the other girl. "The admin, of course."

"What do you think they're talking about?" James asked, breaking into a conversation on the Holyhead Harpies to send a suspicious glare across the room, tapping his spoon against his bowl of porridge agitatedly. Glancing across, Remus noticed that they had indeed ended their relatively loud conversation about exercise and were now muttering together, heads bent close. As he watched, the brunette – Hermione, Remus recalled – looked up. Their eyes only met for a brief moment, but even as she broke away, in Remus' mind Moony woke up and began to watch.

"Remus, probably," Sirius replied, pausing halfway through a Cumberland sausage to follow their line of sight. "Hardly going to be make-up and shopping with that lot, is it?"

Remus rolled his eyes, feeling irritated for no good reason with his friend. "They're still women, you know," he reminded the two of them, because the other two seemed to view their time-travelling guests as the enemy, and without good reason had cast them as some sort of moustache-twirling villains without either personality nor life of their own outside of throwing theirs into turmoil. Remus was frustrated that this instant judgement had been made so quickly, but equally so that he'd not had the pleasure of being able to think these things himself, on account of Lavender's essence loitering at the back of his mind, waiting to be acknowledged. He liked to think he was a good guy, but even a really good guy liked to make his own judgements about people.

This, again, wasn't an option. Lavender's presence was delicate, effeminate, overlaid with the scent of bell heather – a curious scent for a person who looked like Lavender Brown to have, if he was honest. He was reluctantly intrigued by this, as well as the natural interest he should have for a new member of his pack, but these feelings only frustrated him further, because he knew that had he been wholly human he wouldn't be thinking things like is she as delicate as Lavender, or as hardy and stubborn as heather? Because it wouldn't be something he'd notice enough to bother with. Even more concerning was the fact that she felt lonely – something he was intimately familiar with, and it was this more than any wolf instinct that made him soften towards her in the end, for it drew memories of himself as he came to terms with his own lycanthropy. It made him pity her a little, which while being something she would find offensive, was also more effective than sympathy in getting him to view her as a person rather than a burden visited upon him by his curse.

James sent him a surprised look at his words, and Remus didn't blame him. While he hadn't bought into the non-stop bash fest Sirius and Remus were enjoying, this was also the first time he'd defended them. It was the first time he'd been in the mood to defend them. He'd yet to tell his friends about what had caused him to collapse, and they had only asked the once so far before giving into their relief that he was whole, unharmed, and well. He'd have to tell them at some point, of course, but they'd seemed to have reached an unspoken compromise with the girls, and Remus was loathe to be the reason it broke prematurely.

"Don't let Lily hear you say things like that," James said, recovering himself slightly and adopting the hushed reverent tone that was his default when talking about his fiancée. Remus and Sirius exchanged an exasperated look – eight years now, and James still spoke about Lily as if she was some sort of temperamental Goddess; beautiful and terrifying in equal turns, yet completely irresistible. Sweet, yes, but Remus couldn't imagine ever falling for anybody so completely, and Sirius agreed. Together they were waiting impatiently for the day James and Lily started acting like a normal couple, because at the moment it seemed that if Lily chose to Avada James, he would die
smiling for the pleasure of being the centre of her attention for the time it took.

Moony gave a snort of disagreement and let out a huff. That was the first of his plentiful daily reminders to Remus that Moony disagreed completely with this assessment – he thought that one day Remus would have a Mate, and he'd then understand. Remus disagreed vehemently with this assessment, and it was likely the sort of thing they'd never come to terms on. He didn't buy into the whole 'wolf-mate' myth; there was no evidence it existed, and while the romantic side of himself (a rather large part, if he was honest, though at the moment it was gagged and bound on this subject) thought it was a delightful idea, the logical side knew that if there was a perfect person out there for him – beautiful, clever, witty and beyond his wildest wishes – then the best thing he could do for her would be to run a mile.

Depressing thought, but true.

"It's the muggleborn in her," Sirius was saying when Remus tuned back in. He had donned the airs of someone with great wisdom – a person as far removed from Sirius as it was possible to be, probably – and was waving a fork around with authority. "Muggle women get really offended when you say stuff like that, Moony. You know, categorise them according to their gender. You say they like makeup and jewellery, and they'll provide you with a hundred examples of women who don't touch the stuff and men who do, or worse." He shuddered theatrically, his other hand rising to stroke a finger over a scar on his temple. "Take it from me, you don't want to be on the wrong side of a girl's temper when it comes to women's lib, magic or no."

Remus smirked at the memory. In 1976, Sirius had wandered into a night-time political rally in Edinburgh and obliviously started hitting on one of the leaders. Getting beaten by a dozen irate scotswomen after one too many firewhiskeys and an indecent joke about lesbianism had left its mark on him, alright. In Remus' eyes (and Lily's, and Marlene's, and Mary's, and every woman at Hogwarts') it was a lesson he should have learned earlier.

James scoffed, sending Sirius a contemptuous look, though it was laced with enough amusement that Remus could tell that he, too, was fondly recalling that night. Sirius had cried for help as he'd gone down, but James had been unable to render aid on account of him laughing too hard, and Remus had felt morally obliged to let the women have their say. Peter, the only one of them who may have given him assistance, had conveniently disappeared, later to be found passed out face-down in an alley off Queen Street.

"Yes, well, we're not all so stupid as you, Pads," James sniffed.

"I prefer indelicate," Sirius faked affront, a hand to his chest.

"I prefer imbecilic," Lily's voice floated in as she took the seat next to James, unsurprisingly the one closest to the girls on the other end. To make her lack of allegiance even clearer, she added a grin and a jaunty wave in their direction before turning back to them. "Since we're starting the morning by offending the entirety of the fairer sex, and Muggles to boot," she said in an acidic tone that told them she'd gotten the gist of the conversation, "perhaps you can attempt to at least please your own woman, for once, James, and get me some breakfast?"

James flashed them an alarmed look but dutifully nipped off to the sideboard, while Lily turned her attention on Remus. She unleashed a soft, affectionate smile of the sort that warmed Remus through to his bones, and she only ever used on special occasions. "You look better," she observed, looking at the new colour in Remus' cheeks and the brightness of his eyes with approval. "How do you feel?"

"Fine," Remus responded with a gentle smile, trying to beg her with his eyes not to ask the question
he knew she was going to.

"Well that's good," she perked up, "any idea what happened?"

There it was. Remus looked down at his plate, cursing her in his head half-heartedly. He'd be happy to tell her, but not right now, in the company of an intent Sirius and an interested James, and not with the girls within hexing distance. "Does it matter?" He volleyed lightly, before shovelling the last of his bacon into his mouth at speed. He stood, and in a display of extraordinarily dreadful manners, he spluttered an excuse about fetching more food through the chunks of meat and darted off to the sideboard, sending his chair thudding to the ground in his wake.

And then, just as suddenly, he stopped.

There was… something… in the air. Something… sweet… so sweet… so delicious smelling…

His mouth was watering, his eyes almost crossed as it wafted through his senses, luring him into a trance of pure pleasure. It was so strong… so pungent… as if the source was right there…

Moony had padded to the front of his mind, sniffing and whining, but making no attempt to break through. In honesty, Remus wanted to whine too, it was so delightful… he only just had the presence of mind to shut the sound down before it came out…. Only just, though…

It was so comforting. Like home, but not his home, a new home… one with laughter and hugs and kisses and long nights in bed followed by lie-ins and more laughter and more kisses and children and a garden and…

Remus had the absurd urge to rip it from the air, form it into a blanket and wrap himself in it, never to let go…

Moony had the urge to roll in it, covering himself so thoroughly in the beauty of it that no amount of washing would ever rid him of its comfort…

There was a clatter in the background, but Remus paid it no mind. Moony was stretching, preparing for a hunt, and Remus thought that was a brilliant idea, wonderful, anything to find the source of…

A cool burst of air swept past, clearing his nose, wiping it all away so rapidly that Remus couldn't prevent a vicious growl. He span, his eyes opening, to face the culprit.

Stood at the other side of the room, holding a window pole at her side like a triumphant warrior Queen, stood Luna. Her eyes suspiciously wide and innocent, she smiled at him. "Oops, sorry!" She sang, continuing nevertheless to open the windows lining the wall, letting in the spring air and simultaneously ridding the room of the last dregs of the intoxicating fragrance. "Just thought it was getting a little bit stuffy in here, that's all. Is there a problem, Remus?"

Her eyes were, at first appearance, completely guileless, but at the back – and Remus could only see this because he was so buoyed by Moony's rage at the girl, later thinking that he might have imagined it – there was a shimmer of apology.

"No," he responded shortly, seeing no other choice.

"Oh, good," she practically purred, her face as bright as the morning sun as she broke into a smile. "In that case, I think we have work to do. Hermione?"

The girls cleared out in record time, dumping their leftovers into the compost for Dorea's vegetable garden and piling their plates on the sideboard before filing out the door. During the whole
performance, Luna held his eyes, still looking oddly melancholy, before with a respectful nod, she disappeared too, the door closing gently behind her. Remus was left to answer to his friends.
Chapter Twenty: Fate

Chapter Summary
Luna meets up with some old pals.

Chapter Notes
Hi!
I realized this afternoon that if Antonin Dolohov had a daughter, his daughter's name would be Dolohova, and that struck me as really weird for some reason.

Anyway, I did loads of research in preparation for this fic about Gods and Goddesses and the mythologue of the ancient civilizations - Greek, Roman, Norse, Celtic, I have reams of the stuff stocked away in my head. I knew I'd be using an incarnation of Fate, see, but I wasn't sure which one. It hasn't really appeared much thus far, but here it begins.

So this is a chapter in which I basically threw everything I know about every incarnation of the Three Sisters of Fate into a hat, stirred it a bit, poured it into a baking tray and popped it in the oven for half an hour at gas mark six, then served it up into some semblance of a chapter. I know it's not accurate to the interpretations of the Goddesses, and people will be mad at me for mixing pantheons, but really - I was going to stick with Celtic deities, but the Greeks hold a siren call I simply cannot resist...

Basically, while it's heavily influenced by records of the mythologue, when it came down to writing them out, I made it up.

I hope you enjoy, though, it's my favourite chapter yet!

Love, Eli x

Luna sat alone in a dark, dank room situated at the very top of Potter Manor, squeezed between rafters with a ceiling so thin she could almost make out the shape of the roof tiling. Until ten minutes ago, this side of the floor had been closed off, long forgotten, a dusty shadow at the back of the attic the only indication of a door. So far back, indeed, that the dust on the attic floor had interwoven into a fluffy gray blanket, newer layers making a lighter pattern of swirls and lines until it looked like a purposely designed rug, undisturbed even by the elves.

Many generations of Potters had been and gone throughout these walls without a thought for this room, probably unaware that it existed, and consequently it was in a state; filthy and stale, only saved from horrendous mould by the protective incantations woven into the foundations of the building itself. In one corner stood an ancient looking glass of some polished metal, perhaps older than the house itself, and why it had been delegated to this forgotten wasteland was a mystery. It provided very little in the way of reflection, its new primary purpose being in providing a home to a family of
house-spiders that themselves likely dated back to the building's conception.

Some other pieces of furniture scattered the boundaries of the room, pushed up against the walls and covered in draped cloth, presumably for preservation though the state of the material at this juncture made the effort seem futile, but it was evidence of a time prior when Wizards and Witches still employed sensitive Muggles as servants, who would have shared this cramped space and made it their home.

None of this history, while fascinating and worth later investigation, was why Luna had come.

In the ceiling, directly above the very centre of the room, a square window had been installed. It was small, big enough for Luna to pass through uninhibited but too small for, say, Charlus, and its original purpose was unclear – perhaps stargazing, or simply for air for the servants. It was newer than the room itself and much newer than the building, but obviously old enough for it to have been forgotten when the attic was closed off. The outside was clean, evidence of the elves' diligence in cleaning the outside of the home, but the inside had been coated with layers of grime and dirt, cobwebs gathering dust and hanging low, holding onto their prizes determinedly – dessicated insect carcasses dotted both the strands of silk and the floor below – until such a time that it was nearly invisible looking up, as it had blended so well into the rest of the ceiling.

No so any longer.

It was half past eleven, and Luna had been taken from her bed at eleven. Taken was an accurate word to use – though it had been no visible, discernible force, Luna's lack of control over her own shell was telling. The house had been quiet but not silent, for James was in Lily's room, and as she'd passed Luna had heard the whispers of Dorea and Charlus conferring from within the intimate confines of their marital bed. It had, however, been quiet enough for Luna – or, perhaps, the force that controlled her – to slip about undetected. Her consciousness had been awoken by the message, though it had not been a message of words, but a tug and an image. Too indistinct for her to be able to remember in the morning when she tried, it was still enough to alert her in the night, even as her body had already been moving.

It was similar to the night of her first Seeing, as far as she could recall. It was blurred in her memory, but she could recall an image of a beautiful woman in a state of incandescent fury, face almost purple with rage, holding a mess of frayed yarn. What had come after that remained a mystery, a blur of arguing voices and cryptic instructions, growing weaker in her memory every day that passed, but it had been what had led her to Hermione's time-turner, Lavender's attack, and ultimately, 1979.

Luna found herself more aware this night, half conscious and cataloguing any information she came across. She had faith in the Gods to use her well, but if she was to aid them in their design then she'd quite like to make sure she was doing it properly. It was an odd sensation, though. Her body was moving as if of its own accord, much more purposefully than she ever did in her own life, with an authority that felt wrong in her bones. Luna was, effectively, a passenger in her own head. The other entity did not deign to communicate with her, but she could feel it there, blocking her access to her faculties.

The unknown force had taken her body to the kitchens, collecting bread and wine and dozens of candles with a confidence that Luna didn't hold, seemingly knowing where everything lived without looking. Then she had climbed the back stairs, another relic from the time of servants and in a state of considerable ill-repair, but her body skipped nimbly over rotting steps and collapsed panelling, intuitively sensing where trouble lay. It seemed odd to Luna that with all the opulence in the main house, these back routes could be so obviously ruined, but perhaps the Potters had other things on their mind than old house secrets. She wouldn't know anything about the upkeep of a family estate,
after all, she did live in a house in which each storey held only one room and no secrets.

Once they reached the odd little room, she had lit all of the candles with a single spell wandlessly (impressively, even. A trick she promised herself she'd try again in the morning) and placed them equidistant from one another around the room. When they were in place and she'd cleaned the window using the muslin she'd pilfered from the old mirror, she'd sat to one side, the untouched plate of food on her folded knees, and settled in to wait.

For what, she wasn't sure, but patience was a virtue she had long been accustomed to, even before the weeks she had spent during the war sat in the Malfoy Manor cellar awaiting rescue. She tracked the movement of the moon with her eyes once the presence had retreated enough to allow her to do so, and amused herself by naming the stars twinkling high above her. She felt unnaturally calm, her brain like a lake in deep summer. Nothing rose to the surface for acknowledgement, nothing even swam just beneath, hoping to disturb her; everything was relaxed, empty, at ease.

And then the moonlight began to seep into the room. It was sluggish at first, oozing across the floor, seeping into the candlelight. For a moment, the two lights battled, gold against silver, but the cold of the night won over and the candle simply went out without even a warning sputter. Luna was still undisturbed, watching with singular fascination. In the depths her cynical mind spoke a thought about wastage, but if it was small in everyday life then at this point it was near non-existent, and so the thought dissipated before it was even really there, for all intents and purposes never actually existing.

Glossy, shimmering moonlight filled the room like something tangible, reaching far beyond the enforced boundaries of natural light, never fading or faltering in its task. Everything was awash with silver and Luna could taste metal, cool and refreshing as water, on her tongue. For all that the moon was at a more latent phase, it made no difference here, where its power shone as bright as any sun ever could.

Within the confines of the candles – not a true Circle, for nothing had been cast, though Luna appreciated the nod to her heritage before that thought, too, was swallowed by the lake – colour began to seep in, filling a silhouette she had not noticed before. The light made already pale colour paler, like a delicate watercolour on a white background, but the shape became more and more obvious as Luna stared. Pinks, blues, yellows and other colours that she was too far gone to name coalesced into the figures of three women, stood holding hands below the window, their presence seeming to amplify the latent power lingering in the room until it stuck in Luna's throat and she couldn't speak the words that boiled up her throat.

Moirai, Matres, Parcae, her brain provided, the names popping to the top of her mind one after the other, quickly discarded. It was what they were, indeed, but they were also more, and Luna hesitated to put a name to them as if it would give them more power over her. The memories were rushing back now, perhaps triggered by the tidal wave of mingled fear and awe that overcame her at their manifestation, rushing to fill the gaps.

Fate was her ally, she remembered, but it was cold comfort as they stood before her, regal and magnificent and utterly terrifying. They faced her as they had the night of her first Seeing, only she knew now that it hadn't been a seeing at all, for that was not her gift. Her gift was the ability to see between reality, to communicate with other layers of the world that others disregarded, to interpret what she had seen there. She was the key for Fate to ply her trade with, as her grandmother before her, and her grandmother's grandmother before that. Luna, with her talent and power, was a conduit for their will, a job which she accepted gracefully because it was her destiny and the rightness rang through her very soul.
Last time the three sisters had stood before her in anger and demanded that she fix what had been broken. The third one, the one who dealt in death, had initiated the contact – Luna's first true exchange with the Gods themselves – because of her ire at those who had suspended her orders. The middle one, she had been coolly dissatisfied that her carefully worked plans had gone awry, centuries after their inception. And the first…

The first had looked at Luna out of glistening eyes, suffocated by her own grief and therefore unable to say a word. Instead, she had held up a ball of what Luna might have called cotton wool, though it was so much more than cotton wool. It was unspun thread, Luna realized as she'd inspected it, and then had been frozen by the implications. The first was she who spun the thread to create life, and for her to have had so much at hand… One look back at her face had confirmed what she had been thinking, and the bleakness of that image had been what pushed her to move. The pitiful ball of wool, the sight of the first's eyes, and the suggestion of what it meant was what overrode her misgivings as she went about her preparations for the move, though she hadn't truly realized it until this moment. The possibility of what might have been, destroyed before it even had a chance to be realized, and then expected to be discarded like so much rubbish…

And now they were back, these Goddesses, which made Luna think that the situation was more than even she had imagined. For them to take such an active interest in the actions of four humans was unthinkable, when you put it into the context of the whole of reality. Yet here they stood, as solid as any mortal, waiting for Luna to come to grips with herself. Their last visit had been chaotic and uncivilized in such a way that only powerful immortal beings could engineer, and though it was intimidating and uncomfortable, Luna could only be glad that this time they were keeping their Godly masks on.

"Greetings, Luna, Pandora's daughter," they intoned as one when Luna's eyes cleared. They had broken the calm of her mind by returning her memories, but by the first syllable of their address the water had risen up and claimed it all, sucking it into the deep so that Luna was left calm and complacent, with her full attention given to them. Their accord, though familiar to Luna from the tales she had learned as a child, was new in the flesh and made the encounter seem unreal. The edges of her consciousness began to blur again, drifting into dreamlike territory, but she reached for the tickle of unease they created in her and pulled on it with both hands until her vision sharpened once more.

Dutifully, she returned their greeting, referring to them as one with the respectful term of 'Fate'. Though she did know their names, or the variety of names they had worn throughout the years, she couldn't breach the surface of her mind deep enough to discover them, and instead named them One, Two and Three. The formalities duly observed, Three sank to the ground closest Luna, paying no mind to the unhygienic setting and instead reaching for the bread and wine Luna still held as offering. She removed the cork from the wine deftly, took a swig and cleared her throat delicately.

"The ending has changed," Three decreed, as though continuing a previous conversation. She continued on; "The outcome is unclear and our control continues to be limited. All I see are deaths, though whether I will charge them or not remains to be seen."

One nodded thoughtfully in the background, her eyes fixed on the wine. Three passed it up to her, and she drank of it, before passing it to Two. "I am unable to see past the final Weasley birth," she observed in turn, apparently to Luna.

Two, clutching the bottle in one hand and One's hand in the other, turned piercing eyes on Luna. "My points are currently unchanged," she chimed in, though not as if she were pleased. Indeed, her eyes only got more intent, and her next words seemed forced through gritted teeth. "Why have they not yet changed, Pandora's child?" Luna tried not to flinch when Two spat her mother's name like a
One tightened her grip on Two's hand, smiling serenely, and if it was slightly brittle, no one commented. "Now, now, sister. Much has been changed already, I'm sure. We must be patient."
Two lapsed back into silence, becoming a living statue. No signs of life were detectable, truly, if not for the simmering discontent in her eyes, Luna might have thought she had died. "Tell us," One asked gently, "what have you set in motion, child?"

Three was regarding her expectantly now, and if Luna had thought she was uncomfortable before, it was nothing to being inspected by the Fate who commands death like an insect beneath a microscope. The calm rippled, seemingly in an attempt to swallow her disquiet, but gave up quickly when Luna used the little strength she had access to to fight back.

"As you wished we are with the Potter family, but they are reluctant to trust in us. They have been given the bare bones of future knowledge, and they suspect your involvement, if not so very directly as you are." They nodded as one again, silently encouraging her onwards. Two had even melted into movement again, interest present in the lines of her face, and Luna knew why.

Two, as the one who threaded and spun and weaved, was charged with directing the course of lives, allocating Fixed Points in time, giving help and hindrances in the bigger picture and matching Soul Pairs as directed by Greater Powers. Soul bonds were rare, given only when there was need of them, or they might crop up uninhibited once every while. They used to be seen as rewards for work done by the Gods, like the gifts such as prophecy and magic and even zoolingual telepathy. The only thing on earth that was powerful enough to override a Fated match was the rarer True Love, which, though often found in Soul Pairs, was more prized and revered when it occurred without the interference of a Higher Power. It was a measure of the power of free will, and myths suggested the ability had been an apology by the Gods of Love many millenia ago.

In Potter Manor, involved in the war and at this precise moment, resided two True Love matches, the power of which resounded throughout time in the original reality, and had the potential to do so again. Added to that, each of the remaining inhabitants bore the marks of Two, both in their power and their destined mates. This was no accident, and in moving them into position Two had invested a lot of her power in the outcome of this endeavour. The others hadn't objected to this – One with her ball of tangled thread had in fact been delighted at the prospect of salvaging some lives from the discarded remains of the original reality, and Three only wanted to reclaim her shears and get back to work. This would remain Three's aim, no matter what was to come, for she was as stubborn and steadfast and willful as the force she invoked.

"Hermione's working on a plan, though it might... take some time." Luna finished, aware of how lame it sounded even without the added insult of Two's disdainful scoff.

"Time is a luxury we may not be able to afford, Luna," One reminded her, still gentle as a mother.

Two agreed, her eyes taking on a faraway look. She might be stood in front of her, but Luna knew that in her mind she paced in front of the Tapestry, watching free will take its course, manipulating the strands, twisting and tweaking as people went about their lives – or, more specifically, as Riddle went about his. They had confided, last time, that Riddle had thwarted all attempts by the Goddesses to change his path with his unnatural magic, and it was only after a decade of searching and waiting that they had finally found the – literal and metaphorical – loophole through which they had been able to send Luna, Ginny, Lavender and Hermione back. She didn't fully understand how, yet, but it had something to do with the death of the final Mate, and the lack of bonds holding them to their present.

"As we speak he prepares for battle. Our original timeline grows more narrow every second that
passes without action."

Three groaned loudly, her head flopping back on her neck as though the sound had been too large for her dainty throat. She picked at her hemline peevishly. "I told you, sister," she all but growled, her face glowing eerily with the banked embers of her rage. "I told you, I should have cut him when he was but a boy."

"This again," sighed One, her only sign of any emotion other than calm since they had arrived.

Two donned a sour expression to address her sister, a sudden burst of violent emotion rippling the air, and Luna had the feeling that she was only just holding back from slapping Three. It seemed that millennia by each other's sides did not in fact make the heart grow fonder. "And as I told you, sister, he was necessary." She shook herself once, sharply, and Luna had an odd image of a great bird superimposed over Two's graceful feminine features. The feathers undulated as she moved, and it was mesmerizing. "But now..." She looked at Luna's enthralled face, and was seen through the curving beak of the great creature. A queer expression crossed her face and the second image was gone, leaving only Two in her floaty purple tunic. "He has stolen what was not his to take, and in doing so he has jeopardized plans thousands of years in the making, and threatened the very balance of reality. It cannot stand."

Three sent a wry look at the assembled, including Luna in her apparent humour. "Truly, free will, while a delightful concept, is inherently flawed in its practise." She turned on Luna, eyes alight with some dark purpose. "He must be stopped, young one, and soon, before more permanent damage can be done. Riddle is a mistake of creation, one that should never have been inflicted on this world." Behind her, both sisters made noises of disagreement, and Three shot them scornful looks. "My sister is too protective of her casts, all of you, and was too weak to allow me to do what needed done. That fault in her person has since been rectified, but the product remains. If we could do this ourselves, we would."

"We are not ones to rely on mortals for our work," Two added, her lips curled slightly. She softened, though, as Three joined them in their line, her affection for her sister apparent and translating into more kindness for Luna. "We will help as we can," she said, looking at the centre of Luna's forehead. Something inside her glowed with warmth, and belatedly she realized that this was a sort of apology, and wished she knew how to respond.

It was too late, though, for now One was taking charge again. "Time is running short. Take action, child. Begin your hunt. We will be in touch." They looked up at the moon, which seemed to have paused over the window, even though hours must have passed. Luna was suddenly aware of aching in her limbs. "Blessings on you and yours, Luna Lovegood," One sang, and the other two nodded.

Suddenly, they were gone, and Luna was in bed. She could hear Ginny's faint snoring, and the quiet scratch of quill on paper in the next room as Hermione read. Her quiet Tempus told her that it was half past midnight, which didn't seem that odd, when she tried to think about it. She couldn't recall why she was awake, except for a new urgency building in her chest. It pressed on her lungs, made her chest feel tight, her heart beat faster.

Unaccustomed to panic, Luna froze, not even breathing, but her blood pumped still faster, alarm threading through her brain.

_Hermione_, something said. The scratching was slowing, and there was a crinkle of bedsheets. The fear turned into fire in her veins, a tearing pain in her chest.

Too slow, too slow, too slow, her brain taunted. You're already losing.
Chapter Twenty-One: Consequences

Chapter Summary

Luna's visit from the Fates does not leave her unmarred, Hermione deals with the aftermath.

Chapter Notes

Hi!

BAARGH. This is a really odd chapter, sorry about that. It's complex and vague and descriptive all at once but it should get tied up at some point.

Just a warning, there's some dubious consent issues here, where there's a vaguely sexual encounter (sexual because it ends in an orgasm, which skews the perception of what has just happened both for the characters involved and for the readers) and though there is no physical touching there is some odd metaphysical wibbly-wobbly rubbish. Then follows dub-con related angst. If you'd like to skip that part, just don't read past 'I don't think I could handle doing that again, ever'. You'll basically get the gist of the chapter up until that point, and the issues past that I plan to expand upon in later chapters.

If you haven't gathered yet, a lot of this story revolves around exploring the concept of magical bonds and different types of magic, while we follow our characters through their lives and the war. I'm throwing in a new magical bond with this chapter, though it shouldn't come as too much of a surprise as I've mentioned it in passing throughout previous chapters.

I hope you enjoy!

Love, Eli x

Hermione had been awake for going on twenty hours now; thanks to the training session that morning, the stress of bulling the other three unwilling women through research they had no real interest in doing, the tense atmosphere at dinner and then a 'quick jog' Ginny had insisted on leading in the late evening (which had in fact entailed running evermore excruciating laps of the property boundaries until finally Lavender had collapsed to the ground with a shout of "go on without me, leave me here to die!")), she was more than ready to collapse into oblivion for an extended amount of time, leaving the responsibility of their ongoing mission in the hands of the others. Her conscience – and a gnawing part of her that she worried may be an indication of some obsessive disorder, the nightmare illness her parents had consistently had her tested for in her youth – forbid the notion, cruelly supplying her rapidly wilting brain with images of fallen friends and comrades until the prospect of sleep was but a distant memory. Instead, she sat up in her bed, the very picture of alertness, nursing a cup of coffee Bell had kindly provided her with before the little elf had gone to bed that had deteriorated to the point where it was more warming charm than coffee, and sorted laboriously through the product of their hours of work.
"It's no good," she sighed for possibly the fourth or fifth time, abandoning a sheet of parchment scrawled with incomprehensible text that appeared more Rorschach Test than notation to the growing pile of cast offs that littered the floor space between the right side of the bed and the window. All writing was starting to blur before her eyes now, though her dwindling power of sight was the least of her problems. None of the jottings made any sense.

There was a pile of newspaper clippings Lavender had compiled at Hermione's elbow, the valuable parts helpfully highlighted in bright colours, but the woman seemed to have no concept of organization and as such the yellowing pages of the early seventies were interspersed between the crisp white of the nineties, and aside from the state of their parchment there was no indication of their original time, as the identifying date stamps had been neatly and extremely impractically snipped off. It was good work, in theory, and it certainly looked pretty, but Hermione had been there when it had been done and Lavender had spent far too much time trying to wriggle answers about her newly acquired lycanthropy from Hermione and too little time paying attention to her work. Hermione's greatest personal achievement for the day, she felt, was not telling the girl to get off her overblown arse and look for the answers herself because they were sat in a library for fuck's sake do you not understand how books work?

Ginny's contribution had been received with more grace, though it was hardly as great as Hermione had expected, given the many hours they had sat together looking for information. In between dipping in and out of a book she'd found on the lasting consequences of being possessed by dark magical artifacts (something she had stumbled upon quite by accident, though Hermione felt that it was no accident and was in fact the universe conspiring against her to prevent the other three from doing any actual, useful work) she had been spilling the knowledge she had by virtue of being a Pure-Blood witch onto a sheet of parchment in the form of hunting through an up-to-date as of 1979 copy of the Wizengamot Registry and sorting those listed within into the categories of 'possible ally' and 'best to avoid on pain of a nasty cruciatus'. It wasn't so easy as to divide them into 'Dark' and 'Light', she had explained when questioned, because 'Dark' doesn't necessarily equal 'Evil', just as 'Light' does not mean 'Good'. All the same, she had added labels telling them which of them practiced which brand of magic, and their current allegiances. Further amendments explained why families were not joined to the Order/Death Eaters – for example, the Fawleys, while a light family, refused to swear allegiance to Headmaster Dumbledore because he had snubbed Alexandria Fawley some sixty years back when her parents had approached him with a betrothal contract. His excuse had not been acknowledged, and now the Fawleys and the Dumbledores were in feud. Conversely, the Rosiers were an undoubtedly Dark family whose elders would not bend the knee to Riddle, because the maiden aunt, and now only living Matriarch, had been 'ruined' by Abraxas Malfoy in school under Riddle's orders.

Hermione had that list at her left knee, but it had been abandoned for the moment because in order to have people join a movement, it was rather necessary to have a movement, and they weren't at that point yet. Still, it was quite interesting to see how few Pureblood families were entirely 'dark', though she would never be so stupid as to mention her surprise at this fact to Ginny, who would have met her assumption with an impressively scathing look and an 'I told you so'. Her only frustration came from knowing that this was an enterprising use of her time, and perhaps had she not been so lost in her book, there would have been more to appreciate. The frustration came and left quickly and quietly, for even Hermione couldn't begrudge the girl learning about the lasting effects of her first year at Hogwarts, knowing how scarring the experience had been; how it had left a black mark on her soul Ginny could never escape.

Hands down the most useful tool at this juncture came from Luna, which Hermione had been guiltily and most unflatteringly shocked by. Hermione, Lavender and Ginny had commandeered an alcove at the back of the library for their work, with Luna assisting in moving a table across and laying downwards, but Luna had stayed with them only long enough to ensure they were settled. Instead of
joining them, Luna had disappeared off into the shelves, a roll of parchment in one hand and a jumbo-pot of colour-changing ink in the other, not to be seen again until they broke for dinner.

Looking down at the fruits of Luna’s labour, spread across the floor by the door and held down by a continuous border of hardbacks, Hermione was ashamed to admit that she had originally written off any work Luna would do that day. Watching the blonde leave she had given a wry smile and entertained herself with the belief that Lu would be quickly distracted, as she was wont to do, and turn up at the end of the day with an arm full of doodles and the news that she had mastered some obscure art and now spoke fluent Mermish.

Not so. While, yes, Luna had doodled a bit, and also, yes, she had learned how to refill her water glass windlessly, she had also managed to create a solid foundation for their work to build on in an inclusive, ingenious way the shadows of which had never touched Hermione’s mind. When Luna had dumped a folded mass of paper in Hermione’s arms, looking worn but excited, she had been shell-shocked at the sheer amount of spellwork she could feel working – independently of instruction! – beneath her fingers.

Enchanted to within an inch of its endurance, the parchment bore security hexes and runic wards sewn intricately into its very material with a projected ease that Hermione couldn’t fathom. Marauders Map-esque, it had a password, but the similarities ended there. Some six feet long and four feet wide, it dominated the rug once spread out, but it was a necessary size for what it contained.

A timeline, similar to the one Hermione had scribbled in her own notes, took pride of place in the centre. It detailed dates in the original reality from 1940 all the way through to the end of Riddle’s reign of terror in 1998. With a touch of a wand – specifically, the authorised wand signatures of Hermione, Luna, Lavender or Ginny – it expanded to hand unassisted in the air, a three dimensional model that revealed a second timeline overlaying the first. The second was identical up to a red dot to designate the arrival of themselves in the past, and then it was blank but for three new dashes and various shadows blurring the otherwise blunt black. Should Hermione choose, another tap of her wand would relegate the timelines to the background, pulling the focus of her attention forward and into greater detail. Much was still missing – naturally, Luna hadn’t the time to fill it all in what with the spellwork taking hours on its own – but the gist was there. It gave a synopsis of events, in this case either Lavender’s infection, the Potter’s invitation into their home or Lavender’s addition too Remus’ pack, as well as speculations on what was to come, how these events changed the future, what possible consequences they might have in the grand scheme of things, including on the War, their skewed timeline, and the Fixed Points that had been designated by Fate long before time began.

It was gratifying to Hermione that Luna had thought of these things, taking the burden of responsibility from Hermione and sharing it equally between them all.

On the main parchment there were yet more planning treasures, including a column designated for tools to success, such as Basilisk Venom and Horcruxes. Further inspection would yield information, how to gain them, how to destroy them. There was a space for other people involved – probably where Hermione could store the information Ginny had given her once she had the energy – including allies, neutrals, enemies. The Order and Albus Dumbledore had its own space in which they could note their movements and members and perceived threat level. Indeed, it had space for everything they might require and yet more spare to be filled in later, all wrapped up in one piece of ordinary looking parchment, which when deactivated folded to reveal a close-up rendering of what Luna supposed a wrackspurt’s anatomy might look like should she catch one to check, adding that distinctively Lovegood touch.

It was a treat of orgasmic proportions. Hermione would describe it as beautiful if that word had even a patch on what she felt when she looked at it, touched it, used it. She never thought that what was
effectively a study aid/travel companion could have so profound an effect on her, but from the first moment she had touched it her mind had been in ecstasy, and as it was further explored she thought she might have been a little bit aroused.

Another thing never to tell Ginny.

It wasn’t just the device that had inspired this reaction in her, either. Too easily before this point had she fallen into the trap of underestimating Luna, even resenting her for having brought them here and seeming to have left them there to sink or swim. Her odd ways had lulled Hermione into the belief that she didn’t care, wasn’t as invested in the operation as she and Ginny and even Lavender were; for all that she had assisted them in the presence of the Potters and co., Luna otherwise seemed to float around in her own impenetrable bubble of apathy, a detached observer gaining amusement from their antics but not truly one of the team.

But Luna was a Ravenclaw, and they were known – more so than even the Slytherins – for appearing cold and calculated and apart from the rest of the population. Hermione had not made it into that House for many reasons, the most prevalent of which was that she cared, and the pursuit of knowledge to the detriment of everything else was not her bag. She liked to apply things, rather than learn them and file them away and never use it again. True Ravenclaws could lose themselves in it, eat sleep and breathe intelligence, for nothing but the joy of learning and knowing, and so their relationships frizzled away in the daylight where people danced and laughed and played while they innocuously read and experimented by candlelight. Mostly they were an introverted House because nobody else understood that when they left the library, walked out into society, they still loved as strongly as any other witch or wizard, even if human interaction was difficult and foreign and they couldn’t connect to people as well as others could.

Hidden beneath her flouncy dresses and the radishes in Luna’s hair, she also had this softness – vulnerability – a part of her heart that held an image of her friends, Hermione included, if only just. Hermione knew this, but it was so easy to forget when such affection was not often demonstrated.

The parchment, however, was an ultimate gesture of her investment, her fondness for them. The woman must have worked her fingers to the bone creating it, wracked her brains for the spells and information that didn’t come easily even to the most accomplished of crafters. Luna was just as dedicated as the rest of them, but it was harder for her to display it. A tear slipped down Hermione’s face as she contemplated the difficulties of being Luna, stuck at a phase of emotional development so similar to when Hermione herself had joined Hogwarts, fresh out of a primary school where bullying her was pretty much the national sport and she had built up defences to protect her own oddity. Loving and nurturing friends and family had helped Hermione evolve from there, the priceless gift of unconditional love, but Luna had waited too long for that and only received it in the middle of a war, where ensuring her mental health had never been first priority.

Born of this realization was neither pity nor obligation, but instead a sort of odd, distorted resolution to appreciate Luna more for the person she was – weirdness and far-fetched ideas included. The two of them had never been bosom buddies, but certainly they had respected each other in their own way, and many a more deep and twisted affection than true friendship had grown with less a stable foundation. If she could be friends with Lavender, whom she had loathed for half her life, then surely friendship with Luna wasn’t too bizarre a proposition?

Hermione, lost in her own thoughts, plotting and planning in her mist-shrouded mind, didn’t notice the door opening until Luna was there, stood in front of her, as if a ghost summoned from thinking too hard. The shock of her appearance made her strike out and lunge for her wand, but Luna’s fingers curled in a vice-like grip around her wrist just in time to prevent herself from being hexed.
"Circe, Lu, some warning please!" Hermione shrieked, heart still pounding furiously as she retracted her wrist to rub some feeling back into it. It would probably bruise, great. Shit like this was why it was so hard to remember that she was supposed to be her friend. She gave Luna a long look that began as a scowl and melted into something more searching and concerned as she got a look at the other girl's face. Her forehead wrinkled in concern. "Lu? Are you alright?"

The blonde's head spasmed, pale blonde locks slinking across her cheeks like caressing fingers of moonlight. She looked more ethereal in the dark, a shining spectre in a billowing lace gown circa 1819. The bruising under her eyes was like elegantly done make-up, casting shadows that made her eyes seem bigger and more luminous, and Hermione had had to drag her eyes away for a moment in order to break the spell of her peculiar beauty and recognize the look of crippling fear that swam over her features. Her heart picked up its pounding again, faster and harder than before, propelling her out of bed to stand in front of Luna and grab her arms. "Did something happen?" she demanded, trying not to shake the girl but all the same itching to, panic over everybody's wellbeing threatening to overwhelm her.

"Yes. No." Another shudder ran through Luna, rocking her head on her neck. She stared at the floor before looking up, conflicting emotion passing over her face so quickly it sent Hermione dizzy. "We're… it's…" Another shake of her head and now, despite all of her good intentions, Hermione's concern was outstripped by a growing irritation that Luna had burst into her room at stupid o'clock in the morning looking like she had been chased by an evil poltergeist and Hermione hadn't been in the best of moods in the first place and the dozy cow couldn't just get to the damn point.

"Too slow," Luna finally hissed out, her eyes squinted shut as though she was in great pain. She pointed across at the still-expanded timeline to ensure that Hermione got her point. With a burst of unexpected energy, she span around and dived for the paper, wrenching her wand out from her sleeve and pointing at the parchment. For one frenzied moment Hermione thought she was about to destroy it, such was her unpredictable mood, but instead she just closed it down and brought up another section. "I Saw…" she began, then stopped. "No… that's not right…" she muttered under her breath, twirling her wand to flip through the legends, increasing in speed. "It wasn't me it was… them?" She shook her head again, jabbing her wand at the paper, it moving ever faster, ever smoother, until the room was lit by a swirling vortex of primary colour flashing so bright that Hermione felt she had suddenly been transported to a particularly dodgy end of Manchester on a Saturday night. Luna continued to mutter and Hermione moved forward so that she could hear better on the off chance that one of the comments were addressed to her.

Magic began to fill the room, hitting every nook and cranny, raising the hairs on Hermione's arms and legs, bringing her magic roaring to the surface in thrilling reaction. It amped up the voltage until the world was one ball of burning colour.

"Luna!" Hermione screamed as it hit crisis point, and then the air was wrenched from her lungs. Her arms and legs disappeared, or she lost feeling, or perhaps they were destroyed and remade in their own image, she couldn't tell. The power of sight was taken from her completely in one confused blur of purple seeping into blackness. The only feeling she was left with was that of Luna's magic filling a hole too small to hold its magnificent chaotic potential, and it drawing out her own to play, coming along for the ride, a ride with no rules or restrictions for there was no pressing purpose, only the joy of power unleashed. Panic dulled her thoughts, her brain swapping sense for fury, fury at Luna and herself and the situation and fury with no reason or outlet except that it was something to hold onto, to remind her that she was real.

The world snapped back.

Her magic lashed into her with enough force to send her careening into the wall behind her,
sensation returning just in time to fill her with pain upon her collision. It happened with a
great bang!, the windowpane rattling and three paintings falling from their hooks, the door slammed
shut and Ginny, next door, grumbled indignantely in her sleep.

From the far side of her bed, Luna's voice floated up, reassuringly back to its floaty, cheery self.
"Oops," she whimpered, and Hermione hoisted herself onto her elbows, ignoring the searing pain
that resulted in order to give her a piece of her mind.

Being at the eye of the storm hadn't protected her any. She was lay like a ragdoll, all limbs akimbo, a
thin trickle of blood tracing its way down her cheek from a gash on the top of her head where she
had collided with an end table. She was smiling, if a bit limply, and as Hermione watched wet her
lips nervously. "Nothing like a bump on the head to set your thoughts in order."

Hermione's eyes rolled into the back of her head with such force that it was physically painful. All
the fight had left her when she lay her eyes on Luna's body, and a kernel of resignation had taken its
place. "You want to tell me what's going on now?" she grunted, trying not to sound begrudgingly
amused as she levered herself onto the mattress. It wouldn't do to encourage such behaviour. Luna
joined her, moving slowly but surely, and Hermione shoved papers aside to make room for her (it
didn't half amaze her that everything had survived that whirlwind, not a note was out of place), an
action that was greeted with a mildly startled expression from Luna, quickly replaced by gratitude.
Hermione couldn't find the will to care.

The two of them laid parallel to one another on their sides, a scant few inches of space separating
them. Somehow the explosion had obliterated the earlier tension, like a fire burning off the excess
and leaving behind only the base elements. Now they were calm. Comfortable. Luna was right; since
she'd fallen her thoughts seemed a bit more ordered, if foggy with a sluggish sort of relaxation, and
her earlier tiredness had drifted away in the wind.

"I woke up with a feeling, like before," Luna said, referring to her first Seeing, Hermione assumed.
"I just knew I had to get here, to you. We weren't moving fast enough, and I was needed."

"Anything else?" Hermione whispered. It seemed only right to whisper, the atmosphere was so
indulgently intimate, and she didn't want to shatter that.

"No," Luna sniffed, "and it's gone now, anyway."

Hermione's eyebrow twitched, literally itching to make that well-worn sardonic journey up her
forehead. No, she told it sternly. She felt too good to be sarcastic tonight, even if it was only
reflexive. She was on a cloud, and nothing could harm her.

Was she high? Was this what high felt like?

"Something must have gone right, then?" Hermione pondered aloud, thinking back to the events of a
few minutes ago. "What was that, by the way?"

"Sympathetic magic," Luna said with a lazy smile. "It was bound to happen at some point, but we've
never let loose like that before." She let out a giggle, like a child. "Can we do that again, please?"

"I don't think I could handle doing that again, ever," Hermione tittered in response, then paused to
contemplate the noise. What an odd sound. However did she make it? She rolled on her back to
better contemplate the mystery, though was quickly distracted by Luna's buzzing.

She looked down to see her hovering a hand over her abdomen, purring like a metal detector,
reaching higher in pitch as her hand dropped lower and going lower again the further she pulled
away. Hermione shoved away the pull she felt to grab onto Luna and drag her closer, instead asking "what are you doing?" in a drowsy, drunken voice.

"Can't you feel it?" Luna asked, her voice filled with awe as she danced her fingers through the air. Now that she mentioned it, Hermione could feel an itching at the corners of her awareness. As she focused it solidified into a stroking sensation, seeping through her magical shield and into her skin. Closing her eyes, she sank into the mattress, powerless to resist the phenomenon.

She had a new faint sense of Luna, but it wasn't uncomfortable at all, more a rightness not dissimilar to how she had felt with Harry during those months on the run. She had never given over to it with Harry, but she allowed herself to now, thinking that a show of trust like this shouldn't be rejected. It was subtle, so subtle as to not be recognizable had it not been pointed out, but nonetheless there. Another magical bond for her to deal with should have been a bad thing, unutterably stressful and uninvited, but her magic already felt more settled.

"What is this?" she asked, her voice slurred as she stretched languidly, feeling like a large and pampered cat under Luna's attentions. She had never tried this before – the touch of magic on magic was dangerous, could have explosive results if practised with the wrong person; that Luna dared even try it surprised and unnerved her – but now that she knew what she was missing it seemed ridiculous to have held back.

"This is the coven bond," Luna murmured, her voice low in deference to the moment as she pushed her magic further into Hermione. The feelings deepened, taking on more substance once Luna passed the initial resistance of Hermione's natural magical defences, and all at once it was absorbed, sending shards of light above her skin, cooling and inflaming everything in its wake, bringing Hermione's breath in a gasp. She didn't understand, entirely, but she wanted more, it was all that seemed right in this moment, an attainable but mysterious goal. "So this is what they wanted," Luna said, then shook her head again as if to dislodge a fly that had buzzed into her ear, and her eyes went glassy.

Hermione barely noticed, too absorbed in sensation. Tingling rushed over her flesh in waves, her nerves pinged, her heart fluttering in her chest. Her toes curled, her arms tensed, she panted breaths she could never quite catch properly. Slowly, Luna began to withdraw from her personal space, taking with her the magic and the pleasant tickling trickling away in turn. Finally, Hermione was still again, blinking starbursts from her eyes and fighting off a pervasive lethargy.

Intellectually, she knew what had just happened, but that didn't stop her from turning to Luna for confirmation.

"The potential was here from the start, with you, me, Ginny and Lavender, but something was missing and it didn't get sealed," was explained in quick melodic tones, the content being stored away with a note of the wisdom with which Luna had imparted it. "But now…" she waved a hand over Hermione's chest again, and when there was no answering buzz she got a pleased look. "Bond born of fire," she chanted, "sealed with sex."

Blinking, Hermione translated the meaning of that sentence in her mind, and groaned despairingly. "Does that mean what I think it means?"

Luna laughed lightly, taking Hermione's hand. "Yes," she replied, her eyes searching Hermione's face for something.

Snatching her hand back, Hermione used it to cover her face. She expected to feel her cheeks burning, perhaps some shame lurking at the back of her mind in response to what had just happened.
A slightly hysterical giggle attempted to force its way out of her throat but she swallowed it down, blinking into her fingers. The eerie closeness she had shared with Luna was gone with the rest of the enchantment, and she was left cold, but in no way anxious. Her self-consciousness had done a runner along with all of her other negative emotions and had yet to return, but she knew they would. Her brain was all tangled up by the events of the day, and she desperately wanted to lash out at someone just to put herself back on familiar footing, but she couldn't blame Luna for the girl had obviously been as deeply bewitched as Hermione had been. She did, however, have a boatload of resentment towards the Wild Magic or the Gods or whatever it was that had joyfully manipulated her into sealing a bond she hadn't known she had.

To think that earlier that night she had wanted to get closer to Luna. Well. Mission accomplished, she scoffed to herself. Sleepiness was attempting to take hold, but she was loathe to let it for fear of what would greet her in the morning. No doubt she would wake up riddled with shame, self-loathing, questions to which she had no answer, from the mundane to the necessary – what did this mean? Did it affect her magic? How does it alter their mission? What about Lavender and Ginny, were they included? Did they – god forbid – feel it?

She spiralled into unconsciousness in complete turmoil, and yet somehow still completely relaxed.
Chapter Twenty-Two: Consequences II

Chapter Summary

Ginny dreams, Lavender dreams.

Chapter Notes

Hi!
I actually edited this one for once, had to update the FFN version with the new chapter I wrote for this site. It's still not perfect, but I was having trouble with language and sentence structure last week and I've just tried to even that up, put in a bit more Lavender angst.
I'm thinking about a Lavender/Baby Death Eater pairing, btw. Let me know how you feel about that. (I'm still not convinced 100% of Luna's pairing either so like, if you have any ideas, please let me know).

Vague mentions of child abuse, symptoms of anxiety disorders in this chapter.

Love, Eli!

There was a girl, there, in the corridor. Ginny noticed because it was new, and things didn’t change here very often, but she had. Every night for years Ginny had found herself here, and she knew the faces of the students that milled around her like she knew her own family, despite the fact that she’d not seen most of them in person for years. Some of them were even dead, but they were alive here. In her nightmares.

It felt ridiculous, dramatic, to call them nightmares. She never screamed anymore, never woke up crying, sweating, thrashing. The dreams came when she fell asleep and would leave when she woke, and by now she even managed to wake feeling revitalized from the rest. Why they still returned, night after night, was a mystery – perhaps it was her brain trying to punish her, remind her of the wrongs she had committed, remind her of the debts she owed them all. Each and every one of these people were a reason she shouldn't be happy, she wasn't allowed to be happy, not until she had fixed it.

Ginny had hoped that when Voldemort died, they would leave her. Go haunt somebody else. Instead, they had gotten stronger, like perhaps when he had been alive he had other responsibilities but in death he cared only for her torture. He had taken her life force into himself that year, and had taken so much that perhaps now he lived in her, and that was the only reason she survived. These thoughts still tormented her, though she was certain by now that her darkness was all her own. Still, it didn’t change how his image got more vivid, the colours brighter, the words more seductive and the pull evermore difficult to resist.

Otherwise, it was the same every night. She landed here, in the Charms corridor at Hogwarts, watching the students pass by, skirting around her without a thought. They never looked at her, but the action of not looking at her became an insult, as though she was not worth their attention, or perhaps they were too scared to look. In the first months Ginny had suffered this dream, she had
tried to call to them, tried to grab and hold them, but they would shrug her off and continue onwards without even a glance. The stronger her loneliness got the more people were in the corridor, the more she pitied herself the faster they moved. When she was at her weakest, her emotions torn to shreds perhaps after a hard day of classes or an argument with her friends, her family would appear in the line-up. Shining, brilliant brothers wandering past, deep in conversation with others – Fred and George, laughing and joking; Ron with Harry, bathed in glory; Percy, alone but proud, the other students gazing up at him in awe; Bill and Charlie, together, swarmed by women and men alike. Sometimes they would look as if they would perhaps turn to her, but instead they would end up gazing at someone else, listening to a joke or hugging a friend.

And she would be alone, in her corner, unheard and unloved, the pointless, pathetic extra, to be wrapped in cotton wool, locked in a tower and never to be trusted.

Granted, her self-esteem hadn't taken such substantial a hit as to send her back to that place since fifth year. Not since she had discovered her aptitude for creating wicked jinxes, her talent on the Quidditch Pitch and her flair for the art of seduction had she felt low enough to see the boys in her dreams, but the memory continued to haunt her.

Tonight she had felt almost bored going in. It was predictable and while it clawed at her emotions, inexpertly tearing guilt and self-loathing from her chest, she knew what was to be expected. People would ignore her, Riddle would start whispering insults from within the walls, she'd end up in the Chamber, then 'No-ones ever understood me like you, Tom' with a mocking laugh and a breaking heart and so on and so forth until dawn.

But who was that girl?

Ginny was irrationally irritated at them for stealing her dream – it was her dream, damnit! Naturally, she had a bit of a thing for people not crawling into her head without an invitation and yet this – whatever she was – was here and Ginny knew that she wasn't a part of the dream because she was new and smiling and practically vibrated reality.

This girl was a mess – an amalgamation of what looked like several people, put together by a person who didn't seem to know what a normal human should look like. These pieces comprised a whole that was incomparably grotesque and offputting, though Ginny wasn't sure exactly why that was, for the individual components were initially appealing; long, platinum blonde hair to her thighs, olive skin so smooth it looked inhuman, curves in all the right places and a narrow waist reminiscent of a Victorian waist trainer. But together… they were alien.

She – for it was certainly a she, even for all of the ambiguity of the rest of her identity – smiled as she advanced on Ginny, and it radiated warmth, but set off something less than comfortable in Ginny's mind. Unnerved, Ginny stumbled backwards, and the girl-creature came to a halt.

Behind Ginny the dream was rolling on in response to the changes in her emotions, the walls were now beginning to hiss at her, the words translating in her mind automatically now, but even that could not take her attention from the newcomer. Instincts screamed of danger, refusing to let her look away.

"Hello," the creature said, her voice a mix of pitches, she might have been a single person or a crowd all in the one body. Ginny's responding greeting was entirely due to her mannerly upbringing, more knee-jerk reaction than any real welcome, but it pleased the she-creature who took a step forward.

Ginny's back hit the wall. Trapped.
The creature continued on until they were mere millimetres apart. Up close, Ginny could count the freckles on her nose, bright ginger on olive making an odd combination. Her hair drifted forward to caress Ginny's fingers, which she realized were hanging uselessly at her side. The bright amber of the creature's eyes shone as she winked, setting off something familiar in her brain. "Relax, Ginny," she laughed, a bell-like sound that had Ginny blinking in recognition. "It won't hurt..." Considering this, she raised her hand to Ginny's chest in a claw. It rested against Ginny's breast, rock solid against Ginny's full-body trembling. "Well, much," it clarified, and then her hand plunged into Ginny's chest, and the whole world disintegrated into pain.

Lavender was dreaming of chocolate cake. It was her favourite, orange chocolate torte smothered in ganache, her grandmother's recipe. At home she had adored it, covetted it constantly – the allure was only strengthened by her mother, who chastised her weakness repeatedly. "You're fat enough already," she would chide, while cutting the largest piece for herself and her 24 inch waist. On another occasion, upon finding Lavender eating a slice in the kitchen late at night, she had confiscated it with a particularly scathing "men don't want to marry pigs, they want to marry women".

In her dream, however, there was nobody watching. No mother hid in the corner, waiting to strike. No visitors were poised to steal it from her hands. There was nobody around to insult her until it fell to ashes in her mouth. It was perfect, untouched, and she was fairly certain that it wasn't even laced with laxatives, unlike the last time she had been lured in by an unguarded baked good of her mother's. Nothing could ruin this moment for her.

The cake sat there, delectably decorated with gold dust, shimmering in the low light. Lavender was unconfined with a plate and fork in front of her and a napkin on her lap. Everything was perfectly presented, all she had to do was eat.

And yet... she couldn't bring herself to do it. It was a ridiculous fear, pathetic, but it seemed there was a block on her mind that prevented her from moving forward with the feast. It wasn't magical, purely psychological, and Lavender even knew what had caused it and therefore should know how to overcome it but the fear was still there.

Surely something would happen if she took it? Her mind whispered, uncertain, shy. It never hasn't. True, she had never been able to enjoy a slice of this cake without consequence, small though it might be, but did that really matter? She still enjoyed the cake. Good things came with consequences, didn't they? You had to pay in blood for every pleasant thing you got to experience, but that didn't mean you shouldn't still want the pleasant thing. If anything, working for it made you appreciate it more.

It made her angry that she couldn't just take it, though. She'd rationalized it, raged at it, coddled it, but the anxious part of her mind had her paralysed with fear.

It's a whole cake, though. It whispered to her. You've never been offered a whole cake, just for you. A whole cake is better than a slice – and this one has been baked just for you. Surely, a gift like this doesn't come without a steep cost. Surely something awful will happen if you take it – more awful than anything you've experienced before, and what's to stop them from just taking it away afterwards anyway? Why would you risk that?

Lavender wasn't sure how long she had sat staring at the cake. Why couldn't she just have something nice for once, she raged inside. After everything she had been through? It was just a cake, foruck's sake, if she had to have fucking lycanthropy then surely she could have some cake too? Was she evil, was that it? Was that why life felt the need to beat her down at every turn, did she have some great potential for disaster within her that could only be controlled by keeping her in shit?
She was being dramatic now, she knew, but that didn’t help settle her down. Frustrated, she lashed out. Her hand dug through the surface of the cake, the gooey topping mashed into her nails, her fingers clawing up chunks of dense dough. She brought it up to her face to examine.

Perhaps… now?

Her mouth opened, her tongue flitting out to taste, but before she could make contact her brain was full of her mother’s acidic tone, her father’s beaten silence, the laughter of the other girls her age at the parties after her mother had forced her to wear a dress two sizes too small for her in the hope that through humiliation she could forge the daughter she had failed to gain in genetics – slim, kind, polite, beautiful.

Lavender remembered with spiteful pleasure that she had been beautiful for a while there. Her mother’s disgust had not stopped her father from doting on her in private, praising her golden hair, her full lips, her button nose. When Lavender had turned thirteen and her eyes had darkened to lilac, her mother had tried to ‘charm that unnatural taint’ from her face. Her father had hit back in quiet defiance by having his study wallpapered the exact shade of her eyes, complete with permanent sticking and impervious charms. Then, at school, Lavender would have had to have been deaf, blind and stupid in order to miss the attention she attracted from the boys. Perhaps it had sent her a little silly, but she had been drunk on their appreciation – the likes of which she had never encountered before, and had needed desperately to experience.

At least nobody could say she had taken her allure for granted. She had used it for everything she could, wringing every last drop of privilege from her life, passing from handsome boyfriend to handsome boyfriend; watching them fight over her, reveling in the chaos of it all. Lavender liked to think that perhaps she was a good person but there was something so sinfully thrilling about the power that came with beauty - absorbing the envious looks other girls would shoot her. Just knowing that you were wanted, if only for your looks, could do wonders for one's self esteem. Having something to hold over Parvati and Hermione, both of whom were cleverer than her but could never compete visually... it had been delicious.

At least she had made the most of that before it had left her. She might never be beautiful again, might never drive a man wild with lust or instigate a bar fight with a saucy wink, but at least she had the memories of when she had.

"Go on," someone said, breaking her from her reverie. Lavender realised that she had been stood in that position for a while now, the chocolate had seeped through her knuckles and down her wrist, coating her shirt in sweet sludge. Buttercream lingered on her fingertips from the centre of the cake, so close that it was almost on her tongue already, she could almost feel its velvety smoothness sliding across her palate. "Eat it," the voice cajoled. Lavender looked up to see a girl had taken a seat on the opposite side of the small table, and was cutting herself a sliver from the untouched side of the cake. "I love chocolate," she said, and Lavender wondered at the odd timbre of her voice, like it was not one but many.

"Who are you?" Lavender asked, dropping her fist to the table, smearing the snowy white tablecloth with ganache. The tangy scent of orange liquor rose up to tickle her nose, and she breathed deeply to appreciate it. By the Gods, there was nothing more tempting than this...

"We didn’t mean to interrupt your meal," the girl said, looking genuinely abashed. She attempted to move the slice she had taken across to her plate, but it disappeared in mid-air to appear on Lavender's plate instead. "Looks like it’s all yours," she said, looking curious but unaffected, unlike Lavender whose eyes had widened in surprise. "Oh well. We’re not here for the cake. Are you done?"
Lavender looked at her hand, inches thick with the dessert. It still looked appealing. She wasn't, she really wanted to eat the damn cake, but it didn't look like that was happening any time soon. "Yes," she sighed in defeat, reaching for a napkin and using it to remove the crumbs and other debris from her fingers.

"Brilliant!" the girl said, grinning widely. "Are you ready then?"

Lavender sighed again, but stood up. "Have at me," she invited, bracing herself for whatever was to come. The girl spared a second to give her an amused glance, and then Lavender was on fire, and she was gone.

At 03:00 exactly, Ginny awoke with a shout. Pain racked her body mercilessly for a whole minute, though it felt like more, and then subsided into nothing. Ginny sat in her bed for ten more minutes, panting and listening to the silence, waiting for it to return.

When it did not, she allowed herself to fall back to sleep in which, for the first time in seven years, she did not dream.

At 03:20, Lavender gasped into consciousness, every nerve burning. It continued on for an age, only halting when her face had become numb from the attack, at which point she was disoriented and uncertain as to whether the sensation had truly stopped or she had simply lost the ability to feel. Either was acceptable to her, if she was honest.

She cast a tempus with what little energy she had accumulated in her restless sleep, and cursed, in order; her mother, her grandmother, wild magick, and Ginny Weasley for good measure when she realised that there was less than three hours until the cow would be dragging her out for an hour of torture.

When she fell back to sleep, she also did not dream.

At 03:40, Lily Evans was woken by a burning light. Thinking it to be dawn, she stretched and yawned and sat up, only to find four orbs of light hovering by her face. She blinked once, twice, then opened her mouth to scream.

The orbs took this chance to throw themselves into the opening, forcing their way down her throat, blocking her airways until her eyes rolled back into her head and she fell back into the all-encompassing blackness of sleep.
Chapter Twenty-Three: Spinner's End

Chapter Summary

Some Death Eaters regret their life choices.

Chapter Notes

Merry Christmas!
It's raining here, which is one of my favourite types of weather, so I'm glad for that. The last time we had snow it was only a couple of millimeters and I almost broke my leg walking home so this is much preferable.
If you don't celebrate Christmas, I hope you had a lovely day anyway. If you live in Britain and don't celebrate Christmas, is it not a right pain that the whole bloody country seems to shut down for a day? You could probably be spending that time doing anything but being stuck at home with all of the shops shut and the bus services out of whack. That idea has been bugging me for a few years now...

I'd love to have provided you with a really cheerful chapter to celebrate the festive season but it's just not how this works, I can't help it any more than you can. Instead of mistletoe and mulled wine, we have Severus overindulging in the whiskey. Which is sort of festive...right? Here we also have characters suffering from "Severus is a bad friend and a complete arsehole but we love him anyway" syndrome, which I also suffer from, and it's a real problem, folks. Unconditional love is another tradition of our revered holiday, I am told.

Trigger warnings for this chapter include mentions of off-screen torture, psychological and mental, murder, one mention of rape, and descriptive symptoms of anxiety disorders (which is quite subtle, but just in case that's your trigger thing).

I hope you had/are having a wonderful day filled with lovely food, family and good will,

Love always,
Eli x

The wards rippled through the air, fizzing and popping as he forced his way through. There must have been a foot of them, blood wards and family protections included, and his passage always felt rather like attempting to escape a swamp. Even the Black family wards weren't this bad, barely noticeable, and Regulus knew that it wasn't a lack of magical skill that made these specific wards so damn unappealing.

The rowhouse loomed up in front of him once he'd shoved free of the magic; ugly and menacing though it was, he was glad to see it. Not the most inviting of homes in its prime, it had deteriorated over years of neglect into a heap of rotting wood and damp walls, held up mostly by bad memories and the resident's formidable willpower. Its aura was dark, but Regulus was born in the dark and had
never feared its mysteries. He was glad to be here, glad to have made it through another night, glad
to still have the ability to apparate to Cokeworth and walk up this damn street and greet the miserable
bastard that lived within.

One perfunctory knock and the old, peeling door swung open on its hinges. Considering Snape
would never be the type to meet him at the door with a cuppa and a smile, it was the best invitation
he was ever going to get, so he didn't dawdle in crossing the threshold – he had a habit of changing
his mind if you took too long. It swung closed with a slam, forcing the rank scent of mildew into the
air, and Regulus did his best not to cough but failed. Why the man didn't just fix the place, Regulus
wasn't sure, but he had entertained the idea that perhaps it was Snape's way of spiting his parents
even through the veil.

"Where are you?" Regulus shouted, removing his cloak and going to drape it over the bannister, but
thinking better of it upon notice of the thick layer of dust that was in residence there. He closed his
eyes, his skin tingling and itching, and counted to ten very slowly. Usually the state of the place
didn't bother him that much – he had seen worse – but the night before had been trying and he was
feeling vulnerable as a result. If he dwelled too long on the dirt, he would never forget it, and they all
teased him for bathing too much already.

"Here," the voice came, low and bored, from down the hall. Clutching the folds of his cloak in one
hand and shoving the other into his robes so that he wouldn't accidentally touch anything, Regulus
moved through to a parlour that had definitely seen better days. It was dim, the drapes perpetually
drawn; very little light existed with which to cast shadows. A box sat in one corner, which Regulus
knew that at one point had been a television, but it was at least a decade old now and the aerial had
snapped into a jagged metal spike protruding above piles of books, parchment and other household
debris that cluttered its flat top. It was a disgraceful health hazard, especially considering the books
and mugs and unwashed crockery that littered the floor; perhaps it was an extra security measure, so
that those intrepid hunters who managed to pass the wards out front were then thwarted by their own
cumsiness, if they made it that far. It seemed unlikely to him that any burglar would step foot in the
house for fear of tetanus or e-coli – any reasonable person would already have run a mile in the
opposite direction.

Definitely, if Regulus was not presently a deadly combination of determined and desperate, he would
have abandoned his mission on the doorstep and already be back at Grimmauld Place, supervising
Kreacher as he bleached the stench of poverty from his clothes.

A single spider the size of Reg's fist scuttled out of the shadows and over his shoe before darting out
of the door, as if even he could not wait to be free of this place.

It took a moment for Regulus to find his friend in the dark. He wore all black, a contrast to Regulus'
rich emerald casual robes, but perhaps that was not so much a fashion statement as necessary if one
were to live in such a state of squalor. Regulus could already see, with no little dismay, a thick
deposit of silt on the hem of his clothes from where his mere passing had stirred up the dirt on the
floor.

Severus was as he always seemed to be these days; he lounged in an old armchair whose pattern had
long since ceased to be discernible, a spectre all in black but for the pearly whiteness of his face and
one hand, which gripped a crystal tumbler negligently. Regulus eyed the pose with despair fuelled
irritation. It took everything he had not to shout at the man, and instead take a seat on the chaise, his
cloak thrown over an arm and no doubt seconds later acting as sacrifice to the moths and doxies that
inhabited this decrepit hellhole. "Good morning, Severus," Regulus greeted him, his gaze on the
glass the man held in case he needed further evidence of the younger man's disapproval. Pointedly,
Snape brought the glass up to his lips, met Regulus' eyes with his own, and tipped the lot back.
It made Regulus twitch again, but there was a spark of malice in Severus’ eyes that bore a warning, and he didn’t want to get into a fight with his friend – his only true friend – over his bad habits when there were better and more pressing issues to argue about.

"Drop out, did you, Black?" Snape drawled quietly, his eyes watching him like a predator might watch prey. It never failed to get Regulus’ back up to be spoken to that way, because of all the things he could be accused of, the one thing that wouldn't stick would be weak. He was a strong man, powerful for his age, and fully in control of his faculties.


"Wonderful," the sarcasm was so thick Regulus could choke on it, and rather viciously hoped that Severus would, "perhaps we should have a drink to celebrate."

He reached one long, slender fingered hand towards the bottle, but Regulus, in a fit of childish pique, kicked the table. Blishen's bearded mouth formed a comical 'o' shape before it disappeared off the edge, and a smashing noise indicated that the beverage was no more. Severus stared stupidly at the spot on the hearth where it had landed for a moment, watching the precious amber liquid seep into the already soiled carpet, his arm still outstretched to reach for nothingness. Slowly, he seemed to regain his senses, his cheeks and ears flushing red from anger and the drink, and he turned to fully face his visitor.

Regulus stared back, eyes dead, face unreadable. He would not give any more of a reaction, lest Severus strike like the snake he was. The snake he resented being. He hated playing these games but when drink was involved they were necessary, hoops through which he had to jump before Severus would recognise him as friend rather than foe.

"That was expensive," Severus narrowed his eyes. His voice remained level, despite looking like he was about to fly into a rage. It was an impressive feat, but it wouldn't keep him alive unless he could either master himself fully, or stop drinking altogether. Regulus knew which one he would prefer for his friend, but either would be acceptable for the time being, until life wasn't so difficult, so dangerous. Until Reg could let go of his paranoia that his every step was being recorded and evaluated, until putting one step out of line did not mean death. Slytherins were all about self-preservation, and Reg was good at that – great at that – and usually Severus was too, which is what made them such great friends, but recently…

Recently, Severus had less been Severus Top-Of-The-Year, Highest-Ranking-Death-Eater-Of-Their-Age Snape and more Severus Self-Pity and Self-Destruction Snape.

Or something like that, but more punchy and less of a mouthful. Reg had never claimed to be a poet.

"I'll buy you more," Regulus lied. "Why are you drinking that swill, anyway?"

Severus twitched a finger, which was his version of a shrug. People often said he was expressionless, but Regulus knew better. "I happen to enjoy the subtler blend."

Regulus wanted to say, 'I doubt the subtle nuances of the flavour profile matter all that much when it doesn't touch your tongue going down', but in deference to their friendship and his rapidly dwindling respect for the older man he said instead, "aren't you going to offer me tea?"

"Tea is reserved for invited guests," Severus growled, a bit of his usual bluster poking through. It gave Regulus hope.
"Don't be such a curmudgeon," he chastised lightly, his disposition lightening as if in reward for Severus’ good behaviour. He flicked his wand towards the kitchen where he heard the kettle begin to whistle in seconds. He and Severus engaged in a challenging stare-off for a moment, before he rolled his eyes and went through to make it himself. He added an extra couple of spoonfuls of tea to the pot in the hope that it might sober the other man up a bit, but didn't bet on it.

On his return, Severus had vacated his chair and instead stood at the window, glaring out into the street. Regulus was struck with a vision of the man in fifty years, still communicating in mostly grunts, grumbling about the kids on the street, in his garden. It was a sad image, but made even sadder by the idea that if he didn't get his arse in gear, the other man may not make it to that age at all. He cleared a space on the coffee table with a negligent sweep of his wand before lowering the hovering tea tray to the surface. Severus could usually be relied upon to keep his kitchen equipment as clean as his lab equipment, but that rather sketchy rule only applied if the equipment lived in the kitchen, rather than having been left elsewhere – as evidenced by the rubbish all over the floor. Reg had given the cups, saucers and pot a quick scourify just to be on the safe side, though their new proximity to the filth of Severus’ parlour didn't bring him any comfort at all.

He lowered himself back to the couch and took a cup, sipping it for a moment while he regarded his friend. Severus wasn't typically a drinker, hence why it affected him so strongly on the rare occasion that he did. It took a lot to get him to a place where he could overcome his personal history with alcohol long enough to consume it – a situation which was becoming more and more frequent recently, as the Dark Lord got more manic, more determined in his quest for… whatever it was he was searching for, nowadays. The fact that it was early morning and Severus had blatantly neither slept nor stopped drinking hinted to Reg that perhaps his evening had been on a par or above Reg's own.

Regulus would love to not begrudge Severus this vice, Merlin knew they all had them – needed them – but that Severus could not control himself properly when he drank was terrifying when the two of them were in such precarious positions. Neither of them could afford to let their guards down; Occlumency was not fool-proof by any means, and the very walls had eyes in their lives.

Severus seemed to think that the silence was comfortable, or perhaps wanted it to be uncomfortable, so Regulus ended up being the one to break it in an attempt to draw him out of his shell. "I was out with Malfoy and Lestrange last night," he began, because he felt that the single statement illustrated his evening quite nicely.

Lucius Malfoy was a good man, to Regulus' eyes, and had always regarded Reg as a younger brother. It had pissed Sirius off to no end but Regulus had never been more grateful for anybody's existence in the past year and a half. He was protective towards Reg, which Reg would like to say exasperated him (because he could look after himself) but he would be lying. Having Malfoy at his back meant that he was spared the greatest horrors of his life, kept from having to see the worst of the Dark Lord's efforts, and while some nights he despised himself for that and the cowardice it insinuated in him it was also just nice to have someone who cared, who recognised that he was just a kid after all, still at school. Severus, for all that he had affection for Regulus, for all that they were best friends, wouldn't put himself between Regulus and a dying, tortured muggle because he had odd morals which required that Regulus should face up to the reality of the world. Maybe Regulus should, but thanks to Lucius there was some part of himself that remained unscarred. In his mind, he could still be forgiven, because he had never tortured innocent children or raped a helpless woman or torn a man's inards from his stomach while he still breathed…

Lestrange was the opposite. Rodolphus matched his wife in bloodlust if nowhere else, and he believed (strongly) that everybody else should share the same appetite. If Malfoy looked to be protecting Regulus in his presence, Lestrange would only work twice as hard to break him, make his
victims scream twice as loud – last night he had held Regulus' neck in one bloodstained hand as he used the other to tear chunks of skin from a wizard's still writhing body as his wife watched on hysterically. The thing about magical people, Rodolphus had leered up at him, his tone idle like he was teaching an anatomy class rather than doing unspeakable things to what was now little more than a corpse, is that they're a lot harder to kill. Which means, Reggie, that they're also a lot more fun.

The victim had been a half-blood with a muggle wife who both lived relatively unassuming lives in Newcastle. The Dark Lord had wanted them killed, but he didn't care how. Lestrange had liked the lack of restriction. Liked it a lot. It had taken an hour in the shower this morning before the blood was all gone but as with the other times he felt like he could still feel it…

Noticing that his hand was shaking, he took a sip of his tea to disguise it. Severus' mouth contorted into a grimace. "You have my sympathies."

Regulus didn't speak for he had opened the conversation and it was now Severus' responsibility to continue it. One of the other man's favourite tricks was to sit in silence until a person felt obligated to fill it, and now Reg attempted to turn the tactic back on him. It wouldn't work if he was sober, but if he was just drunk enough…

As if intercepting the thought, Severus snorted. "I'm not drunk," he told Regulus coolly, eyeing him with distaste. Regulus' eyebrow cocked of its own accord and Severus' face darkened. "Circe's tit, Black, it's eight in the morning!"

"I know that," Regulus murmured, sipping his tea delicately. Gods, it was revolting. Severus gave him a disgusted look as he finally tasted his own, and sat back down to doctor it with sugar. "You know how this goes, Severus. It's basic manners. I say something about me, and invite you to comment. You comment, and say something about yourself in return. We converse." A finger danced through the air between them as if to illustrate his comment. "It's not hard," Regulus added, his tone dry as dust.

Severus spent a moment contemplating the accumulated grime on the coffee table. Absently, he doodled a pattern with the nail of his index finger, before realising what he was doing and wiping it away with a vicious swipe of his hand. He gulped down a mouthful of tea. "Dolohov and Avery," he responded, finally, and Reg cringed. The torture dream team, with Severus attached as apprentice-cum-inadequate babysitter. Even the Dark Lord shied away from Dolohov and Avery's joint projects, saving the two of them up for special occasions, preferring to have them available as individuals. Playing together, Dolohov and Avery's destructive powers were quadrupled, their sadistic minds capable of more evil than Regulus could imagine. He must have had something important in mind, though it was beyond Regulus to guess what it could have been.

Still, that meant that Severus had had a much worse night than he had. Regulus felt vaguely guilty about wasting the Blishens. "Any more whisky about?" Reg asked in lieu of a proper response. Well, croaked, for his mouth had suddenly gone dry.

They exchanged knowing, resigned looks. The two of them had become increasingly disenchanted with their cause over the past year or so, beginning to doubt the Dark Lord's vision for the world. They would never say it out loud – never had – but it was clear that they were on the same page. The two of them wanted out, but didn't know how to get there. They weren't Gryffindors, after all, to run into battle wands a'blazing, facing death head first. They could hardly just appear at the Manor one night and say, 'Hello, your Lordship, I'm afraid this evil thing isn't quite for us. Tar'rah!' The office leaving do for a Death Eater was a funeral.

Neither of them were ready to die, just yet.
Still, they couldn't stay, not with things as they were. Sure, Regulus was a Dark wizard, and he had made the choice to join, and some people would say that he should deal with the consequences of his actions, but…

Well, he didn't like killing people. He didn't hate muggleborns, so seeing them… _hurt_ was distasteful. Seeing the poor muggles, defenceless and confused as they were dragged into the room, had even cured him of his phobia of them. There might be billions of the things on earth, but there were billions of ants, also. Neither posed any _real_ threat to him, as long as he didn't do anything stupid like poke a nest of the damn things, so why should he bother himself with them? To his mind – and now that he had thought it through, it seemed ridiculous to not have thought it earlier – as long as they didn't know magic existed, then there was no trouble. There were such a thing as Obliviators, anyway, for the odd one that took the discovery badly, and that had worked for centuries.

The real threat was the Death Eaters, who didn't bother to hide their magic, their kills, or their hatred. Sooner or later they would bring the whole magical community into the spotlight, and what then? Would the Dark Lord kill every muggle on the planet? Not likely. Would the Muggles kill them, first?

Maybe.

They needed stopping, obviously, but that wasn't what was foremost on their minds. They knew that it was likely they would have to fight, any idiot could guess that, and they wouldn't mind either as long as they didn't have to bow to the Dark Lord any longer.

But how could they get out?

The Order wasn't an option – even if the lot of them didn't despise Severus, their leader was Albus Dumbledore, and he found all Slytherins beneath contempt.

Moving country wasn't an option – they would be found. The Dark Lord had allies all across the continents, one would never be safe.

They could start an underground revolution, but Regulus and Severus were hardly the best people to lead something like that. Severus was nowhere near charismatic enough, and Regulus had trouble relating to people who weren't just like him. If only they were nicer people, kinder maybe, or even more handsome, handsome enough that people would trust them despite their less than perfect personalities…

"I wonder what that weapon is," Severus said, apparently deciding to talk. Regulus huffed in frustration; he had felt as though he was onto something and the idea was in his head, he just needed to coax it into the forefront, but the second Severus had spoken the thought had scattered.

"What weapon?" He snapped. Severus peered over his teacup curiously, a spark of amusement in his eyes that he'd drawn a reaction.

"The one the Order supposedly has," he drawled lazily. "The one the Fates themselves saw fit to bless them with."

Regulus rolled his eyes. 'Fates' he says, like Gods exist. How could Gods exist when the world is as dark as it is? The only God Regulus believed in was Magic, no matter what the family legends told him. "It's probably nothing," he replied dismissively, then thought about it a little more. "Some sort of poison, to kill the Dark Lord with, perhaps."

"A poison? Gifted to the Potters?" His tone was laced with only the tiniest bit of irony. Regulus
curled his fingers around his cup more securely – he didn't want to think about the Potters, who stole his brother, who lived lives of happiness and light while he was reduced to sitting on a dirty muggle sofa in an equally loathsome little house, flinching at every shadow and jumping at every creak. Severus shouldn't want to think about them either, not with what all they'd taken from him, and yet here the man sat, pondering them like it didn't hurt at all. "Unlikely, don't you think?"

"What else could it be?" *if you're so damn smart,* Reg did not add.

"I'm not certain, but whatever it is, I'd quite like to know." He tapped his spindly fingers against the porcelain, little tinking noises ringing out then abruptly being muffled by the damp. "The Dark Lord wants me back at Hogwarts."

Regulus nodded. "Better there than out here."

"For you, maybe." Severus shook his head, his lank hair spilling over his shoulders. "He thinks that Dumbledore might trust me if I run back with my tail between my legs."

To say that whole situation was unlikely would be understating the issue. Severus had more pride than a hippogriff, his violent streak equal to or greater than. Dumbledore wouldn't buy it, even if he had been a lion cub.

"He'll never trust you. He'll only use you, then throw you away." It was a warning that Regulus had heard from his parents throughout his childhood – beware the half-blood bearing gifts. All of the twinkling in the world wouldn't convince him to trust a man who allowed, even incited, such blatant discrimination within his school, and he wouldn't encourage his friend to go willingly into his grasp either. Severus' eyes went heavy lidded, his whole body suddenly appearing to suffer some great weight. In this position his face was lined prematurely, his smooth skin showing the stresses of his unreasonably difficult life.

"You should get in touch with the other one," Severus said instead of any other response, his voice forcibly light. He was referring to Sirius, a fact made clear by the strain in his voice. When Regulus went to shake his head, Severus held up a hand. "Hear me out. He's your brother, and despite our… differences, he has always loved you. The Potters will take you in, you will be protected."

"Not likely," he could have responded, but it would be by rote. He thought, instead, about what it might be like, if he were to join Sirius. He would be disowned by his family, of course, but his father was dead and his mother insane, so there was little left for him there. Kreacher would remain loyal, and Kreacher was what he loved most in that house. He wouldn't have to marry Emilie Selwyn, which was a definite plus. The Death Eaters would be out for his blood, which was… not so very different to now.

He would have to deal with the sneers of the Light as they looked down upon the fallen Death Eater, probably even grovel to Dumbledore, deal with their distrust…

Severus was watching him expectantly. "I'll think about it," he said, wondering whether he could suppress his pride (which was a match for Severus', easily) for the sake of his life.

"Good," Severus said, a slight smile flickering across his lips. He looked... well, relieved would be the word, but that suggested that he had been concerned about Regulus, and it seemed inconceivable that Severus of all people was trying to keep him safe. Trying to push him into the arms of his childhood tormentors, even.

His quizzical look must have entertained the older man because he laughed, properly, his eyes warm and everything. "I know this seems ludicrous to you, Regulus, but I actually like you. As a person
who likes a very limited number of people, I'd rather if the people I did like didn't go around getting themselves killed." He drained his teacup and set it down, sending the tray back to the kitchen with a wave of his wand. "Now, if you don't mind, I had a very busy day planned."

"Moping and drinking?" Regulus snarked, reaching for his cloak.

"Indeed," Severus replied, with all the appearance of solemnity. "Don't let the door hit you on your way out."
Chapter Twenty-Four: The Mess

Chapter Summary

Lavender Brown is not a morning person.

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year!
Here's a chapter. It's... a chapter. I like it, but then I love writing Lavender, no matter what she does. I could write 5000 words of her normal routine without any sort of gimmick and it wouldn't be wasted time.
Hope you've all enjoyed the festive season, wherever you are and however you spent it!
Love, Eli x

The low rumble of voices reached Lavender as she drifted somewhere between levels of consciousness, teasing and coaxing her brain into interest, leading her up towards awareness. She couldn't hear the words that were being spoken, but it seemed to be an argument. This more than anything else was what woke her, pricking her interest. Lavender loved arguments. To watch, to hear, to participate in... Drama got her blood flowing like nothing else, and clashing with others was an unfailing form of entertainment for her. The best technique for seduction when it came to her, she had learned over the years, was to offer her a good, long, feisty quarrel. She loved it more than any good looks, sparkling humour or buff body – if a man could keep up with her, there was little to stop her falling in love with him.

Her mind settled happily in her body once more, her ears strained to catch more of the hushed conversation. The enhanced hearing of the lycanthrope was one of the many aspects she was having trouble with due to her 'lesser' status; sometimes it was sharp, some times muffled. It couldn't be relied upon, and especially not right now.

Shaking her head, she reached out in a feline stretch, her back arching up off of the mattress, her hands clawing up fistfuls of the sheet beneath her. It took her several minutes to orient herself after being pulled so unceremoniously from sleep – she was a deep sleeper, so deep her roommates had never been able to wake her. In third year she had slept right through Ron's encounter with Sirius Black, and when she'd finally been dragged out of bed even McGonagall's shrieking hadn't pulled her back to reality enough for her to have any clear memory of the attack. She had to wake slowly, in her own time, the result of a lifetime of conditioning, her newly developing senses and the interruption to her sleep the night before. Opening her eyes too quickly would overwhelm her, so she had elongated her morning routine to adapt to her new, more wolfy lifestyle.

She searched inside herself, taking an inventory. The frustration and irritation that had plagued her when she had awoken in the early hours still remained, a snarled up knot in her chest. Resentment towards Ginny, Luna and Hermione lived at the centre of the damn thing, but affection loosened it a little. That was a shock – when did she start to actually like them? – but quickly she put her developing emotions down to the events of the morning, to be examined at a later time. She had what
she had begun to recognise as the Pack bond glowing happily in one corner, so it seemed that lot were fine, and the space where she supposed her Mate would one day occupy was as blank and lonely as ever. Her wolf was relaxing in her mind, weak due to the waning moon and happy in its magical prison.

She shifted her hands to stretch out her shoulder muscles, moaning a little at the pleasurable ache that generated. The linen was cool on her palms, smooth and silky and pleasant. A gentle breeze rippled the air, soothing her overheated skin where it had slipped from beneath the duvet. Her body, in an attempt to fight her infection, had been running on extremes of hot and cold for the last few days, which made for a very uncomfortable Lavender. The heat attacked in the mornings and the freeze came of a night, driving her demented. It was hard enough to keep on top of everything that was going on without heat-induced delusions shaking up her already volatile brain.

The voices were still there, urgent whispers directly outside her door. Lavender opened her eyes only to narrow them on the painted wood as if she might have developed x-ray vision overnight – something that might have come in handy, considering the damned house liked to repel her magic; it wouldn't even allow her to cast cooling charms on the wall. While she couldn't see them, with her concentration focused in that direction she could piece together words and intonations.

"-before they wake up," one voice was saying, a man. She thought that perhaps it had to be Lupin, not because she recognised the voice but because the wolf had responded to it, sort of perking up in her head. She wasn't a massive fan of Remus Lupin, he made her a little uncomfortable as a kid, but he wasn't the worst person to be hanging around her bedroom. At least he had a vested interest in keeping her healthy and safe.

"I don't care! I need it more!" The other person was shrill – Evans, Lavender knew with absolute certainty. It was undoubtedly a young female, and of the girls in the house that tended towards shrillness, Lily was the only one that didn't worship the man to an unhealthy degree.

With a sigh, she reached for her wand to check the time. It was later than she had expected it to be, a surprise because that meant Ginny hadn't come to come for her. A satisfied smirk flashed across her lips – it seemed even Ginny couldn't be up at the crack of dawn after participating in ancient magical rites. It was good to know she had a weakness. Lavender took a moment to wonder who had dared to trigger the bond at such an inopportune moment – her money was on Ginny, given that Hermione was such a prude, but even she wasn't immune to the lure of the Old Ways. Luna had instigated it, obviously.

"Then we'll both have to do it," Lily was saying, not even bothering to keep her voice down anymore. Lavender summoned her robe and patted down her hair just as the doorknob started to turn.

"Lavender?" Lily whispered, which was ridiculous considering the racket they had been making outside. Her vibrant ruby tresses preceded her through the doorway, and those jewel-like eyes widened in shock when she located Lavender sitting expectantly on the bed, wide awake. "Oh, you're up."

Remus poked his head around the frame, looking nervous. His hair was tousled still from sleep, his shirt wrinkled and his trousers an inch too short. He was such a damned mess, it was frustrating to Lavender that she was supposed to answer to him, and she certainly didn't know why all of her friends seemed to think he was a God incarnate. If she had met the kid before she had been infected she could probably have sent him running – to her or away – in five words or less. "Come in, why don't you?" she said, not particularly welcomingly, but she wasn't a morning person and she had things to do. Lie-ins to appreciate.
The pair closed the door behind them softly and turned their eyes on her. Lily had this look on her face, sort of determined, but also conflicted. She bolstered herself with a deep breath before speaking. "What's going on?" She demanded, her voice a lot harder than Lavender had expected it to be. Indeed, she looked fierce, but there was an apologetic shine to her eyes, and it was obvious that she was fighting her innate politeness in order to be here. Confronting a guest and friend in their bedroom first thing in the morning? Not something she would usually do, by Lavender's guess.

"Ever since you four arrived, odd things have been happening," Lily continued, her voice accusatory. "First Moony went mental, then Remus got ill, and up until last night I was all for giving you lot the benefit of the doubt, but I can't just ignore this!" She pulled her hair off of her neck, revealing a necklace of purple-green bruising on her esophagus. Remus's eyes darkened at the sight, his face hardening as he glared at Lavender. Perhaps he meant to cow her into submission, but weak werewolf or not, she was a strong woman and didn't take well to threats. "I think you're all lovely, and I don't think you mean to hurt us, and I'm sure you want to help, but this is one step too far!" She stormed to the foot of the bed to lean into Lavender's personal space, apparently oblivious to the fact that Lavender was roughly twice her size. "You lot have been keeping us in the dark for far too long. It is not fair. We want – we need – we deserve an explanation, and I'm not leaving until I have one!"

She was panting now, seeming to have swelled to twice her size in her fury. Lavender watched her, trying not to get worked up herself – though it was hard. She had liked Lily, truly liked her, up until about the second she had woken to the woman just outside her door. Now, she wasn't feeling so fond of her.

They were here to demand answers, which was fine, completely fair – they shouldn't have been kept in the dark for so long, especially considering the fact that Lavender and the others were trespassing on their hospitality while they tried to figure things out. It was natural that they would be frustrated.

The problem Lavender had was what had brought them here, to this specific room, to wake her up ahead of everyone else and bully her into answering their questions. The assumption that not only would she know the answers – which she didn't, really, she wasn't the brains of the operation and the War was not her first priority, selfish as that might sound – but that she would be the weak link they could pry the answers from. She shouldn't hold it against them – it was a natural belief that most people had harboured since her attack in the war; that she was weak, useless, damaged goods, a burden to everybody else incapable of independent thought and easily led. It felt like the second she had woken up from her coma people had been pitying her, coddling her, the stench of false sympathy had been thick in her nose, clogging her lungs. People liked to project their own issues onto her, the guilt they feel deep in their souls, their self-esteem problems… one of the nurses at St Mungo's, a young witch a few years older than her with large ears barely disguised by a carefully styled hairdo had watched her with a sort of satisfied glee, the beautiful woman brought low by her injuries, and had whispered in the corridor to others without thought that she could be heard, 'if I were her, I'd never go outside. How can she bear to flaunt herself like that, looking as she does?'. It had stung at the time, but she would never have considered hiding herself away for the rest of her life; she wasn't quite that pathetic, despite what people liked to think.

Her image was easily bearable, she had found. Sure, she had her moments of self-pity, but losing her looks hadn't taken away her personality. She was still strong on the inside, she could still cast spells, use a quill, she still had her confidence, if a bit tarnished. It might have taken her a few months to come to terms with the situation, but after that she had returned to her old self – Lavender Brown. She was still Lavender Brown, after all. No werewolf could take that away from her.

It had taken her too long to be built up to let herself be cut down now. She wasn't a victim to hide herself away, she was a warrior. She had gotten these scars in battle – and she had survived. By ignoring that knowledge, assuming that she was some malleable witch easily intimidated, Lily and
Remus had made themselves no better than the assholes in the clubs who assumed she would sleep with them out of gratitude for their overlooking her ravaged face.

"No," she grunted, making eye-contact with Lily and noting with satisfaction her eyes widening in surprise. Perhaps Lily had thought she would break down and spill all of the information, too tired perhaps to fight. Well, tough. She didn't know the answers, and like hell would she give them without Hermione, Ginny and Luna's input even if she did. She was a Gryffindor, after all. "I can't help you. Go away."

Remus looked to the door as if he was considering leaving, and Lavender liked that – he could tell she wasn't lying, and his first reaction was to blush and run away. It said a lot about him that he could do so; he'd probably even apologise later.

Lily, however, was stubborn, and didn't like to be wrong. She glared at Lavender, her head still held high, displaying the discoloration on her porcelain throat. "You really don't know what this is?" she gritted out, pointing at it again, as if it wasn't the biggest eyesore in the room (and this room held mirrors).

Lavender debated this one for a moment, trying to phrase the answer in such a way that perhaps they would leave her alone. "Honestly, no," she sighed, and it was honest, but Remus went stiff and she knew that had been the wrong answer.

"I don't believe you," Lily pressed, dragging a groan out of Lavender. "I don't much care what you believe, Evans. I'm tired, I didn't sleep very well and I don't have the patience for this. Please, get out."

Their eyes clashed in challenge - deep lilac against bright, shiny emerald. Lavender had liked that Lily had those eyes when they had first met, their unusual eye colours something that they had in common. Now they were cold and hard and Lavender knew hers were too, and there didn't seem to be much camaraderie between them. After a moment, Lily turned towards the door, then paused. "You didn't sleep very well?" she asked quietly, probingly. Lavender, having thought she had won, muffled another groan.

"Oh, this is just- Right. Follow me."

Wrapping her robe around her, Lavender hauled herself from the bed and through the door, shoulder-checking Remus on her way out and smirking when he stumbled. It was petty, yes, but she was irritated, and despite knowing that she would feel guilty later it made her feel more in control right now. The other two scurried along behind her as she led them through the halls, away from their own beds and towards the guest wing where the other three had been given rooms. She banged first on Hermione's door, shouting a command for her to wake up, and then turned into the next room along, where Ginny and Luna slept. The door slammed against the wall when she opened it, startling the two of them awake.

"Lavender, what-" Ginny began drowsily, before noticing the other two coming in behind her. She uttered a yelp, collecting her covers around her and dragging them up to her neck. "What in Merlin's name is going on?"

Lavender ignored her, flopping herself down at the foot of Luna's mattress, narrowly avoiding crushing the other woman's ankles. Luna gave a sleepy smile as she sat up, her luminous eyes taking in Lily's agitated state and Remus' discomfort. "Sit down, make yourselves comfortable," she invited, smoothing the counterpane for them. Lily opened her mouth – no doubt to rant again, she really was quite shrill – when Hermione slipped in the door and looked blearily around.
"Starting early today, are we?" she commented with a faint smile, pulling her terry-cloth robe closer around her. Her eyes skimmed across the occupants of the room, neatly avoiding Luna's, though a faint rosy blush lifted in her cheeks. She pushed her way between Lily and Remus to join Ginny, Lavender and Luna on their side of the room in a gesture of solidarity, despite the fact that anybody could tell she didn't want to be there. Her eyes were bruised purple and her skin was pale, and beneath her cheery, pleasant façade Lavender could sense her agitation, and it fed her own. None of them wanted to be here, now, discussing what they were about to discuss. The room was too cramped, they were on top of one another and being confronted for answers they hadn't the chance to prepare.

"I'm sick of this," Lavender exclaimed abruptly, addressing her comment to Hermione, their de-facto leader. It probably wasn't any more fair to lay responsibility at her door than at Lavender's own, but she had been elected as their spokewoman and she knew far more about the situation than Lavender did. "I'm frustrated and bored. I didn't ask to be here, I bought no ticket to the crazy train. All I wanted was to get married and have some chubby ginger kids. This is not my damned mess," she snarled, pointing at Ginny, Luna and Hermione in turn, seething with sudden rage, "and I refuse to clean it up!" Hermione blinked slowly, Ginny frowned, and Luna lifted a hand to rub it comfortingly on her shoulder as Lavender scowled.

"Evans and Lupin want to know what the fuck is going on. They turned up at my door this morning, near on kicked it down, and demanded an explanation." She waved her hands at the two outsiders, and looked back at Hermione, then Ginny, then Luna. "Mess." She said bluntly. "Get cleaning."
Chapter Twenty-Five: Consequences III

Chapter Summary

Lily and Remus are very grumpy bears.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is basically a hot mess. You have been warned.

Remus watched with interest as Lavender slumped against the wall, her eyes closing, and effectively removed herself from the conversation. About two minutes after they had entered the room to confront Lavender, he had regretted it. His hasty actions had prompted an offense he didn't know could be triggered in the little witch, releasing tidal waves of anger mixed with grief and resentment. The emotion had come through their bond so strongly he'd almost stumbled, and were it not for Lily he would have left the room immediately. No answers, he thought, were worth upsetting her that much. Moony's protective instincts had become engaged, and he'd been pinned to the spot by his conflicting impulses. One part of him wanted to calm Lavender, another wanted to tear apart the agitator, another wanted to remove Lily from a potentially dangerous situation... how other werewolves stayed sane in packs was a mystery.

Now he was in this room, the same size as the other, but now packed with hormonal witches and scents that assailed him in one huge wave. There was the scent of the perfume on the sheets, the apple of someone's shampoo, the musk from where they hadn't showered. Each of their individual scents was rolled into a ball with the others, their magical bonds confusing the image, weaving their identities together as one. All five girls were inextricably linked, and recently, and it set the wolf on edge. Usually his Pack bond would override the Other, but without all of his members by his side he was overruled, and Moony didn't like the feeling of being outnumbered.

Setting him more on edge was the addition of that mysterious scent from the dining room, warm and soft and tantalisingly faint, threaded through the wave. It was weak in the presence of the others, not nearly enough to drag him into the trance he'd suffered yesterday, but still there, present. He could smell jasmine on it, and something spicy that set his mouth to watering, reminiscent of magic. He wanted to search for the source, almost desperately, but the more human part of his mind was fixated too solidly on his problem to follow any other path.

Hermione sighed, dragging his attention to her where she sat on the floor between Ginny and Luna's beds. She looked so tired, like she was praying for a reprieve, and Remus wasn't sure that she could handle the situation. Again his protective instincts were riled, presumably in answer to a female in distress, and he had to fight the urge to comfort her.

"We should have expected this," Hermione murmured, looking to Ginny, who was half-asleep, still snuggled in her blankets.

"Yes, you should have!" Lily snapped, still fired up and projecting haughtiness. "We have a right to know what is going on. You can't have expected to keep everything a secret forever! Not if you're
going to continue to use us like you have!” There was more than anger in her voice, there was also hurt, and a feeling of betrayal. Lily had thought they were friends, had played devils advocate for them amongst the Marauders, and now worried that her trust had been misplaced. Remus edged away from her, closing himself off against her volatile emotions, not wanting to agitate the wolf any further. Already they were playing with fire.

"We're not using you, Lily," Hermione soothed, her hands up as if to surrender. "I promise, that's the last thing we were trying to do."

"Then what is this?" Lily cried, pulling her hair from her neck again. Hermione sucked in a breath at the sight, her eyes bugging out of her head. Ginny gasped, her head rearing back. Even Lily couldn't miss their surprise, and wilted. "You don't know?"

Hermione opened her mouth to say something – agree, perhaps – when suddenly her head whipped around and she was staring at Luna. Luna watched her with a worrisome frown. The corners of Hermione's mouth crimped, an expression of supreme impatience flitting across her features. "You know, don't you."

Pushing the covers back, Luna emerged from her bed, skinny white legs swinging childishly inches above the floor as she sat upright. Everybody's eyes were on her, but her focus was riveted on Hermione. "Don't be mad, please." She whispered, fisting her hands in the coverlet. Shyness and pain seemed to shrink her until she seemed about ten years old, easily breakable and tormented. Hermione's eyes were hard, as though she had little sympathy left for the other girl. She would not make a promise she could not keep.

"It's the bond cementing itself," Luna informed them with a sigh, finally tearing her attention from Hermione. She peered at Lily's neck, one tiny hand reaching out to brush across the delicate patchwork of bruising. "I didn't realise it would be so violent, but I can imagine why that would be." The blonde ran a her hand through the other girl's hair, letting the strands catch on her knuckles and wink in the light. "You aren't as open to the magic as the rest of us are, our friendships with you not as strong. It makes sense, therefore, that you would pay a higher price."

Remus frowned, trying to place what little information she had given in with his knowledge of bonds and wild magic in his head. He knew that there were many types of bonds in the world, to compensate for the many different types of magic. There were romantic bonds, such as soul bonds and mate bonds, but they bound two or three people, rather than five. There were family bonds, natural, like the the Pack bond, but that wasn't spontaneous bond that could be triggered at any time, there had to be an awareness; the infection of lycanthyropy and other emotional rules, such as trust in the Alpha. He had never studied a bond that could bind five witches without their permission, seemingly randomly in the night. It didn't make sense, couldn't be possible.

The girls seemed to have forgotten that he was there, and he didn't want to break the moment by reminding him – he wasn't a part of this so his questions could wait. Right now he could feel Lily's distress, and getting her answers was top priority.

Luna was still talking. "It's feminine magic, coven magic, that links us now, but the problem with that sort of magic is that it comes at a cost – a cost which we all consented to pay in one way or another. Hermione and I paid our price in sex, Lavender and Ginny paid in pain, and it seems that you – as the focus, linking us to this time and this earth – paid in blood." Luna's face was overcome with a great melancholy, so deep it radiated outwards to weigh on the shoulders of everybody in the room along with her, dragging them down, sharing the burden. Remus could see the surprise on the other girls faces as the bond diluted the emotion through each of them, the shiver of surprise as the side-effects of their new Coven came into effect. Remus was the only one unaffected, but even at the
back of the room, pressed against the wall as if the small distance could protect him, he could sense their sadness, anger and frustration with the blonde.

"It wasn't in the plan, Lily, or we would have asked permission, we would have warned you." A soft sob, regretful, broke through but Luna swallowed it back and continued bravely. "This magic has been dormant for our kind for centuries, nobody could have predicted its rise. By all rights it shouldn't have done so, but…

"None of us are in control anymore. Our lives are in the hands of Fate, and they do with us what they will. Last night Hermione and I experienced the lengths they will go to in order to keep us on track. We were enchanted, unable to prevent ourselves from forging the bond. No human compulsion could have forced that."

She pushed off the bed, sinking to her knees beside Hermione, reaching out for Ginny with one hand and Lily with the other. "I admit, back in our own time, I took a message from the Fates and in doing so committed myself and the rest of you to this path. At the time I thought it might help us all – you were so miserable, broken and alone, the lot of you. You won't think it a very good excuse, I know, but I believed that bringing you here would open your hearts back up again, give you back your happiness, and at the same time save the world."

Luna pressed her cheek against Hermione’s shoulder-blade, almost hidden by her fall of white-blonde hair and the angles of the other girl's body. Her eyes, peeking through, were large and tearful. "In opening our lives to Fate I gave permission for this to happen. I was naïve, I realise now, but at the time and for a while after I believed it was for the best. I still do, deep down. I can only apologise that I didn't think more of the consequences when I orchestrated this."

There was silence for a few moments as the information was assimilated. Remus was bewildered, his brain racing to make sense of the information it had been given. So Luna, the one who seemed like the lesser threat, the ditzy one, had brought them here? Without the permission of any of the others? While the rest of them had been struggling to make sense of the situation, she had known about it all along? Did that mean she had further information? Did she know what they were to do?

Without conscious thought he had moved forward, and was now towering over Luna where she sat on the ground, calm now and accepting of whatever the other girls might throw at her. Hostility radiated off of Hermione, she was as stiff as a board where Luna leant against her, but hadn't yet moved away. Lily looked dazed, confused, and that expression was mirrored on Ginny's face. Only Lavender seemed to properly understand the situation, but Remus didn't respond to that, instead looking down at Luna, questions vying for answer in his mind.

"Did you know that Lavender would become…. Like me?" he asked quietly, his tone belying the wrath that threatened to explode within him. He hadn't realised that the answer was important to him until he'd spoken it, until it was out in the universe and there was no way to call it back. Luna looked up, met his glare without flinching, and he could read the answer there, plain as day. A growl burst from his chest, loud and damning, sending the other girls cowering in automatic fear response.

All except for Hermione, who threw herself in his path, suddenly on her feet with her chin lifted, her teeth bared in aggression. "Back off," she snarled, her arm out to push Luna behind her legs.

Remus snarled right back at her, until the room was alive with the rumbling. "How can you protect her?" His voice was furious, his eyes flashing. "After what she did to her, your friend?"

Hermione's face only got more set, her jaw clenched in anger, her throat vibrating visibly where it was stretched so that she could look up into his face. He was perhaps six inches taller than her, yet she stood in front of him like they were equals in height and strength, all of her Gryffindor bravery
coming to the fore. "I don't think that's any of your business," she replied smartly, one hand curling around her wand and holding it out to her side. Magic sparked in her eyes, playing along her curls, her image one of danger, a threat all of its own. The taste of jasmine, the tang of her magic invaded his space, but he barely noticed, his wolf clawing at him in response to his anger.

"She ruined her life for a game, made her a monster-"

Shouts rose from every corner at that, cutting off his tirade as the girls all jumped to their friends defense. Remus just shook his head, gritted his teeth. They didn't know anything about it, not really. Lavender hadn't even had her first change yet, she couldn't know the pain, the terror of it. The eerie sensation of losing time, of being wrenched away from consciousness, the horror of waking up covered in blood and other unknown liquids in a different environment and not knowing what happened, whether you killed someone or not, whether you passed on your awful affliction in the night. She would barely recognize the presence growing in her mind, alien and unnatural, whispering to her with tales of bloodlust and murder, begging him to lose control, to give himself over to it.

He was shaking with rage, his wand in hand though he couldn't remember drawing it. Lily had her hands on his arms, pleading with him to calm down, but it didn't seem like anything would ever pull him back, the urge to fight pounding through his veins, heating his blood. He met Hermione's challenge with his own, sure he could beat her at whatever game she wished to play, and then he could get to his real target. She might be a fighter with all the experience of war but he was a duelling champion and the only thing that prevented him from simply stunning her and tossing her aside was the fact that she should attack first.

"Remus John Lupin, you know you're not a monster," she finally said, her voice low, unexpectedly calming. He blinked in surprise, jolting the haze of red in his mind. She must have noticed the change in his expression because suddenly her whole visage seemed to warm, her shoulders relaxing and the hard brown of her eyes melted to the colour of chocolate. "Neither is Lavender. She's a bitch, yes, but she doesn't have murder in her any more than you do."

"I'm not sure that's a compliment, actually," Lavender said snidely, the only person still seated. It was like the tension of the moment had completely bypassed her, leaving her in her original position, looking no more ruffled than before.

"Literal bitch," Ginny sniggered from where she stood by the foot of her own bed, wand in one hand, using the other to blow Lavender a sarky kiss. Lavender made a performance out of reaching to catch it in her fist, then pressing it over her heart and pretending to swoon. Ginny snickered again, and Lily made a little noise of amusement. Remus couldn't see where Luna had disappeared to, but when he moved to check behind Hermione the witch darted out to block his passage.

"I think it would be best if you and Luna stayed separate for now, don't you?" she said, again in that low, husky voice she had used on him before. It seemed practised, specifically cultured to cut through his more feral thoughts and replace them with others. He looked away out of habit, and if he'd blushed then no one would know because he had already been flushed from the adrenalin. Hermione grinned like a shark just out of his line of sight, proud of her distraction, revelling in the rush of power she hadn't felt since her first days with her Remus.

"You come and sit over here," she said, still soothingly, taking a hold of Remus' arm and pulling lightly to guide him over to Ginny's vacated bed. She pushed him down at the pillow, paused for a moment to make sure he wouldn't move, and turned to the other girls. "Take Lu over there, and then we'll continue our chat."

Remus thought of objecting, but now that the rush had gone he could smell that scent again, and he realised it was coming from Hermione. It surrounded him, smothered him, kept the wolf locked in his
cage and somehow prevented his anger from rising. He wanted to resent it, this new trap he had fallen into, but he couldn't quite think straight.

Her fingers were still locked on his arm as if to prevent him rising, and he stared at them, soft and slender against the rough wool of his jumper. People didn't often touch him casually, without thought, but this witch seemed to have no such qualms. He wanted to ask her if she didn't fear the wolf, didn't think he'd attack mindlessly, but remembered that she had known him before. How well, he was unsure, but they must have been close enough to touch if she was so at ease with him now. Again her peculiar scent teased his nostrils, her heat radiating through the weave of his shirt to burn his skin.

"I'm sorry, I'm trying to get this straight in my head," Lily said, still standing in the centre of the room. Remus wondered if she realised that she had moved herself protectively in front of Lavender, or if it had been subconscious. "You're saying that this... whatever it is... was orchestrated by God?" Her scepticism was palpable.

"Not God, Lily, Gods. Plural, multiple, like the Romans and the Pagans." Lavender shifted to tug on Lily's sleeve, pulling her slightly so that Lavender could see around her into the room. "Some purebloods and half-bloods worship Gods and Goddesses, like Circe, Apollo and Hecate, which you'll recognise in the language. Most of us believe in the Fates and the Furies and their intervention in mortal life." Lavender shrugged a little, making sure the motion was visible to the rest of the rooms occupants. "Most of them we disregard, but the ones that are relevant to our way of life, you can bet we worship them properly. Did you never notice Professor Sprout's shrine at the back of Greenhouse One?"

"I thought it was just her peculiar way," Lily said, but her face had taken on the slightly blurred quality of a scholar when there is information to be had. Remus knew she was filing this away for later examination.

"I think Luna has a valid theory, if it makes a difference. The Moirai are known to be inflexible, indomitable and beyond human morality. Assuming they orchestrated our path, I can see them doing anything in their power to prevent us from diverging, including binding us to one another indestructibly. In that case, had Luna not opened the way for them they would have found another solution, one no doubt more objectionable than this."

"You're just trying to excuse her," Remus accused, though less loudly than perhaps he might have done without Hermione gripping his arm in warning.

"I have to say, it doesn't seem very likely," Lily added, the pleasure of learning having passed, now seeing clearly again. "It's like you're suggesting we've been chosen as some sort of heroes, but look at us. We're hardly Odysseus."

"Odysseus was born for his quest. With us, the Fates just picked up whatever was available at the time, why else would there be four of us?" Lavender parried, managing to sound quite reasonable even while saying something completely ludicrous. Remus feared for her sanity, and more so his own, because he was starting to see the logic of it.

"So what you're saying is that the 'Fates'," Lily raised both of her hands in overdone air-quotes, her nose wrinkled in disbelief, "are binding us together in every available manner to make sure none of us can leave?"

"Not before the job is done, no," Luna chirped up. She had moved to Lavender's side, the two of them leaning on one another for support, both physical and emotional. Lily wavered in the centre, as though she was afraid to even consider what they were saying as truth. Remus wasn't sure he bought
it either – he might only be a half-blood, but he knew that some of his friends worshipped deity. The very manor they stood in was full of the evidence of their worship; vaguely morbid tapestry and statuary dedicated to Persephone, Thanatos and Atropos were present in nearly every room, even the nursery in which they raised their young. He had never bothered to question the phenomenon, in the Wizarding world it was widely accepted that the Potters had an alliance with Death, but now he considered that it might be something more than that.

Over his head Ginny and Hermione seemed to be carrying out a silent conversation that involved a lot of nose twitching and eyebrow wagging. It had been going on for quite some time, the motions sometimes getting quite aggressive, as though they were arguing, though it was difficult to tell exactly what it was about. 'Remember your promise,' Ginny finally mouthed, an action only just caught by Remus. Hermione let out a long sigh and Ginny shot her a triumphant grin.

"The tales from that era do seem to substantiate the notion that the Gods would choose mortals to carry out their dirty work," Hermione droned, but there was a bitter edge to her voice as if she resented saying it, and Ginny looked far too smug for comfort. She was the sort of woman, Remus thought, that only looked that smug when someone was in pain. "Though I can't say for sure-"

Ginny let out a groan and marched over to Luna's bed, joining the two blondes to face the room, her chin jerked defiantly. "Do you not think that the Fates would want to have a hand in destroying a man that can defeat death? A man who has found a way to defeat his own destiny? That certainly fits with the mythos." She took Lavender's hand, an arm slung around Luna's shoulder, and glared up at Lily. "You don't have to believe our explanation, you know. Just accept that we're bound now. It doesn't mean much of anything, a coven bond, just that we're stronger together, weaker apart. It's an incentive to keep you close, that's all."

"Oh… well, what about Remus? What happened to him?" Lily was fighting to hold onto her anger, the emotion draining her of energy quickly. She was too tired to fight for much longer, Remus could tell that from the way she held herself, and her tough-girl image was severely dented by the longing looks she sent the pillows when she thought they weren't looking.

Remus shifted uncomfortably, not fully wanting to accept what they were throwing at him, but unable to entirely discount it either. The fact that Hermione didn't seem to believe it herself was a balm to him in some ways, as was the fact that she was sat beside him, serving as sanity in the storm. "That was Lavender drawing energy from me, right?" he asked, his eyes on Lavender. His voice held too much concern, was too soft for his liking. He couldn't seem to help himself – she brought out his compassionate side.

"Right, sorry," Lavender winced, not meeting his eyes. "I didn't know about that until after."

"That's fine, we know now," his voice was still damnably gentle; he knew from the colour that rose in her cheeks that she thought he was patronising her. It seemed she was very easily offended. "Moony added her to the Pack, that wasn't their doing," he explained to Lily, a tad sheepishly. "It seemed suspicious, what with everything else going on, so I came to ask about it. It wasn't my intention to stress you all out."

"What's done is done," Hermione said firmly, her nails still keeping Remus in check while her glare seemed to do the same for Lavender. "Since the Fates-" her cynicism beat even Lily's, seeming to fill the room, "have seen fit to provide us with these resources, however, perhaps we should use them?"

"What do you mean?" Lily asked, suddenly seeming wary. He didn't blame her – Hermione had a zealous glint to her eyes, a sudden malicious grin on her lips.

"Well yesterday we were trying to research things, but we hardly made a dent in the list. With the
help of you two on top of the four of us – and Sirius and James, of course, we wouldn't want to keep them out of the loop – we should be able to get the ball rolling much faster." Her face suddenly went innocent, all big brown doe-eyes and pouting lips as she bounced her gaze between the two of them. "You did say you wanted to be included, right? That you deserved to be involved?" Before they had a chance to answer she was nodding decisively, straightening up and finally releasing Remus from her clutches. "Then you'll be happy to meet us in the library after we grab some breakfast. Thank you so much for offering your help."

She hustled out of the room, the door not even having swung shut before the sound of running water could be heard from next door. Lily looked at him, startled.

"Scary, isn't she?" Ginny sniffed from the comforter of the other bed. "Now, I don't know if you've noticed, but I'm half naked. Unless you're going to marry me, Remus, could you please get out? Anybody would think you're trying to compromise my virtue."

This from a woman who lay sprawled across the two blondes like they were her own personal harem. Remus rolled his eyes, but left the room. Lily followed swiftly. "I know I'm supposed to be upset," she said to him as they headed in the direction of their own quarters, "but I'm actually dreadfully excited. Aren't you? They talk a lot of rubbish but I think they could actually change things, and we've just been plonked right into the middle of it!"

She was smiling, walking backwards with a near skip, and Remus didn't want to break her bubble, but – "That's all well and good, Evans, but you're overlooking the more immediate problem." She blinked at him in question and he smirked. "You're the one that has to tell Prongs and Padfoot that you've volunteered them for a day in the library. Good luck with that."
Chapter Twenty-Six: Time Passes

Chapter Summary

Potter Manor's occupants prepare for the full moon.

The boys turned up that day, after much grumbling and grousing – and, the girls thought, more than one attempt to throw Lily out, going by her malicious smirk, James' limp and Sirius' bright red ears – and settled down. Hermione had found it an honour to work with such quick minds, remembering everytime one of them flicked through a book that these were the men who had mastered the animagus transformation at fifteen out of empathy for their friend's plight. Well, she found it an honour until about two hours in, when they begun to get bored, and she had to put up with Sirius howling Remus' name and parchment taking flight around her. Not even thinking about the magnificent intricacy of the charms work on the Marauders' Map could save them from her wrath in the end, and the boys had grovelled at her feet as she kicked them out of the library and threatened to leave them out of her plans.

After that small hiccup, things began to pick up in their research. Days turned into weeks as Spring settled more fully over the Manor, and the inhabitants fell into a routine. Delicate compromises were made between work and play, the boys and Lily having to fit war preparations around their original commitments. All residents found time to help, including Charlus and Dorea, though Hermione was – wisely – careful of the information they were privy to. While they had been kind hosts, and at present agreed to hide their existence from the outside world, Hermione could sense the strain they were under to fulfil their obligations to Dumbledore and therefore was loath to confide anything more than the necessary information. All six of the original residents continued to attend Order meetings, of which there had been two, though they were sure to bring the information back to add to Luna's chart. The newcomers were uneasy about how easily they could come by this information, vowing to find a better way to police their own revolution; something more secure than blind trust and less torturous than dark magic tattoos.

Remus and Lily proved to be the most committed to the cause, due to them spending more time at the Manor than James and Sirius, as James was often out visiting allies and investments with Charlus in preparation for managing the Potter holdings, and Sirius was busy with Auror training at the Ministry. Lily, who studied Healing magic from home with the elves and an imported tutor from St Mungo’s, balanced this with her Defensive Magic study, and volunteered to join what she referred to as their 'Girl Power' classes (so named after coming across them in their clearing, with Lavender and Hermione puffing around the trees and Luna and Ginny sparring in the centre). She was Ginny's favourite student by far, mostly due to Ginny's inability to corral Luna into any sort of training if she wished to be elsewhere, Lavender's defiance whenever she was asked to do anything remotely physical, and Hermione's typically bookworm ineptitude. The redhead proved to be a quick study, who had already been in fair shape and far stronger than she looked. She and Ginny were quick forming a bond, though it had nothing on the one between Lavender and Lily, who grew closer by the day.

Remus worked part-time in an independent bookshop in nearby Helmsley, allowing him ample free time to spend either with his head in a book or assisting Lavender through her pre-moon preparations. He was Hermione's near constant library companion, though the both of them were liable to leave the room at random times without explanation, and not return for hours. For
Hermione, this was because of difficult memories which often visited her without warning both in the day and at night. Remus had his own problems being close to Hermione, which he wouldn't confide to anybody.

Slowly, by inches, the girls began to get to know the Potters and their adopted children, more as people than as amorphous figures distorted by time and nostalgia. They learned that they had flaws, just as the girls did, but also their kindness and compassion. Lily was found often outside of Lavender's room in the night, pacing restlessly as the other girl suffered through nightmares, knowing that Lavender's pride wouldn't allow her comfort but unable to return to her own room without assurance of her wellbeing. Remus would put aside his own loathing of his beast in order to reassure Lavender that lycanthropy 'wasn't that bad', despite patently disbelieving every word he said. He continued to pretend that Luna didn't exist, but didn't say a bad word about her to the other lads, nor did he make her feel unwelcome, which only further convinced everybody of his unfathomable goodness. Luna cared about his disapproval not at all, when asked about it she told the girls, "don't worry, I'm used to it. At least I still have all of my shoes!"

The situation between the two of them made Hermione uncomfortable, but she had precious little time to contemplate a solution, busy as she was attempting to keep a grip on Sirius and James. They were perfectly good researchers, very clever – they could make accurate intuitive jumps with very little information. Unfortunately, their concentration failed easily, leaving them to revolt against their 'babysitter' who more often than not was Hermione, herself. She had spent the 29th with straight, blue hair; the colour not bothering her as much as the straightness, for she looked good in blue, but with her hair straight her magic was much weaker and she was drowsy to the point of narcolepsy. When Ginny saw what they had done she was swift and merciless in her retribution, leaving Sirius wandering around looking like a wolfman from a Muggle film with thick thatches of hair sprouting from his flesh and bursting from his clothes, and James with antlers sending his head askew, hopping around on hooves like a confused, bastardized faun.

Remus, upon walking into the chaos, took one look around and walked straight back out again. Still, as April melted into May, they found themselves growing more comfortable with one another. There was ample time for Lavender, Luna, Ginny and Hermione to observe the relationship between the boys, which had been amplified to mythical proportions by the men they had known in the future. As it was, in the present, it was fascinating to watch. Everybody seemed to have their designated role and was happy with it, and even with Peter gone there was no imbalance. James and Sirius were inseperable, but that did not make Remus an outsider, for he was the calm to their storm even in temper. Sirius was the closest to Remus emotionally, James their comic relief for when things got too morose. For both of the men, it was clear that James was representative of home for them, in a world where everywhere else was so unwelcoming. The relationship was idyllic, the girls watching from the sidelines in a mixture of awe and jealousy, suddenly feeling petty for the divisions in their own ranks.

As the full moon approached Lavender began to get skittish. She spent a lot of time in her room or outside, playing in the pond that backed onto the Potter's property. Luna shadowed her from a distance, hovering by in the case that something went wrong, but otherwise going unnoticed. She had a talent for melting into the background that she used shamelessly to her advantage, Lavender never knowing she was watched. Her research slowed to a trickle before stopping altogether as her attention was drawn to other, more imminent things.

Hermione allowed this, as she herself was involved in her own project. At the beginning of April she began to disappear for hours at a time, returning looking flushed but pleased. Lily and the boys would look at her askance, but she gave no hints as to her whereabouts, though Ginny and Luna
often sent her knowing smiles. Dorea, too, seemed smugly knowledgeable, but that seemed to be her
default emotion nowadays around the children. Despite her and her husband not being fully involved
in the plotting, Hermione and Ginny had a habit of disappearing into her office to debrief her on their
work in the least possible detail, though mostly they reassured her of the boys' health and
helpfulness, leaving Dorea feeling proud and involved.

On the sixth of May Hermione burst into the library at speed, holding two goblets out from her body
and hovering two other glasses behind her. Ginny squealing in excitement drew the attention of
James and Sirius, who wandered out from the stacks to eye the steaming cups with trepidation. "For
us?" he asked, shrinking back a little, no doubt regretting the trouble he had caused her over the past
few weeks.

Smirking, Hermione wove her way through the chairs scattered about the open area in the centre of
the library towards where Lavender and Remus sat with Ginny, nestled in an alcove protected by a
statue of Artemis in armour on one side, and a regal looking doe on the other. Both werewolves were
already wincing at the stench. "Sadly, not." She informed the lads, who were following her through
the library.

"Is that chocolate milkshake?" James demanded, reaching out a finger to taste some of the whipped
cream. The glass danced forward, out of his reach.

"Yes," Hermione said curtly, placing the goblets one each in front of Remus and Luna, blessing
them with a wide grin. Remus gave her a wary smile before contemplating the contents of his goblet,
not looking at all trusting.

Lavender, by contrast, picked it up. She went to take a sip then paused, looking up through her
eyelashes slyly. "What did you bring me, if Remus gets chocolate milkshake?" she asked, much like
a child would bargain with their parents over how many vegetables to eat. Rolling her eyes,
Hermione dropped the other glasses onto the table with a thud.

"Cola float, you disgustingly Americanised traitor," she scolded, slipping into a chair and pulling a
face as she examined the congealing ice-cream/soft drink mixture. "I hope your teeth rot."

"Gosh, Hermione, you're so kind to me, how on earth does anybody resist your myriad charms?"
Lavender fanned her face exaggeratedly. "I just want to fall at your feet and scream 'Take me, take
me!'!"

"Are you going to drink it or not?"

"Is 'not' an option?"

"No."

She poked her tongue out, scrunching up her face in displeasure, but Hermione had already turned to
her other patient, who was looking distinctly suspicious. As he watched, the concoction bubbled and
what looked like a Hedgehog's spine drifted to the surface, only to be swallowed up again by the
seething mass. He gulped back the sudden urge to vomit.

"You want me to drink this?" he prayed that the answer was no. He understood that potions were
necessary and helpful, but when you got a pepper-up potion it didn't exactly advertise its contents.
Having the eye-of-newt actually staring up at you as you drank was a whole other – disgusting,
sinister – ball game. The expression on her face gave him no hope at all. "To think I was starting to
like you," he accused, anything to delay the moment he would have to shove it down his throat.
Ginny piped up quickly enough to distract everybody from the heat rising in Hermione's face, smirking mischievously at the two lycans. "Oh, come on. I doubt that's the worst thing you've ever put in your mouth." She dragged the cup over to herself, peering inside curiously. "Well, actually… nope, I'm going to stick with my first assessment," she chuckled softly, then turned her head towards Hermione and Lavender to mouth 'Michael Corner'. Lavender turned slightly green, but Hermione's entire face flamed up.

The blonde snatched her cup back, clutching it protectively to her chest. "You're depraved," she hissed at Ginny, who only smirked wider and winked.

"What is it?" Sirius asked from where he and James loomed over the lot of them, arms crossed, looking a little constipated. Hermione thought that might be due to the fact that they were half-amused, half-protective, and weren't sure which emotion should be allowed to win out at the moment.

"It's a potion," Ginny answered slowly, as if he were very dull, in order to allow Hermione time to regain her composure.

"Wolfsbane Potion," she expanded, pressing her fingers to her cheeks to cool them. "Foul thing, a pain to brew, but I have it on good authority that it helps with the transformation."

Remus glanced up from where he had been mesmerised by the fact that the liquid in his goblet seemed to breathe. "By 'good authority' you mean me, don't you?" He sighed, looking back down. "I read about this, I think, last year. It seemed wonderful, but I'd written off ever being able to get it because -" he met Hermione's eyes, a calculating look in his own. "It's meant to be really complex and ludicrously expensive, how did you make it?"

"Wait, you've heard of it?" James butted in, frowning at Remus. "How do you know that's what this is? She might be trying to poison you."

Ginny scoffed and Hermione flew onto the defensive, turning around to glare at the man. James just raised an eyebrow. "What? It's not a stupid question. What would you think if I just turned up out of the blue with a potion for Lavender to drink?"

"I would never drink anything you brewed," Lavender retorted playfully. "I quite like my life, thank you."

Huffing, James flung his arms out in exasperation. "You get what I mean, though?"

"Dorea helped. She bought the ingredients and oversaw the brewing process to make certain nothing went wrong. She's quite the potions mistress, your mother." Her gaze turned wicked. "Of course, if you don't trust her…"

He looked surprised to find himself so firmly backed into a corner. Remus, knowing that he was running out of ways to procrastinate, searched wildly for another way. Lavender on the other hand, simply lifted the goblet to take a generous swig.

She let out a hacking cough, her eyes watering. She grimaced, then quaffed the lot. The goblet was returned to the table and she retched violently, her body rejecting the potion already. "Oh, Gods," she gasped, reaching blindly for the drink Hermione had thought to provide as both bribe and compensation. After a sip of the creamy brew she relaxed, though didn't look any happier. "Why lycanthropy?" she demanded, everybody jumping. She traced the condensation on her glass with a finger, pouting. "Of all the magical creatures in the world, why a fucking werewolf? Why not a Selkie, I ask you? I would have made a fucking fabulous Selkie."
Hermione said, "she'll be fine" at the same time as Sirius nodded thoughtfully and said "it's the tits." They stared at each other for a moment, blinking blankly, just marvelling over their differences.

"Thank you for that input, Black, much appreciated," Lavender drawled dryly. She prodded Remus' goblet with a finger. "Bottom's up, wolf-boy. I thought you were meant to be braver than me?"

It was an obvious challenge, meant to prick his male pride, and Remus was ashamed to say that it worked. His mind fixed firmly on delicious, not mouldy and cadaverous looking things, he poured the lot down his throat.

"Delicious," he muttered, smiling weakly. Hermione gave a throaty laugh, then pushed the milkshake over the table.

"Reward for a job well done," she teased, her eyes sparkling with amusement. His heart stuttered for a moment as they watched one another.

"Thank you," he replied in a husky voice that he knew he would pay for later. James and Sirius had lit up like fucking Christmas trees at the sound, poking and prodding one another excitedly, probably already formulating jokes. Remus forgot the danger, though, as his fingers brushed hers, sending a shiver of awareness down his spine. Ginny called her attention to her and the moment broke as if it had never been, leaving Remus with an unsettling sensation unfolding in his stomach – he wasn't sure if it was intuition or the potion. Either one didn't seem too good.
Chapter Twenty-Seven: The Full Moon Part I

Chapter Summary

Regulus makes a decision. Lavender and Remus prepare for Lavender's first change.

The letter, which had been dropped into his breakfast that morning and now bore traces of melted butter and jam on its pressed ivory envelope, looked deceptively harmless as it sat, starched straight and practically shiny in its perfection, against the rich emerald satin of his bedspread. Unfurled, its secrets revealed and imprinted forever onto Regulus' psyche, it seemed to mock the mess that was his life; its unblemished innocuousness giving no hint as to the devastation it had wreaked with its delivery.

The 'Death Eater' thing had been all well and good while it had been only himself in danger, his family spared the backlash of the Dark Lord's displeasure. It had been Regulus' understanding that while he worked for Him, his family would be safe. That had been the agreement, unspoken and unsigned though it was, and the Dark Lord had given his word.

What did the Dark Lord's word stand for? Nothing any longer, it seemed.

Tapping his wand negligently against the sole of his dragonhide boots, Regulus contemplated the offending parchment. He was locked and warded within the confines of his four-poster, the better to properly absorb how much his life had changed within the last twelve hours, and what exactly to do about it. The sounds of the other boys in his dorm going about their bed-time preparations seeped through the thick velvet curtains, and Regulus felt detached. More than ever he was different to them, apart from the boys he had grown up with. They were normal, he was Other, a fact he had known for most of his life and yet the enormity of which had only just occurred to him.

They wouldn't disturb him. He was the last Heir to the Ancient and Most Noble House of Black, second richest House in the country, with their fingers in every pot and every politician on puppet strings. Here, in Slytherin, they could appreciate that fact, treating him with the deference his birth allowed him. Often it served to make him feel more Other than he knew he already was, but today their behaviour was a blessing, for he needed to think. He needed to plan, as best he could with the limited time that had been afforded to him by this warning.

Absently, he traced Lucius' garishly flamboyant signature with a finger. The warning had come written in his usual fluffy style, plumped up by words most men hadn't used since the eighteenth century, sealed with Lucius' personal seal rather than that of his family or, alternately, as in the case of Regulus' own brother, whatever was lying around in easy reach that was heavy and looked cool. The last missive he had gotten from Sirius, some two years ago now, had bore a picture of a dragon picked out rather crudely in the red wax with one of Evans' hair pins.

Regulus shook his head violently to rid himself of thoughts of his errant brother, but it was no good. Severus' suggestion had haunted him since the trip to Spinners' end some three weeks ago now, pair that with Lucius' message and it was predictable that Sirius would be on his mind. He found himself going over Severus' suggestion again, turning the possibilities over in his mind.

At first, when the concept had been put forward, Regulus had dismissed it out of a confused mixture of pride and concern. He didn't want to put Sirius more at risk than he already was, and at the same
time, this honourable gesture would keep Regulus safe from the risk of rejection. Both had seemed perfectly acceptable reasons; between them, the perfect excuse.

That was then, though. Now… now, everything had changed. Severus would think him ridiculous for this, and indeed, Regulus doubted his own sanity on the matter, but this was the proverbial feather that broke the Hippogriff's back. Logical or no, he needed out, and he needed out now.

Sirius was staying at the Potter manse, he had learned from eavesdropping and his own investigations during the last day of the Easter holidays, with the Potter and the rest of his entourage. There, along with his cohort, lived the mysterious 'weapon' the Death Eaters were convinced the Wild Magicks had granted them, unless they had already handed it over to Dumbledore. With the 'weapon' there they were hardly likely to trust Regulus, but he had enough determination to pursue shelter with them anyway, sure he could find some way to get them to trust him. He could be useful to them, he assured himself when his self-consciousness rose, he knew a lot about the Dark Lord and his workings, and he had contacts.

If they were Slytherins and not Gryffindors he would be less nervous. No Slytherin would turn away this opportunity, dangerous though it might appear on the surface. There were too many ways to turn it to their advantage, it would be idiotic to say 'no'.

Regulus pushed away his negative thoughts and focused on the positives: Sirius was his brother, and they loved one another despite their mutual failings. Evans had always been fond of him, too, and she was a soft heart. Potter's mum liked him, that was another stroke in his favour, and even Dumbledore wouldn't be able to turn down his offers of information. There was a way out.

Seeing the light, he grimly prepared himself to reach for it. The other boys were breathing deeply and evenly, not a one was disturbed as he packed his trunk. He burned the letter to ashes in the fireplace and tergeoed the remains before clipping his cloak around his neck, picking up his trunk and his wand, and slipping from the dormitory without a sound.

Lavender gulped down the last serving of Wolfsbane for the month with a decidedly reluctant air, glaring petulantly at Hermione as she did so. Hermione stubbornly refused to take it personally – it was only hours to the full moon now, and Lavender had become increasingly tetchy as the week passed. The attitude she had adopted over the last few days had Hermione yearning for the sassy, spitfire girl she had come to know, her memory seemingly whitewashing away her perceived faults until the Old Lavender had nearly been granted a Sainthood in her mind, so much was she preferred over the near-feral, snarling, volatile creature that sat in front of her now. Lavender's adverse reaction to the coming change had not been unexpected, but the extent to which her personality seemed to have been overrun by her wolf was amazing.

"That's shit," Lavender told her, her voice a rolling purr as she slammed the goblet down next to her tray of untouched food.

"It's necessary," Hermione replied smartly, never particularly renowned for her soothing bedside manner. "You need to eat."

"Not hungry." Lavender scowled as she caught the expression Hermione turned to hide – the other girl was mouthing the response as it was said. It had been the standard over the past two days, though this morning she had made a token attempt to nibble on a sausage. The full moon had apparently stripped Lavender of the will to do anything but glower and complain, leaving Hermione with the impression that she had been strong-armed into playing nursemaid for a younger, far prettier Professor Snape.
"You need the energy," Hermione pushed. Lavender shook her head, climbing back up onto her bed and curling into a ball in the middle, tucking her hands behind her calves and resting her chin on her knees. Her eyes, large and focused, stayed fixed on Hermione as she collected up the tray in defeat and, after placing a bag of Maltesers on the bedside table (for Lavender would eat chocolate, she just couldn't resist it if it were in reach), stalked from the room.

In the kitchen she found James and Lily; Lily attempting to bake cookies while James flapped around her in characteristically fawning fashion, making the most of the little time they could find to spend together and alone in a house of ten people.

"Oops, sorry," Hermione laughed as James took a comical leap backwards and shot her a wink. Lily blushed deep red, that more than anything informing the brunette that the display was a form of foreplay for the two of them, and regretting even more that she had interrupted.

James seemed undeterred, scooping up a handful of cookie dough while Lily's attention was divided and hopping up onto the counter, swinging his legs as he gnawed on his prize. "She still not eating?"

"Not a bite." She lifted the tray to show off the cooling spaghetti Bolognese. "The elves are going to start refusing to feed her at all."

"Not likely. They're too pleased to have so many more mouths to feed to complain about anything," Lily murmured, moulding her mixture into balls and dropping them onto the baking parchment from a height so that they made a satisfying 'splat' noise, the force compressing them into imperfect circles. "How's Remus doing?"

Grimacing, Hermione moved across to clean the plates, transferring the food into a box for later. "Sirius refused to let me see him," she muttered, scrubbing hard at the dish to release some of the aggression that statement rose in her. "He intercepted me at the door, said Remus was too agitated for visitors."

She downplayed her reaction deliberately, but James' softening expression said she didn't do a very good job of it. If there was one thing about the future everybody in the house accepted but didn't talk about, it was that Hermione and Remus had been close. Nobody asked how close, and Hermione was glad of that, but the more time the two of them spent together in this time the clearer it was that she had experience with him, older and wiser though he was. This only made it hurt more that he had begun to avoid her, and she had had several late nights that week going over and over her actions to try to figure out exactly what she had done wrong.

"'Mione…" James began, his voice low. That was too much, the sound of the horrific nickname she had always abhorred and yet was inextricably linked in her head with the Weasleys and happiness. James had never called her it before, for him to choose this moment felt like a cruel joke from the universe. It was getting hard enough for her to hold it together, without being reminded of what she had lost…

She was a rational person, Hermione. She knew that there had been very little left for her in 1999; her parents and Remus were dead, her friends were drifting away from her, she spent her days alternating between obsessing about work and bitterly observing her friends' more successful lives. There had been no sign of her being able to move forward with her life, she had been unable to shed the past as easily as everybody else, and it had lived as a constant wall between her and the world. By contrast, here in 1979 she felt connected, alive, nothing was blurry any longer and she could feel again.

Still, she had lost much in the move. Harry and Ron would never be the same, she had lost the family she had adored in the Weasleys, her past might as well have never been. Those grades she had
worked so very hard for were gone, the Dark Wizard she had fought so hard to kill was back, she was stuck as the commander for a revolution she knew next-to-nothing about in a world of suspicion, guilt and war…

To her horror she felt tears prickling her eyes. "Excuse me," she gasped in a strangled voice, desperate to escape before she could humiliate herself. She forced a walk from legs that would rather run, nonetheless leaving swiftly.

"Are you ready?" Ginny asked, helping Lavender navigate the stairs in the entrance hall as they descended to meet the crowd who awaited them below. It felt a bit like entering an extremely depressing ball, with the grim expressions on everybody's faces. Most of them were wearing black, too: black trousers, black jumpers, a threadbare black tracksuit in Remus' case (an outfit, upon witnessing the unmitigated horror on her face when she had first seen it, he had assured Ginny that he only wore for full moons) and a black dress transfigured from a cotton pillowcase for Lavender. Getting her to change clothes had been a challenge and a half, it took both her and Hermione to wrestle her into the thing, and she had refused underwear on the grounds that 'it would only get fucked up'.

Lavender sent her a scathing look. "That's a stupid question," she grunted as her feet met solid ground. It seemed that what she lacked in energy she could make up for in rancour, Ginny was displeased to note. Tossing lank hair over her shoulder, Lavender turned her pale, greying face on the other and assumed a regal tone. "Let's get this over with."

Remus was in a much better state, though his mood was no lighter. He watched Lavender approach with the air of a condemned man, actually flinching when she took his elbow. Dorea clapped her hands now that they were all assembled, pasting on a bright smile despite the dark mood. "Is everything prepared?"

She was referring to the wards Luna, Lily, James and Sirius had been working on for the past week or so, which theoretically would allow the werewolves a large space outside to enjoy the full moon in, but would prevent them from leaving. It had been unanimously agreed that allowing Lavender free range would be much too dangerous both to herself and the inhabitants of the house, and immediately Luna and James, as the best at Charms, had begun their experimentation. In the orchard they had erected a dome which should, in theory, allow humans free access until moonrise, allow animagi free access all night, but keep the werewolves sealed safely within.

"As good as we can get without testing it," James informed her, wrapping his arms around Lily and resting his cheek on the top of her head. Dorea clapped her hands now that they were all assembled, pasting on a bright smile despite the dark mood. "Is everything prepared?"

What he didn't say, but they all knew, was that now they were relying on the luck of the draw. Hopefully, the spells would hold. If not…

"Good enough for me," Lavender said, though Remus looked uneasy. "Let's go."

They left Dorea behind as the rest of them traipsed across the garden towards the orchard and their destination. Lavender and Remus led the charge, though Remus was still looking doubtful and it appeared that he was being dragged. Everybody silently gave Lavender points for bravery; she was charging out to an uncertain fate that could feasibly include death or serious injury, and she only seemed determined to get it over with.

They reached the iridescent cage in no time at all, at which point the more human of the lot stepped back. "Ten minutes," Hermione called, making Remus flinch. Her voice slid across his skin like the finest of fur coats, enflaming his nerves. He had avoided her for fear of Moony, who seemed
increasingly enamoured of her scent, but it seemed that he was becoming more sensitised to her, even her voice setting the wolf to prowling.

The girls stepped forward, reaching for Lavender – to hug her or kiss her or even just wish her luck? – but the blonde tossed her hair again, scowled back at them and stepped through the curtain of magic, bringing Remus with her. He shivered as the magic slid over his flesh, an unpleasant crawling sensation beginning between his collarbones and spreading. And then, they were locked in the box, sound muffled slightly but their view of the sky brilliant and unobstructed. By instinct Remus looked to Lavender rather than watch the girls leave for the house, wondering if she might need help or comfort.

Far from that, the woman had stretched out on the floor, leaning on her elbows and tipping her face up to the stars, a peaceful smile on her lips now that the moon was rising.

James and Sirius, now the only people remaining on the other side of the wards, shot him matching grins. The idea was that after the change was over, Padfoot would join them in their cage in animal form, and help him with the new wolf. As second-in-command of the pack, Sirius should be accepted by Lavender, though there was still the risk that she wouldn't recognise their bond and would lash out. For that reason, Prongs would remain outside of the wards, his scent blocked out by their clever charm work, and guard the area.

Remus tried to use the well-thought-out plan to reassure himself, but he had a bad feeling. He wasn't certain what it was, but it was there. These things were unpredictable, nothing could control a werewolf, they just had to have hope.

The first groan from Lavender coincided with the spilling of silver light over the horizon. Remus just had time to turn to her in concern, catch a glimpse of her writhing on the grass, before the pain burned through his spine, forcing him to the ground and wiping awareness from his mind.
Chapter Twenty-Eight: The Full Moon Part II

Chapter Summary

Regulus visits Potter Manor.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It had taken him hours to find the Potter home, despite the vague image he had of it in his head. Regulus had never visited, but Sirius had, and Sirius had taken great pleasure in describing the place to his little brother. He’d made the place sound like a haven, a magical land away from his responsibilities, obligations and parents, many conversations revolving around Reg sat in awe as Sirius trotted out his memories and experiences in an attempt to stir his brother's envy.

He could remember them all: at Potter Manor, Sirius had excitedly informed his younger brother, they could have pancakes for breakfast. At Potter Manor they could play outside in the Orchards. At Potter Manor there was nobody lecturing him on the rights and privileges of the Pure-blood class. At Potter Manor he could wear muggle clothes – muggle clothes – and nobody batted an eyelid over either his choice of attire nor what he did in it. Reg had been on the receiving end of long stories that mostly consisted convoluted descriptions of the grounds, full of apple and pear trees, and the large cherry sap that had been planted at the head of the drive because Mrs. Potter adored the sight of blossom across her steps in the spring. Mr. Potter's many virtues were extolled relentlessly; painting him as a man who was rarely heard but seen often, and told the best jokes. Regulus knew that the Potters had Thestrals in the stables instead of Abraxans, that the house-elves wore little tailored tunics, that the damn bricks were said to be blessed by Merlin himself.

(Even as a child Regulus had read into these tales what Sirius would not say out loud: this is my real family, Reg. This is where I belong. When his brother had eventually abandoned him, at least Regulus had the comfort of knowing that the images taunting him of Sirius' happiness were detailed and accurate.)

He knew a lot about Potter Manor, but it was knowledge that did not include a map, which made his mission that night a lot harder. He'd apparated to the outskirts of Helmsley, the nearest market town, and hiked due West under a disillusionment charm with the naive assumption that he'd find the place quite easily. Knowing that the Manor was close by, he'd ensconced himself in the countryside, wandering near aimlessly for an hour searching for any signs of life, until finally he'd come across a little dirt trail that had been travelled recently by horses.

That was where it had gotten difficult. The Longbottoms and the Potters shared a fondness for the area, their houses built close together on this stretch of land. If he chose the wrong direction he could find himself faced with an angry Augusta Longbottom, who had always terrified him more than anything the Potters could possibly produce.

He chose south, and strode onwards for a while longer, his brain on alert. It was only when he'd realised he was walking absently in circles that he noticed the paths disappearance into the air before him. It didn't reappear on the other side, where he could only see endless moor. The wards twitched in his head, trying to subtly push him away. His awareness of the magic nulled their efforts.
He sat down rather than attempting to go any further at that particular moment. He had been walking for a long time; Blacks weren't built for physical exertions, at least not ones that required hours of stamina (the implications this could have on his future relationships wasn't something he cared to worry himself about at the present time, or any time in the past, or the future. He'd cross that bridge when it came). The grass was soft and well maintained, despite the fact that it was ostensibly just a patch of crabgrass in the middle of nowhere, and that more than anything else told him he had the right place. House-elves without enough work made work where they could find it, so strimming and feeding the surrounding area's earth was right up their street.

Stretching, he stifled a yawn. His night was not done, not by any stretch. He'd found the place, now he needed in.

First things first, he figured he might as well start with the simplest solution in the hopes that he might get lucky. The locks on his trunk clicked open without any prompting, allowing him to slip the little white envelope from within. He then pulled from his cloak pocket a shrunken cage, complete with horned-owl plaintively hooting at him. "I know, Castor, hush," he whispered, enlarging it back to full size and meeting the regal amber eyes of his pet. Castor was a typical owl, a wild thing with a temper when provoked; it was likely that hours of being bashed around on Reg's hip could have triggered that temper.

Careful to keep his fingers clear of the creature's beak, he slipped a few treats into the cage and watched Castor suck them down. The little owl had no manners, either, though that wasn't anything that could be helped. Castor was his own bird, making it clear often that he only returned to Regulus out of affection rather than servitude. "You like that, buddy?" Regulus murmured, a smile twitching his lips as Castor let out an affirmative sort of choke. He clicked the cage door open and offered a strip of bacon from his hand. "Come on, don't fail me now," he encouraged, watching Castor turn his head consideringly before he hopped forward and stole the bacon, swallowing that, too, whole before presenting his leg. Regulus took a moment to savour the victory over his truculent feathered friend, but hurried along when Castor started to click his beak in impatience.

"Take this to the Potters. Give it into the hands of anybody you find – preferably Sirius, but anybody will do." He tied the letter securely to Castor's leg, and leaned forward. Castor brushed his downy cheek against Regulus' in a feathery estimation of a hug – or so he supposed, he wasn't any expert in animal affections, or affection at all. Castor could be promising to kill him for all he knew. "Go on then," he ordered, his mood a little soured by the thought.

Castor shot him a look of reproach as he hopped back, cooed in understanding, and launched himself towards the wards. He was gone in a split-second, and Reg was alone again.

He settled himself on his resealed trunk, nibbling gratefully on a roast beef sandwich. He'd had no trouble leaving the castle, using the tunnel down to Hogsmeade as an apparition point after collecting a stash of food from the Kitchens. He'd miss the little elves, of course, but not so much his fellow wizards – yet another reason his parents had been so disappointed to be left with him as the heir. Regulus's inability to form lasting relationships with other humans had long been an irritant for his mother.

The moon shone overhead, providing a clear light for him as he scanned the area. Squirrels hopped through the trees overhead, insects chirped in the undergrowth, and Reg felt a part of nature, even as he sat waiting. His back ached, his legs tensed, Reg paid the sensations no mind as he relaxed into the environment, chewing thoughtfully on his snack and attempting to find order in the unrefined chaos of his plan.

"Regulus Black," a woman said suddenly, sending Regulus sprawling backwards in the dark. She
appeared directly in front of him, a dream come to life, with an airy smile on rose-petal lips, grey-blue eyes large and shining in the moonlight. Platinum hair streamed down her back to her knees, spilling over her bottom in a way that—well, Regulus had no right to be admiring. She wore a white tunic over torn yellow corduroys, her feet bare. Castor perched happily on her shoulder, cooing like a maniac, rubbing his beak into the silvery mass like he lived there. In her right hand she held his letter, open and pressed against her thigh.

He wasn't jealous of an inanimate object. That would be ridiculous.

"You are Regulus Black?" She said now, her tone still light but with the edge of a question as she watched him. Regulus realised how ridiculous he must look, lying spread eagle in the mud like a lunatic. He scrambled to his feet, finding himself a few inches taller than her, and so close he felt her breathing. She grinned in amusement and he became conscious that he had done it again—acted like a nutter.

Putting some space between them—though not too much, because he couldn’t resist the urge to be near her—he brushed off his knees for something to do and gathered a blank expression onto his face. "That's me," he said finally, then winced because it came out sounding so pathetic.

She smiled, if possible, even wider. "I've been expecting you," she told him, her voice music to his ears it was so beautiful. Frantically, he tried to gather back the pieces of his sanity (and, if he could find it, his dignity) to figure out what was going on. Random forest nymphs didn't make a habit of appearing to him, which meant she was likely human, however impossible that might seem to him at the moment (she glowed, for Merlin's sake).

"You have?" She wasn't a Potter, that was obvious. With her blonde hair, pale skin and bright blue eyes she was basically the antithesis of everything the Potters were: with their near worship of Death they could never produce a woman like this, all light and beauty and laughter. But, if she wasn't a Potter, then why was she here? She couldn't be a girlfriend; he would have heard if Potter and Evans had split, Sirius never stuck with the same girl for more than a week never mind long enough to introduce them to the family, and Merlin knew the werewolf wouldn't even touch a woman like this.

She looked like Pandora, but not. The figure was the same, the face was similar, but he knew Pandora was older, and currently shacked up with the Lovegood scion in some odd little tower down south. This woman could only be a few months, if a year older than him. She continued to smile at him while he observed her, the image of patience, with Castor snuggled comfortably in her hair, her body entirely relaxed. She seemed unmoved by his scrutiny, almost expecting it. "Yes," she answered him, the words languorous. "Not tonight specifically, but sometime. You chose a risky night to appear," she added at the end, faintly scolding.

Confused, he tried desperately to think what could be dangerous about this night. Had he missed something vital? "It's a full moon," the woman supplied, now looking a little perturbed, probably by his utter stupidity. "Everybody is supposed to be tucked up safe in their beds, not wandering the countryside like so much fresh meat."


The woman shrugged, a liquid movement that barely disturbed her feathery hitchhiker. "I'm safe." She tilted her head as though listening to something Regulus couldn't hear. "We're not talking about me. Are you stupid, or just fearless?"

Maybe he should have been offended. Neither option had him looking very good and he'd rather like to look good in the eyes of this odd angel. The truth remained, however, that he had been very idiotic in coming out tonight without even checking the lunar chart. Especially when the place he was
intending to visit had a werewolf on call. "I was in a hurry," he muttered.

"Death has a way of solving that problem," the girl fired back, leaving him dazed. Was she threatening him? Then she sighed, looking up directly at the moon as if for help. After a moment, she nodded, then turned back to him. "If you're so determined to see us that you'll walk miles in the middle of the night - during a full moon, no less - then the least we can do is offer you some tea."

She grabbed his hand and pulled, yanking him through what felt like a pinhole. He couldn't see, couldn't breathe, was dying, regretting trusting strange apparitions that appeared to him of a night on the moors, didn't exist any longer, was simply dust in the air–

A second later, they were facing the imposing façade of Potter Manor. Regulus blinked once, twice, thrice, then turned and voided his stomach behind a rose bush. The woman watched him do so without expression, offering him a handkerchief once he was done. "Was that bad?" her eyes watched him curiously as he mopped at his face. "I've never brought an uninvited guest through wards before. Wasn't sure if it would work."

He gazed up at her in disbelief. "Really?"

Not sensing the incredulousness behind his words, the woman nodded. "I've not really needed to. Most people will open the gate to guests. Not the Potters, no." She, again, seemed pretty disapproving of this fact.

"Who are you?" he decided, probably wisely, to ignore her commentary. There were more important things to concern himself with, for example; this woman seemed more than a little insane.

"Luna," she replied, face brightening. "Didn't you know that already? I'm the moon, see, and you're the star. I hear that works for other people." Then she paused, tipping her head to one side. "Though now that I think about it, my last lover was the night, and that didn't end well at all."

Definitely crazy. Not Black-Crazy, a nice crazy, but crazy all the same. Reg also thought she might have just offered to be his lover, which wasn't half bad either, if he could live long enough to make that happen.

As if sensing his thoughts, a howl cut through the night, followed by a second, then loud barking. He flinched in automatic fear, glancing from left to right. Luna laughed lightly, touching his shoulder to draw his attention. "Don't be scared," she teased, pearly white teeth flashing in the night. "They're locked in. I should know, I designed the wards." She folded his fingers in his once more, giving them a light tug. Her hand felt cool against his; a pleasant cool, like coming upon a spring after days in the desert heat. "Come on, they're waiting for us." Luna pulled him forward, sending him stumbling behind her on the path towards the front door.

Regulus looked at the house properly for the first time. Doubtless in daylight it would be a beautiful country home, filled with the scents and sounds of family life, with the inhabitants visible through the windows as they went about enjoying their day. Tonight, however, it looked bleak and threatening, the white stone bleached dark grey by the night, the darkened windows gaping maws into some hellish underworld. He shuddered, a feeling of foreboding striking him hard.

"I don't like tea," he said, the only thing he could think to say that might save him from some obscure Hell he had a feeling would soon be his life. The Manor did not look friendly, not at all. Whether it was just the effects of some rather clever wards or an actual warning, his instincts were screaming at him to stay out. Was this how people felt when they visited Grimmauld Place?

Luna looked between him and the house, puzzled for a moment before she scowled. "You're
British," she told him, like that would explain everything. Castor let out a hoot of agreement, ruffling his wings. He looked perfectly pleased to be here. Perhaps it was Reg alone that felt the dark aura the manor exuded.

He was still being dragged onwards, his heels digging into the gravel not stopping his forward motion on account of Luna being much stronger than she looked, plus more determined than he gave her credit for. She had him at the door in no time, swinging it open to pull him inside, luggage and all. There was a split seconds impression of darkness closing in on him, oppressive heat crawling up his spine, his nerves winking out from pure fear, before the door was closed and he found himself stood in a well-lit entryway, the walls and floors decorated in pale colours that were infinitely comforting.

His knees buckled, giving up on him after his fight with the wards. The floor rose up to greet him like an old friend.

Luna caught him around the middle as he fell, pulling him upright and placing him back on his feet to allow her to fuss over him. "Sorry, sorry," she muttered, pressing her tiny hands against his cheeks and forcing him to look up into her own. "Sorry," she muttered again, but Regulus waved her away. He was fine, or at least he would be, and there were other more urgent matters at hand.

Two girls – or women, he should say, for they were older than him – awaited them in the foyer, neither looking very impressed. One, a redhead, had the distinct look of a Weasley, all freckles, roses-and-cream skin, the brown eyes of a Prewett and a tilt to her brows that belied the expressionless look she had sought. She wore a pair of black trousers with a blue jumper, her arms folded across her chest. The second they stepped inside her glare had locked onto Luna, not sparing him a glance. The other had wild, curly chestnut hair that stood a few inches from her head in volume. Between the curled strands hung little thin, tight braids that whipped through the air when she moved her head, which she did now, shaking it to demonstrate her vexation. Her skin was darkly tanned, and her eyes, like her friend's, were an average-looking brown, though they sparked with power that hissed and spit as it zapped along her hair and down her arms. She gave him a once over, recognition flickering in her eyes before she, too, turned to Luna. "Lu," she said in a low voice that fairly hummed with supressed exasperation. A vinewood wand had made its way into her hand and was now aimed unerringly at Regulus; he did not doubt that she would hex him if he gave her cause to.

"I found him outside the wards," Luna squeaked, her hands up in front of her in surrender. The underlying message here was: "I didn't do anything wrong!". Resignation on each of their faces spoke of how often she must pull stunts like this one, and he felt vaguely jealous that this meant he was not special.

The redhead sighed. "Regulus Black, Luna? Like Sirius needs more of a reason to distrust us." Luna shrugged again, bringing a hand up for Castor to hop onto, and moving the little owl over to perch on Reg's trunk. Otherwise, she acted as though Reg wasn't present. "I couldn't just leave him out there to freeze to death," she told them, quite sensibly he thought, but then it was his life on the line.

"He's a wizard, he'd be fine for the time it took to ask permission, at least," The brunette snapped, then took a deep breath as if to calm herself. "It is not our place to invite strangers into the house, Lu. Especially not estranged family members who happen to also be Death Eaters."

What struck Regulus about this statement was the lack of condemnation in it. She said 'Death Eater' like she might otherwise have said 'Journalist' or 'Lawyer', a distasteful occupation, yes, but more the result of poor life choices than anything to condemn one for. Of course, he couldn't properly judge
her feelings on the matter as she refused to look directly at him; nonetheless he felt a flicker of hope that the situation wasn't as dire as he first assumed.

"We need him," Luna seemed to remind her, the statement greeted by a harassed toss of the brunette's impressive mane. "What better time to bring him in than when he arrives himself? Do you think we'd have gotten a better reception had we left him out there, or sent him away, promising to call him back at some arbitrary future point?"

"She has a point, Hermione," said the redhead, relaxing almost imperceptibly and turning to examine him now that she deemed the immediate danger gone. Her eyes travelled from his patent leather Oxfords, up his black-clad legs, to his muddied and wet cloak, which she did not offer to take, which made her either not the hostess or unforgivably rude. Finally, she looked at his face, tracing his cheekbones, chin and eyes with her own, then his hair, at which point she made a dissatisfied moue with her lips. Regulus was used to this reaction; he was, after all, a man who had spent his entire life being compared to his brother – the larger, more handsome and charismatic of the two – and suffering the disappointment which people were often unable to disguise upon meeting him. Obviously, this girl knew Sirius, and likely quite well.

"I'm getting really sick of this 'ask forgiveness' attitude, Luna," Hermione huffed again, clicking her fingers agitatedly. Her wish to continue her dressing-down of Luna was so strong it was almost palpable. Self-control won out, however, as she shook her head and continued in a different vein. "Your reasoning is all very well and good, but how will we explain it to Dorea? You've broken through her wards to bring a Death Eater into her house, which I doubt she'll take well. And, that's without even considering how the boys will respond."

"Then it's rather lucky we have four more hours before they're back, isn't it?" Mrs. Potter hummed, appearing from behind a door. She looked as regal as ever, even in the middle of the night, dressed in a dove-grey robe that skimmed over her body to pool on the ground. Even the three girls who had been surrounding him jumped, parting like the red sea before the older woman, who strode straight past them to stand before Regulus himself. "Hello again, Regulus," she smiled her majestic smile, the one which had always been able to cow him. That wasn't a rare effect, however – he would freely admit to a deficiency in his courage stores, particularly right at that moment. "What a pleasant surprise. Come, we'll sit. You can tell us all about what brings you here so urgently."

Regulus was led to a salon that bordered the entrance hall, where with the door open he could see the front door without twisting his neck. Luna stayed right by him the whole time, which both comforted and unnerved him, though the 'unnerved' part grew larger when he saw the faintly possessive look she shot Hermione as the brunette drew closer to him. It wasn't a romantic look, as perhaps he might have liked, but more of a child's reaction to a sibling closing in on their new favourite toy. At least she didn't growl. He wasn't a fan of that.

Mrs. Potter perched on the edge of a sofa, her feet crossed at the ankle on the floor below. She motioned for Regulus to take a seat opposite, which he did to the backing track of three womens' jangling nerves. Mrs. Potter let them stew for a moment before transferring her gaze up to them, gathered as they were around the back of Regulus's seat. "Ginny, dear, I wonder if you might check in with Lily? Last I saw, she was pacing in the library."

Ginny opened her mouth only to snap it shut just as fast when she saw the look in Mrs. Potter's face, instead nodding and slipping out of the door. Regulus appreciated the subtlety Mrs. Potter was attempting to employ, but it seemed quite useless when he knew exactly what was going on. Now, the older woman looked between Hermione and Luna with a calculating eye, taking in Luna's close proximity to him, her faintly protective stance, like she had to reconsider something. She seemed to reach a decision. "Luna," she said. Beside him, Luna jerked slightly, a chirp of surprise leaving her
lips. "Could you please direct the elves to take Regulus's luggage up to the Rose Room? No doubt you'll want to oversee the unpacking, make sure everything is just so." Her eyes narrowed when Luna didn't move. "I'll speak with you later."

Luna let out a *humph* of displeasure, trailed one finger down Regulus's hand and flounced off back into the entrance hall, calling for an elf as she did so. Mrs. Potter waited until she was out of earshot before inviting Hermione to sit down. Hermione settled herself in a chair separate from the couches of both Mrs. Potter and Regulus himself, metaphorically proclaiming no allegiance in the discussion to come. It was a political move, whether she recognised it as such or not; one which the Slytherin part of Regulus approved of even as the human part mourned the loss of a potential ally. In this arrangement he had the feeling he was about to be interrogated.

"Regulus," Mrs. Potter was every inch the Queen of the castle, leaving Regulus feeling incredibly common. Sirius saw Mrs. Potter as a second mother, but while she'd always shown a liking for Regulus he'd never been that comfortable with her. "Meet Hermione Granger, a friend of mine." Hermione looked bemused at the introduction, enough to make Regdoubt whether the two women were all that friendly. Sure, they were comfortable with one another, just not the sort of comfortable that lends itself to friendship. They were allies, and allies of circumstance rather than choice. Mrs. Potter continued, unnoticing or uncaring that her lie had been so transparent as to not exist. "Hermione Granger, Regulus Black."

Hermione sent him a quick smile from her chair, but she didn't take her attention from Mrs. Potter for very long. That was just as well, because Mrs. Potter had transformed herself into the Inquisition, and watched Regulus with direct, burning eyes. "I've promised myself not to get too involved with the goings-on in this house," she told him, voice low. "Hermione and her friends hold the reins when it comes to their plotting, and I am not challenging that. I do, however, need some reassurance that you will not sell my family down the river with your presence. I care not how much they trust you," she waved a hand dismissively at Hermione, who was braiding the longest parts of her hair with nervous twitches of her fingers, "only whether or not *I* can trust you. If you will assure me that you mean us no harm, nephew of mine, then I will leave you in their capable hands. If you lie to me, however, Hermione here will obliviate you so thoroughly that you will be unable to recall your own name."

Hermione blushed red. Uneasiness tainted her features, along with concern. Concern for whom, though?

Mrs. Potter brushed her skirts off with her hands. "Now, child, answer me this, and answer knowing that you are still affected by the Potter wards. They will communicate to me the truth of your answer..."

Regulus had expected something like this. Not this situation precisely, he'd suspected illegal veritaserum or legilimency, but blood wards worked similarly for uninvited guests, which Luna had so neatly made him. He was in the grips of the wards now, the magic a presence at the back of his mind, brushing his thoughts every now and then to ascertain his intentions, to make certain he wasn't planning to hurt anybody. Definitely, if he were to draw his wand and attack either of the women in front of him, he would be yanked from his position on the couch and deposited elsewhere before his curse had the chance to land.*

Luckily for him, he hadn't come here with cruel intentions. He only wanted a safe place, maybe even a home in time. He wanted his brother back, he could admit now in the safety of his own mind, and a life of his own, to do with as he would. He wanted to save those he cared about from some awful fate such as the one alluded to in Lucius's letter, and preferably have a place to escape to once he had done so.

"Who do you owe your allegiance to?" Mrs. Potter asked, breaking through the fog of his thoughts.
She wanted him to say the Dark Lord, Dark Magic, the Blacks, or even Dumbledore, or the Light as a whole. Something stark, black and white, not the grey in which he generally operated. Beneath his robes his Mark burned, his mother's face appeared in his head. Severus' years of sage advice ran through his mind, Lucius's continued attempts to save him from a Dark fate remembered in that short second. Then his owl, which he hadn't expected, the elves from Hogwarts, the one centaur foal he'd made friends with during his youth.

The wards pushed at him, demanding an answer to the question the House Matriarch had put to him, as the prisoner, the interloper and intruder. He wasn't sure he had an answer, but then it came to him, pushing aside Kreacher's beloved image. "Myself," he said, knowing it was absolute truth and he couldn't say anything different, not even if they cast him out for it. "My first loyalty, Mrs. Potter, Aunt Dorea, is and always will be to myself."

"Bloody Slytherins," he thought perhaps Hermione hissed in disbelief, but his attention was fixed on Dorea as he waited for the axe to fall.

Chapter End Notes

ABAHDEWHEIFD.
So Reg is here, I know you'll probably like that.

The blood wards thing was inspired in part by a comment on an earlier chapter of this fic by EDelta88 (I did bear your suggestions in mind, and likely this isn't the only pathetic attempt I'll make at some sort of pure-blood voodoo magic oddness).

I hope you enjoyed!
Eli x
Chapter Twenty-Nine: Recovery

Chapter Summary

Remus recovers from the full moon, Hermione plays nurse.

Chapter Notes

Hello!
I've been completely guilty of neglecting our romantic relationships. I know. I'm dreadful for it. I get all caught up in the action and moving the plot forward...
But yeah. I had a pretty good week for paving the way when I was writing this. I hope you enjoy this brief (less-angsty-than-usual-but-still-angsty) Remione interlude!
Eli x

He didn't hear the first knock, wrapped up as he was in several layers of cushioning. The second was louder and managed to penetrate the material, but he ignored that too, a twitch of his nose the only thing betraying his annoyance. The third was brisk, preceding the door clicking open and footsteps padding into the room. Remus growled a little at the intrusion, snuggling even deeper into his cocoon, hoping Sirius would leave the tray and go.

It was not to be. His post-moon sensitivity notified him to the scent of the trespasser, even as he valiantly attempted to ignore their existence. It wasn't Padfoot, he realised somewhat blithely. The intoxicating and well-known scent of jasmine wound itself around him, infiltrating the many, many layers he had used as protection from it, coaxing the top of his head free of the duvet until his hair, mussed from the night before and his sleep, peeked over the top of the bed, shortly after followed by tired green eyes. It was more instinct than thought that drove him to do it, because he'd known her identity the second her scent tickled his senses, but he'd wanted to see her too.

"You're awake," a low, musical voice washed over him, the slight scratchiness evidence of her lack of sleep. He swivelled his head, still mostly hiding in his burrito, until she was in his line of sight.

Hermione was smiling, even humming a little under her breath as she twitched the cover of his tray just-so before glancing back at him again. She looked excited, like she'd had very good news, and he wanted her to share it with him so that he might wrap himself in her joy. Her curls were a bouncing mass of energy even this early in the morning, her face flushed and eyes sparkling. The sight of her, as it had the past week, sent a punch to his gut and even the beast in his mind, so recently exhausted, managed to perk up at her proximity. He fought the urge to reach out and brush the one lone curl from her face and follow its path down her cheek, to trace his fingers down her throat, across to where he would be able to feel her pulse pound beneath her skin. Would it speed when he touched her, he wondered mildly. Would she react to him like he knew he would to her?

Suddenly frightened of the direction his own thoughts were taking him, he cringed away from her. He'd thought things might get better after the moon, that he would have more control over his own thoughts. Apparently, he wasn't getting away from it that easily, and the realization made him scowl.
She arched an eyebrow, faint lines of consternation appearing by her mouth and eyes, as though she blamed herself for his reaction. Guilt streaked through him, but he didn't reach out, not trusting what he might do. The thought of touching her, experimenting with his touch, lips and fingers on her skin was still too close to the surface. "I brought your food," she said softly, waving at the plate.

Right, food, yes. Food was good, he liked food. He even thought he should be hungry. "Where's Padfoot?" he asked, remembering that she shouldn't be here, he had left specific instructions to have her kept away before he had succumbed to the lure of the wolf.

Her pulse jumped in her neck, something he wouldn't have noticed but for the fact he continued to be enamoured by that expanse of bared skin. His thought processes were delayed by new desires, desires to kiss and lick and bite, desires that had nothing to do with his original question and everything to do with her presence so close to him when he was so sensitive. She shook a little hair into her eyes, the sign of a guilty conscience if ever he'd seen one, distracting him with a fresh wave of scent.

Tearing his eyes away, he forced himself to concentrate on her face, which didn't help either as she had brightened even through her guilt, lips spread into an anticipatory smile. She still held the tray in her hands, fingers drumming the wood. Wandering closer, she leaned forward to place the plates on his bedside table, the movement tightening her shirt, causing it to cling to her curves while simultaneously loosening in the front. He might have moaned, or even whimpered, he wasn't sure – whatever noise it was had her stood right in front of him, clinking vials together in her hands.

"Are you hurt?" She asked, switching dizzily fast to business-mode, worry lacing her voice. Her scent hit him like a cannonball, distracting him from the fact that she still hadn't answered his question, tasting of everything spicy and delicious and melt-in-the-mouth. She babbled on about something-or-other as she scanned him for injury, cocooning him with her body heat as her hands fluttered over his skin. He tried to separate the feelings she stirred in him, for they were odd indeed – he was comforted, he felt safe, but he burned with a desire that seemed to set fire to his very veins. Her fingers landed firmly on his collarbone, the touch blazing through his shirt, working to push him back into bed when he hadn't even realised he was sat up; he wanted to say that he felt better, was fine, there was no pain. She talked right over his protests, her anxiety palpable, and his mouth was too dry to bother anyway, not when he didn't even understand his own thoughts.

"I checked you over when you first came in, but sometimes these injuries can take a while to show, especially when you've been sleeping. What is it, are you sore? Stiff? Drink this." She pushed a vial of what might have been a pain potion into his hand. His fingers missed the offering, instead lacing through hers seemingly of their own accord. Everything paused as Hermione drew back a little to stare, her brow furrowing quizzically. "Remus?"

He wasn't sure what he was doing, not really. Her fingers twisted through his was a new sensation, somewhat calming. Watching James and Lily over the years, he'd never quite understood their need to be close to one another, to walk with their hands linked, shoulder to shoulder. He would have liked to, his romantic's heart had always craved it, but he'd always known that those sorts of feelings weren't for him.

Or, that was what he had always thought, until he'd met Hermione.

Her eyes finally locked with his, the world dropping away as she read his expression. He wasn't sure what she would be seeing, what part of his whirlwind of emotion might be written across his face, but she didn't seem too scared. Shock replaced worry in her eyes, then it shifted to realization, only to be swiftly replaced by nerves and the faintest flicker of heat – heat to match his own, to warm him from the inside out. The wolf growled at the sight, low and hungry, too far away from Remus'
consciousness to make any sort of movement. Remus, therefore, could blame nothing for his actions but himself; he had made the final decision, whether he remembered doing so or not.

How it happened was a mystery, he only knew that it did. There was a blank space between the sight of her lovely eyes heating to a swirling chocolate and the first touch of his lips to hers. Logically, it was probably a mistake, for they hardly knew each other at all, and the moment that his lips brushed against the corner of her mouth, and then pressed more firmly to hers, he had the sense that he was beginning something he couldn't pull back from.

But she was warm, and so soft, feeling unbelievably right beneath his fingers as he cradled her head in his hands, tilting her face up to him. She tasted of spearmint toothpaste and the same spices he could identify in her scent, followed up by the burn of cinnamon to sear his senses. It would be so easy for him to drown in her. He even felt like he would, when he traced the seam of her lips with his tongue, her inviting him in with a soft sigh, then a moan as he stroked her tongue with his own.

Until that moment a part of him had been braced for some sort of backlash, perhaps a slap, or she would shout at him. He was terrified that perhaps he had read the signals wrong, and was forcing himself on her unwillingly, knowing that shame would be his constant friend once this moment had passed. This, until he felt her response, the way she pushed closer to him, losing herself in him just as much as he was in her. He took shameless advantage of the moment, drawing her deeper by claiming her mouth more thoroughly until she mewled against him, lavishing her lips with teasing nips and licks. One hand slipped from her cheek to her neck, feeling her pulse beat a tattoo against his palm as he pulled her closer, a twisted sort of triumph jolting him when she curled her own arm around him, the other hand clutching his arm for balance.

Remus could have kissed her forever – just that, just kissing, if he had to he could have stuck with that. With every minute that passed the sensations grew more overwhelming, as she relaxed more fully against him, her body a pleasurable weight atop his. Her inhibitions lifted until she was fighting for control with him, little breathless laughs escaping them both as she bit down on his bottom lip, hard, suckled his tongue. Eventually, however, good sense began to prevail, beating its way through the fog of his mind, forcing him to slow the kiss, gentle it, loathe to end their play but aware that he should. Her disappointed mewl when he withdrew would be with him for a long time, he knew, as would the sight of her, so dishevelled as she lay sprawled across him on the bed, only the duvet between them to prevent what could have been a very tricky situation. Her eyes were glazed as she blinked heavy, slumberous eyes up at him, her ravaged lips pouting slightly. Pride welled in him alongside affection to see her like that, filling him up near to burst.

Unable to hold back a grin, he turned his head slightly to see the plate she'd brought him. Suddenly his appetite had come back with a vengeance. "You said there was food?" he asked, feeling inexplicably more human.

She shook her head, blinking rapidly. "Erm, yes…” she pushed herself up on one arm, seeming to orient herself. Her features arranged themselves back into her business-like expression again, like she was trying to compose herself, though the effect was lost on him when she was so delightfully rumpled. "Eggs, toast, maybe some black pudding? I wasn't really paying attention, it was a long night."

She knew she had said the wrong thing when she felt him stiffen beneath her – and wasn't that something, to find herself laid across him like some sort of wanton nymph. In her defence, she had been a little distracted, what with the unexpected snogging. Somehow she'd fooled herself into thinking she wouldn't be affected by his kiss, not when she had experienced it so many times before… she had been mistaken.
Her fondness for Remus carried through into any incarnation of the man. He made her laugh, smile, enjoy life in a way others couldn't touch. Kissing him, loving him in the future had been heaven on earth, even when she had been sure she would go to Hell for it. Nonetheless… with the older Remus there had been so many strings, complications that wouldn't go away. Obligations they couldn't escape even alone together, not with the age difference, her role in the war, his disease, then Tonks and later Teddy hanging over their heads. They had been each other's addictions, unhealthy but irresistible, and in the end it had destroyed not only the both of them but Tonks and Teddy, also.

The difference, then, with the younger Remus, must have been in the lack of barriers between them. There was a sense of rightness, purity there than she hadn't ever experienced before. It had been their first kiss and it had felt like one; soft, curious exploration followed by a conflagration of mutual lust. No encroaching darkness or guilt, only the questing pleasure of two people who, despite their many differences, just seemed to fit. And, while Hermione felt somewhat deceptive, for Remus didn't know of their joint pasts and the disaster they had wrought together, she also felt like this had been inevitable, and perfect, the way perhaps their relationship should have been the first time.

She would have to fill him in, if this went anywhere. At the moment, however, there were other more pressing concerns; such as the prodigal son's untimely return to the fold, said son's brother who lay blissfully unaware in the room next door, Lavender's good health, and above all; their rapidly diminishing timeline for war.

"First," she said, pulling herself off of Remus's body and slipping onto the floor, making a show of brushing off her clothes to hide her red cheeks at such an undignified display, "you should know that everybody is fine. Lavender woke up an hour ago and threw a hairbrush at Ginny's head, so she's pretty much back to her old self." Hermione made certain to meet his eyes so that he could read the absolute sincerity of her words, waited for his nod before continuing. "Sirius is unharmed. Sulking, actually," she let out a chuckle, remembering his face when he had carried Lavender through the front door. " Apparently you were all excessively boring last night, and he has put in a formal request for better entertainment next month."

Remus's mouth twitched up at the corners. "Request noted. I aim to please," he rumbled, eyes glinting wickedly. She rolled her eyes at him, fussing with the bedclothes just to have something to do.

"James and Lily are in the library journaling last night's events for posterity. Of course, I'd rather be doing that, but they're inseparable right now, something about him taking too many liberties with her 'future husband's' body." Hermione sniffed slightly, her opinion of the matter clear. She thought Lily was overreacting, given that James hadn't even been within the wards last night, never mind fighting werewolves. Remus and Lavender had been in much more danger than he.

Frowning, Remus caught at her wrist to stop her moving about. "I'm sorry," he said, not sounding sorry at all, "but did I just hear you say that you would rather be in the library with James than here with me?" A mischievous glint sparked in his eyes, though his face was the picture of hurt. "Am I that bad at snogging? Or is it something else? It's the antlers, isn't it? Nobody can resist the antlers."

Hermione let out a laugh, making him smile. "I don't know why, but I'd assumed you would be shyer than this," she teased, prying his hand loose and running her fingers across his palm.

Curling his fingers around hers, Remus grinned. "It's the potions," he informed her solemnly. "I feel like I'm floating on a cloud right now. Don't you worry, I'll be back to stammering and blushing in the morning."

Her reply was cut off by the feel of his lips brushing against her fingers, even though his eyes were still on hers. "Well," she tried again, yanking her hand back. "That's good to hear. I was beginning to
worry that James had brought back the wrong werewolf." She dumped the tray into his lap, shooting him a severe look when he reached out to grab her. "Eat up, there's a good boy. You need your strength, we've called a meeting for seven."

Remus, his mouth full of eggs, widened his eyes in question. "We received a visitor last night and Luna has claimed him as her own. We need to figure out what to do about him, sooner rather than later, and according to Lily 'democracy' is a thing you all consider important." She screwed up her face in displeasure, startling a snort from Remus. "She's insisting on a vote. So, the library at seven, please. If you're late, I'm taking your vote."

"That's not how democracy works," Remus pointed out reasonably as he buttered some toast.

Hermione stood, pushing her shoulders back and jutting her chin out in characteristic defiance. "She's lucky there's a vote at all, if I'm honest. As it is, I'm sorely tempted to give you all the wrong time, just to ensure my victory." At his look, she waved a hand impatiently. "I'm not going to do it, I just want to."

"I think I preferred you before, back when you were snogging me," Remus muttered. "This you is scary." He paused. "And a little bit evil."

"Power corrupts," she warned him, only partly joking. It was true, after all, power did corrupt. That's why she had been so reluctant to take over the mantle of 'leader' for their little band of misfits; she didn't want to be mini-Dumbledore. Right now they seemed to have a good balance, she, Luna, Ginny and Lavender, but when the Marauders and Lily were added, there were imbalances. That needed to be solved, though she didn't know how that might work. It wasn't like any one person could just take up control, that would ruin everything they had been working for with this new approach to the war. Everybody needed to be involved, equal, to know they were important and that none of them were cannon fodder. It was a political minefield, even when there had only been four of them, never mind eight.

Worse, Regulus was here now, which meant that at some point in the not-so-distant future, a Black family feud would begin. That occurrence needed to be headed off, and the two boys needed a mediator, as well as a leader; she just wasn't made for that, you only had to look at her school days with Harry and Ron to know. Whenever the two of them had a falling out, the best she could do was not pick sides. She wasn't a therapist, she couldn't handle complex emotional problems, she had enough of her own to worry about without taking on the many and varied issues of the pureblood aristocracy. Luna and Ginny were so much better prepared for the role. In fact, the only person more inept than herself in matters of diplomacy was Lavender, who was much too prickly and volatile to play peacemaker.

They needed Regulus. Not least because with his arrival he had illustrated exactly how their changes were affecting the wider world. In the old reality, Regulus hadn't searched out his brother, he'd preferred to take on the world alone. This time, he had them, and they had him. Hermione's only problem with the situation (if you ignored the emotional minefield he had created with his arrival, which Hermione was trying to do, at least for the moment) was that the world had suddenly become unpredictable. He was living evidence that they could, in fact, change the future, but what else did this mean for them? They couldn't control everything and everyone – if Regulus could walk up to the door and demand entrance, then others could do the same.

The question that bugged Hermione the most, even with the threat of a Black family duel hanging over her head, was who will be next?

"I don't like that look," Remus murmured softly from the bed, frowning. "What's wrong?"
"Nothing," she responded quickly, collecting up his plates. "It's complicated."

"I can do complicated," he groused as she made for the door.

Hermione sighed. "I know, but right now I'd rather you 'do' sleep. Rest, Remus, or I won't let you into the meeting." When he opened his mouth to protest, she waved a hand. "No! You know I'll lock you in here. Don't you push me."

Hermione thought he might have tried to narrow his eyes at her, but he'd underestimated his level of exhaustion. He forced his eyelids to slits, glaring out at her, before his fatigue took the last steps to closing his eyes and they stayed that way. She smiled a little, taking one last glance at him huddled beneath the pile of duvet as though it were the middle of winter, snuggling deeper almost unconsciously. She thought that perhaps she was looking forward to their mutual mortification, later, when the realization of what had happened between them came crashing down. It would remind her that she was alive and kicking, able to feel something other than massive stress.

Remind her that she wasn't some bossy, emotionless automaton placed in this reality for the sole purpose of war.

Even if they didn't work out, at the end of the day she'd have that to hold onto.
Chapter Thirty: Recovery II

Chapter Summary

Or: Lavender is actually in a good mood for once, and Hermione suffers for it.

Chapter Notes

Hi!
As you all can probably guess, getting to write post-war hardened/angsty/sassy/uberbitch werewolf!Lavender Brown is one of my favourite things about this fic, which is odd because when I first dropped her into it I thought she’d be a real hassle.
I would have loved to follow up Remione with some Lav-Lav love, but since she doesn't have a romantic interest yet, I figured I'd do the next best thing.
Lav-Lav self-love, of course. If there's anybody in the world Lavender adores unconditionally, it's herself.
Enjoy!
Love, Eli x

Lavender Brown, in spite of popular opinion, was not a stupid girl. Sure, she might have failed out of Ancient Runes, and, sure, Professor Snape had once called her 'a menace to the art of potion-making, only ever surpassed by Longbottom', but she wasn't an idiot. She just wasn't all that good at books and learning and that sort of thing. Her priorities had always been on other things; learning secrets, gossip, make-up skills and the like. She might not be able to brew the Draught of Living Death but she could apply lipstick with her eyes closed, name all the different shades of blue, and seduce a man – any man – in under ten minutes (which, according to the films she'd watched as she grew up, was really a much more useful skill for a female spy than knowing how to re-pot mandrakes, anyway).

She knew, with utter certainty, that she was useful. That she had abilities beyond the purview of the other girls she'd found herself here with. Because, let's be honest, Hermione might be 'the brightest witch of her age' (who even told her that? Whoever it was, Lavender wanted to punch them. Way to give everybody else an inferiority complex) but she was definitely a specific person's type, and the sort that grows on you with time and exposure, at that. Ginny, on the other hand, was smokin' hot. Gorgeous. Her hair was the sort of thing men dream about – and Lavender knew this because she'd heard Seamus waxing poetic about it more than once, and wasn't that just typical of Seamus, the serial arsonist, to fancy a redhead? – and her skin the type that women wanted for themselves, at any cost. Her problem was that she was a lad. Growing up with six brothers had given her a sort of blunt forwardness, the type that men refer to as 'refreshing' but don't dare take on. Flirting with her was an exercise in self-preservation, as she makes it quite clear that she could break your neck, which for most people just isn't sexy. She also intimidated other women, setting their teeth on edge, not a great trait for someone who needs to collect information. And Luna… well, Luna was odd. Probably wild as all hell between the sheets, but vacant and weird out of the bedroom. A conversation with her could go literally anywhere except the place you want it to – and Lavender was pretty certain she did that on purpose.
Most men liked nice, docile women. Pretty, kind, affectionate but distant, that was what her mother had told her. Lavender had difficulties with the 'distant' bit, not because she couldn't withhold emotion – she could do that, and when she got angry with someone, she could hold a grudge like no—one's business – but because when she allowed herself to fall, she fell hard. If she detached herself, though, she could get a man. She could be nice (no, really, she could), and sweet, and switch between personas as easily as she changed clothes. While her scars were a drawback, her base appearance was the same. Plump, curvy, pretty, *blonde*.

Decades of experience with girls also added to her skillset. Any girl could be charmed into being her friend. She could go on a night out alone and return with dozens of numbers, all females, all wanting her company another night, another event. In terms of information-gathering in the real world, she was the perfect spy. With a glamour and a smile, she could do anything she set her mind to, as long as no equations were involved.

So, she knew she was useful. For something aside from scoring them an all-access-pass to Potter Manor via a magical disease, that is. Not so much in the library, but later, when they were doing more practical things, her expertise would be indispensable. Hermione knew that, too – they were already making plans to send Lavender and Ginny on excursions into Wizarding Britain, to check the climate of the war and how things might have changed, and later, to collect Horcruxes with as much discretion as possible. They couldn't, after all, fight a war from within this house.

Plus, while her talents might not be coming into use right now, in the planning stages, they certainly helped Lavender. She knew things about the occupants of Potter Manor that perhaps they didn't even realise themselves. Ginny and Black, for example, were *definitely* going to fuck. Not this week, perhaps not even this month, but at some point. Maybe at Potter and Lily's wedding, when Ginny is at her lowest and most miserable for having lost Harry, and Black is all hopped up on the free bar. She looked forward to watching that happen.

She also knew that Hermione had met her match. How the others were so ignorant, she didn't know. It was in her stance when he was near, in her fidgety movements, in her eyes when she looked at him. More, it was in the dreamy way she'd flitted in and out of Lavender's room after the full moon, her cheeks flushed and lips all plumped the way they could only be after a good snogging session. Really, Lavender was happy for her. The girl needed to unwind, she was so damn highly-strung, and the difference that one encounter had made was remarkable. She was practically floating on air. Lavender couldn't even imagine how Lupin must be feeling – didn't really want to, if she was honest. He seemed nice and all, but ruminating on what they might have been doing in the other room gave her an icky feeling in her stomach. She couldn't see the attraction *at all*.

He should feel lucky, Lavender determined as she watched Hermione practically tear her hair out, pacing through the library in agitation. Hermione, for all of her faults, was a sweet lass with a heart of gold. A big head, too, but everybody has flaws. If Lupin could find a way to keep her, he should. He wouldn't regret it.

*Probably*. Even his charitable nature must have its limits, after all. Hermione could be a veritable *harpie* sometimes.

Such as right then. Lavender had woken up for good at midday, feeling *fine*. Hermione told her she'd woken up earlier that morning and thrown something at Ginny, which she didn't remember, but couldn't deny, as it did sound like something she would do. Not the second time, though. Then, she'd been perky as a newborn babe.

Apart from the excruciating pain of her bones being broken and rearranged repeatedly, her skin crawling off of her fleshy innards in order to make room for fur, and the blinding headache that came...
from her eyes changing shape, size and ability; her full moon hadn't been that bad. She couldn't remember much, of course; when she tried her mind conjured images of fangs, burning pain, and the soft brush of fur against her flank. All she knew was that she must have slept, because when she'd woken up she was fully charged, her wolf asleep, pretty much been ready for battle.

Hermione disagreed.

First, Lavender had been wrestled back beneath the covers, Hermione claiming that she needed more rest. She didn't. What she'd needed was a bath, then a swim. Maybe sex. She'd woken up pretty aroused. That was irritating, considering she seemed to be the only person in the group who didn't want to hump anything in the house – and thank the Gods for that, because unlike Ginny, she still loved her former fiancé. Still, she'd bathed, spending hours in the bath, happily sacrificing the smoothness of her skin in order to feel the serenity that came to her when she was fully submerged.

Pancakes had been shoved down her throat by Hermione next, after which she'd been tucked back into bed, half-expecting Hermione to kiss her on the forehead and sing her a lullaby. She hadn't gone that far, thankfully, and after a token attempt at sleeping Lavender had thrown off the sheets and gotten dressed. She'd been informed of the 'family meeting' later that night, therefore had headed to the library, determined to be of help, despite not knowing what was going on.

Once there, Hermione had sighed in resignation and shoved her into an armchair. And that was where they were at, with Lavender watching Hermione run herself ragged, feeling quite impotent.

"Look, 'Mi, if it's bothering you that much, why don't you just tell him to shove it?" Lavender suggested, anything to get her to calm down. The pacing was making her dizzy.

Hermione swung around, her eyes wide with shock and dismay. "Lavender!" Then her mouth contorted and she added, "and don't call me 'Mi."

"What, you don't like 'Mi? I do. You'll have to help me out here, it's a real pain trying to find a nickname that sticks if you're just going to scowl at me. What?" She rolled her eyes at Hermione's scoff. "As for the Black situation, I'm not saying that's what you should do, only that it's an option. If you don't want to hurt Black, get rid of mini-Black. Black-lite." She tilted her head on her shoulders considerably. "Petit Noir?"

"He does have a name, you know," Hermione scolded, going back to the table where she'd laid out her research, as if the parchment might suddenly achieve sentience with the express purpose of telling her how to handle this situation.

"I know," Lavender hummed. "Regulus." She rolled the word on her tongue, tasting every syllable until it came out on a melodic purr. "Like the star, constellation of Leo. I'm not entirely uninformed, you know. I've been studying the Pureblood directory since I learned to read."

"Really?" The other girl blinked, the haze Lavender had come to associate with her spinning off into research mode drifting over her eyes. "I didn't know your family did that."

Lavender smirked wryly after nodding. "Me and every other kid in Wizarding Britain. Anyway, you don't know much about my family, Hermione, you've never asked." She waved away Hermione's repentant look, mostly because she didn't want the girl's guilt, nor her pity. And didn't want to think about her mother. "Just because I know his name, doesn't mean I'm going to use it. Wasn't that your idea in the first place? Use their surnames so that we don't get attached."

Hermione snorted. "It's a bit late for that," she confessed, her hands pressing her cheeks in a pre-emptive defense against blushes.
Lavender sent her a saucy wink, because no matter how icky the idea might be; as a woman and a friend, she just couldn't let that opportunity pass. "I know. Exactly how good a kisser was he, by the way?" She burst out laughing at the other girl's flustered flapping. "That good, huh?" Deflecting Hermione's glare, she continued, "I wasn't talking about that lot, anyway. It's pretty clear we're not leaving anytime soon. I meant Regulus."

"Too late for that, too," Hermione informed her, her nose wrinkling in disapproval. "Luna's claimed him. And I mean claimed. Apparently, she lives by the 'rules of the wild', and in 'the wild', that which you discover is yours."

Her interest perked, Lavender sat up straight, her legs swinging down from the arm of the chair to thud onto the ground. Her gossip-detector was vibrating. "You mean she's used the principle of 'finders, keepers' to get herself a boyfriend?" she clarified, her voice wobbling with suppressed mirth. "And how does he feel about that?"

"He's a bit starstruck right now," Hermione rolled her eyes, shuffling papers. "That's not the point. We need to figure out how to break the news to Sirius."

Lavender swung herself back up into her previous position, her head dangling over the edge of the chair so that she was upside down. Hermione scowled at her, muttering something about 'idiotic werewolves overexerting themselves'. Heroically, Lavender didn't make a joke. "I don't get the problem," she said instead, watching as Hermione picked up and discarded sheet after sheet of parchment. "Shouldn't he be happy that his brother's back? The estranged son who has seen the error of his ways and wants back into the fold – it's any mother's wet dream."

"Some things can't be forgiven," a new voice snapped. Lavender turned her head to see Ginny and Lily in the doorway, looking like a study in contrasts. Ginny had her red hair tied up in a messy bun, was dressed in sweaty work-out clothes and looked intensely bedraggled. Lavender knew she'd just come from the forest from the leaf in her hair and the mud on her shoes. She pitied the elf that had to clean that up. Lily, on the other hand, had the top half of her own red hair braided into an intricate bun, the bottom half free to tumble around her shoulders. She wore a peasant shirt of some sheer material, her bra as visible as her navel, and heavy bell-bottom jeans over platformed shoes. Her nails were perfectly painted as opposed to Ginny's chipped, and her face powdered where Ginny's shone. Together, they looked like twins the Gods had made negligently, without attention to detail. Lily was the one who had spoken, her face looking thunderous.

"Regulus abandoned Sirius, all because he was a Gryffindor," Lily declared, glaring at Hermione and Lavender. "What sort of a brother does that?"

"One under a lot of pressure, holding the weight of his House on his shoulders, with an inattentive father on one shoulder and an abusive mother on the other," Hermione fired back with equal heat. Again, Lavender straightened herself, feeling like she might need access to her wand for this. Lily looked furious. "Sirius pulled away from Regulus once he was at Hogwarts. What did you expect him to do, just ignore that? Take a leap of faith when he wasn't sure if anybody would catch him?"

Lily scowled, stalking up to Hermione. "I know Sirius and Regulus. You do not. Regulus joined his family in throwing Sirius out, rather than protecting him. He's a Slytherin, and a Death Eater."

Hermione's hair was electrified, sparking wildly. "Oh, and you would know this because you're so close to Regulus? He just tells you everything that's on his mind, does he?" She snarled the words, her anger palpable. "You're judging him for making a decision based on a situation you know nothing about! Regulus is the younger brother, it wasn't his job to protect Sirius! Yes, he's a Slytherin – so what?"
"Slytherins can't be trusted!" Lily shouted.

"I was almost a Slytherin," Lavender threw out, just wanting to be a part of it, really. Standing on the sidelines of a fight this epic isn't really all that fun. She liked to be in on the action. Plus, Lily’s blanket statement about Slytherins was pretty offensive. She quite liked Slytherins, sometimes. She and Pansy Parkinson used to meet for a stitch-and-bitch session every other week, with Hannah Abbott and Susan Bones. Pansy was weak-minded, yes; nonetheless, absolutely hilarious once she got going.

There was a silence so complete you could have heard a pin drop. Lily was staring at her, eyes wide, her mouth opening and closing repeatedly. She looked a bit gormless, to be honest.

"What?" Hermione said, blinking rapidly. "How?"

"I can see it," Ginny said thoughtfully, her first words since entering the room. She'd mainly stayed on the outskirts during the fight, but now she came forward. Lavender nodded at her in thanks.

Hermione, having pulled herself together, seemed to think she had a trump card in hand with that. "There, see? Lavender can definitely be trusted, and she was almost a Slytherin." A smirk crossed her face. "So was Harry, actually. He asked to be put in Gryffindor, however before then, the Hat thought he'd make a brilliant Slytherin."

Lily threw her hands in the air. "Oh, great, use my unborn son against me, why don't you?" She was a little more subdued, though. "Really?"

"Yes," Hermione said, softer now. "And he's not the only good Slytherin you know, is he?"

"The Minister was a Slytherin," Lily murmured. "And Marley, she was almost a Slytherin, before she was put in Gryffindor."

Hermione raised her eyebrow – that slow rise she did when she was spectacularly unimpressed. In a dangerously low voice, she said, "that's not who I meant, Lily."

The redhead flinched, backing off a step before she even noticed she'd moved. "How do you- never mind. That subject is not up for discussion right now."

Curiosity was almost suffocating Lavender. There were certain things Hermione and Ginny tended to know about the past and the future that she didn't, simply by virtue of having been Harry Potter's friends, rather than just the girl his best friend was shagging. Most of it they had told her, or had written on Luna's map. Not so much with the private things, little details about people's lives – such as this one. Lavender knew juicy gossip when she saw it, and what she wouldn't give to know...

"What are you talking about?" She asked. Suddenly she realised she had leaned forward in her chair so far she'd almost fallen out. Both Hermione and Lily shut up, looking guilty. Gods, she was so stupid sometimes, that ridiculous Gryffindor brazenness materializing out of the blue to ruin things for her. It would be so much easier to be nosy if she could be quiet and nosy.

"My point remains – seeing Regulus here could tear Sirius apart. I say, chuck him to the curb. He can't be trusted, and I won't see one of my boys in pain over some no-good Death Eater, not again." Lily flipped her hair over her shoulder, all self-righteous defense of her friends. Lavender quite admired her for it, and at the same time, was stubborn enough that her opinion turned the tables on her own.

"Bollocks to that," she said, most eloquently. "You know we wouldn't have kept him here without a good reason. The boy says he's in trouble, Hermione says there's more to him than meets the eye,
and Luna likes him. Put those three things together and, in my opinion, at least, you have a rock-solid reason to accept him. Besides, we're having a vote, aren't we? Isn't that good enough for you?"

Lily glared at Lavender, but she didn't shrink back. She wasn't afraid of any hoity-toity ginger; she'd faced down Molly Weasley on a wedding-planning rampage. Evans had nothing on her. Luckily, Lily still had a soft spot for Lavender, and let the point go, instead letting her eyes turn clinical as she scanned Lavender's body. She could predict the next question with accuracy. "How are you feeling?"

"Perfect," she replied with complete honesty. "Never better. I haven't felt this good since before the first attack. The she-wolf is snoozing, my senses are perfectly normal, and I'd rather eat spinach than steak. For me, that's the height of good health."

"Don't get used to it," Hermione warned, slipping into lecture-mode. "My research suggests your symptoms will return with a vengeance the moment the moon starts to wax."

Lavender shrugged, too busy being grateful for the reprieve. Lily, however, looked confused. "That can't be right," she said. "I've been observing Remus for years through his transformations. Generally he feels awful both before and after the moon."

"He fights it," Lavender responded easily. "I can't be bothered to do that. No offense to him, but I watched him change, and it was like torture, horribly painful. I couldn't endure that, not simply to keep some obscure sense of control over my humanity. I'm not that stubborn, nor am I that strong. I figure, if I have to be a werewolf, I might as well commit to it." She stretched, her body flexing like a satisfied cat, twisting itself over the chair, demonstrating her impeccable physical state. "I have zero regrets."

Brandishing a notebook, Lily hitched herself up on a nearby corner table. She flipped through her notes, presumably those she had taken from James earlier, ignoring Hermione's envious looks with ease. "James also said that you and Moony got along quite well," Lily observed, still watching Lavender.

"He fights it," Lavender responded easily. "I can't be bothered to do that. No offense to him, but I watched him change, and it was like torture, horribly painful. I couldn't endure that, not simply to keep some obscure sense of control over my humanity. I'm not that stubborn, nor am I that strong. I figure, if I have to be a werewolf, I might as well commit to it." She stretched, her body flexing like a satisfied cat, twisting itself over the chair, demonstrating her impeccable physical state. "I have zero regrets."

"That's possible," Lavender mused, "except that I don't know what an 'omega' is."

"It's just another way of saying you're the weak wolf," Hermione clarified.

Nodding, Lavender considered this for a moment. "I think 'omega' is more polite, makes me less likely to slap you," she smiled, nodding at Lily, who sent a victorious look in Hermione's direction. The two of them could get along like a house on fire, but they clashed equally frequently. They were too similar to do anything else; their personality differences were mainly in that Lily had more of an ego and a shinier exterior. Inside, down where Hermione was the girl she used to be, before nine years of war and self-deprecation had touched her, she was a match for Lily Evans.

Hermione had the biggest heart of anybody Lavender had ever met, which was why she fought so hard for Regulus. He meant something to Luna, and Hermione loved Luna, so Regulus was under her protection. Hermione was too principled to do anything else. In fact, Lavender could bring home a troll next week, she was fairly certain, and as long as she professed to love him Hermione would make him feel welcome. She was a difficult woman, high-maintenance and sometimes unduly harsh, but it was life that had made her that way. At her core she was a good woman, fiercely loyal and loving, and would stand by her friends through hell.

In demonstration of these traits, she backed down. "Fine, then. 'Omega' it is."

"James also said that you and Moony got along quite well," Lily observed, still watching Lavender.
She simply smiled. "I'm a dog person."

"Is there anything you'd like to add to the notes?" Lily asked, brandishing a pencil.

"That would be a no. Even if I could remember anything – which I can't – I think you two are far too addicted to your note-taking. It can't be healthy."

Hermione snorted. "Lav, are you high?" Probably. She did feel quite floaty, but then, Hermione had poured unnecessary pain-killers down her throat every three hours since sunrise.

"Your potions are strong," she responded.

"Lily made them," Hermione deflected. "I was too busy with the wolfsbane. At least now I know who to blame, anyway."

"Blame for what?" Lily asked, suddenly all perked-up like a kitten hearing a tin open. Hermione shot her a look, blushing again, and turned away.

"Nothing, never mind. Back to Regulus. We can't send him away, Lily, so what do you propose we do about the Sirius situation?"

Lily tapped her pencil against her teeth in thought. All animosity seemed to have been washed away by the brief interlude, replaced by genuine concern. "You should have gone to get him last night, the second Regulus arrived."

Ginny, from the floor where she was stretching, piped up, "Lily. Really?"

She sighed and frowned. "Fine, then. I guess one of you should warn him now, rather than spring it on him later. If he just walks in on Regulus with you lot, he'll go mental. And Sirius doesn't trust any of you all that much, so it could be the final straw."

Hermione grimaced. Lavender didn't blame her. Sirius was an imposing bloke, funny but scary. A Black, also, which to the informed only made him a bigger threat. "Any volunteers?" Hermione asked, a little desperately.

Rising to her feet, Ginny smiled. "I'll do it." She smiled even wider at Hermione's bemusement, baring her teeth. "Seriously. I'm not scared of him. Never have been, never will be." She pulled her trainers back on one-handed and glanced at the clock above the door. "Where's Regulus?"

"In the study with Luna," Hermione said. "Last I checked, Sirius was in bed."

"Leave it to me," Ginny nodded waving a hand over her shoulder as she turned for the door. "I'll sort him out."

None of them were all that reassured, not even when Ginny wiggled her hips and threw them a smirk as a departing shot. No girl was attractive enough that this could be forgiven all that easily. Not even Ginny.
Chapter Thirty-One: Sirius & Resentment

Chapter Summary

Ginny risks life and limb in the name of the Light (or, close enough, anyway).

Chapter Notes

Hi!

This chapter took, like, forever to write. Sirius and Ginny are so very difficult, I have a new respect for people who are able to write Ginny/Sirius-centric fics (not that I didn't respect them before, but now it's... over the top, respect).

I hope you like it!

Love, Eli x

Ginny wasn't as confident as she made herself out to be. Not by a long-shot. She only knew that she was their best bet at talking Sirius down, next to Lily – but Lily couldn't be trusted not to fan the flames of his temper. Better it be Ginny to bear the brunt of his reaction; she was a tough girl. She could take him down if he got feisty.

She tore the bobble from her hair as she crossed the landing, running her fingers through it to allow it to feather out across her shoulders. She stopped at the entrance to the family wing to scourify her shoes, her sports-bra and her joggers, too. A freshening charm came on the heels of that, then a quick make-up charm to powder her face.

Really, that didn't mean anything, though. She'd freshen herself up to go into any man's room. The fact that the man she was going to see was Sirius Black was irrelevant. He probably wouldn't even notice what she looked like, too busy would he be facing the emotional torment that came with Regulus's return. She was okay with that, because she wasn't neatening herself for him. Really.

Even though she knew he preferred it when she wore her hair down, because it only just brushed the tops of her breasts, and drew the eye there. Conjuring a shirt to cover her sports-bra would be logical, too, but... well, like she said, he liked her tits. She'd seen the flare of lust in his eyes, quickly dampened. That didn't mean anything – if it did, she'd probably have gone in there all sweaty, in order to make his mind go to other sweaty activities.

She paused.

No, Ginny. Bad Ginny.

Shaking her head, she continued on. She could lie to everybody else, but never herself.

His door was closed, which could equally be a bad or good sign for her. Knocking lightly, she pressed her ear to the cool wood, straining to hear his breathing. Nothing. Hell, if he was out and
about, her mission had already failed. He could walk in on Regulus any time, and they wouldn’t know until it happened. And then what would they do – he’d see Luna, put two and two together, and probably come up with an even worse theory than the already pretty awful one that was true.

"Shit," Ginny muttered, biting her lip. She pulled back, hands on either side of the door, to look down the hallway. He could have gone to visit Remus, she supposed. That was unfortunate, neither of them would welcome a visit from her if he had. Remus would be feeling vulnerable; Hermione’s caretaking would have pushed his pride far enough without her wandering in on him in his exposure and demanding an audience.

James was in bed. That was the only way Lily would have left him to rejoin the girls in the library, so he must be there. Unless they were in the habit of sleeping in puppy piles (and she wasn’t completely discounting that theory; sheer adorability overrode the oddness of grown men sleeping together), Sirius couldn’t be with him.

She took a few steps towards James's door anyway, more out of curiosity than any real belief that her quarry was there. Stopping herself with a brisk shake of her head, she marched determinedly back to Sirius's door and banged her fist against it once again.

"Black?!" she shouted – just to cover all of her bases, you understand. What was the harm if he wasn't there?

There was a thud beyond the door, followed by a groan. Then footsteps.

Well. In her defense, she didn't think he was inside. He wasn't breathing, for Merlin's sake! And she told him that, too, the second he opened the door.

"Circe, do you not breathe?"

Her lips slammed closed, her mouth dry. She hadn't meant to shout at him, but shouting at him had stopped her doing something less appropriate – like, maybe, drooling. He was shirtless. Not just shirtless, but shirtless and tattooed. Shirtless and tattooed with blurry sleepy eyes and mussed up hair. Fuck, if he didn't look like a Playwitch model, all muscle tone and ink and the softest little happy trail leading down towards his –

"Like what you see?" Sirius asked, leaning against the doorjamb with his arms crossed, smirking.

"Just until you opened your mouth," Ginny shot back easily. "Put some clothes on, we need to talk."

"Can't fault a woman who knows what she wants," he drawled, turning back into his room, his every movement heavy and languid with sleep. Ginny took the moment to shake the sudden tension out of her limbs, and, scolding herself for being a lech, slipped inside. She fought a momentary crisis in her mind – to close the door or leave it open? Closed forced intimacy, but open was weird. Quick escape in case of an explosion, versus high likelihood of eavesdroppers. She reached back, stopped her hand, then shook her head irritably. There she went again, losing her bloody mind over Sirius Black. She was a grown woman, damn it!

She turned back to see him pulling a t-shirt over his head, his back-muscles rippling. Her breath caught in her throat, sudden heat flashing through her. She was grateful, then, that she’d left the door open, for all of the air seemed to have vacated the premises. He span around on his heels, head down, shaking his hair out like – well, like a wet dog, actually, but four-hundred percent more sexy.

Finally, he finished his little reverse strip-tease, and Ginny was able to roll her tongue back up off of the floor and into her mouth. He glanced behind her at the open door and pulled his gaze back with a
little knowing smirk that made her want to slam the door in his face, preferably with her on the other side of it. "What's so important that it merits a house-call?" He asked, sauntering closer. She took a step back without thinking, then scolded herself for the weakness – he veered off at the last minute and sat himself on the edge of his bed, elbows on his knees, leaning forward with his eyes piercing hers. He checked his watch and frowned. "Don't I have a couple more hours before I have to present myself to Her Highness?"

Finally, familiar ground! If there was one thing she could do, it was fight. "Don't talk about Hermione that way," she snapped, grateful for the defensive anger he had riled in her. There was a short list of people allowed to insult Hermione, and he most certainly was not on it.

He rolled his eyes, allowing Ginny a few minutes to remind herself that she was supposed to be nice to him, he was in for a rough evening, for Merlin's sake, Ginny, have some compassion. "Retract your claws, Weasley. It was a joke."

"In poor taste," she couldn't stop herself from muttering. He was this infuriating mix of beautiful and irritating that pressed all of her buttons at once. It was bad enough when he'd been pushing forty, but at nineteen?

Just… insufferable.

"I need to talk to you," she repeated, forcing herself back into business-mode. She made a valiant attempt at softening her features into something close to sympathy. From the look on his face, she must have taken it one step further, closer to insanity. "We had a visitor last night," she began again, slowly, more to keep herself in check than anything else. She wasn't brilliant at modulating her temper, as any quidditch player she'd worked with could tell you. Adrian Pucey still had a lump of displaced cartilage on his nose from where she'd caught him leering at one of her teammates in the showers and swiftly, mercilessly, broken it. Or, she supposed he didn't have that anymore… she wasn't sure how that might work. The specifics of alternate reality time-travel was something she didn't want to delve too deep into.

"A visitor?" Sirius prodded, face carefully blank. No trace of his previous humour showed, which she was grateful for.

"Your brother," she blurted out, her face colouring. Maybe this had been a bad idea. She wasn't brilliant with delicacy. Weasleys, as a general rule, were to discretion what an elephant was to glass.

He blanched. No joke, his face went white as a sheet, his eyes widening so far there was a thick white band around his irises. Ginny wondered for a moment whether he'd suffered a heart attack, he was so pale, so unresponsive. "Black?" she wandered a few steps closer, concerned that his eyes didn't track the movement. "Sirius?"

He swallowed a few times, his lips smacking with the action. "I'm good." He said, finally. Grey eyes focused on Ginny again. "Reg was here?"

Surely referring to him by a nickname was a good sign?

"Is here," Ginny told him in a quiet voice.

Sirius blinked a few times, trying to digest that information, before he stood up so quickly it sent Ginny stumbling back. There was a low thrumming noise coming from his direction – a growl? "Where?" He demanded, looking all ready to storm the barricades. This was what she had been prepared for, she could do this. As long as he didn't slip into another emotional coma, she would be fine.
"We need to talk about this before you can see him," she said calmly, her hands held up placatingly. "There are some things you ought to know ."

"Circe's tits, Weasley! I don't care! Where's my brother?" He advanced on her, nostrils flaring, eyes flashing silver. Seems Sirius had thought the situation over and decided anger was the best solution to this problem. Ginny almost got whiplash, what with him going nought to one hundred in the space of a second. It took everything she had not to move – in that, she used all of her energy to paste her feet to the ground with a non-verbal sticking spell, unable to trust that she wouldn't run away. That done, she straightened her spine and squared her shoulders, meeting him head on.

"Regulus is a complicated boy, Black. There are things you must know before you go thundering on in there and destroy everything we've worked for." She sounded calmer than she felt, a veritable tsunami of fear prepping itself in her chest. Her heart pounded double time, so hard she could feel it in her thumbs. One hand caressed her wand lovingly, the sliver of yew slipping smoothly against her flesh, reassuring in its solidity. She could take him down if she had to. She could.

Sirius's eyes turned calculating, zeroing in on Ginny like he'd just figured something out. Not a feeling she appreciated, being flayed by his glare, but she could deal. Temporarily. "You think I'm going to harm him, don't you?" He asked in a soft voice. Ginny resolutely did not reply to such a trap of a question, and the both of them could testify to that point with complete accuracy when Hermione went off on her later. Sadly, her face? Not so discrete. "For fuck's sake, Ginny, he's my brother!"

Not a great argument to his point, really. "I broke Charlie's shoulder once, gave Percy a hairline fracture in his kneecap. And I love my brothers. I'll need better assurances than the 'he's my brother' spiel."

"How about, I'm not a crazy b-" he seemed to catch himself, "witch!"

She growled low in her throat. "Since I assume you quite like being a functioning male, I'll take that at face value. Another statement like it won't pass."

They stood, both fuming with rage, glaring at each other. The space between them, little as it was, popped and fizzled with their magic, waves of it seeming to emanate from their skin. Something flashed in Sirius's eyes, a sort of speculation – Ginny could understand that. She felt the same way. She kept her fury up front, but behind that… well, her brain was considering other uses for their volatile chemistry. More physical ones, where the bruises wouldn't come from an impending duel. Not that a duel wouldn't be fun, but wrestling – and the things it could lead to – would be more so.

"I would never hurt Regulus," Sirius said, finally, his voice rough. "Not… intentionally."

Relief washed over Ginny. "I'm glad to hear that."

"However -" Sirius added, and Ginny let out a disappointed sigh. He couldn't just leave it at that, could he? Couldn't just trust his brother – and the rest of them. He had to qualify his bloody statements like some sort of politician. She had the sense that her relief was premature. "- he is a Death Eater. I know that, I've seen him with his friends, heard them talk. You can't tell me otherwise, because that would be a lie. Bringing him here – and I assume you have, because he'd hardly come himself – was a massive liability."

"All is not as it seems," Ginny said, mysteriously. Or, something close to mysteriously, anyway. You'd think after years spent with Luna as her best friend that she'd have the airy thing down pat, but it came out sounding like the cliché it was, and Sirius was looking at her like she'd lost the plot, so her voice couldn't have been dead on either. "Look, Regulus is a good bloke," she tried, abandoning
her Cassandra-esque attempt to convince him for her more usual forthright tones. "Misguided, yes, but we have reason to believe that his moral compass remains firmly set north, no matter what mistakes he's made in the past."

Sirius had begun his groan about halfway through her sentence, and it lasted much longer than her ending did. She scowled, crossing her arms across her chest. He was *such* a dickhead.

Scrubbing his hands across his face, he peered at her with incredulous eyes. "Did you quote that directly from Her Highness's diary?"

Infuriated by the burn that elicited in her cheeks – just because Hermione had said something similar didn't mean she didn't believe it herself! – Ginny found herself stamping her feet in frustration. "Damnit, Black! Can you stop being – well, you – for one second and just listen to what I'm saying?"

"I *am* listening, Weasley. You're telling me Regulus isn't a 'real' Death Eater, despite that tattoo on his arm that says otherwise. You lot have also said that Peter *is* a real Death Eater, despite our years of friendship! Some of the things you lot say make *so* little sense."

He buried his head in his hands, his fingers blocking the full strength of his muffled roar of rage. "You don't understand – I just don't know what to believe anymore! What is the world coming to that our friends aren't even our friends, and our enemies might in fact be something more than that?"

Ginny shrugged, suddenly uncomfortable. "I don't know. I suppose… it's just been par for the course my whole life."

Sirius stared at her in disbelief. "You're joking."

Not joking. Sirius couldn't even comprehend the amount of not joking she was doing here. She had been possessed by Voldemort at the age of eleven, had to live with his demon mark on her soul ever since. She'd been the Chosen One's girlfriend, the most powerful Weasley child, the one with the potential for darkness that had had Death Eater children sidling up to her in the library to leer considerably, wondering how far she had taken her magic to the Dark, whether she would be a useful tool, when she'd snap. She shook her head, omitting all of this to give him a smirk. "Sadly not."

"I don't- how can you bear it? To live every day not knowing who will be next, having dinner with your family and having to wonder – wonder *constantly* – who will be the next to go? Who will die, or who will turn? Who – who -" Ginny realised, to her horror, that he was crying. And not the sobbing, messy, sodden cry of a distraught woman, the sort that Ginny had experience with, but the infinitely more heart-breaking silent cry of a grown man whose emotion has completely overwhelmed him, leaving him young, vulnerable and defenceless in the dust. She was sat next to him without really thinking about it, stroking her hand down his spine and humming softly, like that might help him at all. Like a complete stranger witnessing his breakdown could be anything other than completely humiliating.

A strange ache started in her chest as she watched him crumple, his shoulder leaning into her heat even as he turned his face away to hide his tears. She'd never seen Sirius cry before. She'd seen him angry, in pain, lost and frustrated, but never so hysterical that he *cried*. She hadn't even been sure he *had* tear ducts. But here he was, breaking down in her arms, and she had no idea how to deal with that. His fingers still blocked his face, but tremors shook his body, transferring from him to her as she tried to absorb some of the shock. His fingers shook against his face, and his eyes – what she could see of them – were dark and stormy against his paler skin.

"I keep thinking," he said, his voice a raw croak. She didn't think he realised where he was, or who
he was talking to, only that he needed to talk it out, get the poison out of his system. Selfishly, she experienced a pang of jealousy to think that he might have done this in front of Hermione, or Lily (not Lavender, she thought. Very few people were brave enough to cry in front of Lavender) just as equally as she, and though she'd identified her role in this tableau as concerned friend, she couldn't help but think even a hippogriff could fill this position – had filled this position.

"I keep thinking," he repeated, his voice steadier now, his breathing less erratic. "What if it was James, or Remus, and not Peter? How would I feel if one day I went out on a mission and came up against Moony or Prongs, and they suddenly weren't who they'd said they were? Would I be able to fulfil my responsibilities – to the Order, to the light – or would I just… give up?"

He let out a rattling breath, his shoulders shaking violently against her. "It was bad enough with Reggie, even though I was prepared for that inevitability. Or the day someone came through the doors of Headquarters and just gave me that look, you know the one, where they've suddenly remembered what family I've come from, and they pity me, or I disgust them, but then it's followed up by those words – "Reg was there" or, worse, "We've had to take him down". But, the idea that it might be Peter… and then, the consequences of his betrayal…"

Sirius had calmed now, but his face was bleak as he looked at Ginny. "I don't want to feel this. I don't want to have to look across at my best friends and have to consider that they might – might – you know." Ginny nodded. She did know.

She also knew that his worries were unfounded, that he need not fret. And while he didn't trust the girls implicitly, he could use their reassurances right now. Besides, she knew where he was coming from - he wasn't the only one whose family had betrayed them. She reached out tentatively and, when he didn't push her away, took his hand in her own.

"I'm not going to tell you you're being stupid, because you're not," Ginny said fiercely, her eyes fixed forward. She could probably talk in full sentences if she didn't have to look at his face; having to look at the grief in his eyes, however, would likely reduce her to a babbling, cooing wreck as she tried to comfort him. She wasn't so great at comforting people, more so when she actually wanted to. "I get your worries better than you think I do. A blow like that – well, that's going to undermine everything you thought you knew, open a fissure in your remaining relationships. It has you doubting your judgement, and that of those around you."

By this point, she couldn't remember how she was supposed to turn this around. Ginny was not an overly eloquent person at the best of times, never mind when she had over 12 stone of gorgeous male piled in her lap. She gave it her best effort, though. "James, Lily and Remus are stalwart." She proclaimed, injecting her voice with as much confidence as she could muster. "They would never abandon you, nor would they betray you. If they went to the Dark Side, they'd never leave you behind – they love you so much it verges on incestuous." She nodded, firmly, once, to drive the point home. "That, my furry friend, never changes."

He pulled back a little, a strange expression on his face. For a moment everything tightened inside of her, worrying that she might have gotten it wrong, or made things worse.

But then the impossible happened – he sniggered.

"I think that's the most backhanded compliment I've ever heard," he snorted. "Incestuous?"

Grinning, she shoved him with her shoulder. "Yes. Completely. It's so weird. Do you sit in the corner while James and Lily get it on, advising him on technique?"

He smirked, and it was like the sun had come out from behind the clouds. "He should be so lucky.
Besides, it's not like you can talk. You and your lot, always whispering in corners, demanding that you and Luna get to share a room – and don't think we didn't notice that time Lavender and Hermione shared a bed. Should Remus be jealous?"

She was laughing, now, and he was watching her, not ready to laugh properly but seeming to bask in her mirth. "Merlin, you're such a creep," she informed him, the effect somewhat marred by her smile.

"Guilty as charged," he leered exaggeratedly, his eyes scanning from her trainers up to her face. The light atmosphere was heady, a relief after the darkness that had preceded it. Ginny almost felt like she could fly, her relief was so complete. Sirius got somber for a moment, but the glitter remained in his eyes. "Alright, then," he said seriously, giving her hand a squeeze. She'd forgotten it was there, actually, and remembering her impromptu gesture sent her blushing. "I'll give Reggie the benefit of the doubt. But I'm warning you now – don't expect miracles. Too much has happened for us to go back from."

Tracing his fingers with her own, she thought of Percy and his return to the family. How he'd struggled through the blame and recriminations against him in the months following the war. How, even though he'd stood with his family at countless funerals, and mourned with them over Fred, there was still that invisible barrier between them; one which, at times, seemed insurmountable. "I won't," she replied with absolute honesty. "It's enough that you'll try."
Chapter Thirty-Two: Regulus & Resentment

Chapter Summary

Regulus and Sirius host an impromptu family reunion. It does not go well.

Chapter Notes

Hi!
I started writing this fic and I was like "Remione is best, better than all the rest' but in the writing I have become equally as attached to the other ships I'm sailing on into harbour. Sirius and Ginny, for one. Regulus and Luna, now. Lavender and Unidentified Male (tho you all can probably guess who that'll be by now) battling for first place next to Remus and Hermione, the two couples clawing at each other to earn Wolf!Mate supremacy.
Basically, I'm invested, now. I love them all. Even Ron, for his effect on Lavender, and that's not a thing I've felt for him since I was seventeen.
I hope you all enjoy!
Eli x

Luna was sat cross-legged on Charlus's desk, the floor around its base littered with quills and inkpots and sheets of parchment. She'd not thrown them there – no, every piece had its place, carefully reproduced on the rug from where it sat on the top. Regulus hadn't questioned her process, and she'd been tempted to think he was too preoccupied to notice, except that when she'd laid the indigo ink next to the scarlet, he'd reached over and replaced it an inch to the left, beside the sapphire. They'd locked eyes for a moment, he'd blushed profusely and retreated to the sofa. He didn't say anything; the small gesture told her enough.

They weren't talking much, but she was in no hurry. Not tonight, anyway. Content simply to bask in the presence of the man the Fates wished her to marry, she'd taken the time to catalogue his every movement, feature, mannerism in her mind.

Regulus Black. She hadn't been expecting him, not on anything more than the topmost of logical levels. She had known that he would come, and it was only a matter of the 'when', but she hadn't realised that when he came he would be coming to her. Not until she'd seen his sweet face in the woods, him perched on his suitcase, equally as large as his brother but somehow more elegant, more refined. His eyes had been wide with fear tempered by a sort of wild intelligence that appealed to her in her core. That, even before his looks – his lovely, imperfect yet delightfully carved face, his long pianists fingers, his broad shoulders yet slim neck.

She could come to love Regulus Black, she knew. Her soul belonged to him as much as his belonged to her. All of those things that others found quirky and odd in her would be understood by him, and she would know him best of anyone. Their pairing would be magnificent – provided she could keep him alive long enough for them to bond. His fate was by no means sealed, nor was it entirely open to manipulation. She was aware of this – of all of the girls' matches, hers was the most
precarious.

Which hurt, really. Luna wasn't a woman to find pain wherever she looked, oftentimes able to dismiss it even if it stared her in the face, but there was a certain loneliness in being her; the woman whose soul-mate was killed before she was even born. A man who, if reality had its way, would have never known the comfort of a match, had died alone and afraid and so full of self-loathing there was little room for anything else.

Not this time. If Luna could control their fate – and she knew she could, for she was a powerful witch with connections, and her mother had taught her that she could do anything she put her mind to – it would be high priority for her to keep him safe. He was sweet, and vulnerable, and so very hers that it ached to remove herself from him, she wasn't sure she would survive being even a room apart.

Which was what had led her to spend nigh on eight hours in this room with him, where they'd been deposited just before the werewolf gang had returned from their full moon romp. It was, for her, a sort of prelude to courting. She understood, after all, the importance of men in believing that they had a choice in matters of the heart (even though they most certainly did not). Regulus required the illusion of free will, and as such she would allow him the space and time to come to terms with the truth – which was that they belonged together. Luna believed fervently that his decision wouldn't take very long to make, not very long at all, but just in case she would put her very best features on parade.

Hence the robe. It was a nightdress, but not much of one, covered by her sheerest dressing-gown. the effect was seductive and yet remained demure, the way he would like her, she imagined. Her hair was down around her hips, spilling into her lap and around her shoulders, framing her face to great advantage. The nightdress reached her calves, but the way she sat with her legs crossed caused it to rise, flashing her bare feet and ankles in the light. Not a sight to arouse any average male, no, but Regulus was a different breed. His eyes lingered there longer than appropriate.

It gave her such a rush, to have him look at her like that. Never before had she given much thought to seduction; Theodore, darling though he was, hadn't taken much convincing before he was happy to jump into her bed ('jump' perhaps being an overstatement of the matter, he was much too sedate to do anything so enthusiastic – despite what his sexual proclivities might suggest) and Neville before that had been a fast, passionate affair, conducted in the heated aftermath of beheading Nagini and ending just as quickly with blushes and profuse apologies the morning after. She'd never wanted someone enough to bring her head from the clouds and focus on reality, a strange experience for her. Certainly, she'd never had cause to consider her clothing, how the fabric fell against her body, or to fret about how one might like her hair styled. She felt all at once twelve and thirty, with the worldly knowledge of a woman and the giddy anticipation of a preteen.

Regulus shifted in his seat. It had been a long night and an even longer day, with very little to occupy them since they'd taken this room as their own. The first two hours had been spent in antsy expectation – when would Sirius find out, when would he appear? – but the adrenalin had grown stale, leaving him, at least, exhausted both mentally and physically. With Luna promising to watch over him, he'd been drifting fretfully in and out of consciousness since. They'd barely said more than fifteen unique words to one another since the walk, but then, Luna had never needed words to communicate.

His eyelashes fluttered against his cheeks. Thick, ebony lashes, much too long for a man, against unmarred alabaster skin. His eyes, Luna knew, were charcoal; two shades darker than his brother's, to fit his more serious personality. His nose was too long to be conventionally attractive, and his lips too thick. Luna didn't care – she'd never had much time for convention. His sleeve inched up his
forearm where it lay bent beneath his head, and she could just make out the writhing head of the Dark Mark.

*Oh, Regulus.*

She smiled a little. In another time, another place, another reality, she'd have been the one with that tattoo. The Lovegoods had never been known for strict adherence to the Light/Dark dichotomy of Magic. They only cared for magic itself, and Luna was no different. If Harry hadn't been her friend – her only friend – it was likely she would have fallen to the Dark. She'd had offers. While the general population thought of her as dotty and vapid, there were those who remembered her mother, her grandmother, her great-grandmother. They knew what women of her line were capable of, and they'd have killed to have her on side.

Her allegiances, however, sat firmly where her affections lay. She'd loved Harry, so she was Light. She loved Ginny and Hermione, so she was Light. Now, she loved Regulus, and in the interests of securing his survival, she would remain Light.

Twirling her wand through her fingers, she leaned back on the desk, her head dangling off one end while her feet dangled over the other. From this position she could read all of the titles on the bookshelf behind the desk, and occupied herself with that for a while. The Potters had the oddest tastes – from Muggle fairy tales (a first edition of *Household Stories by the Brothers Grimm* was prominent behind glass) all the way to more modern textbooks, which appeared from their state to be the ones Charlus had used in school. How nostalgic of him, to have displayed them in his office. The collection was seemingly random, but all of the spines were bent and broken, all of the pages yellowed with age and use. Though many of the tomes in the library were ancient and priceless, there had never been an air of affection about them as there was here.

A silver flash broke her from her ruminations, and she realised she'd been about to open the cabinet that held the Grimm book. Frowning, she stared at her fingers. Often they would take on a life of their own, go off on kleptomaniacal thieving sprees until she came-to in her room with treasures heaped around her like a Niffler. That was how she'd found Riddle's diary in her first year, discovered Harry's Invisibility Cloak at Shell Cottage, how she'd discovered Hermione's love-notes from Remus in the aftermath of the battle. Why they would want a book of fairy-tales, though, she had no idea.

Glaring at her prize, still imprisoned behind Unbreakable Glass, she swung herself up to face the interruption. It was a patronus, shimmering but strong, pawing at the ground as it swung its mane. A horse, which meant Ginny. Behind it, Regulus was awake, staring in awe.

"Is that-?"

Luna touched the apparition on its nose, letting it nuzzle into her hand, before it poofed out of existence. "We've got company," she said with a smile.

Seconds later there came a knock on the door, and Regulus bolted upright, his trepidation clear. Luna shot him a smile, and padded over to the door, cracking it open.


Behind him, Ginny snorted and tossed her hair, looking awfully like her patronus. "Let him in, Lu. He's promised to be good."

"Ah, but will Regulus?" Luna asked lightly, turning her head to make eye-contact with her charge. "Your brother's here. Nobody else seems worried that you might hurt him, but I'd rather not wake up
with his head in my bed, so can you swear you'll be nice?"

Shock flitted across his face, followed by offense. "Of course," he bit out. Luna nodded solemnly.

"You'd best come in, then," she told Sirius, opening the door a little wider. "But no funny business."

The last time Regulus had been in the same room as Sirius, Sirius had been incapacitated, and Regulus was trying to save his life. Lying in a pool of his own blood, barely conscious, Sirius could hardly have been considered a threat, but Reg had worked quickly and carefully anyway, because he knew his brother, and Sirius could be deadly even in sleep.

This time, Sirius had full control of his faculties. He filled the doorway with his shoulders, towered over little Luna until she looked even smaller and more breakable, enveloping her in his aura of barely-restrained violence. It took everything in Reg to stop him from jumping up and shoving her out of Sirius's path, knowing it would only rile him more if Reg treated him as a threat. Oh, but it did hurt to see her there, shoulders squared up to the brute like she could take him out, when she looked so fragile.

"Can I speak to Reg alone, please?" Sirius asked. Reg was shocked on about fifty different levels. Since when did he ask permission? He was so polite to Luna, despite the fact that he was obviously stressed, his neck tight. And he'd called Regulus by the nickname Sirius himself had bestowed upon him, as though they were still close, as if they'd spoken only yesterday with civil tongues and affection.

Dumbstruck though Regulus was, Luna wasn't anything near it. She twisted her fingers in a strand of platinum hair, cocking her head to one side and watching Sirius with huge pale eyes. In a split second she'd gone from seductive water-nymph to lost little girl, and the transition made Regulus hugely uncomfortable. "Lu…" the redhead in the hall warned her, as though she was just as uncomfortable as Regulus, but Luna didn't back down.

"How do I know I can trust you?" she asked, matter-of-factly. Sirius's eyebrows shot up, his mouth falling open in surprise.

"You want to talk about trust, now?" he replied, his voice just the right side of menacing. "Why don't you ask Lavender what she thinks about trust, Luna? After what you did to her, I'm sure she has an opinion."

Luna flinched back, the only sign that she felt anything less than completely confident since Regulus had met her. She reacted as though she'd been slapped in the face, watching Sirius with a face drenched in betrayal. Regulus was frozen, completely impotent, as Sirius glared back with eyes as hard as diamonds. "Yeah, that's what I thought," Sirius sneered finally.

Luna shook her nightdress out, raising her chin. She glanced back at Regulus once, then turned to the door and swept out. The redhead looked after her, then shot Sirius an angry look. "What was that for?" she demanded.

"Half an hour, at most," Sirius responded, completely ignoring the question. "You can wait outside if you like."

She snorted, sending Sirius a disgusted look. "Yeah, like I'm going to leave after what you just did. You'll need a bodyguard once Hermione finds out."

"Right, yeah, see you in a bit, Gin." He closed the door on Ginny's outraged face, and turned to Regulus. For the first time his entire attention was settled on him, his eyes running over a face so
similar to his own, over his robes – still messy and sweaty from the walk – and the trunk by his feet. Leaning one shoulder on the door, Sirius crossed his ankles and folded his arms. "You've got yourself some fans," he told Regulus, his mouth still twitched in a sneer though it was obvious he was making an effort to control himself.

"What, the women?" Reg asked, nonplussed. "I don't know why. They've just been really… nice?" He shrugged one shoulder, deciding to omit any mention of the suspicion he felt for the secrecy they were acting under, and his inexplicable connection to the smallest. "Who are they, anyway?"

"It's really not my place to say," Sirius grumbled, and when Reg opened his mouth to protest, he waved a hand and continued, "No, really. I'm not in charge here, so I don't get to make the call. I doubt you'll be in the dark for long, though. Like I said, they seem to like you."

Yes, well, them liking him hadn't gotten him very far up to now, had it? He watched Sirius take in every detail of the room, and let the silence hang between them. There was no way to answer what he'd said without inflaming Sirius's anger, which boiled beneath the surface of his careless façade. Besides, it wasn't like Regulus knew anything. He'd been trying to put the pieces together since he'd arrived, but nothing made sense. So far, he'd figured out that there were at least three foreign women here, perhaps mercenaries hired out by the Order from overseas. It seemed they were in charge, but who was to know? The Dark Lord could be hosting a cotillion in the ballroom for all the facts he had.

Mind, if they were mercenaries, it wasn't likely that Sirius would be comfortable enough to tease and harass them the way he just had. Which left him, once again, completely lost.

"Merlin, Reg, talk to me," Sirius snapped, frowning. Reg couldn't stop the rise of his brow. Sirius looked almost frustrated, jaw ticking as he looked down on his brother. His brother. Anybody else would be uncomfortable with the body language and what it suggested – intimidation, domination, whatever else you fancied calling it – but Reg was a Slytherin, a snake, and snakes are more deadly when they're threatened. He wouldn't know what to do if he was in a position of obvious power over his brother, probably back down, but from the bottom he could see his way clearly.

"What do you want me to say?" He asked, suddenly quite exhausted. It had been a long night, and an even longer day of tensions and theorising and plotting and re-plotting over and over. There seemed to be no end in sight. He'd come here to be safe, but was he really safe? Because it felt like he was running the damn gauntlet. First we'll tempt you with a beautiful woman but you must not touch her, then you'll have to face the matriarch and convince her of your worth, then you'll be locked up for hours and you must not go mental, and then you'll have to fight your only brother… Gods, what was next?

"How about, 'hello, brother mine, nice to see you after so long, how are you?'."

Regulus stifled a roll of his eyes. Sirius might hate Severus, but they were two peas in a pod when it came to infuriating him. "Hello, brother mine, nice to see you after so long, how are you?"

Ignoring the blatant sarcasm, Sirius strode across the room and hitched himself up on the desk opposite him, right where Luna had been sat before. He had to admit, the scenery was better when Luna was here. "Oh, just fine. You know, except for the whole war thing, worrying that my friends won't come home alive, worrying that Death Eaters will break in, worrying because my stupid fucking brother got himself wrapped up in Dark magic and I never know whether he's dead or alive." He growled out the last sentence, eyes gleaming. "But, yeah, pretty good, thanks."

"Well, I'm alive," Regulus announced unnecessarily, waving a hand over his body to illustrate the matter. "So that's one less thing to worry about."
"You're a stupid fucker, you know that?" Sirius shot back.

"I didn't, but since you're the second person to say so today, I'm starting to get the picture."

Sirius tapped his nails against the top of the desk agitatedly, glaring down at Regulus. Regulus stayed passive, avoiding looking Sirius directly in the eyes – that would just start a fight – but keeping his attention on the other man. He looked good, Reg noticed. Tired, but good. The space under his eyes was swollen and bruised like he'd been crying, and his hair was rumpled from sleep. His lips were pressed in a thin line, holding back the torrent of words no doubt swirling in his mind.

"Why did you come here, Regulus?" He asked finally. Reg let out a long breath, his hands digging in his cloak pocket. He produced the letter he'd received the morning before and smoothed it out, before handing it over. Sirius took it, eyeing the thing suspiciously.

"It's just a letter," Reg drawled, smirking a little. "A letter from Lucius Malfoy, yes, but the only danger it poses is the message inside and its disgustingly flowery prose. You might need a sick-bucket, not a doctor."

His brother shot him a venomous look, unfolding the parchment to inspect. Regulus knew the moment he'd found the hidden message because his eyebrows rose and eyes widened before they narrowed, and his mouth ticked up at the corner. "How very you that this would be the trigger that set you on the right track," Sirius murmured, his voice laced with morbid amusement. "They threaten your family, you join them, but gods forbid they threaten your House-Elf…"

Regulus snatched the letter back, scowling. "Don't take the piss, Sirius. I didn't have to show you."

"Hermione's going to love you," Sirius went on. "Good old Regulus. Forget blood purity, forget the muggle-born poison, House-Elves are my cause!" He stopped, realised something, and let out a bark of laughter. "Oh, Merlin, she already knows, doesn't she? That's why they're all so protective of you! Oh, this is priceless! Wait 'til I tell James."

The laughter continued for a few more minutes before Regulus had had enough. He shot to his feet, scowling. "Yes, alright, laugh it up why don't you. Regulus wants to save Kreacher, how pathetic," he imitated in an insulting voice. "Well, maybe he wouldn't mean so much to me, except that he raised me. He's been there for me all my life. He isn't a fair-weather friend, or, in your case, a fair-weather brother. He deserves my loyalty a whole lot more than you do!"

"Reg," Sirius said, but didn't get a chance to continue.

"Don't you Reg me, Sirius. You were always a dick to him, I didn't expect you to understand, but I certainly didn't expect you to do this. You've gotten what you wanted, haven't you? I'm committed to the Light, now. The Order, or whatever it is you're doing here. You don't have to worry. I'm not going to shame you anymore, not going to kill your little friends. You can leave now, forget I ever existed!"

He was panting, his blood rushing in his ears. For all that he worked so very hard to be the perfect heir, the perfect Slytherin, Reg had always had this temper. Hair-trigger, it wasn't so much dangerous as humiliating, as Reg was more likely to burst into tears on the heels of it than maim anyone. Aware that he was perilously close to crying now, he turned his back on Sirius, glaring hard at his trunk in the hope that it would force his tear-ducts into submission.

"Regulus…" Sirius pleaded, sounding a little broken. His amusement had died a quick death, and now he was feeling… well, Reg didn't know what he was feeling, but it very likely wasn't anything like regret. Sirius never admitted he was wrong, not to Regulus. And he didn't apologise, either.
"Look at me, Reg," Sirius cajoled, his steps coming closer. Reg's hand curled around the grip on his wand, causing Sirius to stop in his tracks. Regulus didn't think he'd hex him, wasn't really planning to, likely never would not even in a fit of temper, but knowing that Sirius thought he was capable of harming him, his own brother...

"Get out." Regulus snapped. He didn't care if he would be trapped in this damn room for the rest of his life, he wasn't spending one more second in Sirius's company.

"Reg… brother," Sirius tried, stopping when Regulus shook his head.

"You can't use the brother thing on me again, Sirius. No."

He could sense Sirius frowning. "Use it…? No, Reg, that's not what I'm doing. I'm your brother, and you're upset. You have to know that I care."

"For someone who professes to care so much, you've got a funny way of showing it. Go – your half-hour is up. I'm sure there's someone out there who actually wants to see you."

Silence reigned while Sirius seemed to struggle with himself. Reg didn't move, he knew how this would end. Instead he spent his time memorising the wallpaper pattern, counting the flowers that washed across it. Eventually, footsteps marched to the door and it was wrenched open, causing whoever was on the other side to give a little squeak. "Black?" The voice asked.

"Not now, Weasley," Sirius replied before he stomped away, his footsteps fading into silence. Regulus glanced over his shoulder to see that the redhead had appeared in the doorway and watched him with a calculating look on her face. He didn't tell her to sod off – his mistake.

"That looked like it went well," she said, hands on her hips. He didn't bless her with an answer, and she sighed. "I remember lying in my bed at Hogwarts once and wishing on a shooting star – I wished, 'please, please, please send me a tall, dark, handsome stranger to sweep me off my feet. He should be brooding, and complex, but passionate above all!' At his derisive look, she lifted her chin defiantly. "Hermione had just lent me Pride and Prejudice, don't you judge me."

She shrugged. "Anyway, you can guess how that worked out. I'm locked in a house with the worlds' supply of Byronic heroes, and far from being blessed with some hot, steamy, contemptuous sex, I've in fact been gifted with only a migraine for my troubles. You lot," she scowled at him again and pointed a thumb over her shoulder in the direction Sirius had left, "give 'be careful what you wish for' a whole new bloody meaning."

His manners lifted their head, shrugging off the chains he'd kept them under for the duration of his conversation with Sirius. If there was anything that could prod him into civility, it was a woman. "My apologies for your inconvenience," he said smoothly, dipping a slight bow. "If you'll show me to the exit, I will make myself scarce."

"Scarce?" she frowned, her mind trying to figure out where things had taken a turn. "I was only joking," she clarified. She apparently felt no compunction against rolling her eyes, for she did so frequently. "Besides, we need you here."

"But Sirius-"

"I'm sorry," she interrupted loudly, "but Sirius isn't in charge here."

"Who is?" He asked, tired of the games.

She grinned, tossing her hair over one shoulder and thrusting her chest out in glee. "Well, right now,
it's me." She held out a hand to him. "We're late for a meeting, which is unlucky, because you're sort of the guest of honour."

He stepped back involuntarily, his mind providing flashes of Death Eater revels, the phrase guest of honour bandied about with malicious laughs as they dragged some poor muggle to the floor, and then the blood and the horror that followed it…

"Oh, shite, I'm sorry," Ginny winced, seemingly recognising her error, though how she did Regulus couldn't guess. "Yeah, been there, done that. No-one's going to hurt you. Even if they wanted to – which they don't – they wouldn't dare take on Luna to get to you. She can be scary when she wants to be." She shook her head. "No, you're safe. We just want to inform you of a few things, take a vote on you living here, introduce you around, that sort of thing."

"Is it an Order meeting?" he wondered aloud. He didn't think it was, because Dumbledore led the Order and he was too power hungry to relinquish any sort of control to a woman Ginny's age, but then he was unpredictable.

"Oh, Circe, no," Ginny laughed. "Like we'd subject you to that. No. We're... well, I suppose we're the underground underground movement to take down ole' Voldy. Come on, we're late. I'll explain more on the way."

She stood just to one side of the door, waiting. He had a moment of split-decision – was this the best choice? When he'd come here, he was coming to a known entity, but now everything was on its head and he was confused and in the dark. He needed information, yes, but did he trust this girl enough to get it?

He'd have to. There wasn't really a choice. Tense and wishing he'd brought Severus so that he didn't feel so bloody outnumbered and alone, he followed Ginny out of the room.
Chapter Thirty-Three: Meetings & Structure

Chapter Summary

Regulus attends a group meeting.

Somewhere outside of reality, a steady pocket in the timestream had been occupied by three fretful sisters, for the purposes of correcting their egregious errors before any of their fellows became aware of their fallibility. Luckily for them, they had been planning their attack for nigh on a mortal century.

The pocket had been decorated as a temple from a bygone era, with high white marble walls, arching pillars of the same material, cushions and tables and chairs scattered around. In the centre of the room sat a table upon which there lay a now-defunct spindle, a basket of unspun wool, and two empty crystal caskets, older than time itself. On the far wall there hung a tapestry, a magnificent thing woven from every imaginable colour, glinting in the ambient light of the dying chandelier. The image was unclear, and would yet be for many millenia to come, but it was beautiful even for the confusion it would evoke in any admirer. At the far end the tapestry frayed, thousands upon thousands of threads hanging loose to trail upon the ground, waiting for action.

Two paced before the tapestry, her skirts swirling around her legs in a non-existent wind. As she watched, more twists were made, knots weaving themselves against her instructions. Her long, ebony fingers twisted together just below the sash of her gown, hidden from her sisters by her body. Still, she shook with anger and anxiety as she watched the tapestry work, taking on a life of its own despite the impossibility of that action. No, it wasn't weaving itself – it was being woven by a renegade mortal who'd tapped into powers beyond his comprehension.

Behind her, Three lay on a chaise, her bare feet brushing lightly against the cool marble floor of their sanctuary, the rest of her body arranged across the silver cushions with great care, her arm slung over the back in a deceptively relaxed movement, head propped up on the arm. Her face was turned towards Two, black eyes hooded as she watched her sister. Two raised her hand as if to tug on her hair, and then seemed to remember herself and buried it deep in the folds of her gown again, so violently the whole thing sagged to one side.

"Calm, sister," Three murmured softly, a warning.

Two spun around, her arms tight to her body, keeping herself under rigid control. "How is serenity to solve our problems?" she demanded.

"Serenity, no. Patience, however…” Three glanced over at the end of the tapestry, at the wreck which was all that remained where the three of them had ripped out a whole section in order to reweave it. Golden thread tied four displaced threads together, before they spread again to intersect others' lives. The four of them were irrevocably linked – Two had made certain of that – and the three of them believed that as long as the four of them followed their current path, they would destroy the renegade.

Their threads wove even as the sisters spoke, dancing and flitting between one another and those surrounding them. They dragged others closer, interlocking them into their web, clutching them so close to the original four that they might never escape. Then, Three looked farther up the Tapestry, at the thick black line which headed steadily towards them. In the black one's trail there lay many a
frayed thread, not so many as there had been before the reweave, but still hundreds. Hundreds lying dead in his wake, not something that Three usually shied away from but seemed unjust now, as their lives ending had no place in the grander scheme of things and were most certainly not planned. Some dozens more had been infected by his darkness, their threads turning grey with taint. "How am I to summon patience in such circumstances?" Two was demanding now, but Three wasn't listening.

"Something's about to change," Three murmured, her fingers reaching out to examine a bright, thick thread which had featured prominently in this section for many decades now. She frowned, tracing upwards, searching for the trigger while ignoring the burning that came into her hands lately when she touched the tapestry.

"Danger," One announced, shimmering into existence on Three's left, her hands buried deep in a white fur muff, a matching hat perched precariously on her head. She dropped the accessories to the floor, both disappearing before they hit the ground. "It bothers me to be locked here like a lesser being; I have been watching," she explained when Two and Three eyed her askance. "It is good that I have, for I saw the mistake they made." She reached out with a translucent hand and plucked at one of the shorter threads that hung from the end of the tapestry. "You see? Foolhardy of them, wasn't it?"

"Ah," Three nodded, following it back to where it had knotted in with their primary threads, a tiny streak of grey amongst the reds, yellows and purples. "Yes. How do we resolve this?"

"Sister, weren't you just advocating for patience?" Two said snidely. "Now you call for action?"

Three scowled. "He is just as dangerous as the Other. Our intervention is necessary."

"Is it?" Two pressed. "Or are you just bored?"

One pressed the palm of her hand against Two's shoulder in reprimand. "Stop. We mustn't fight, sisters. We chose our champions wisely, have trust in them. We are forewarned."

"Yes," Three jerked a hand toward the tapestry, "Sadly, they are not."

Hermione scanned the area, taking in the expressions of everybody present and generally getting a feel for the atmosphere. It looked like nothing so much as a social club, with armchairs and sofas scattered about, some people laid on the floor looking completely at leisure, others with books in their hands, just reading quietly. Lavender was spread out across the whole of a three-person sofa she'd levitated over a couple of hours ago, having gotten tired of her armchair perch and antsy to use magic while she wasn't so volatile. It was rose-pink with dark wooden legs, some French design, and Lavender had taken to it like it was her soulmate. She had her hair spread out over the arm, the rest of her body twisted into odd positions on the back and sides. She was reading a magazine she'd pilfered from Lily earlier, seemingly engrossed in an article detailing the possibilities of using Ashwinder Eggs in perfume to give them love-potion-esque properties.

Behind her, Luna crouched on a plush golden cushion, braiding tiny plaits into Lavender's hair behind her customary bright pink headband. Every now and again she'd give Lavender an instruction, and the other girl would follow it, rewarded by Luna's hand stroking through her hair to massage her scalp. Luna'd taken up that position the minute she'd come through the door, looking as upset as Luna ever did and still dressed in the nightgown she'd been wearing earlier. The two of them whispered quietly to one another, exchanging small smiles and laughs but never talking loud enough to be heard.

Lily had commandeered Lavender's old armchair, with James seated on the floor beneath her. Lily
read from a Muggle romance novel she'd brought with her, one hand absently playing in James's hair. Her calves were over his shoulder and locked on his chest, where James hugged them to him with his arm even as he turned to talk to Remus, who was perched on the arm of another two-person sofa, this one forest green and worn, with squishy cushions that could swallow a small cat if it was so silly as to land on them.

Hermione herself was trying to calm her nerves, pacing around their 'war table', checking her notes to make sure she'd not missed anything. She had faith in Regulus, emotionally, but intellectually she knew that this move was a risk. If Regulus wasn't yet the convert she thought he was – though the evidence worked in his favour on that one – then she'd be inviting a snake into their bosom, betraying the trust everybody had seen fit to vest in her.

She took a deep breath in through her nose, and let it out through her mouth slowly. She could do this. The only person who doubted her was her. Everybody else had faith. Luna, as if sensing her thoughts, turned to shoot her a smile. She returned it, if a little strained. She could do this. If only she knew how Sirius and Ginny's meeting had gone, so that she had a little heads-up. If only she knew how the meet between Regulus and Sirius had gone…

The door swung open to admit Sirius. All eyes turned to him immediately, some softer than others, Luna's surprisingly harsh. He took a glance around the room, his face seemingly carved out of stone. Taking a seat near the back, he shot a brief nod to James and Remus, then folded himself up and stared out the nearest window, neatly blocking the rest of them out.

Lavender turned her head to look at Hermione, the movement pulling her hair from Luna's hands. The other girl let out a miffed little huff, but Lavender ignored her. She was as curious as Hermione was about what had gone down, except for Lavender it was more of a detached curiosity, simply a matter of her wanting the latest news, whereas for Hermione it could make or break their entire operation. "Sirius?" Lily questioned, her voice soft. Sirius didn't respond in any way.

"Padfoot, mate," James said, straightening up. He sent Remus a significant look and the two of them rose, striding over to huddle with their friend. Sirius continued to stare out of the window as the two of them talked to him, nodding every now and again as they posed questions. The exchange was too quiet to hear, but the Black heir gradually relaxed, so it must have been helpful. She was glad for that – it hurt her to see him hurting, though they'd never been that close.

She busied herself with something else, anything else, to give them some semblance of privacy – taking a quick detour to smack Lavender upside the head when it became clear that she'd had the opposite idea. Ignoring her offended looks and Luna's quiet chuckling, she instead checked and re-checked the agenda she'd written up for the meeting, ensured that Luna's map was locked and folded away, and created duplicates of the notes she'd made to help her run the meeting with Lavender and Lily that afternoon.

The silence itself was conspicuous enough to grab Hermione's attention when Regulus walked in the room. She glanced up from her parchment to see him hovering in the doorway, looking small and somewhat lost, with Ginny on his arm grinning like the cat who'd got the cream. Luna stood from her place behind Lavender but didn't move forward – it wouldn't have seemed appropriate, the atmosphere seemed so tense that any sudden movement might shatter it.

Lily, remaining curled up in her armchair, peered over at Regulus with a cold sort of curiosity. She didn't like him, that much was certain, but she was an intellectual and if intellectuals liked to study people then Regulus would be a prize. His eyes were an odd mix of hard and soft, a thin layer of ice preventing you from reading his emotions but still allowing you to see their depth. Indeed, they were like hollows in his head, bearing the strain of his lifestyle in their darkness. His intelligence was
equally easily read, and she knew he was assessing the room just as much as everybody in it was assessing him.

The men in the corner with Sirius had stood, automatically shifting into semi-protective positions around their friend. What warmed Hermione's heart, also, was that Remus's eyes shot to her, too, as though it was a reflex to make sure she was safe in the face of a new threat. She battered down a blush as pleasure zipped through her at the thought.

Everybody was still, watching, waiting for something to happen. Ginny didn't drop Regulus's arm, which sent out a clear message to Lily and the Marauders – the girls were taking responsibility for him, he was under their protection, like it or lump it.

A piercing catcall suddenly ripped through the air, breaking the stand-off as everybody's heads whipped around. Lavender, never very good with tension, grinned from her perch on the couch where she had hopped up onto an arm for a better view. "Look at you," she called, shooting Regulus a salacious wink that had him blushing furiously. "Are all of the men in 1979 this beautiful? Because I wasn't looking, but I might be now."

"Lavender!" Hermione scolded over the sound of a few surprised snorts. She glanced back over to Regulus, who was staring at Lavender wide-eyed, like she was a new and disturbing species he'd never come across before. "Ignore her," she told him, waiting for him to turn his attention to her before giving him a warm smile. "She's incorrigible, but harmless."

"Oh, I don't know about that," Lavender murmured, forming a claw with one hand and pawing at the air, smirking in his direction. "I have been known to bite."

"She's also high as a kite – err, a hippogriff?" she corrected hastily when he just looked more bewildered. "She's on about fifty pain potions. Come in, sit down." Coming out from behind her table she moved towards him, Ginny tugging on his arm until he reached her. Gesturing towards the couch farthest from Sirius – and a good distance from Lavender, just in case she wasn't joking – she sat down and beckoned for him to join her.

"I'm Hermione, by the way," she held out a hand, which he shook somewhat awkwardly as he sank into the chair. Luna was behind him almost immediately, swapping places with Ginny who joined Lavender on her settee, allowing the blonde to drape her legs over her lap. "I know we met last night but I don't think we were properly introduced. That's Ginny, I'm sure you know, and the loud one is Lavender."

"Er- yes, hello. Regulus Black – you know that, though." Oh, his voice was so lovely, perfectly cultured and entirely reminiscent of the people Hermione had known as she'd grown up. She was smiling genuinely before she even realised that the other one had been forced. He glanced around again, catching Lily studiously ignoring him, James and Remus still stood in front of Sirius, who was watching the interaction with unfathomable eyes. He then turned back to Hermione. "Can I ask, what am I doing here?"

Hermione furrowed her brow. "You came here last night, don't you remember?" She shot a look at Luna, panicking slightly on the inside. Was he quite well? Had he hit his head?

"Yes, I remember that I came here with my own agenda," Regulus replied carefully, sounding out the words as he weighed them in his mind. "But it's quite clear that you lot want me for something else."

Luna made a quick movement, a strangled noise escaping her throat. Regulus studiously ignored her, but Hermione couldn't stop herself from looking up. Luna stared at her with wide eyes, telling her to
tread carefully. Well, of course she'd try to do that, but she wasn't the most delicate of people. Then again, at least she wasn't Lavender.

"You're right," Hermione nodded. Honesty was, after all, the best policy. "Though I do think that our interests are aligned, at least in this case."

Regulus shot her a sceptical look. "I haven't told you why I'm here."

Hermione froze for a split-second, a war raging in her head. It was so very difficult, talking like this, withholding information while sharing enough to earn his trust, all of the subtleties and double-talk that was required while discussing the matter with him because, regardless of how much she wanted to trust him and her knowledge of what had occurred in the future, it remained that they didn't know Regulus, he was a complete wild card. Who knew what might have happened to him if he hadn't died in his quest to retrieve the horcrux – he could have continued to be a Death Eater, he could have changed his mind about destroying the horcrux. And, while Luna obviously adored him and she trusted her judgement; sitting across from him now and staring into those eyes, feeling the darkness in his energy, she felt more and more doubts creep into her mind.

"Why don't you explain, then," Hermione asked, pitching her voice higher to grab everybody's attention, as if they hadn't been fully tuned in already. Lavender's magazine hit the floor with a soft thunk, apparently having slipped through her fingers while she was concentrating on Regulus so hard. "We'll need you to explain to the whole group in as much detail as you can, please, so that we are well informed when we come to take a vote."

"A vote?" Regulus asked, eyes still fixed on Hermione, oblivious to Luna looming behind him, her fingertips playing through the hair at his nape.

"Yes. Lily suggested we take a vote to decide whether we can afford to bring you in. It is, after all, our lives on the line if... well, you understand."

He nodded, and took another scan of the room. He was on edge, rather antsy, which made it all the more odd that he'd not notice Luna. Hermione met her eyes again in question; Luna smiled. The time they'd spent together in the study must have done more than simply bored them.

"Very well," Regulus jerked his head, words clipped neatly at the end. Honestly, how was his accent so very particular when Sirius's was, in contrast, so very gruff? "I suppose that's to be expected. I received a letter yesterday, at school." He fished the square out of his pocket and handed it to Hermione, who unfolded it and smoothed it out over her legs. Relatively short, it held only a few paragraphs in a nauseatingly flourished hand. The sign-off caught her eye – your friend, Lucius – and shocked her, rather. She'd known, of course, that Snape and Malfoy had been friends, and that Snape and Regulus had been friends, but she'd never joined the dots.

She looked back up at Regulus, who tucked a stray hair behind his ear and ducked his head. "It's not what it appears."

Fingering the edge of the page she shot him a smile. "That's only to be expected. I doubt an inquiry into your mother's health would cause you to abandon school."

"Indeed. When he says that, he's not referring to my mother, he's talking about Kreacher, my House-Elf. It's a warning, fairly standard, to let me know that the Dark Lord is interested in using them. Where he invites me to tea, that's informing me that I'll be called up soon..." He trailed off, catching sight of Hermione's raised brow. "What is it?"

"Oh, nothing -"
"She's surprised," Ginny said from behind her, causing Hermione to jump. She'd been reading the letter over Hermione's shoulder without her noticing, and now grinned at Regulus. "Merlin, I'm surprised. Who knew Lucius Malfoy had a heart?"

Hermione touched her fingers to Ginny's pale ones where they rested against the arm of the couch, and the other girl shot her a tight smile. The scars of Malfoy's intervention in her childhood ran deep, much deeper than she pretended, and Hermione knew that her grin took a lot of effort. Regulus had no such knowledge, his feathers all ruffled, righteous indignance in defence of his friend. "Lucius is… complex, but he's not a monster." His voice was quite snippy, reminding Hermione that he was only eighteen.

Personally, Hermione thought complex an extremely generous way to describe the aristocrat, but then she didn't know him very well. It was hard to be charitable towards someone who would sell his own son to the devil, attempt to kill children, then stand back and watch silently as you were tortured.

"I'm sure," Hermione said instead, managing to keep the dubious tone from her voice. "So, Mr. Malfoy sent you a letter warning you that you would be Called on soon, and that it would have something to do with your – with Kreacher."

"Yes. It was the final straw." His face was set defiantly, challenging them to pick up on that, to ask him why, why everything else – the killings, the torture – was just fine but harming his House-Elf was despicable. Everybody kept silent, but she could see those questions spinning through everybody else's mind no matter how much they tried to give him the benefit of the doubt. "I'd been having... doubts for a while, though I couldn't find an appropriate out. Not one that wouldn't get us killed."

"Why didn't you go to Dumbledore?" Hermione asked, curiosity swirling in her. He shot her a contemptuous look.

"Is that not what I have just done?"

She huffed, bristling against his sudden change – the look in his eyes, so familiar from her childhood, that pureblood superiority which grated against her very Muggle ideals of equality. "Not at all," she snapped. "You came to your brother, walking miles in the middle of the night with no certainty of a happy ending, rather than simply taking the stairs. If you'd wanted to go to Dumbledore, you would have. I may not be a Slytherin, Mr. Black, but do not mistake me for a fool."

He narrowed his eyes at her, Luna behind him looking tense. Ginny, behind Hermione, had also straightened up, her hand on her wand. Sure, they would give him the benefit of the doubt, but not at the cost of Hermione's protection, which warmed her deeply. Though if it came to a fight, Hermione wasn't entirely certain where Luna's loyalties would lie.

All of a sudden, satisfaction flit across his face. "So you aren't with the Order," he mused, his mouth ticking up. "Ginny said you weren't, but one cannot be too careful. The Headmaster is known for his tricks."

"Not in our crowd." Hermione replied easily. "You'd be hard pressed to find one person in the Order who'll admit outright to him being the manipulative old coot that he is."

"Yes, but there aren't any Slytherins in the Order, are there? At least – I don't know of any. And you Gryffindors tend to worship him." His nose twitched as though he smelled something bad, the idea was so deeply offensive to him. Still, in his eyes, there was a flicker of respect at her response, though she could tell he found her delivery gauche.
"You haven't answered the question," Hermione tilted her head in curiosity, attempting to steer the conversation back where she'd needed it to go. There was a list of questions on the table behind her, but she didn't want to disrupt the conversation long enough to get it, and she was doing well enough on her own. Or, she thought so, at least. The others might disagree, but they'd put the power in her hands and so she would run the show as she saw fit.

"Headmaster Dumbledore has a past, one which does not set him in good standing when it comes to seeking assistance, not for Dark wizards. Severus, alone -" both Ginny and Hermione rolled their eyes at the automatic derision that emanated from the Marauder's side of the room, though Lavender let out a little snort of her own, amused by their actions, "- has suffered the consequences of his bias more times than any child rightfully should." He studiously did not look at his brother, and Hermione knew what he was thinking of. Having one's own brother attempting to kill one's best friend must be a delicate situation.

"I did not join the Dark Lord because of a belief in his rhetoric. Like many others, I joined because there seemed to be no other place for me. It is hard to fight the monsters in the dark with no weaponry and no support, Miss…?"

"Granger," Hermione replied, waiting for the recognition to cross his face. There it was. He now knew she was a muggleborn. All of her instincts went on alert for any changes to his attitude, anything that might bely his claim that he didn't believe in Voldemort's 'rhetoric' – though, he hadn't exactly said he didn't, had he?

"Miss Granger," he repeated, with a slight acknowledging tilt of his head towards her. "My family was threatened. My friends were threatened. Severus had already joined the cause by the time I was called up and, well, what self-respecting person wouldn't follow their best friend into the dark when they were asked to? Of course, he was angry at me for it, but he understood." Regulus shrugged, the same fluid shrug as his brother. For all of their differences there were still the base similarities of siblings raised in the same environment – their inflections, their movements, their tempers. "I am a Dark wizard, that I won't deny, but Dark doesn't always mean evil and the one thing I cannot stomach is the rape, torture and murder of innocents." He paused, gazing off into the distance. "Well, that and being forced to do things I shouldn't like to do. Being boxed into a corner has a habit of making one lash out."

"I understand." Hermione did, actually. Despite being a Light witch and everything that came with that, there were times when her actions could be seen as grey, or even dark. The mysterious case of Umbridge and the Centaurs, for one. Keeping Skeeter in a jar, for another. Still, she drew the line at murder and mayhem – she didn't crush Skeeter, despite how much she'd wanted to. And she'd sent a message to the castle about Umbridge, too. She had a conscience. She could see how that might work for Regulus, too – his line might be further away, but it still existed.

"We still need a guarantee." She added, remembering what her goal here was. Talking to Regulus was surprisingly absorbing; he had such a different take on life to her, on morality. He was the antithesis of everything she'd been taught made a good wizard; he was slippery, cunning, unmistakably Dark, and yet she could feel his power and it wasn't a bad one. Powerful despite his own self-consciousness, a sort of seductive caress that held very little appeal to her while at the same time helping her understand what drew Luna in. "We can't have you suddenly decide one day to run back to Lord – He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. If you're in, you're in, and you can't run off just because you're insulted, or upset, or angry. And you have to understand this, too; while we're not the Order, if we're to give you our protection, we will require you to assist us in turn. There will still be times when you are asked to do something difficult, or distasteful. I need reassurance that you will not take off when that happens."
One of his perfectly formed eyebrows crept up on his head. "An Unbreakable Vow?" To give him credit, he didn't flinch at the idea.

Hermione did, though. She wasn't fond of having everybody look at her for guidance, never mind having them be magically beholden to her. "No. Not that."

"An oath," Ginny piped up again. Hermione shot her a confused look, and Ginny continued patiently, "A wand oath, to assure us of your… cooperation. It won't bind you, there is no death penalty, but it is a show of loyalty from Regulus and faith from you, Hermione. A nudge in the right direction whenever he may find himself torn, is all it is."

Hermione turned back to Regulus, an unspoken question on her face. He jerked another nod in response. "That's settled, then." Fiddling with her holster, she drew her wand into her palm. "Your hand, please, Regulus?"

"No."
"No."

The voice came from Lily, who was staring at Regulus's hand in Hermione's, stricken. It was hard to decipher the emotions behind the expression, but Lavender thought they might be something along the lines of 'protective' and then, the darker 'jealous'. Personally, Lavender thought she might just be objecting for the sake of objection. To remind everybody else that Hermione wasn't infallible, despite the general consensus on that matter being 'she might not be perfect, but she's a damn sight better than me'.

Or maybe that was just Lavender's personal opinion. It was difficult to tell, what with the odd habit other people had of not spitting out their feelings the second they have them.

Hermione's lips crimped together in what looked like exasperation as she turned, not releasing Regulus, to face the redhead. "Excuse me?" Hermione said, her words shot through with acid-tipped impatience. Ooh, Lavender thought with a smirk, you've done it now, Miss Priss.

Lily turned her head up, her chin jutting out defiantly. "You promised us a vote. If you do the… oath-thingy, whatever it is, that means he won't be able to leave, no matter what we decide. So, no."

Hermione stirred, her face darkening to thunderstorm levels of anger. Poor Regulus edged back a bit, looking rather concerned at the turn of events. Lavender liked that, almost as much as she liked the way he didn't take Lily's apparent hatred of him personally. Lesser men would have fallen at her feet and begged forgiveness for whatever perceived wrongs they had done her (she really was quite pretty). Ginny cut off whatever tirade was about to begin with a hand on Hermione's shoulder. "She's right," she murmured softly. "You gave your word."
Hermione's fingers tightened around Regulus's, and for a moment it looked like she wouldn't let go. And then, with a sigh, she released him and stood up, her hand clenched into a tight fist around her wand's handle. She shot another poisonous look at Lily, striding to the table piled high with documents. "A vote, then." She snapped out, then sucked in a deep breath. Her eyes fluttered closed for a moment and when she opened them and released the trapped air, she was serene. "A vote," she repeated in a much softer voice.

Lavender glanced around. She felt she could probably guess how this was going to go, and it was going to go not well. There were too many big personalities in this room, too much tension. It ratcheted up even more as she waited, raising the hairs on the back of her neck and setting the she-wolf in her head to growl-mode. Awareness and anticipation shivered over her skin, and she moved, almost without noticing, into a stance that would allow for more movement in a fight.

Over in the back of the room, Remus was fighting off a similar reaction. He'd gone stiff as a board, his lip curled up in a silent snarl, his muscles coiling even as he fought to keep them still. Neither James nor Sirius seemed aware of his struggle, but Lavender watched with interest. The more time she spent around him, the wiser she thought her decision to go with the flow in regards to her lycanthropy became. They were at war, they couldn't afford to waste their energy on pointless internal battles.

"The facts are as follows: Regulus Black is a Death Eater," Hermione began. She'd done something to her voice, and it sounded richer and more powerful than it ever had before. It was filled with a charisma Lavender wasn't aware she was capable of, a persuasive silken touch that convinced the speaker that she was right. It wasn't magic, nothing of the sort, it was the strength of her own convictions. Lavender wondered what it was like to feel that deeply about a specific cause, and worried about it, because Hermione had a habit of picking up causes. If she turned this level of influence on her House-Elf campaign, perhaps people would have paid attention.

"He is Marked, both on his skin and within his soul, so I won't deny that truth. He is also a Dark wizard, and the remnants of his magic cling to him." She took another of her breaths, and spun her gaze onto each of them, her odd spell dragging them in. "However – Dark does not always mean evil, and Regulus does have his good qualities. He's loyal, clever, and subscribes to a morality. He stands by his family, doesn't hold grudges."

Regulus blinked slowly, lazily, and Lavender could see him trying to absorb what was happening. His limbs were stiff even under Luna's soothing hands, a flicker of fear in the back of his eyes. He was waiting for the axe to fall, Lavender realised. He was refusing to be lulled into a false sense of security. Some of the people in this room were his enemies, his friends' enemies, and he never forgot that.

Hermione's calculating eyes fell on the Marauders and Lily, a challenge in them. "We know what he is capable of, but I understand if you don't wish to take our word for it. Operating on blind faith is very difficult when you've got something to lose. I do ask, however, that you trust us in this. Without giving too much away to those who are less well informed, I can say that I've seen Regulus make the ultimate sacrifice to end Lord- sorry, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, with all of the bravery of any Gryffindor, and the blind recklessness of one too."

James's eyes softened as he looked across at Regulus, whose eyes were wide. Apparently he didn't appreciate that description of himself. Too bad. Hermione was trying to wind a picture of empathy, and it was working. Even as James softened Hermione smirked, and muttered, "I thought you'd like that." Then she straightened again, her face blank. "I've made the decision to trust him, despite my many and varied misgivings. Will anybody else stand by me on this?"
Now, Lavender was a Pureblood. She wasn't really up on the concept of democracy. Wizarding Britain voted for their Minister, but the rest of the government was made up of hereditary positions and titles, department heads were given to political allies, and very few people had any real say in how the Ministry was run. The Browns themselves had a temporary seat on the Wizengamot, unelected. Her mother had never bothered to vote for Minister. The only voting she'd ever encountered in her life was in magazines, when they asked which skin cream was better. She would never consider herself politically savvy, nor did she want to be. Democracy, to her, seemed rather like a waste of resources, using up time and effort that could be better spent improving their society.

The same opinion, she extended to this farce. Hermione knew better than anyone in the room how best to defeat Lord Voldemort. She'd been in the centre of the war in the nineties, the best friend of the Boy Who Lived. Ginny had a window right into what remained of his nasty delinquent soul, too, from her possession. And Luna… well, Luna had a direct line to the Gods, or whatever it was that was going on in that freaky head of hers.

In contrast, the Marauders were temperamental pranksters as likely to think with their little head as their big one, proficient in magic but prone to flares of anger, whose only real advantage here was that they owned the house, and Lavender's friends seemed to drool on them quite frequently. And while Lavender did like Lily, it seemed ridiculous that she'd march into a situation she didn't properly understand that would have consequences she'd not even notice and demand that she have an equal say in all matters discussed.

Lavender was self-aware enough to admit that she didn't really have very much to offer here either, other than her knowledge of the future and her furry tendencies. This was, she thought, what qualified her the most to have these opinions, because if Hermione or Ginny did, they'd come off stuck-up or mean. Hermione probably even agreed with Lily on the whole 'democracy' thing, which, really, she was so damn nice and logical and accommodating about everything that it began to border on dangerous.

Or, not even began. It was dangerous. Here they sat, four against four, with Regulus in the middle. They needed Regulus. Lavender didn't really understand why, but even the little wolfie who lived in her head was telling her they needed him close, and little wolfie was clever. But because Hermione was so bloody moral, so bloody soft-hearted, they were dancing on a knife's edge of losing the kid forever!

She-wolf growled at that. She didn't like the idea that the men would try and take away Luna's mate – or, whatever, that was the message Lavender got. Her wolf was lonely, regardless of the fact that she'd only popped into being a month ago. She wanted her mate so much that she was projecting that ache onto everybody else. Though, Luna did look awfully attached to Black Jr.

"I will," Luna said, the first to respond after a lingering pause. She'd sat at Regulus's feet with her legs all tangled into some pretzel shape, head leaned back against his knee. The languorous look was somewhat ruined by the blue fire that blazed in her eyes as she looked around the room, her features deceptively relaxed. The way she was curled around his legs gave off the clear signal that he was hers, and approach at your own risk.

Her she-wolf was perfectly happy to abide by that rule.

Lavender kind of wanted to break it, just to see what happened.

Maybe she hadn't been put into Slytherin because her self-preservation button was somewhat jammed.

"Me, too." Ginny added, to nobody's surprise. She was stood, still, at the back of the couch.
Lavender wondered if there'd been a memo sent out that she'd not received, something about physical intimidation and standing around him. She kept her distance anyway because, well, first, she wasn't as completely insensitive as she appeared and had realised she made him uncomfortable, and second, in the physical intimidation charts, if ten was a dragon and one was a flobberworm, she probably hit negative numbers. She wore a bow in her hair, for Merlin's sake.

Still, she liked him. She liked him better than she liked his brother, in any case. Regulus didn't look at her like she was incurably dim.

She waved a hand in the air. "Count me in," she leered at him, just to see him squirm. She must not have put enough effort into it, because Luna didn't so much as blink.

Lily was still in her seat, lips pressed tightly shut. She didn't want to give her opinion until James had, that much was clear. Not for a lack of back-bone, but more because the only reason she'd called for a vote was so that Sirius could have a real say in the matter. James would follow Sirius's lead, and Lily would follow his. It was a reasonable idea, but, again – Lavender didn't have much time for democracy.

Plus, this was setting a precedent for the future, and Lavender didn't much fancy having to face the Disco Inquisition (complete with gross bell-bottoms and tight asymmetrically striped shirts; yes, Sirius Black, there are _are_ styles you can't bring off) if and when she wanted to bring home her theoretical troll lover.

She turned with everybody else as a tangible shift in awareness occurred. Sirius had stood up from his chair. He still looked worn, tired and morose, but his spine was straight and there was something of his characteristic arrogance on his features. He stared down his little brother from across the seemingly vast expanse that separated them, and there was a silence so complete Lavender was convinced that she was the only one breathing.

His head whipped around to glare at Hermione with fierce resentment. "If anything – _anything_ – happens to anybody in this house because of him, it's on you."

"Sirius," Lily breathed from her chair in shock. Somehow, Lavender didn't think it was shock that he'd speak to Hermione that way.

He rotated his shoulders once, twice, and breathed out until he seemed to collapse in on himself. For such a large man, he suddenly looked alarmingly delicate. He scrubbed a hand through his hair and faced his brother again, face etched with heart-breaking sorrow. "I don't think you'd hurt us, not purposefully," he said quietly, "but you wouldn't be the first to destroy their family out of ambition or neglect." Then, to the room at large, "I have nothing against Reg's presence. Our family problems are _family_ problems, not to do with the War effort."

Then he left, waving off James and Remus when they moved to go with him. Lily stretched her neck over the back of her chair to watch him go, before turning to her fiancé with a bemused expression. "What? I don't understand." she said to herself. Nobody explained anything.

"Are we done?" James asked, his jaw ticking. He remained stood halfway between the group and the door, turned slightly away. Remus was hovering behind him, his expression lost.

Hermione looked rather shaken herself, the blood in her face completely gone. "Er- yes?" she said finally, that commanding note from earlier having vanished. "Is he okay?"

"Does it matter to you?" Lily asked sharply. "I thought it was pretty clear who you preferred."
Another shadow crossed Hermione's face, and this time nobody bothered to hold her back. "Oh, go to Hell, Evans!" She spat. "I don't know where you get this idea that the world is all black and white, that emotions are so fragile they can turn on a frigging dime, but it's not bloody right. I don't owe you anything, and like Hell am I going to stand by while you pull your 'little girl lost' routine on me. What just happened, what I said – that wasn't personal. It doesn't mean I don't love Sirius, or I love him less, or any of that. This was about the bloody War; you know, the one that rages outside, the one where people are being tortured and dying every damn day, the one we came back to save you from?"

"Oi!" James shouted, his hackles visibly rising as he turned on Hermione in defence of his girlfriend. Lavender, seeing danger, was there before she even realised she'd decided to move. Remus was stood beside her, murmuring 'calm down, mate' at his friend, even as Lavender prepared to tear into James for threatening her friend.

"You think I don't understand the war?" Lily was screaming back. "I'm muggle-born! I grew up with the war! I've seen people killed, people dying. My friends and I have been targets since first year! I've seen things you couldn't comprehend, and yet you come into my house, tell me what to do, treating us like second-class citizens because 'oh, Hermione knows best!' Well, fuck you and the horse you rode in on, Hermione fucking Granger. You don't know shit."

Hermione, however, was on a roll. Her eyes flashing, the air cracking with power, she stood still in the one spot glaring at Lily, recognising even in her clouded state that moving would trigger something she wouldn't be able to take back. "Oh, I don't, do I?" she said in a deceptively light voice, cocking her head to one side, her eyes innocently wide. "I've not seen people killed, have I not? Never been tortured?" She wrenched up the sleeve that hid that gods-awful scar of hers, the one which could crawl into your soul and make you ache for days, make you consider every time you've thrown an unthinking slur at someone in anger, and turn that pain they felt back on you. Lavender always felt it like a punch in the gut, the memory of that one time in second year she and Parvati had laughed as Draco Malfoy had called Hermione a mudblood in the middle of the Charms corridor, so petty, simply because Hermione had told them to shut up the night before. The time in sixth year when she’d said the awful word herself, angry because Ron had left her to ask Hermione for help on his homework, precious, brilliant Hermione who had more Potions knowledge in her fingertip than Lavender had in her entire, vacuous head.

Lily's eyes flashed wide when she saw it. Hermione barely recognized the gesture, for she was snarling on. "I've lost friends in battle, so many of them. Seen small children taken down. Comforted their parents. I lost the man I loved in war, Ginny lost her brother, Luna was locked in a basement for months and months on end. Lavender lost her fucking flesh."

She shoved her sleeve back down so hard it yanked on the seams at her shoulder, and crossed her arms. Slowly, her power drew back into her, the air becoming less electrified. Her eyes still held a wealth of aggression, but her words were measured. "Listen to me, Lily Evans, and listen closely. I like you. I think you're a lovely person, with a kind heart and a brilliant mind. You were the mother of my best friend, and I do not discount that – he was a wonderful boy, and an even better man.

"However. I paid all of my debts to you when I gave my life up to protect him. I do not regret this choice, and I would – and am – doing it all again, and I'm certainly not here to hold it against you; I'm only pointing this out to ensure I'm making myself very, very clear." Her eyes sharpened into razors, drilling into Lily, who watched her closely, still prepared for a fight. Her face was purple against her red hair, which still allowed her to look fairly charming.

Ridiculous how some women could look good in any given situation.
Hermione was not done. Her voice was like whips, slashing through the air and landing with precision. "While, yes, you are all of those things, you are also a petty, self-absorbed little witch, and I do not have the time or the energy to pander to your whims. You have James for that. Remus and Sirius. Your other friends. I have, however, seen the long-term effects of being your obsequious little puppet and I can tell you with complete confidence that I will never, ever beg for your attention, or your forgiveness, for any action I might take that you may find issue with. While it would be nice if we were friends, because when you're not doing this you're genuinely wonderful, I have no gnawing urge to abase myself to you in order to be so.

"Now, I apologise most sincerely if our behaviour since we joined your household was something you found offensive. Please, feel free to discuss with me your issues and we shall see if we can come to an arrangement about it. Do be warned, though; if your issues stem from not being –" she cast about for a word, and Lavender grinned.

"Top bitch," she threw out there.

"Top bitch," Hermione said with a wry glance at Lavender. "If they stem from not being 'Top Bitch', then I reserve the right to ignore you. Are we done?"

"No, we are not-" James glared from behind his werewolf barricade. "Remus, move."

"Oh, get over yourself," Lavender scoffed. "It's about time she had a breakdown, it's just unfortunate that Lily was at the centre of it. Your woman is perfectly fine. Maybe her ego's a little bruised, but that's what you get when you've sheltered someone their whole life and they suddenly get exposed to the real world." She raised a wry eyebrow. "Honestly, she was asking for it. Who in their right mind challenges a mummy bear on her love for her cubs? She might as well have spat in a Hippogriff's face."

James turned his face to her, showing her the roiling anger that boiled there. She just shrugged. Like she said – self-preservation button severely on the blink.

"You won't hit a girl," she snapped. "Now take your pretty little girlfriend and fuck off to lick your wounds. We'll see you when we're all a bit calmer, won't we?"

She stepped back to allow him through. He sent a blistering glare at Hermione, but grabbed for Lily. Lily turned to Hermione and scowled. "I am not petty," she whined, sounding very much like Lavender herself when she was in a mood.

Hermione just cocked an eyebrow. "Yeah, sure. Tell that to Snape."

And then they were gone, the door slamming shut behind her. Hermione twisted around to face Remus, who once again looked rather abandoned. Lavender was so glad she'd gotten over that 'I want to be liked' phase, because Remus did look terribly torn. It couldn't be easy to choose between your mates and your Mate.

She snickered quietly at her own joke.

"I rather think you know where you're needed right now, Remus." Hermione said softly, with an apologetic smile. He looked at her, worrying his lip between his teeth. Gods, there was such a wealth of emotion there, it was a miracle either of them had time for anything else when their beasts were so damn busy pining. Was that what meeting your other half was like? If it was, she didn't really fancy it. Going googly-eyed over a lad stopped being acceptable two years ago.

"Sorry," he said finally, and with a nod to everybody else, followed in his friends' footsteps.
Hermione walked behind him to the door and warded it closed, before turning around to the rest of them, her arms crossed across her chest as though it was the only thing keeping her together. The consequences of wielding that sort of temper did not pass her by - already she seemed to crumple, regret staining her features. Ginny rushed over to fold her in her arms, and they clung to one another gratefully.

Lavender looked over at Luna, and their eyes locked. "Well."

"That went better than I expected." Luna replied guilelessly. She rocked her head back onto Regulus's knee, who had apparently been forgotten in the commotion, and smiled triumphantly up at him. "Welcome to the family."
Chapter Thirty-Five: Information Leak

Chapter Summary

The girls realize Regulus was not supposed to hear that.

It was quiet in the library, the other men having left. He wasn't sure how long it had been but he'd remained unobtrusive, in the background, respecting their moment of peace, while Hermione tried to work through what she'd just done. He was a patient person, but the hour was getting late and he was very tired, so eventually he spoke.

"'The one we came back to save you from'," Regulus said, his voice breaking through the silence. His eyes were fixed on Hermione, who was huddled on a chair with Ginny wrapped around her like a security blanket. She glanced up at his words, frowning.

"Excuse me?"

He tipped his head, one finger tapping out a beat on the arm of his chair. "That's what you said to Evans. The one we came back to save you from." There was a pause as horrified recognition flared in Hermione's eyes. "Came back from where?" He asked smoothly, his voice completely level.

Luna, who was still sat at his feet – which made him vaguely uncomfortable in a 'this is weirdly submissive' way, rather than a 'why is the stranger touching me' way, which in turn unnerved him even more – turned to lay her cheek on his thigh and gaze up at him. He determinedly shoved away all of the mental images that came with that tiny motion, instead cocking an eyebrow haughtily.

"Well?"

"1999," Luna hummed. "It was a good year. You'd have liked it. Voldemort was dead, the Wizengamot was being dismantled and the Snufflops were mating. They only mate once a decade, you know."

"1999," he repeated sceptically, turning his eyes to the other girls. He didn't know what a Snufflop was, but he doubted it was real. If he'd learned anything over the past day it was that Luna really was quite odd.

And then of course there was all that information he'd managed to glean from Hermione and Lily's argument. He couldn't count that – yet – on account of not understanding a word of it.

He would, though. Soon.

1999 seemed a bit far-fetched even for Luna. Time-travel simply didn't work that way. Not that it was a particular project of his, but he'd read the research. He knew of Eloise Mintumble and her ill-fated experiment. These girls were here, interacting with the world, controlling the world, and that simply wasn't possible with time-travel. Time was a loop, self-correcting. Things could only happen if they had already happened, which would make their entire trip pointless, even if they were from the future.

But some of the things they'd said…

No. He wasn't going there. He was a logical man, he couldn't subscribe to ludicrous ideas such as
The women didn't seem to get the message, however. Ginny was nodding solemnly, and Hermione was looking pained. Luna was the only one with any measure of composed nonchalance, playing with his fingertips.

He was quickly learning that he couldn't leave anything within touching distance of Luna if he wanted it to go unmolested.

"That's not possible," he said aloud, realising he hadn't actually responded to the statement, and it seemed that the others were formulating their attack around his opinion. Hermione eyed him for a long moment, before saying;

"You're right, of course. It's not possible." She smiled widely and stood up. "Guess that's us done, then. See you tomorrow-"

"Sit back down." Ginny said, rolling her eyes. She grabbed Hermione's hand in what looked like a painfully tight grip and yanked once on her arm until the other girl over-balanced and collapsed onto the sofa. "It's possible," this she addressed to Regulus. "We've done it. I don't know how or why, but we have, and we're here. We're not leaving, either. Our reality is gone, shattered to the wind, and all we can do now is make the best of the new one."

"Which is a real pity," Lavender piped up. She was still on the settee she'd occupied since the beginning of the meeting, her legs spread over the back, shoulders on the seat, head hanging off the edge. "Considering how I wasn't a werewolf in that one, and how in this one my fiancé is not even a foetus." Catching Ginny's acidic look, Lavender closed her eyes and sighed. "I was just making a point."

Ginny waved the interruption off, but Regulus continued to watch Lavender. She was an odd sort of girl, extraordinarily pretty if it weren't for the mangled flesh that coated her face, arms and legs. He could only assume it was present on her torso, too, but he couldn't see that in the clothes she was wearing. Her hair was bright gold, voluminous, tangled and braided, and she spoke with an eloquence that belied her actual words. Her personality, from what he'd seen, was crass and self-absorbed, though there was an almost Hufflepuff-ian sense of loyalty hidden beneath her Gryffindor aggression. While he'd seen and knew of the other three girls's assets; the ones which would, he supposed, make them perfect for an inter-time mission to save the world (if that was what this was – he still had his doubts) he couldn't quite see where this other girl fit.

She was a conundrum.

"We arrived just over a month ago," Ginny was saying. "It's a long story, but the gist of it is that this trip was entirely accidental. Well…" she glanced at Luna. "At least, we rather thought it was. Until… some things came to light.

"Anyway," Ginny shook her head as if to clear it. "We're from the future. And we're going to take down Voldemort – sorry," Ginny winced along with Regulus when a spike of pain radiated up from his Mark to vibrate down his spine. He couldn't hold back the glare. "I forget about … yeah."

Hermione huffed, still looking irritated that he was learning anything at all. Which was ridiculous, considering how the other inhabitants of the house must know much more than the spare information they were giving him, and all of them Gryffindors, a notoriously unreliable bunch. "We were told there was a weapon," Regulus informed them, thinking that perhaps a little quid-pro-quo would get them to loosen up. "About a month ago, He informed us that the Potters, and therefore the Order, had received a weapon from the Fates. I assume that's you."
Ignoring the scoffing coming from Hermione's corner, Luna nodded. "That's the theory we're running with," Ginny said. "It would explain our ability to change things, at the very least."

Regulus took a moment to contemplate this. It was a feasible explanation, he thought. All the more easy for him to subscribe to given his upbringing. Many pureblood families were into the 'Gods' thing, choosing a patron from one of the Pantheons and running with it. There were rituals and sacrifices and whole days and events given to the Gods, to the belief that they existed and interfered with mortal life. It wasn't so far off to suggest they might meddle in a war – though he didn't see why they would.

"He's immortal," Luna murmured. He glanced down to see her staring up at him, solemn as though she had heard his thoughts. "He's meddled in the Fates' realm. You must know how much the Fates abhor interference."

"In the stories they just curse people," he replied, his brow scrunched up in thought. "Whole generations or bloodlines. They don't actively displace whole groups of mortals through time."

"They do now," Luna said with finality, as though her words were law. The other girls were nodding. Regulus studied them all for a moment more – Hermione, tired and drawn after her earlier fight; Ginny, looking like she'd happily jump off the nearest cliff if only it would solve anything; Lavender, bored and sleepy; and Luna, curled up in the cradle of his legs, only half-connected to the world. Their speech patterns while they were explaining things to him were, upon reflection, discordant and exhausted. Hermione had kept her mouth shut because she was struggling to keep her eyes open, and Ginny's voice had borne all signs of strain. Lavender was seconds away from falling asleep, only keeping herself in the land of the living by fixing her pansy-purple eyes on him.

Many of his house would take this moment to prod and push, for people have fewer protections when they are tired, but he was in need of their protection. Manipulation, while effective in the moment, would only lead to distrust and distrust was the last thing he could afford right then. Besides, if he quit now while he was ahead, he could use the time to dissect the information he'd gleaned from their argument.

He put on a tired mask of his own, looking across at Hermione. "Can we pick this up tomorrow, please?" He asked in his most polite voice, his Guest voice. Her eyes flared open with relief, and she pushed up off of the sofa with a smile.

"Of course. Dorea had the elves set up a room for you – it'll be Lavender's old one, back near the boys."

"What?" Lavender suddenly came to life, her mouth falling open. "They've kicked me out of my room?"

Hermione twitched her nose as she shook her head, rolling her eyes while her back was to Lavender. "Not 'kicked you out', only moved you. Closer to us."

"Dorea says that while we're adults, she wasn't going to encourage any 'hanky-panky' between unmarried couples under her roof," Ginny snorted as she climbed to her own feet, a little wobbly. "Like we don't know that she knows that James and Lily get it on like rabbits."

"I don't appreciate the insinuation that I'm anything other than perfectly respectable," Lavender sniffed, in what Regulus thought was a fair impression of Hermione. "I'm not the one sniffing around wolf-boys genitalia. I'm not the one indulging in snark-tastic foreplay with the most notorious playboy of the generation. And I'm not the one attached to Mini-Black like a bloody limpet!"
"Ignore her," Ginny said, guiding Regulus from the room – admittedly, with Luna still attached firmly to his side, though he would reject the limpet analogy – and down the hall. "She's touchy when she's not getting laid."

"I heard that, Ginevra!"

"Would that Lavender's quick temper be our only problem," Hermione hummed from Luna's other side. "Sadly, there is much more to deal with. And it appears I've alienated half of our assets."

"They'll get over it," Ginny assured her, flipping her hair.

"I doubt that," Hermione murmured. "Lily Evans can hold a grudge like no other."

"Well, it's either forgive you or die horribly at the hand of Lord – well, you know. I think getting over herself is a small price to pay."

Hermione made a noncommittal noise and stopped before a door. She turned to Regulus with a smile. "Right, this is you. The family wing is two doors down, we're on the other side of the library. Ginny runs fitness sessions every morning at six, if you want to join in, otherwise you'll often find me in the library. The elves serve breakfast from half-seven onwards in the dining room, though they'll bring food to the Morning Room if you're so inclined."

"Almost like a hotel," he said, to lighten the mood.

Ginny grinned. "Yeah, a hotel, only everybody in it is the exact opposite of relaxed, the staff are super hostile, and there's no room-service." Cocking her head, she clarified, "unless you get furry once a month. In which case, Hermione's only too happy to play nurse-maid." Grinning and ignoring Hermione's aghast gasp, she leaned closer to whisper conspiratorially; "Werewolf fetish, you know? One too many romance novels when she was in school, I reckon."

"Ginny!" Hermione snapped, her face purple as she smacked the redhead on the arm. Regulus raised an eyebrow sardonically in her direction, to which, maturely, she stuck out her tongue. "Don't you start," she rolled her eyes with genuine affection, as if they'd been friends for years. The sight knocked him off guard for long enough for them to usher him into his room and slip back out of the door, Hermione grabbing Luna around the waist as she went. "Sleep well!" Hermione chimed.

"I'll be here for you at six!" Ginny added with a cheeky grin, and the door closed behind them.

Regulus looked around the room. Large, airy, bright with candlelight even though the sun was setting. The opposite of his room at home, but welcoming even for that. His trunk was set at the base of the bed, Castor chirping merrily at the sight of him from his perch on the wardrobe. Regulus fed him a treat through the bars, scolding himself for doing so even as it happened. He really did spoil that bird.

Well, he thought, glancing around, taking in the faint scent of female that lingered even after the deep cleaning, glancing at his view. This is my life now.

He pulled up the cuff of his robes to examine the Mark on his arm. Still there. Still bold. Still entirely, disgustingly Dark. He could feel it infecting his blood, his flesh, his magic. He was tied to the Dark Lord through blood and bone, and the only way to rid himself of the obligation was to kill him.

He could do that. Not alone, but with a team, maybe. Even if that team was querulous, ill-suited to one another, with undertones of disdain and resentment. A gang of misfits, half of whom travelled accidentally back through time to take on the responsibility, the other half adopted in like scruffy strays. Two werewolves. Two muggleborns. One girl who was quite clearly a Weasley. Hardly the
crack team he'd have chosen, were he in charge, but oddly, they fit.

He wondered what Severus was doing right then. Whether he was safe, sleeping, or whether he'd been Called. He wondered about his mother, who was hardly much of anything anymore but whom he still loved. He wondered about Kreacher, who would no doubt be alerted any minute now to his disappearance.

One finger traced the outline of the Mark. Looking at it was hard but he forced himself to, had been doing that every night for the last few months. A way of facing up to his mistakes, to the ones he's made and the ones he'll continue making. A symbol of where he'd gone wrong and exactly how far he'd go to make it right.

It might not be too bad, here. Sirius… well. They'd patch things up or they wouldn't. The women were nice, if a bit intimidating. They had faith in him to do what was right.

He couldn't remember the last time someone had had faith in him.

It felt nice.

He wouldn't let them down.
Voldemort is one crazy sonova - but then, we all knew that.

It was nearing dawn, the world outside of the house still living in peaceful slumber, the darkness like a comforting blanket. Grimmauld Place shivered and groaned, but stood proud even after the onslaught it had experienced when the Dark Wizards had smashed their way through its formidable wards. There was a sense that the visitors were unwelcome, seeming to vibrate from the very walls, but it was not malicious nor dangerous, so they ignored it.

They were congregated in the Lady's Parlour at the front of the house, where the Dark Lord himself had brought them. The lady of the house was there, curled in an armchair. She didn't flinch when they'd broken in, only staring at them dolefully for the wilful destruction of her property. Walburga Black didn't do much at all, nowadays, sick as she was. Nobody knew which had come first, the insanity or the deterioration, but all were aware that Walburga was worse than useless now.

That did not prevent the Dark Lord from questioning her, however.

"What do you mean, 'he's gone'?" Lord Voldemort asked in a silky tone. Walburga turned her head to look at him, a maniacal smile fitted onto her face, a face so stiff from years of disapproval that the flesh stretched grotesquely over her skin; a horror. Where had her looks gone, Severus idly wondered. What happened to the proud woman he'd met seven years ago, so handsome and strong?

"Gone." She reiterated, her voice trembling with supressed… something. "Gone, gone, gone. They're all gone." She threw her head back, cackling to the ceiling. "The house of Black, desolate and crumbling. There's only Kreacher and I left now!"

The Dark Lord let out a hiss of anger. "Where?"

"Who knows?" Walburga's dim, lifeless eyes rolled in their sockets. She was dying. It was clear from the pallor of her skin, the loss of weight; she sat before them skeleton-like, flesh dripping off of her bones as though it were melting away before their very eyes. "Killed, probably. That – that – Dumbledore. He always hated us."

"He – is – not – dead," The Dark Lord gritted out, glaring at Walburga with disgust. They had been contemporaries, Severus remembered idly. She was only a year older than him. And yet, here Walburga sat, shrivelling to dust, while Riddle was more beautiful and powerful than ever. It was odd how things worked out. "I would know if he were dead."

"So would I," she replied, nodding sagely, bone grating against bone disturbing the stillness of the air. "And he is dead. Gone. I can feel it, here." She lay a spindly hand against one withered breast, the rings she wore obscene in their sumptuous wealth when she held them against her desiccated body.

"HE IS NOT DEAD!" The Dark Lord roared, leaning close to the woman so that his spittle flecked her face. She did not flinch, gazing obstinately into his face – or what would have been obstinate, were she not so terribly vague. "He is hiding from me," he whispered, his face only an inch from
hers, their noses almost touching. "You will tell me where he is, hag, before I burn your precious house down around your ears!"

Another tinny laugh was released from her mouth, her eyes fixed on his chin as though it were awfully interesting. Severus fought down a chill. She was insane – entirely and completely. There was nothing of the once-formidable matriarch left in this shell, only a spirit with similar mannerisms and a familiar face. Empty, he thought her, and tried to battle back the nausea she elicited. He was here because the Dark Lord wished him to see what would happen if he were found to be harbouring Regulus. His job was to stand back and watch, never moving, no matter what he deigned to do to Walburga. She was his third visit this day – Severus had come first, as Regulus's closest friend. The Dark Lord had kindly fixed him up after his own 'questioning' in order to allow him to observe the other interrogations. Then, he had visited Lucius, who now laid at home overcoming the effects of the Dark Lord's Cruciatius.

It didn't look like Walburga Black would be surviving this encounter.

"My sons are dead," she murmured softly. "All gone."

The Dark Lord did not give her another opportunity to defy him.

As they turned to admire the flames from the park opposite the house, the Dark Lord spoke again. "We must return to Malfoy Manor," he drawled, a smirk playing at his lips when screams began to emerge from the neighbouring muggle residences.

Bellatrix Lestrange, stood at the front of the group, conducting the flames with her wand, scowled fiercely. "Why, my Lord?" Her voice, Severus could have told her, was not compliant enough. Not trusting enough. He would not take it in the spirit it was meant – curiosity, to the Dark Lord, was defiance.

Predictably, He reached out and grabbed a hunk of her hair, yanking backwards until she stumbled and fell into the mud at his feet. "You think to question me?" his voice remained level, almost pleasant.

"No, my Lord, I apologise, my Lord," Bellatrix grovelled, not moving from the mud, her eyes peering up at the Dark Lord with slavish devotion. Severus, not wishing to watch her display, turned his attention to the fire. 12 Grimmauld Place had been consumed, a darkened husk remaining as the flames spread through neighbouring houses in search of fuel. He tried not to consider Walburga Black, her corpse the human version of the house, blackened and singed, the fire feeding off of her flesh until all that was left was her diminutive frame.

Severus often wondered at exactly which point he became disenchanted with the Dark Lord's cause. Perhaps it had been then, as he watched the Ancient and Most Noble House of Black turn to ashes, while Lord Voldemort watched on in apparent victory. There had been near a thousand years of history kept in that house. If the walls could talk, they would have told stories of the many great wizards who had lived in those halls, Dark and Light alike. Artefacts the like of which Voldemort, with his lack of true magical and cultural knowledge, would never appreciate but many scholars would kill for had been destroyed in that fire. The pureblood tradition, so proudly upheld by members of the House of Black, had been destroyed.

How could one follow a leader who toes the line of the pureblood dichotomy by day while destroying their history, their people, their culture and their beliefs by night?

If many of his followers had not been insane, they also would have left at the first sign of any such atrocity. Sadly, there were too many like Bellatrix – fanatics who would lay their wands at the feet of
any man who would allow their bloodlust to slip its leash.

"You are forgiven, my pet." the Dark Lord hummed, still admiring his handiwork.

His lips tipped up at the corner as he tilted his face to the sky, revelling in the screams of muggles as they flooded the streets, mothers carrying newborns into the cold, dark night and watching their worlds burn down, university students gawping in half-drunk, half-hungover shock as their flats are gutted by that most volatile of elements.

The Dark Lord took all of this in with an air of complete satisfaction, his fingers flicking as he locked the occasional door and watched the fallout from it as the people trapped inside trampled one another to reach windows which blew outwards in lethal shards of glass from the heat.

Eventually, he turned back to them all, the line which consisted of Severus, Mulciber and Rabastan Lestrange, stood silently watching the destruction. Hiding their true thoughts, their screaming rejection of the scene they had just witnessed, behind thick Occlumentic walls. "To Malfoy Manor," he repeated, a terrifying grin spread over a face that seemed even brighter than it had before all of the killing, as though the premature taking of someone's life rejuvenated him somehow. "I find myself in need of a House-Elf."
Chapter Thirty-Seven: Shovel Talk

Chapter Summary

Ginny and Lavender are protective in their own very special way.

Chapter Notes

Hi!
This chapter is one of my favourites, I think because it's so lighthearted and brisk - Lavender's a chaotic hurricane of passive-aggression at the best of times, so Ginny pointing her in a direction could only ever be either massively destructive or super entertaining.
Here's to Ginny and Lavender's delightful little friendship (and to the hope that in the future I can write something with Lavender and Pansy in it because I think they'd be great together).
Enjoy!
Love, Eli x

Hermione sat on the doorstep outside of the kitchen exit, her bare feet buried deep in the grass, staring off into the middle distance. It was early – much too early for her to be out – and cold, a biting chill she barely noticed other than to think it seemed suitable, what with her mood being so dark, hung in the air. There was nothing much to see in the inky blackness but for the silhouette of the woods, the occasional mouse rustling through the grass, and an owl or two flying overhead. Occasionally some small creature would wander up to her and carry out it's own investigation; a toad whose resting place she'd usurped, a wild Niffler that left disappointed when it realised she wore no jewellery, and a vole. The latest woodland detective had taken a shine to her and stayed, not that she noticed. It was a hedgehog, which played in the grass three feet away, contracting and releasing itself from its spiky little ball, turning beady eyes on Hermione occasionally as if the show were for her singular benefit. It wriggled its little paws in the air, flipping onto its front as she stared into the night. It let out a miniscule huff, toddling on its tiny feet over to gaze up into her face.

"Hmm," she sighed deeply, startling the tiny creature such that it constricted itself once more into a spiky ball. She shifted on her legs, head cupped in her palms.

It had been two days since The Confrontation, and she was in a near-perpetual state of self-doubt. She wouldn't say she regretted the things she'd said, per-se, only the way she'd said them. Often she'd find herself going over and over the scene in her head, finding places where she could have tweaked it to be less offensive, or more sympathetic. She'd not wanted to alienate the whole lot of the Potter clan, after all, only make Lily understand. But she'd definitely gone about it the wrong way, so badly that perhaps she'd broken a bond which would prove necessary over the coming weeks – and that failure would be on her head.

Then she'd realise what she was doing and get angry at herself all over again, going on long rants in her head about how it was the right thing to do, and she shouldn't be so hard on herself, and how
Lily would get over it. Until she remembered Lily's propensity for holding grudges over the silliest of slights. It was a vicious cycle, spinning on and on, up to the point that she no longer realised she was doing it. Just that morning she'd been laid awake in bed, going over it again, half-conscious, until Lavender had slammed into the room and attempted to smother her with a pillow.

Apparently, she'd been talking aloud. She hadn't noticed.

It was eating her up, though. The atmosphere in the Manor had been strained for the past few days, understandably, with Lily tactlessly vacating rooms as one of them entered, or glaring at Hermione across the dinner table. James at her side, the stalwart protector, casting Hermione as the Wicked Witch, out to destroy his pretty bride. She shouldn't let it get to her, but she couldn't help it. She'd always had the failing that she wants to be liked, while at the same time refused to compromise her personality in order to be so.

If only she could fix this, because it wasn't just affecting her, not anymore. Lily had stopped training with Ginny, and Ginny was less perky because of it. Sirius was still distancing himself from Regulus, which in turn infuriated Luna, and while she couldn't take all the credit for that she certainly hadn't helped it with her little tirade. And Remus, whom she'd only kissed hours before the Confrontation, was now avoiding her eye, standing staunchly with his Marauders.

Only Lavender remained untouched by the drama, and Hermione thought maybe it was because she didn't care enough to let it get to her. She still swanned around like she owned the place, all sarcastic commentary and witty banter. The only sign of stress she showed was that her clothes had gotten progressively louder in colour, as if she was purposefully drawing their attention to her, to the point where Hermione was pretty sure she brightened them up with a spell every time she left a room. Sunshine yellows and hot-pinks were her current favourites, the yellow so glaring as to blind them, the pink verging on Umbridge-ey. She was making a point, but nobody seemed sure what it was.

There was a clattering behind her, bringing her back to the present as the door opened. Her little hedgehog pal bolted with a squeak, lunging for the woodland which encroached ever more on the Potter land. There were footsteps and a pair of trainers appeared in Hermione's peripheral, lime-green with black stripes. Ginny dropped herself to the steps beside her with a huff, folding pale arms across her chest to battle the pre-dawn chill.

Together, they watched the sun edge over the horizon, spilling gold light across the acreage, gilding the trees. Hermione lifted her face to the light, allowing the delicate heat to warm her, the magnificence of the sunrise to make her feel small; insignificant. Helping her to feel balanced, despite the chaos that surrounded her. Her worries didn't feel nearly so large when she faced the sun in all of its glory, watched the cycle of life spin. The only sounds for a little while were those of the birds waking up, the nocturnal creatures scurrying to bed, and each other's breathing. After a while, though, Ginny spoke.

"You're moping," she said gently, and Hermione scoffed half-heartedly.

"We're at war. There's no time for moping," she rebuffed, but in her head recognized that that was exactly what she had been doing. It was foolish of her, too. They had too much to be getting on with to be concerned with petty arguments. That view only worked, however, if the other side thought so too. They didn't, and Hermione certainly wasn't going to be the one to remind them of their obligations. She'd been the bad guy enough for one week.

For a year.

They fell silent again, listening to the birds whistling in the trees, feeling a soft breeze pick up and play against their skin. Ginny's fingers crept over and linked through Hermione's, and she felt like
she could let go. Release some of her burden. So she did.

Ginny’s arms were out to catch her, and they huddled together, listening to the elves work in the kitchen behind them. She didn't cry, she'd done enough of that, but it was cathartic in its own way. Just Ginny's indomitable strength surrounding her, her friendship assured, no matter what ridiculous things Hermione might do or say. There was no pressure here. Only two girls, who knew each other inside-out, liking what they saw.

Tense.

That was how Ginny would describe the past two days. It was as though the string that connected them all together had been stretched to breaking point, and they were all just waiting for it to snap.

Hermione had lived in a state of constant self-flagellation – her default setting appearing to be miserable and pessimistic, as she repeatedly beat herself up with imaginary consequences to the (completely necessary, if you asked Ginny) actions she'd taken. She barely spoke, buried herself in research, stayed away from meals until she was too hungry to refrain. Ginny was certain she'd barely slept, too – her brain was too busy to allow it, and Lavender, with her enhanced hearing and her bedroom next to Hermione, was getting frustrated herself.

The whole situation was, to her mind, ridiculously unfair. After all, all Hermione ever seemed to do was try and make life better, easier, for the rest of them. She wore the weight of the world on her shoulders, and it had been so long since she'd looked completely relaxed (if you ignored the two hours of happiness she'd had just before the meeting, which Ginny did, otherwise she might get very angry that her best friend had been so close to happiness only to be dragged back once again and who knows who she might end up taking it out on).

She was not the only person to see it as a problem, either. After watching Hermione run herself ragged at school for seven years in service to two men who never seemed to appreciate her, Lavender seemed to gather just enough team spirit at the sight of her back-slide that she was angry too. And after two days of watching the girl wear herself to the bone from the sidelines, she and Lavender had decided to do something about it.

So, after depositing Hermione back in her room, Ginny picked up Lavender (who was awake and ready, a miracle in itself) and together they headed to the family wing, to beard the lion in his den.

Ginny liked teaming up with Lavender, she really did. Even in school when, admittedly, Lavender had been a bit of an airhead, Ginny had liked her. When Ron had announced their engagement Ginny had been overjoyed – and had to admit to a twinge of satisfaction, too, that her brother wouldn't be marrying Hermione. It wasn't that she had anything against Hermione, no, not at all, only that a blind person could see that they wouldn't make a good couple, especially with Hermione so uninterested in romance, as she had been back then. Ron would touch her and she'd bear it, rather than welcome it. The sight was painful enough to watch, she couldn't fathom how awful being in the relationship must have been.

Lavender, on the other hand, would have made a perfect sister-in-law. She was the exact opposite of Hermione, which in Ginny's mind made her perfect for Ron – loud where Hermione was quiet, self-absorbed where Hermione was selfless, inept where Hermione was intelligent. She was the sort of
wife Ron could look after, rather than feel emasculated by, and that was what he had needed. Plus, she'd loved him. She still did. It was often visible in her eyes, the ghost of her love for Ron, the one thing preventing her from fully connecting to this time and these people. Despite her loudness and laughter, she still suffered. Ginny loved her ever more each time she saw it.

The two girls had originally grown closer over the course of their respective engagements, to the point that her mum had been pushing for a double wedding, except that Lavender railed against that idea ("Are you insane, Mrs. Weasley? Why in the name of all the Gods would I want to share my special day?!") and Ginny had watched her grow, toughen and soften at the same time, to become the person she was today. And while they had their moments of contention, as two women so similar were wont to do, it was still nice to come together on these rare occasions as a team. It felt like old times, with her balancing Lavender's forthright, quasi-violent nature with the patience that came of having six brothers, and Lavender moderating Ginny's often hair-trigger temper.

Lavender knocked, because Ginny didn't trust herself not to punch through the door, so mad she still was from comforting a broken Hermione. It was a good knock, polite but demanding, and Ginny wondered whether she'd put some magic into it or if it was just the force of her personality echoing through her movements. There was a shuffling inside and it swung open, revealing a scowling James Potter.

"Morning, Bambi," Lavender chirped pleasantly, while Ginny stuck her foot in the door, forseeing his attempt to slam it in their faces. "Mind if we chat?"

"What do you want?" he demanded, not inviting them in. Ginny was inclined to think that was rude. They, after all, were not the ones who tore his girlfriend into little bite-size pieces.

"World peace, chocolate-chip pancakes and the entire works of Madonna on CD, but that's not going to happen, so I'll accept you telling your girlfriend to take that stick out of her arse instead." Lavender flashed him a charming smile. "You know, since you asked."

His face flushed purple with anger in mere seconds, and he tried to slam the door again. Ginny fought back a wince as her foot got smashed into the doorframe. Painful. "Will you stop that?"

"Nobody told you to put your foot there!" James replied indignantly. "I'm not going to do what you want, so you might as well leave."

"Look, Potter," Ginny tried, her voice level, face serious. "I know she's your fiancée, and you love her, but even you can admit that some of what Hermione said was true – oh, no, you don't!" she shoved her shoulder against the door to keep it open, glaring at James when he went to push it forward. "Just – fucking – hear us out!" The door slammed against the wall and James scowled at them, but released it in order to step back. She took his lack of further attempts to chuck them out as acquiescence, which was probably pushing it a bit, but worked for her purposes so she wasn't going to let the opportunity get past her.

Ginny took a deep breath to moderate her voice before she continued. "You love her, I get that. You're a man. All that testosterone in your head makes you go all fuzzy about women who look at you for protection – I understand. But what you need to get is that while you want to keep her all innocent and lily-white, it's not possible. Her naivete will get her, or one of us, killed."

He jerked his chin forward. "Hermione was out of line, saying the things she did."

Sighing, she let herself slump a little. "She could have said it better, yes. She shouldn't have shouted. She understands that – don't look at me like that, she does. She's a fucking person, James Potter, with
emotions. She's not just your bloody – never mind, we're not here about that.” More deep breaths, while James looked supremely sceptical.

"There's nothing wrong with Lily the way she is." James said with the stubbornness of a man who had loved a woman through her formative years. Ginny could place a bet that he completely overlooked the faults in her personality. She could have handed him hard evidence of Lily's bitchier side and he'd still think she was perfect, as long as it didn't happen in front of him. "Her uncompromising goodness is part of what makes her Lily."

"We're not saying she has to go Dark," Ginny huffed. "We're just saying she needs to open her eyes. See what's actually in the world rather than what she has decided is out there."

"I don't understand what you mean. Lily's not blind. She knows there are bad people out there.” James said. There was, to his credit, a hint of perplexity in the midst of his now wavering certainty.

Ginny folded her arms, resisting the urge to tap her foot in impatience. "Yes, bad people. Evil people. That's not the problem. The problem is that she sees it all as a five-year-old might, without any nuance or consideration of context. She sees the Big Bad Wolf and the Wicked Witch of the West, not people. There's a difference – people can make mistakes. People can do bad things and still be good, and a bad person can do good things. Abraxas Malfoy – a known Death Eater – donates ludicrous amounts of money to the Children's Wing at St. Mungo's. Augusta Longbottom, the pinnacle of light magic, once almost killed a person in a duel when her anger overcame her. Lily doesn't get that, which is a problem."

"Lily doesn't-"

"Alright, Antlers; here's how it is," Lavender interrupted with the air of someone making a great personal sacrifice. "You love Lily. Well, goodie for you. We love Hermione. She's done more for us than you know and she always deals with the consequences, and let's face it, they're mostly bad. I have no problem telling you that I hate her, sometimes."

"How is this supposed to help?” Ginny hissed, but Lavender waved her off.

"The thing about Hermione, though, is that she's loyal as a dog, and has no sense of self-preservation. She's sacrificed herself over and over on the altar of the Greater Good, no matter the cost. Most of her time in school was spent in seclusion because people shunned her for the choices she made – good choices, choices that saved people's lives. Hermione is everything that is good in the world, no matter how bossy she is, or how stuck-up she can seem."

Lavender flipped her hair back over one shoulder, the mass of gold bouncing about, pink, purple and blue ribbons dancing through the air as it moved. Her eyes became hard, and there was no trace of Lavender's usual bonhomie in her face as she spoke next.

"I won't let you and your girlfriend destroy her, James Potter, just because you don't want to face the truth. It's not happening. What you need to do – that's right, need – is get over this. Move on. Because while I might not like Hermione – hell, I might hate her – I also love her, and I will protect her to my last breath. If anybody deserves your forgiveness, it is her."

She stopped, and cocked her head. "Plus, you know, she's totally in love with Lupin, and he's ignoring her because you and Lily are in a mood, and it's breaking her heart. Fix that, too, while you're at it. There's a good lad."

Nodding at him once, she turned around and swept from the room. Ginny followed on her heels, stifling her urge to take a look back, to see the look on James's face. She wasn't sure if he'd gotten the
message, whether what they'd said would help or hinder their case, but going back certainly wouldn't help. The door slammed shut behind them, Ginny feeling the rush of air against her back when it happened. Lavender seemed unbothered. "I've never met a bunch of people so arrogant in my entire life," she mused as they moved along to their next destination, effectively breaking the tension.

"I know. Doesn't it just feel like home?" Ginny deadpanned.

Lavender shot her a scathing look, but otherwise ignored the comment. "I begin to understand why Snape hated them all so much."

Ginny snorted a startled laugh. "Merlin, there's something I never thought I'd hear you say. Sympathising with Snape? Who are you and what have you done with Lavender?"

She smirked out of the corner of her mouth. "Oh, I know. I mean, I've started to wonder that myself. It's crazy - last night I even dreamed of him."

"Snape? As in, Professor Severus Snape?" She edged closer, lowering her voice to a whisper out of some insane fear that Hermione might be lurking around the corner, prepared and waiting with a hex on her lips in the event that someone insults a teacher. "Greasy dungeon bat, Severus Snape?"

"Yeah. Don't pull that face, it wasn't anything sexy. Get your mind out of the gutter." Lavender paused, shaking her head with a laugh as Ginny snapped her mouth shut. "I dreamed he was telling me my potion was 'passable'. That's it. The extent of the dream. Do you think I'm going mad?"

"Don't ask me," Ginny shrugged, still a bit dazed. "I never liked Divination, it was always your strong suit. Bit of a disappointing dream, though. If your subconscious is going to subject you to him, it could have at least been something genuinely scarring. Dodgy detentions, trading sexual favours for grades, and what-not."

"Oh – what is wrong with you?" Lavender demanded, slapping Ginny on the shoulder as she stopped walking.

"You're right," she nodded. "The sexual favours thing – entirely unrealistic. Nobody would believe that you had managed to scrape an 'A' in Potions, never mind an 'O'. Talk about wanting to get caught." She couldn't help a wink, even as Lavender smacked her again, face aghast.

"You're a dirty girl, Ginevra Weasley! Do you kiss your mother with that mouth?"

Ginny shrugged. "Well, no. Not anymore."

Lavender blushed a little, the sight so shocking it stopped Ginny in her tracks. "Merlin, I'm sorry," she said. "Sometimes I forget that I'm not the only one who left things behind – people, you know?"

"That's alright," she leaned her forehead against Lavender's shoulder for a second, letting herself relax and release the grief that sometimes crept up on her with a suddenness it froze her. She didn't cry – she wasn't a big crier, not since fifth year – but she wobbled for a brief moment, inhaling Lavender's unique scent of cut flowers and petrichor. There was a layer of something vaguely canine beneath it, but far from off-putting, it rather reminded Ginny of softness, safety and calm. It seemed inordinately comforting, for a girl who wasn't generally disposed to comfort. "Carry on, anyway. You had this entirely appropriate dream about ol' Snapey, and you wanted to know what it meant, whether you were going mad. Which, if you ask me, seems like a bit of an overreaction to a dream, but to each their own."

Lavender dithered for a moment, and Ginny could tell she was caught between wanting to talk about herself – which was always her first instinct, if Ginny was honest – and the unfamiliar urge to maybe
hug Ginny, or offer some sort of reassurance. Ginny was not at all in the mood for that, so she moved just out of reach and waved her hand in an encouraging manner, raising an eyebrow with impatience. Lavender rolled her eyes, but continued her tale. "I looked it up in my copy of *The Dream Oracle*. It didn't help, useless waste of sodding paper. Apparently I'm craving approval from a hostile source, or whatever. Load of rubbish. I've never craved anything from Snape and that's not likely to change. I mean, come on. With that nose?"

"You know he's around somewhere," Ginny said, thinking. "Hermione wants to recruit him."

"That foul-tempered old git? What for?"

"He's very clever," Ginny hummed in consideration. "Astute. Brilliant with potions, and he always was a great spy."

"Great. Let's roll out the welcome mat, shall we? At this rate there won't be room for my troll."

"What-" She blinked in confusion, only to be brushed off. Which was fine, considering she needed the moment to rid her mind of the truly disturbing image her troll comment had generated.

"Nothing. Here we are." She knocked again, leaning against the wood. "I don't know why we bother knocking, he knows we're here. Maybe he even understands why I was so mad when he was loitering around outside of my room, now. Do you, Remus? Do you understand?"

"Nobody understands you, Lavender." Ginny said, then turned to the door. "Maybe he's not in."

"I'm in," came a voice from behind the door. "I'm just…"

"He's naked," Lavender said in a stage whisper. "I can hear him putting on his boxers. Or maybe they're briefs. Or, he could be a long-john person. How exotic."

"Why are we friends?" Ginny asked the ceiling with harassed patience. "Why me?"

The door cracked open and Remus's eyes appeared there, puffy from sleep. A sliver of sparsely-haired bare flesh was visible, from his neck, down his chest, to finish in a sea of plaid material. Lavender let out a squeal of glee. "Boxers!" she whooped. "I was so right."

"Can I help you?" Remus asked wearily. Ginny gave him a soft smile because, well, she always did like Remus, and teenage Remus was just so adorable she kind of wanted to nibble on him. Plus, she was giddy in the aftermath of a wave of relief so profound she'd nearly fallen over at the realization that while, yes, she could just eat him all up; the sight of his bare chest – nice though it was – gave her nothing beyond the vaguest stirrings of lust in her lady-parts. She certainly had no overwhelming urge to lick him all over – thank the merciful gods. That would have been a complication too far. "Er – Ginny?"

She looked up to find him blushing, giving her a strange look. Oh, Merlin, she'd been staring at his chest. Lavender was smirking her bloody face off. "Oh bloody – sorry, Remus." She winced. "Not that you're not… lovely… but I wasn't – it wasn't sexual."

"...Thanks?" he said, a confused sort of frown crossing his face. "Sorry, did you need something?"

"Yes," Lavender drawled, still smirking at Ginny in an infuriatingly knowing way. "Can we chat, Remus, please?"

He blinked, scrubbing a hand through his hair. "What – now? You and me? In here?"
She widened her eyes until there was a ring of pure white surrounding her lilac irises, in some bastardised display of innocence. "Why, no, Mister Lupin. I certainly cannot enter your chambers alone. What of my reputation?" She fluttered a hand in front of her face and then scowled. "Yes, in there, idiot. Don't worry, Ginny's here, she'll guard your virtue." Then she winked at Ginny, a sly expression crossing her face. "Well, from me, anyway. It seems she might have designs on that lovely body of yours herself, and I certainly aren't strong enough to hold her back."

Remus stood back with a sigh, eyeing Lavender warily. Most people seemed to do that, Ginny realised, eye Lavender like she was something extremely dangerous. Not one to let an opportunity pass, however, she let it go and entered the room through the gap he'd created, turning in the space to look back at Remus. He hadn't closed the door, she noticed, which was probably for the best.

He looked – well she didn't want to say bad, but bad was correct. His hair was a mess, his eyes were bruised with lack of sleep, and his skin was so pale his veins stood out like delicate blue spiderwebs. "Are you alright?" Lavender asked, apparently on the same page as Ginny, though Ginny took more immediate action by dragging him – gently, or something close to that – to a chair and pushing him down. She and Lavender wore identical masks of concern.

"I'm fine," he grumbled, pushing Ginny's hands away when she went to check his face. "What did you need?"

"I'm no healer, but you don't look fine to me," Ginny muttered, withdrawing her hands to fold them across her chest.

Remus shrugged, avoiding her eyes. "I feel fine. Just tired. Haven't slept enough, apparently."

Ginny scrunched her eyes in suspicion until he was nothing but a blur of beige and yellow. He shrugged, raked his hand through his hair again, and shook his head. "Fine," Ginny let up. "We were here to give you The Talk."

"The Talk?" Remus repeated, in the same tone Ginny had used, the one where you could hear the capital letters. "What 'Talk'?"

"You know, The Talk," Lavender said. "The one where we promise to kill you if you hurt our friend."  

"I get that normally it would be the brother or the father that gives it, but I think we're plenty scary enough – even though we have wombs and shit." Ginny added. "Hermione's our best friend, we just wanted to let you know that. She's under our protection."

"I don't -" Remus blinked hard. "Nothing's going on between me and Hermione."

"Well not right now, no." Lavender groaned. "You're still on the 'Poor Lily' train. But you did kiss her, and I'm thinking that you'll probably do it again at some point, so in the event that that happens, you should be aware of the consequences."

"Namely, our combined wrath should you cause our Hermione to shed so much as a single tear through your idiocy." Ginny added, with a smile for the splash of colour that had risen in his cheeks. They'd dialled it down a bit – down from the already pretty placid speech they'd intended to give, in deference to Hermione's genuine love for the boy and her own warmth towards the man he became – but the point still came across pretty well, she reckoned.

"We're not telling you to go and fix it up now, or to scoop her up and make a run for the sunset," Ginny then clarified, seeing a flash of cornered panic in his eyes. "We're just saying… if you don't
intend to keep her, don't string her along. It's not fair."

"I'd never do that!" Remus protested, unaware of the untruth. Well, that wasn't entirely fair, she supposed. He had been thirty-something when he'd married poor Tonks, decades separate from the cute kid in front of her. And she couldn't help but think of him as a kid, despite his towering height, because he was pouting slightly and his hair was so mussed, making him look a worn fifteen rather than nearly twenty.

"Good," Ginny said. "Then don't."

There was a knock at the door and Remus jerked, his face colouring guiltily. "Moony?" Sirius's voice called through the gap. It was ridiculous, Ginny mused, that she could be stood in a bedroom with a topless Remus Lupin and have no response, but hearing his sodding voice through a slab of wood the thickness of her wrists set all of her nerves to fizzing, and she suddenly became some lovesick puppy. "You in here?" he asked again, prodding the door open, and stopping in his tracks at the sight of Remus in a chair with the two of them stood over him. Sirius's eyebrows crept up his forehead. "Should I come back later?" he asked, voice infused with gallons of suggestion. Ginny scowled reflexively.

"No, we're just leaving." She snapped, wrapping her hand around Lavender's arm. "Come on, Lav."

"So soon?" Sirius taunted, but his eyes were much too empty for the girls to take any real offense. Ginny was too busy running to safety, anyway.

"Glad to see you looking better, Black," Lavender threw back gaily as they passed the Black heir in the doorway. "The slapped-arse look never did suit."

And then they were around the corner and both men were out of sight, and Ginny was glaring at Lavender. "'Slapped-arse?" She sputtered indignantly. "Do you ever stop?"

"Well there were those three days where I was unconscious, and then the next one where I didn't talk to anyone at all…" She flashed a grin that showed all of her teeth, making it vaguely threatening. "I'm making up for it now, though, don't you worry."

"You're lucky you've never gotten yourself killed," Ginny muttered as they sloped towards the library, where they'd promised to meet Hermione.

"Oh, people have tried." Lavender replied easily. "As it turns out, I'm not that easy to kill. Who would have guessed?"

Ginny was saved from having to reply by the appearance of a silver light in the hall, blocking their path. It coalesced into the form of a hare, only where usually it would be prancing about in a manner similar to its creator, this time it sat solemnly on the floor, it's massive ears drooped over its glowing silver eyes.

"What…" Lavender began, only to fall silent when Ginny shushed her. That, in itself, was a miracle that illustrated the suddenly dark atmosphere in the hall.

"Come quick," The ghostly hare squeaked in Luna's airy voice. "Grimmauld – it's gone."
Chapter Thirty-Eight: Crispy Dead Mom

Chapter Summary

Potter Manor's Inhabitants react to the news of Voldemort's latest rampage.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hermione had known something was wrong. It was a feeling in the pit of her stomach, an anxious tightening as she watched the clouds disperse and reform with apparent spontaneity in the sky. She was no centaur to read the heavens, but the feeling of foreboding never left her. Reading hadn't squashed it, meditation hadn't coaxed it into the light; it was just there. Lurking.

The patronus, in hindsight, was a relief to receive. It meant knowledge, it meant action. They could do something, something other than sit in the same chairs rereading the same books, reorganizing the same information as they waited for each other to get stronger, faster, for their allies to gather, for better ideas to occur, for the right time. They couldn't, after all, destroy the Horcruxes until Voldemort had hidden them all. They couldn't recruit members until their own ranks were stabilised. They couldn't fight until they were in a position to do so.

They just needed a sign. Something to clue them in on Voldemort's movements.

And, as she often did, Luna provided exactly what they needed at the exact time they needed it.

She caught up with Lavender and Ginny as they all followed the glowing, spectral hare through the house and towards one of the disused rooms in the East Wing. Next to the morning room, it had originally been a smoking room for the men of the family to gather in, but had been shut off as the numbers whittled down to three. Dorea had handed Hermione the key after their blow-up in the library, when she'd asked for a place to repurpose into a study. Untouched for decades until they'd taken ownership, it boasted all of the original furniture and a faint whiff of smoke in the air. One large, impressive window took up the back wall, though it was covered in heavy red-and-black drapery that blocked out any light, so stiff with age that after a few tugs they'd given it up as a bad job and instead put a note on one of their lists to ask an elf to replace them. Dark panels covered the walls and floor, with the original burgundy rug still spread across the centre of the room though that, also, was near-black with dust. A few cleaning spells had fixed it up enough to be just about habitable, though none of them would want to be in there for more than a few hours at a time – hence why Hermione had been in the library.

Pushing open the door now, they could see that it was still in the exact same state they'd left it in, except for one glaring irregularity – the House-Elf keening on the rug.

Regulus was sat with the tiny creature in his lap, rubbing at its back on autopilot, it seemed, because his face was bloodless and his eyes stared unseeing into the distance. Luna was curled up in the juncture of an armchair and the wall, her expression panicked, her hair falling around her like a silken cape. As they entered the room she looked up, and experienced relief so intense they could almost feel it themselves, despite the many feet separating them.

Hermione took in the scene in one sweeping glance and felt her spine straighten. Automatically, the
moroseness she'd been wallowing in the past few days was shoved to the back of her mind in favour
of taking charge of the situation in her usual logical, no-nonsense fashion. The patronus had said that
Grimmauld was gone; surely that meant 12 Grimmauld Place? Which would make the elf clutching
at Regulus Kreacher, the last Black family house-elf.

As if on cue, he threw back his head and let out an ear-splitting wail, followed up by a cry of
'Mistress!'

His grief was plain and cutting. Regulus's face crumpled, even as he tried to calm his faithful servant,
muttering platitudes with flimsy conviction. Luna made an aborted gesture to move towards them,
before huddling further into her corner, face stricken. Hermione made a judgement call based on the
information at hand, and indicated that Ginny should grab Luna and bring her over to the group.
Ginny helped the blonde to her feet and stumble over to them, and the four girls retreated to the
hallway, closing the door behind them to block out the noise.

"What's happening?"

Luna grimaced, unsteadily swaying on her feet. "So much death… so much…"

"Luna!" Hermione said sharply, ducking down to look her directly in the eyes. "We need to know
what happened."

Luna's eyes flitted around in her head before settling on Hermione. Clarity returned by inches until
she nodded, pushing up off Ginny to stand at her full height. "Voldemort attacked Grimmauld Place
this morning," she said, pushing a fall of blonde hair from her face. "Kreacher says he was looking
for Regulus, and he was angry, so angry. Mrs. Black refused to give him information – or, just
couldn't, that wasn't very clear – and he tortured her, before burning the house down around her."

She gazed up at Hermione, her eyes glazed with tears. "He burned her alive, Hermione. Her, the
house, the elves… Kreacher was only able to escape because Regulus had given him an order – he
must always return to Regulus, no matter how bad the situation. Always. But the other elves…" She
let out a choked sob. "And the muggles, oh, gods, the muggles…"

"Shit," Hermione swore, hearing Ginny echo the sentiment with equal vehemence. "This is a
problem."

"What do we do?" Ginny asked, rubbing one hand in comforting circles on Luna's back. "I mean –
we didn't exactly plan for this."

"No, but we should have." Hermione rubbed the bridge of her nose, where pressure was mounting
rapidly. She was dancing on the brink of self-pity, about to collapse into the depths. A deep breath
pushed it back a little, but it remained on the horizon, watching her, waiting for its chance.
"Bloody Hell."

They pushed the door back open to see Regulus talking to Kreacher in whispers. The elf was sat on
the floor, hands bunched in his towel-smock, staring up at Regulus with pure adoration. Regulus's
voice was firm but gentle, compassionate, as he soothed the creature. He glanced up when they came
back in, his eyes carrying a dead quality, too cold around the edges. "Someone needs to tell Sirius,"
was his startling opening line. "He never liked her, but… he has a right to know."

"I'll tell Dorea," Ginny said in a quiet voice. "He'll take it better from her." She slipped away.

Regulus turned back to Kreacher, mumbling quietly again. Luna slipped into the room and sat beside
him, one tiny hand pressed against his shoulder in support, and he leaned into the comfort even
though he showed no outward signs of noticing it. Hermione sighed and looked at Lavender, who was watching them with a pained look on her face. She turned back to the despairing Regulus.

"Shit," she said again, under her breath.

Kreacher, hysterical though he was, calmed down enough in the following hours to agree to transport Regulus to the wreck that was what remained of Grimmauld Place. Sirius demanded to accompany him, and nobody argued. The two men looked entirely worn down by events, and nobody had the heart to deny them, not when they looked so heartbroken. Even Sirius, who had hated his mother, felt pain at the thought of her death, and the destruction of their family home.

They gathered in the entrance hall; Sirius, Regulus, Luna, James and Remus. Kreacher glowered at the boys under heavy lids, but made no verbal complaints, even holding his hand out to the older Black son when it came time to leave. Hermione, Lily and Ginny stood in a group nearby with Dorea and Charlus, both of whom had spent the morning comforting Sirius after the news had come through. A temporary truce had been enacted in respect for the Blacks' loss.

"Be careful," Dorea warned them again, as they prepared to leave. "They'll probably be watching the house, knowing you'll return to it."

"We're prepared," James assured his mum with a faint smile. "They won't be expecting so many of us."

"All the same, I think I've lost enough of my family for the day," Dorea said in a slightly subdued voice, and nodded to Lily, who stepped forward with a silvery bundle in her arms. "I'd be much more comfortable if Regulus would go under the cloak."

James raised his eyebrows as Lily handed the mass into his arms, but didn't argue. Regulus, after all, was the one the Death Eaters were looking for. Sure, the rest of them would make a nice bonus, but if they'd been put there to wait for Regulus it wasn't likely they'd take any chances by attacking their group. Not if it meant going against orders.

Or, they could be exceedingly stupid, and attack them anyway. In that case, as he'd told his mum, they were prepared. All of them were armed with their wands in wrist-sheaths, and wore dark clothing so that they might blend into the night. Hermione had handed them each a vial of her tweaked Bulgeye Potion, which could be thrown at an enemy rather than ingested, and would 'distract them' for at least a half-hour. It sounded vaguely dark, so James hadn't pressed for more details – what it did and how remained a mystery to him. Plausible deniability, and all that. Luna had packed a hand-bag full of odd-shaped objects, the purposes of which she remained infuriatingly cryptic about, except to say they would prove 'useful'. Again, he had felt it best not to press.

The Marauders had been unsure about bringing Luna on for the ride – she was one of their 'secret weapons', after all, despite their personal relationships being on the rocks, and it seemed premature to bring her into the light. The girls had argued back that she looked too much like her mother for that to be a problem, and it was a visit to a burn-site, not an Order meeting. They most certainly weren't sending them off alone, because 'the Gods know what sort of trouble you idiots will get into' (Lily). Still, in deference to the men's concerns, Luna had braided her distinctive hair up and around her head, then covered it in a hat – or at least, it seemed to function like a hat. James wasn't particularly brilliant at matters pertaining to fashion; to him it looked like a bonnet hastily made of woven ribbons, and judging by the proud look on Lavender's face when it had been revealed, he was pretty close to the truth.

Doodads and thingamajigs all packed, the five of them cloaked up and said their goodbyes. Regulus
knelt down to give Regulus a muttered order to return to the Manor straight away and wait to be called back, and then they were all linking arms and being sucked away.

They landed in the park across the street, hidden in the shadows cast by the trees that lined the border. It was nearly ten at night, the day given away to planning this excursion, and so the only light available was that of the moon, which cast a grey tint over the land. The streetlamps, they knew, had been blown out by the fire, the wires that hooked them into the electricity source fried by the heat. Lamps all across this street and the next three were out, meaning there was no ambient light to orient themselves with. This was fine by James, as his animagus form gave him exemplary night vision, but he worried for Luna.

They spread out, with Sirius in the centre and Regulus under the cloak. James took point, and Remus took the back. Luna slipped away, as was the plan – she hoped to find the Death Eaters on watch and take them out quietly, with minimum fuss, so that Regulus and Sirius didn't have anything more to stress about while they examined the house's remains.

James didn't like being out in the open like this. He hated it. The hairs on the back of his neck were stood on end and he could swear they were being watched, though there was no evidence. The park was nearly entirely deserted, the gates chained closed, a swing in the distance shifting in the breeze sending discordant notes into the air. Luna shivered into invisibility a few feet away as she cast a Disillusionment Charm, and he lost track of her. The only other sounds were the soft breaths of his friends and the crackling of grass underfoot.

The row of houses loomed out of the darkness, the moon behind limning them with a silvery edge. The street was deserted, and it was easy to see why.

The fire had spread through at least six houses before it had been stopped by the authorities, feeding on the flammable stuffing in the ancient furniture and bursting through wooden doors as if they were never there at all. The road was scattered with shiny, sparkling shards of glass, like a diamante carpet. Number 12, the centre of the fire, had burned down to cinders. All that remained of the roof were a few beams of blackened wood, the walls having collapsed beneath it, allowing the moon to shine straight through the destruction. The door remained in place, stood proud at the top of stone steps, but the walls surrounding it had crumbled until there was only five-feet, perhaps less, of standing brick left of what once had been at least four-storeys high. The back of the house had fared better, but only just, and now had the look of a dollhouse, where you could see straight through to the back wall. Some of the windows there were untouched, except for warping and soot, and on the third floor a single bed sat unscathed by a window, scraps of paper dangling from its four-poster frame.

Behind him he heard a strangled noise, and then a dash of heat as someone brushed past him to hurry up the steps. The cloak distorted the air for a moment where Regulus stood, but just as soon it was gone. Sirius, still stood at James's back, was breathing hard. James, himself, was fighting back the urge to vomit.

The fire department and crime-scene crew had obviously spent the day here, with plenty of witnesses. The debris of a days' work was strewn across the scene, ribbons planted at various points on the floor, visible through the windows. Temporary scaffolding had been erected at Number 18, where the second floor appeared on the brink of collapse. By the edges of the park coffee cups and crisp packets rolled through the ditch. None of this affected Number 12, which would be invisible to the muggle authorities, but no doubt the Aurors would visit as soon as the coast was clear. The untouched houses on either side had the look of places that had been summarily abandoned, Number 6 with their door left open, gently swaying back and forth with the wind. All over, windows were open to the night, freeing the residences of the scent of smoke, though it wouldn't do very much.
From their arrival in the park, the stench of ash had laid heavy on James's tongue.

"Sirius?" Remus said softly, the sound almost offensive in the hush of the night. James glanced back to see that Remus had moved up alongside their friend, who just stared at the wreck of his childhood home, his face blank and empty. "Sirius, are you alright?"

He shook his head suddenly. "Yeah," he croaked, then cleared his throat. "Yeah, Moony. I'm good." He looked around at the rest of the street then, as if it had only just appeared. "Gods, who could do such a thing?"

"We know who did it, Pads," James said slowly, his voice curiously flat. "There's no mystery here."

"But how," Sirius asked, sounding lost. "So much…"

There was a fluttering as something moved around in the house, and they all three whipped around to face in that direction. Regulus suddenly appeared in front of them, his face bleached white, eyes haunted. "Gods, she's still there…" he said faintly, before turning to his right and promptly throwing up on the pavement.

Sirius pushed past James to join his brother, pausing for a moment before reaching out to pull his hair back with one hand and rub between his shoulder blades with the other. James stepped back beside Remus to give them privacy. The werewolf's mouth was fit into a grim line. "They're right, you know," he murmered. James shot him a questioning glance, and Remus shook his head. "The girls. We… well, we don't understand this. Not any of this. The scope of evil…" Remus gestured to Regulus. "That isn't the reaction of a man who could torture and kill innocent people, Prongs."

James kept quiet. It was hardly the time to be debating politics or personal offense, anyway. That could wait until they were all back home, in the safety of their Manor. Sirius was now talking quietly to Regulus, offering him a handkerchief. Regulus took it gratefully and cleaned himself up, then straightened to his full height and turned to Sirius. James couldn't hear what they were saying, they made their comments deliberately low, though watching was emotional enough. Regulus watching Sirius with shielded eyes; Sirius's shoulders sagging; Regulus's face crumpling as he tried to talk, gesturing at the house. Sirius finally grasped at his brother's shoulders and dragged him into his chest, and the two of them shared a bone-crushing hug.

Of course, as was par for the course in their lives, someone had to ruin it.

The atmosphere had changed suddenly, the very air stilling in prelude to violence. Goosebumps pricked up on the back of James's arms, and Remus stiffened, turning to his right, staring into the shadows of Number 10.

"Well, well. In't this touching," a slimy voice crept out of the darkness. James whipped his wand out of his sheath and into his hand, pointing it into the shadows, but he couldn't know if his target was right. There was a movement, and he shifted further to the left, Remus taking the other side. Sirius and Regulus had frozen.

A man materialised on the street half-way between James and Sirius, his wand held loosely at his side. Dark hair tangled around his ears, dark eyes staring out of bruised sockets. His mouth, wide and thin, was crooked into a leer as he stared at Sirius and Regulus. James didn't recognise him, couldn't match his face to any of the Wanted posters.

"He said you wun't go back to yer family," the bloke hissed, lips curling back to reveal crooked yellow teeth loosely attached to his gums. "I knew be'er, o'course. Lil' Regulus Black, always running home to mummy…"
"Back off, mate," Sirius snapped with his usual haughtiness, wand trained steadily on the approaching Death Eater. He tried to shove Regulus behind him, but he wasn't having that, instead moving out of reach and facing the threat with his wand held between two slender fingers.

"Evening, Wilkes," Regulus said amicably, over Sirius's frustrated rumble.

"Black," Wilkes growled, stopping in his tracks, as though the idea of carrying out a civilised conversation was so completely beyond him it had shocked him into stillness.

"I must admit, I'm somewhat surprised to see you out and about so soon," Regulus mused, his perfectly articulated accent curling around the words, making them sound both perfectly pleasant and vaguely threatening. James shifted further, putting more space between him and Remus so that he could circle behind the older wizard. It was four against one; perfectly good odds, if not for the fact that Luna was still out there with who knew how many more. If Wilkes got off a call for help before they took him down they could find themselves in very hot water. "Considering how very upset the Dark Lord was with you the last time we met."

"What you on about?" Wilkes snorted, then spit on the floor. "I'm not 'ere to chat."

"How sad. Such a failing in our society – whatever happened to the days when one could have a perfectly civil duel, rather than getting ambushed in the street? There's no honour in your approach." Regulus tutted quietly, each click of the tongue winding the Death Eater tighter. "Really, what would your father say?"

"Kill the blood traitor is what 'e'd say!" Wilkes spat, then raised his wand. "O' course, I'll get a prize if I bring you back alive…"

"I suppose you'll have to do that, then, won't you?" Regulus sneered. "Never could think for yourself."

Wilkes snarled, taking a step forward as he exclaimed, "Think for me'self? I'll – fuckin' – Avada-"

"Stupefy!"

"Incarcerous!"

"Expelliarmus!"

"Stupefy!"

James straightened up from his casting position to see Sirius and Regulus both blinking at him over the prone form of Wilkes. "We should have just done that in the first place," he commented wryly, running his eyes over the now Stunned, bound and disarmed Death Eater. "He wasn't that stimulating a conversationalist."

Regulus smirked. "He's always had that problem. If he ever has more than two thoughts to rub together at one time, I'll eat my hat." Remus snorted a laugh from James's side.

"So what are we doing with him?" Sirius asked, a disgusted expression on his face. He reached out and poked the man with a toe, relaxing when he moaned. He met James's raised eyebrow with a shrug. "I thought we might have accidentally killed him."

James shook his head, smiling. "I guess we should drop him off at the Ministry. They'll sort him out."
"Won't they question how we got him there?" Regulus was mimicking his brother in that he wore an 
expression of supreme distaste whenever he had to look at the body. James was quite sure his distaste 
was more of a personal nature, however, than Sirius's general distaste for all Death Eaters. 

"Nah," Sirius shrugged. "We'll take him to Moody. He doesn't like me much, but he's a bloody good 
Auror, and a member of the Order. He'll sort it out."

"Oh, well that's g-" Regulus's face slackened midsentence, eyes going round with surprise. There 
was a split-second pause, and then he fell. James watched the sequence happen in slow-motion: 
Sirius crying out as Regulus's knees buckled and he slammed face-first into the concrete pavement. 
Sirius lunging for him, not making it because a bolt of red light struck him in the ribs, sending him 
flying backwards. 

James and Remus cast shields simultaneously at the sound of his impact, squinting through the dark 
to see their attacker. 

Nothing. 

"Fuck," James hissed, his eyes shooting from Regulus, collapsed on the ground, blood trickling out 
from beneath his face, to Sirius, crumpled against a defunct streetlamp, his head lolled abnormally to 
one side. Remus was turning from slowly in deliberate circles, sniffing the air, wand out. James made 
a movement to dart to Regulus's side, as he seemed the most grievously injured, but Remus grabbed 
his arm at the last second, digging his fingers in sharply. "What?"

"Don't be an idiot," Remus snarled, his eyes shining golden in the night. There was a flash of ghostly 
white at the edge of the park and then Luna was stood before them, taking in the scene with wide, 
startled eyes. 

"There were four – I took out two, who were waiting in the bushes down the street. One of them 
was waiting in Number 10, for someone to turn up, and there was another, but I don't know…” She 
took three steps toward Regulus absently, her eyes fixed on him and the stream of blood marring the 
pavement. Remus grabbed her arm too, and she acquiesced to the unspoken command without a 
word. She turned her haunting eyes on the two of them, a plea buried in the depths. "Are they 
gone?"

"I can't sense anyone," Remus said in a low voice, strained from keeping a tight leash on his own 
protective instincts. "That doesn't mean they're gone."

Luna's mouth firmed up as she looked at Sirius, looking like a broken rag doll, and Regulus, face-
down in the dirt. "Then we'll leave," she said resolutely. "Remus grab Sirius, James, help me with 
Regulus."

"How are we getting back?" James frowned. "Regulus is the only one able to Summon Kreacher."

Luna glared at him from where she was attempting to lug Regulus up using an arm around her 
shoulders. He hurried and grabbed the other side, and together they lunged for the shelter of the trees. 
"Are you a wizard or aren't you, James?" she snapped, then shook her head. "Wait here."

She darted out of the shelter towards the bound man on the doorstep of Number 12. James could 
track her movements by the shine of her face as she knelt down beside him and drew her wand. It 
was pointed at his head, there was a flash of light, and then she was up again, running back towards 
them. 

A plume of smoke blocked her path, stopping her in her tracks as a man appeared, wand raised and
pointed. James let out a warning yell even as he began to cast, dropping Regulus to the floor and sprinting to Luna's aid. She was hidden from sight, but he saw the orange bolt streaming forward even as he hit the newcomer in the back, taking him to the ground in a rugby tackle he'd not had occasion to use since he was twelve. Luna landed five feet away, eyes open and thankfully not vacant. Blood streamed from a cut in her shoulder.

"Stupefy!" he gritted out, his wand pressed to the back of their attacker's neck. There was a shudder underneath him and his body went limp, James scrambling off of him immediately. "Luna," he gasped when he reached her, his hands fluttering uselessly over the gash in her muscle. It was deep, he could see the white of her bone at the top even as everything else was covered in a steady flow of blood. Cursing silently, he racked his brains for emergency aid spells, but couldn't think of any. Then Remus was there, pulling him up and away.

"Take them home, one at a time," Remus directed in a no-nonsense tone as he knelt down beside Luna, pressing a hunk of folded material that James recognised as the sleeve of his shirt to her wound. "Then come back, obliviate that one." he pointed at the man James had just stunned. "I'll stitch this up and wait for you so that we can all go back together."

"It's not safe," James protested, scanning the street. He tried really hard not to think about the warm stickiness on his hands, or of the scarily unnatural glaze in Sirius's eyes.

Remus threw a glare at James over his shoulder. "We'll be fine, which is more than I can say for you if we get back and the girls find out you lingered rather than getting them all help. Quickly, James."

He dithered a second more, but the threat was real, and gave him the shot of adrenaline he needed to think clearly again. Leaving Remus chanting over Luna's shoulder, he wrapped one arm securely around Sirius's waist and lifted him to his feet. Carefully going over his three 'D's, so as not to risk a potentially devastating splinch, he twisted on his heel and threw them through space to his front garden. He laid Sirius gingerly on the grass and shot off a patronus to the house, before apparating back to London for Regulus.

When he returned, he found Remus propped up against a tree with Luna curled up in his arms. She was conscious, but only just, smiling and humming blearily some song about a Crumple-Horned Snorcack (whatever that was). His obliviate took only another second, and he dragged the man behind a particularly large Oak. Then he joined Remus and together they returned to the house, and the motley collection of panicking women that waited for them on the lawn.

Chapter End Notes

Hi!
Chapter title donated by the lovely ZoeyOlivia on FFN as her reaction upon reading this chapter (I still have a mixture of amusement and extreme nausea upon reading the quote, strong imagery, heck).
So, in answer to earlier comments: yep, looks like I didn't kill Kreacher, I just couldn't, he needs too many hugs for me to betray him like that. He just needs love, people! (No it's not weird that I've adopted Krecher into my crew of misunderstood misfits
*author ushers him into a room with Severus and Regulus* who knows what might be next????)
Enjoy!
Love, Eli x
"Luna!" Hermione's heart stopped when she saw Remus appear in the garden. The witch-lights they'd hung in the air lit her skin with a ghostly white light, bleaching all colour away and making her look, for a moment, entirely dead. Hermione's throat tightened around a scream as she barrelled through the group, ignoring the others where they were gathered around the Black brothers. "Luna!" she breathed again as she reached their side, wrenching her friend from Remus's arms with unexpected strength and instead cradling her in her own as she lowered them both to the ground. "I swear to all of your Gods, Lu, if you've gotten yourself killed…"

"'M fine, He'mi'ne." Luna mumbled, turning her head to burrow her face into Hermione's blouse. "Y' r such a worrier."

Hermione let out a relieved laugh, her entire body relaxing. "Bloody Hell, Luna. You had one job. One job!"

"They cheated," Luna grunted, her head lolling back. Her eyes were mere slits in her face, though her pout was pronounced. "We expected one or two, not four. Cheatin'. Don' be mad at me, He'm. Be mad at Regulus." A smile curled her lips and she threw one hand back as though it weighed the world, to point at Regulus where he lay being tended to by Dorea. "He took off the cloak."

"Idiot boy," Hermione replied without real heat, more because it was expected. Luna twitched another smile. "One might think he wants to be killed."

"He was very brave," Luna said dreamily, gazing besotted at her love. "Like a lion, only better."

"If you say so, love," Hermione agreed, pulling apart the torn fabric at her shoulder. Someone had spelled the flesh back together, and it had been cut clean, five or six inches from the curve of her shoulder down to the top of her breast. She'd obviously jumped out of the way and the spell had gone wild – Hermione hated to think what could have happened if she hadn't. It was a nasty cut, she could tell it went deep from the position and the way Luna favoured that side of her body. The arm attached lolled lifelessly at her side, making Hermione think it had torn through muscle and nerves.

Ginny approached from the front, clinking vials in her hand. "You look like you've been in the wars, Lu," she said brightly, crouching on her other side. "Protected the lads well, did you?"

"They'd be useless on their own," Luna slurried, blinking lazily. "What'd you bring me?"

"Blood-replenishing potion and a generic heal-all. Wasn't sure of the damage," she explained to Hermione over Luna's head. Hermione nodded her understanding as Luna brightened up and attempted to push herself into a sitting position.

"Oh, is it Hermione's Heal-All? The one that tastes like aniseed?"

Ginny grimaced. "I think you're the only person in the world who appreciates that." She commented
drily, uncorking the vials and bringing them to Luna's lips.

"I like it," Hermione huffed.

"You made it," Ginny rolled her eyes. "Will it work, d'you think?"

Colour was already seeping back into Luna's face, just in time for her to wince. "Oh, it feels like a million ants are playing under my skin," she moaned, wriggling out of Hermione's lap to lie on the floor. Her head shook rapidly. "Eurgh…"

"Looks like it," Hermione laughed, the sound brittle but existent, which was good enough for now. "Where's Lavender?"

Ginny hitched a thumb over her shoulder. "Dorea's teaching her how to properly cast an episkey. She thinks it might come in handy in the future."

"Episkey?"

"Regulus broke his nose when he fell over. Otherwise, it was just a strong Stupefy. He'll be fine after some rest." She frowned. "Sirius got the worst of it. Broken ribs, a concussion…"

"What? How?" Hermione's mouth fell open as she tried to imagine how someone could inflict that sort of damage on Sirius Black, a stocky boy with muscle and agility. He had been a Beater, for Merlin's sake. He used to get battered with bats and balls for fun.

"Remus says a stunner got the best of him, a big ol' tree broke his fall. Don't worry, he's fine enough." Ginny grinned, cocking her head towards where Sirius sat, looking awake enough as Lily fusssed over him. James and Remus were stood over him, James talking rapidly with his hands and Remus looking like he was trying to smother a smile. "They're giving him what-for. I don't think Lily's ever going to let them leave the premises again."

"How, though?" Hermione asked again, shaking her head. "He's an Auror…"

"Can't be a very good one," Ginny shrugged, looking pleased with her own assessment. Hermione raised an eyebrow but left it at that – their weirdly competitive flirtation was their own damn business, she had enough to worry about without concerning herself in her friends sex lives. At least, not Ginny's. That girl could complicate basic arithmancy along with the best of them if she wanted to. "Anyway, I'd best get back to work – I make a really shitty porter, just for future reference."

Hermione waved her off and examined the group again, lifting her arms so that Luna could snuggle her head into her lap. There was something off about this whole thing. Regulus, Sirius and Luna's injuries… something didn't add up. It niggled in the back of her mind, but every time she reached for it, it slipped through her fingers like fog.

"Hmm…" Luna burbled, rubbing her nose on Hermione's knee. Hermione glanced down to see that she had her eyes fixed on Regulus, who was being helped up from the ground by Dorea and Lavender. The boy looked around, his eyes settling on Sirius for a moment, lips pinched in concern, before he moved on. His eyes flared wide when he caught sight of Luna.

"Are-" He shrugged off his helpers impatiently and hurried over to Luna's side, his eyes fixed on the gash in her shoulder. "Are you alright?" he asked in clipped tones.

"Brilliant," Luna smiled, her fingers rising to trace the outline of the bruises on his face. He had a great black one surrounding his nose and left eye, tiny cuts littering his skin from falling on a pavement blanketed with shards of glass. "Not okay." She pouted, prodding at his eye. "Cheaters."
Regulus captured her hand in his and frowned at her. "You're not okay?"

"Nooo…" Luna cooed, "you're not okay. Look at your face."

The tension melted out of him completely as a smile grew on his lips. He winced as it stretched his skin, but didn't let it drop. "Because I was so pretty to start with," he snorted, letting go of Luna's hand and claiming the other one so that she could continue her exploration. She pressed her fingers gently to his eye, and then to his nose, and then drew her finger back and in one smooth notion flicked the bridge of his nose, where the bruising was at its worse. "Oi!" Regulus bawled, his hands flying up to cup his nose. "What was that for?"

"You were meant to stay under the cloak!" Luna informed him primly, in a wonderful impersonation of Hermione's voice, if Hermione did say so herself. The blonde wriggled around in Hermione's lap until she was propped up by her knees, and fisted her good hand on her hip. "You could have been killed!"

Regulus's mouth fell open as he stared at Luna. Hermione tried to stay entirely still, not wanting to disrupt what could potentially be a pivotal moment in their relationship. Of course, it was difficult to do, what with the tension crawling up her spine, the awkwardness stiffening her joints. I swear to the Gods, Luna, Hermione thought loudly, in the hopes the other girl would hear it, if you snog him on top of me I will hurt you.

"You were worried about me?"

"I'm from the future," Luna said tartly. "I know exactly how good you are at getting yourself killed. Of course I worry!"

Regulus blushed, his face shadowed enough to almost hide it, but not the way he ducked his head in embarrassment. "Really?"

Luna shook her head and then, using her elbow and knees, crawled out of Hermione's lap (thank the merciful Gods) and towards Regulus. "Does it still hurt?" she asked in a low voice.

Now, at that point, Hermione knew she should leave. Turn around, busy herself with anything else. But the moment passed all too quickly while she dithered and Regulus was saying "no".

Luna nodded thoughtfully and reached up with her good arm, hooking it around Regulus's neck. He looked faintly bewildered, but didn't move away, kneeling entirely still, almost preternaturally still. Luna let out a stressed little huff and shuffled onto her knees in front of him, reached up, and pressed her lips to his.

It only lasted a second, but Hermione could pinpoint the exact second Regulus realised what was happening. His eyelids slammed shut and his entire body melted, tension seeping out as he bowed over her. That was when Hermione finally moved. She spun to turn her back on the embracing couple, feeling an embarrassed flush burning her own cheeks as she searched wildly for a distraction. Sirius chose that moment to let out a piercing wolf-whistle, and the other lads laughed with them while Lavender shouted "you go girl!".

Ginny appeared in front of Hermione, a soft smile on her face as she looked over her shoulder. "Well, at least that's something," she said in a low voice. "Though it's hardly fair that Luna gets her happy-ever-after before the rest of us."

"She did save his life," Hermione scolded. "Regulus deserves to be happy, no matter what Luna's done."
Ginny hummed noncommittally. "I'm just saying, before anybody else has the chance. Now if someone else brings it up we can scowl and provide a united front on the matter." She grinned. "Aren't they adorable? Regulus is like a lost puppy. He so doesn't know what he's getting into."

Hermione snorted, turning back. Regulus and Luna were still kneeling, their foreheads pressed together as they talked in low voices. Sirius was chatting animatedly to James, as Dorea, Lily and Lavender cleaned up the area. Remus, though…

Remus was watching her.

"Hermione!"

Hermione paused in the hall, closed her eyes and counted to ten slowly as the pitter-patter of footprints caught up with her. Lily. She didn't know if she had the energy to deal with this right now. After the night before and the outcome of Regulus's trip back home, she'd barely slept, and felt like a walking zombie as she made her way to the downstairs study with an armful of paperwork. If nothing else, at least the trip had provided the kick up the arse they'd all been needing to come out of the complacency trance they were existing in, and now everybody seemed enthusiastic to move on.

It was Hermione's job to find a way to do that.

Something she'd be unable to do if she was derailed by an angry Lily Evans.

A hand waved in front of her face and Lily's pale face appeared. "Helloooo?"

"Sorry, I was…" Hermione spun her hand in the air helplessly. "…somewhere else."

"Yeah, I get that." Lily nodded, her face pensive. "Long night, huh?"

Hermione had the sudden feeling that this conversation wasn't going to go the way she expected. "Er… Did you want something, Lily?"

Lily's hair fell over her face as she turned her head, biting her lip. "Yes, actually. Can we talk?"

She really wanted to say no. She was still raw over the whole argument, and then the being ignored for several days. If it were up to her, she'd happily keep the truce in place forever, never talk about it again. Still, she was a polite person, so she acquiesced with a stiff nod and Lily showed her into a room. A Ladies Parlour, with all of the bells and whistles; fresh flowers, pink fainting couches, ivory curtains open over freshly washed windows with a view of Dorea's pet flowerbeds. Lily navigated the room with the ease of a person who'd visited many times, slipping over to a cooler cabinet and offering Hermione a drink. Somehow it felt hostile; a woman making clear her position in the household, while she was just the lowly guest. Another girl-political victory for the opposite side.

"I was angry," Lily said as she set two glasses of gillywater on the coffee table and gestured Hermione to a seat. She searched wildly for a place to set down her burden, finally settling on the couch cushion next to hers, and took up the gillywater, watching Lily warily over the rim. Lily, recognising she wasn't going to receive comment, huffed a little and faffed with the roses on the nearest end table. "I'm not going to apologise for being angry with you. I was right to be. You were… extremely rude."

"I'm not going to apologise for what I said," Hermione interjected quickly, her voice snippier than she'd aimed for. "On the defensive already, are we? She asked herself wearily. "What a surprise."

"I know." Lily heaved a deep breath and folded her hands in her lap, then met Hermione's eyes. "I've
been thinking about it. What you… meant. And… what I've seen, over the years.

"I know you think I'm blind, and I… well, I wasn't the most observant. But I do notice things, you know. I'm not stupid." She took a sip of her gillywater and nodded. "Dumbledore, for example."

"Dumbledore?" Hermione asked faintly, searching around for anything that might have indicated a segue into that discussion. Nope, nada. "I thought you and the Potters…"

"The Potters and the Marauders adore Dumbledore," Lily said, flicking imaginary flint from her skirt. She suddenly seemed years older, much more mature, as she looked at Hermione with knowledge in those startling eyes, knowledge that for some reason she'd hidden. "The Potters owe him their loyalty, and Remus especially feels indebted to him."

"Not you?" Hermione wondered aloud.

"Not me," Lily agreed, gazing off into the distance. "Understand, I don't know Dumbledore. He never spoke to me, not once, and I was Head Girl. It was only once I joined the Order that he paid me any special notice, and only then, I think, because of my closeness to the boys." She gave a rueful shrug. "I'm a clever girl, and powerful, but I'm still a muggleborn female with no family ties, and I owe him no fealty. He, for all of his supposed 'equality', is as prone to that pitfall as a Malfoy. More subtle about it, I would think, but it's still there. The prejudice."

Hermione could see that. He'd never had much interest in her, either, except for as an extension of Harry. She was Harry's brain. That was the extent of her usefulness. There was something else, though… You use such odd phrasing – fealty, owe, as though it's not a choice." She fixed the other girl with a piercing look. "Are they beholden to him?"

Carefully, Lily picked her words and answered slowly. "The Potters have been… allies… of Albus Dumbledore for many years. You took a great risk coming here, sharing your information with us. You do know that?"

"I know that, yes." Hermione nodded, then looked up at Lily with new respect. "You never gave any indication that…"

"That I didn't trust Dumbledore?" Lily let out a bitter laugh, shook her head. "I know you think I'm naïve, Hermione. What would it have helped if I had?"

"It would have helped us understand you better. The way you've been acting, you'd think you were only here as James Potter's arm candy!"

"Sometimes, it's better that people think that." Lily snapped back. "You talk about Dumbledore as if you know his personality, yes?" Hermione nodded. "Well then, you'll know that that he plays the long game, and he wins it, too. He devises so many ways to trap you in a corner that you cannot fight, lest you're wrapped up tighter in a web of your own making. He's smarter than people give him credit for, and I would wager more powerful to boot."

She sighed, looking at her shoes. "Remus… he is a prime example. He's been groomed for Dumbledore's cause since he was a child, and he doesn't realize it. A werewolf, hidden at Hogwarts, gaining an education. Three friends who just happen to be clever enough, and powerful enough, to become Animagi at fifteen – without any incidents, which is miracle in itself knowing the boys' temperaments, and the low number of successful animagus transformations."

Lily was now fidgeting awkwardly, looking around as though she thought she was being listened in on. Her anxiety showed clearly in her face, but she plowed onwards, her shoulders stiff and straight.
"When you're raised outside of all of this, without any prior prejudice, you notice things. You start to learn how to add two and two to create five, and it makes sense. But when you've learned all of it, and you know you're intelligent, but two and two still makes eight…"

"You think Dumbledore interfered…" Hermione whispered, quietly. Lily gave a jerky nod, but Hermione's thoughts were already rolling onwards. "And if he did that, then who knows…"

She was reluctant to finish the sentence, but Lily understood. They stared at each other for a moment, lost in the potential repercussions of their theory. "We need to tell the others…" Hermione said vaguely.

Lily gave a start, reaching over to grab her arm, digging her nails in until the flesh was almost ripped. "No!" she exclaimed, then repeated again quieter, "no. I'm only telling you this to explain why I am the way I am. I love James. I love him with everything in me, and if I were to speak up, go against Dumbledore, then… Well, dangerous people with dangerous thoughts have been turned or disposed of more easily than you could imagine, in crueller ways than…" Lily's lips pressed together in a thin white line, her eyes fixed on Hermione's, pleading.

A puzzle piece fell into place in her head. "You're – this is about…"

"Severus." Lily shook her head.

"He was your friend."

Lily nodded jerkily. There were tears welling in her eyes again and without thinking Hermione reached over to clasp their hands together. "Yes, my friend. Severus. He was a good boy, if a bit dark, but darkness isn't-

"Darkness isn't what Dumbledore likes in his followers, because if you can turn to the darkness, or even dance in the grey areas, that means that you aren't a rule-follower. You aren't as easily controlled, the world isn't as black and white as you expect it to be." Hermione took a deep breath, let it out slowly through her teeth. "Your split…"

"It was real, at first. Then, when I started to put the pieces together, it was more for my own good than anything else. Like I said, Hermione. I love James. I want to be with James, and I'll be whoever I need to be to keep my place here." She let out a bitter, cold laugh. "Gods, that's so selfish, isn't it? I deprived him of his best friend because I wanted to marry his mortal enemy. And now – well, now he's a Death Eater, isn't he? And I have to ask, is that my fault?"

Lily gripped Hermione's hands in hers and leaned over the table so that their faces were close. "I'd do it again, Hermione, if I had to. Cruel as it was. Even though I've seen the person he's become, I don't feel guilty. I miss him sometimes, but it's all a part of the game you have to play, isn't it?"

Hermione pulled back, both disgusted and respectful. She remembered in her head Severus Snape going to his death to avenge Lily Potter's, thinking that she hated him for something he said in anger when he was sixteen, how he'd beaten himself up about that his entire life. Then again, that couldn't all be lain at Lily's door, could it? Most of it was just Severus Snape. The cruelty. The Darkness. She wasn't entirely to blame.

It wasn't Hermione's place to place blame, she decided. The respect took over. Respect for a girl who'd hidden herself away for years in order to keep herself safe from a benevolent Dictator everybody she knew loved. A girl who fostered that mistrust and never let herself slip, never took her guard down – not even when she met four girls from the future who seemed to sincerely hate him as much as she did. Not even when the 'leader' humiliates her in front of her fiancé and friends by
basically calling her stupid.

"I'll apologise now," Hermione said slowly, looking up at Lily, who was sat like some exquisite statue on the sofa. "For the way I said those things. For rushing to judgement, I suppose. I could make excuses, but it wasn't my place to say those things, anyway."

Lily smiled slightly. "No, it's okay. You opened my eyes to some things. Reminded me that I shouldn't be acting this way – shouldn't be pretending. In faking ignorance I think, maybe, I caught it?"

"Well, we all know that ignorance is contagious," Hermione said with a weak smile. Lily bobbed her head in agreement.

"I think – I don't like you, Hermione." Lily said, running fingers through her hair. "I think maybe I could grow to like you, but I don't... not yet. I respect you, though. That's why I told you this. I'm trusting you."

"I'll try not to let you down." She should probably have been more offended that Lily sat there and proclaimed her dislike of Hermione for all the world to hear, as though she was the final word on all such matters, but she wasn't. One couldn't be around Lavender for very long without either breaking down or growing a thicker skin, and this time, Hermione had gotten tougher. So Lily didn't like her. So what? Ginny did. Luna did. Remus did. Lavender...

Anyway, she could deal with not being liked. Story of her life so far. Being wrong was what bruised her ego, so she wasn't going to blindly accept what Lily just told her. She'd mull on it. Watch the girl. Research. It was what she did best, after all.

For now, however. "Truce?"

Lily gave a tepid smile. "Truce."
Chapter Forty: Conversations

Chapter Summary

Remus and Sirius have girl talk. Ginny is suspicious.

Chapter Notes

So. Much. Swear.

As a British person from a port-town I have no idea how to be angry and not swear like a sailor. Please, enlighten me.

Love always, Eli x

"You fancy her," Sirius teased quietly, his voice barely above a whisper.

Remus jerked out of his trance to turn to his friend, remembering at the last minute to school his features. "Who?" he asked, nonchalantly turning a page in his book.

Sirius rolled his eyes exaggeratedly. "Really, Moony? We're really going to play this game?"

"I'm not playing a game, Pads." It was weak even to his own ears, and Sirius seemed to agree, if his cocked eyebrow was anything to go by. It didn't matter. His strategy was deny, deny, deny, and they couldn't prove the truth. He wasn't ready to talk about it, so he'd just… not. It was a fair tactic, really, and one he'd been settled on since the fight in the library; an approach that he only became more convinced was the right thing to do, especially after Ginny and Lavender's quite frankly terrifying visit.

If he didn't talk about it, it didn't exist.

And the wolf in his head would just have to learn to deal with it.

The dog, however, had different ideas.

"You like her. You want to kiss her. You want to snog her," he sang with a smirk, resting his elbow on the table and his chin in his hand as he stared at Remus. "You probably want to do a whole lot more than that, too, you're just too much of a gentleman to say so."

Remus turned his back on his best friend with a sigh, trying to bury himself back in the book, only to realise he had no idea where he had been up to. Most likely due to the fact that instead of reading it, like a normal person, he'd been watching Hermione navigate the library, collecting up books and papers. Drooling – him, not her. And that might be an exaggeration but it also might not because she really did have lovely curves and an arse he wanted nothing more than to bite, and at one point she'd dropped a sheet of paper and bent near-enough in two to pick it up...

Disgusted with himself, he pinched his cheek lightly to drag him back to the present and flipped back
to the start of the chapter. Only, he skipped back too far and found himself staring at a page titled Mating Bonds, which not only was decidedly not a chapter on Alpha/Omega shared healing but also hit a little too close to home. So close to home, in fact, that he threw the damn thing across the room and simply sat there, staring at it. Fuming.

Sirius had fallen silent and out of the corner of his eye Remus could see him looking between him and the book with a questioning look on his face. A low growl rumbled out of his chest without any conscious thought, and that was the final bloody straw.

Moony was being a prat. He was prowling and snarling and keeping Remus awake at night, demanding more of what they'd experienced with Hermione, with no regard to what Remus himself wanted. He wasn't even sure the wolf cared what Hermione wanted, only that it had decided Hermione was his, and he was going to do everything in his power to get her. And that included punishing Remus for not immediately going to the woman and mating her right then and there.

Remus liked Hermione. He thought she was sweet, clever, pretty and funny in a dry sort of way that he could appreciate. He admired her for her loyalty, respected her bravery, and understood her compulsive need for control. It didn't hurt that she'd tasted so delicious and fit so well against him that he felt all of twelve, waking up in the middle of the night painfully aroused by the memory of their kiss (humiliating, for a nineteen-year-old). He just... he didn't know her very well, and didn't want to jump into a permanent mating when it might not end well. And, let's face it, the odds were not in their favour. He was a werewolf, compulsively poor, scarred to all hell, and a pretty miserable bloke on top of that. Hermione was nice, but she wasn't that nice. He'd give their relationship a year, tops, and like Ginny said – if he didn't intend to keep her, he shouldn't go after her at all.

"I know that face," Sirius drawled, shoving his finger under Remus's nose and waggling it. "That's your self-pity face."

"I don't have a self-pity face," Remus snapped, waving off Sirius's hand.

He wasn't deterred, barking out one of his belly-laughs and watching Remus with amused eyes. "Oh, you don't, do you? I've been your friend for eight years now, Moony, and let me tell you – you're so bloody mopey I sometimes have doubts about your gender."

Remus snorted derisively. "It's talk like that that gets you beaten up by women, Pads."

"That only happened twice, and the point still stands. You're thinking about Hermione, aren't you? Doing your noble thing, the oh I'm such a horrible person why me rubbish."

Somehow affronted, Remus scowled. "I am not."

"Yes, you are." Sirius grinned. "Look, mate, I'm not about to tell you what to do, but I think you should go for it."

"You're suggesting I just... do it. Jump into a relationship with someone who I like and respect, which, if it ends badly, could have disastrous consequences not only for the two of us, but for the entire war effort." Sirius nodded his head rapidly, looking pleased. Remus sighed deeply. "Why am I not surprised?"

"She likes you," Sirius said, his voice, for once, grave. "You like her. I've been in relationships with less of a foundation."

"I know," Remus muttered. "You and Marley still haunt my nightmares."
He clicked his tongue in disgust. "Yeah, I admit that was an error in judgement. But that's not you and Hermione, is it? She's perfect for you, all bookish and swotty" – "hey!" Remus huffed – "and so bloody bossy. She's got a caring streak a mile wide, you need that. And she needs – needs – to get laid."

"Stop talking now, Padfoot, if you want to keep your tongue."

He held his hands up in surrender, a mischievous smirk on his face. "And she's your Mate. What? You think I haven't seen you researching it?" He picked up the book Remus had thrown – *Howl: A Gentle Study of Werewolf Behaviour* – and waggled it in his face. "The spine is worn down to nothing at chapter twelve, shall we see what that is?"


"Ah, mating bonds. Did you know, Remus, that werewolves, like normal wolves, mate for life?" Sirius pulled a 'thinking' face, curling a finger over his chin and squinting as though he had a monocle. "The Alpha of any singular pack is likely to find their Mate in a human – they're so much more fertile than werewolf women, apparently. Twins and triplets are common, due to something in the mating bite stimulating the woman's fertility – did you know that, Remus? Fascinating stuff."

"You can stop anytime," Remus snapped coldly, and Sirius glanced up at him. "I know all of this."

"Yes, but I didn't," Sirius said with the air of someone greatly intrigued. "Remus, why did you never tell me that your cock can-"

"That's enough!" He shouted over him, grabbing for the book again to mask his blazing cheeks. Sirius simply dangled it just out of reach of Remus's arms, smirking. He scowled. "What can I do to make you stop reading?"

"Well, I don't know. It really is very enlightening." He stopped when Remus let a growl trickle out from between his teeth, and smiled. "I suppose, you could promise to talk to Hermione. About… all of this."

"I didn't know you were such a big fan," Remus ground out between gritted teeth, trying to curtail the part of his head that demanded he *jump on the bastard and show him who is boss!*

"I'm not," Sirius hummed. "You are, though, and I want to see you happy. Also, well rested, because you're grouchy when you're tired and it makes taking the piss a risky experience. I quite like my throat where it is."

Remus paused. Moony, in his head, was flipping somersaults, he was so excited. If he were in physical form, he'd probably have licked the bloke half-to-death, he so adored Pads's proposition and the way he'd neatly boxed Remus into a corner. There was another part, more human but no less pining for Hermione's attention, that was urging him to take the out and be happy about it. To go and talk to Hermione. See if she'd kiss him again. See if she'd be open to a relationship of some sort, because Remus knew that he'd never be able to leave it at just one night.

"Fine," he relented, pushing as much reluctance into his voice as possible so that Sirius didn't think he'd won. "I'll talk to her. Now give me the book."

"Promise?" Sirius wheedled, bringing it closer.

"I promise." Remus seethed.
"Now?" Sirius brightened.

"Don't you push it," Remus growled, snatching his prize out of Sirius's hand and clutching it to his chest.

Now, Ginny wasn't usually inclined towards eavesdropping, you understand, but when she witnesses something potentially dangerous – like, for example, a girl who hates her friend dragging said friend into a room alone – then she feels it is her moral duty to keep an eye on the situation; or, as in this case, an ear. And when she feels that said friend is being shovelled a shit-load of Hippogriff dung by said enemy, her obligation only grows, and at this point, she cannot with good conscience abandon her post. Not even if the conversation grows personal, not even if said friend buys into the aforementioned Hippogriff dung, not even if she strikes an agreement with said enemy.

Protectiveness was a Weasley's innate instinct. They were a large family who defended and supported each other with all of the weapons in their arsenal. When opponents close in on a single member, their reaction is always to close ranks around the target, to protect their weakest member from all outside interference. Ginny had tried to do that for Hermione with James, and that seemed to have gone well – after all, there was no way Lily had swallowed her pride enough to talk to Hermione without a nudge from her devoted fiancé – but she had overlooked Lily herself in all of the commotion. She'd felt that all that had needed to be said had been said, and these things would resolve themselves in time.

Apparently not, because now she'd walked in on a conversation in which Lily has once again cast Hermione as the aggressor, and while Ginny had sympathy for her plight – and she did – it also seemed weak of the other girl to drop all of the blame for her, frankly quite nasty, actions towards the people in her life on Dumbledore and the wider Wizarding society. It was predictable that Lily would find some excuse, some way to make Hermione feel guilty about her actions, but Ginny hadn't guessed that she would be quite so clever about it, quite so brilliantly manipulative in pinpointing the one thing in her life that Hermione might actually identify with 'we're both muggle-born' thing doesn't quite make the cut) and twisting it into the perfect reason for Hermione to not only forgive, but to reassess the whole situation.

Ginny's fingernails cut into her palm as she listened, the one on her middle finger carvling a half-moon shape into the fleshy part of her thumb. She was angry, and maybe it had something to do with her own guilt over Harry, and wanting his mother to be that most vaunted, deified woman he'd been told of when he was younger, therefore being disappointed with the reality, but it was more likely that her anger came from the woman's blatant disrespect of Hermione, and everything she'd suffered, everything they'd suffered. She didn't care what Lily spewed – being ignored and vaguely threatened by the Headmaster had nothing on hours of torture, a possession, involuntary murder, years of therapy, losing the respect of your family and peers all in one fell swoop and futile fighting for years to regain it, battles in the middle of the night when you're too young and much too unprepared, and living off of scraps for a year as you hide, terrified, in one single room amid dozens of equally petrified students, some of them no older than twelve; and that was just Ginny.

Before she could go in and confront her, however, Hermione opened the door and stepped out, closing it quietly behind her. She showed no surprise at the fact that Ginny was there, only putting a finger to her lips and indicating that she should follow her down the hall. Ginny hesitated, her mind vacillating between wanting to warn Hermione and wanting to punch Lily. The decision was made by Hermione herself, who rolled her eyes and grabbed Ginny's wrist, dragging her along in her wake. By the time she got back her ability to speak through the gnawing fury, Hermione had locked them in a room decorated entirely in moss-green, closed the curtains and warded the room to silence. She took up a position by the desk and waved a hand. "Now you can speak."
"Lily fucking Evans." Ginny grunted. "She's playing you, and you're just fucking buying it!"

Hermione affected a startled expression. "Really?"

"Yes, really! She tells you some sob story about how she's this poor muggle-born oppressed by 'the man' and its cost her her best friend but that's okay because she loves James, so she's pretending to be fucking naïve? Just – how does one pretend to be that naïve? You can't fucking trust her!"

"Alright, calm down with the swearing, love." Hermione frowned. "Her story makes sense."

"Makes sense? Makes sense?" Ginny screamed out her rage, raking her fingers through her hair. "Gods, Hermione – no, it doesn't fucking make sense. Not unless she's a spineless fucking coward!"

Grimacing, Hermione muttered, "I actually thought it was quite brave of her to-" only to be cut off by another wordless shout. "Ginny, calm down."

"No! Honestly, Hermione. Someone has to say it, and I know you! You talk the big talk, but in your mind you're thinking 'well, she's a really nice person'. Newsflash: not to you, she's not! To you, she's just a really shitty person suffering from an inferiority complex."

"Ginny, do you know what we just got there?" Hermione said patiently, her eyebrow raised. "Do you?"

"Hermione, I will not – what?"

"Do you know what I just got from Lily?" She enunciated each word carefully, tapping her fingers across the surface of the desk.

"Well – no. What?" Ginny suddenly felt like she was missing something big, something that had given Hermione this calm air, despite Ginny's temper – and her temper was quite cowing, if she did say so herself.

"Well, on the one hand, a truce, which is helpful because we can't move forward without us all being on the one side. On the other," Hermione flashed a wicked grin. "I also lost my only real reason not to bring Severus Snape in. Congratulate me, Ginny."

Ginny stopped, her mouth falling open. "You what?"

Hermione gave a shark's smile, all teeth, her eyes sparkling. "Severus Snape. We can bring him in now, and Lily can't complain – she told me directly that she has no personal problem with him. The 'mudblood' thing is gone. Poof." She leaned back on her hands on the table, a satisfied expression on her face, reminding Ginny why she'd always thought Hermione made a better friend than enemy (Poor Skeeter, poor Umbridge, silly fools. Ginny didn't dare even consider what punishment Hermione might find fitting for her were she ever to betray her. Maybe she'd transfigure her into a broomstick. Lock her spirit in a diary. The possibilities were, truly, endless). "I agree with you – we can't trust her, she's only out for herself and James. Yes, there was truth there, but I'm not convinced on all of it. One thing I know is that she's obviously much brighter, much more involved than we gave her credit for. As long as we keep them close, however, they're basically harmless. Snape, though… he'll be difficult."

"That's an understatement!" Ginny exclaimed, still reeling from the announcement. "Even if Lily doesn't complain – and I doubt she'll let it lie, no matter what she says – James, Sirius and Remus despise him, and Dorea will never let him in the house for as long as that's true. Snape hates them in return! Plus, and I don't say this lightly, Hermione, not with Regulus in the house; he's a fucking Death Eater!"
Hermione did that thing with her face where she looked very disappointed, as though Ginny were a naughty child. "Yes, Ginny, he's a Death Eater. Please stop swearing, this is not a Samuel L. Jackson film."

Ginny narrowed her eyes, recognizing the familiar tactic. Fucking muggle-borns using muggle culture to throw the purebloods off guard, sneak things in under the fence while they're still dazed and confused wondering 'what the fuck are you on about?'. "I'm not falling for that. Severus Snape is a Death Eater and that is a problem."

"An easily over-come one, now that we've got the green light on Snape-"

"What green light?" Ginny hissed. "You've got a vague statement from Lily saying she doesn't hate him. That's hardly an invitation."

"It's enough." Hermione said firmly. "We can't bring him here, obviously, but we won't need to. We need a Death Eater. He could be it."

Scowling, Ginny threw up her hands in exasperation. "Yes, except for the part where he's a Death Eater! A real one, Hermione, not a good-guy-pretending-to-be-bad. Think about it; the reason he crossed over in the future was because Lily died due to something he did. That was a guilty conscience, not a pure bloody heart or whatever it is one needs to be considered 'good' in this fucked-up decade. With her alive, he's got no reason to change sides. And, as much as she has pissed me off, I don't think offing her will solve any of our problems."

"Regulus says he wants to leave, and he might help us." Hermione said matter-of-factly. "I trust Regulus."

"What's that story – the scorpion and the frog?" Ginny sniped, but the other girl just rolled her eyes again. "How do you suppose we get him to help us, then?" she sighed.

"We could try asking," Hermione suggested, showing once again that while she is the cleverest person Ginny knows, and extremely aware of the dangers in the world, she's also delightfully trusting. To a fault. She seemed to read what Ginny was thinking because now she was the one who sighed. "Well, then, what do you suggest?"

Using her outstretched arms, Ginny vaulted onto the desk, straddling it so that she was facing Hermione, close enough that she could talk quietly, in case the wards failed. Suddenly, she felt quite businesslike, the words crystal clear in her mind. "First, we can't tell anybody we're going after him. Not Remus, not Lily, not anybody. All it will do is create a fuss we can't afford."

"I wasn't exactly going to advertise it," Hermione said, pulling herself up onto the desk with rather more difficulty than Ginny had had, glaring at her when Ginny raised an eyebrow tauntingly. She sat with her knees over the edge, swinging her feet, so that she faced the door but was only centimetres from Ginny.

"Don't anything it. Lavender can know, Luna can know. Regulus can have a vague idea because we'll need his help on it. Nobody else."

"They'll be angry if they find out we hid it from them," Hermione warned, but it was a weak objection.

"Rather beg forgiveness and all that," Ginny said dismissively. "You wanted Snape, you'll have to deal with the consequences. You're sure you want him?"

"I want to save everybody I can," Hermione declared, voice thrumming with determination.
"Regulus, Snape, hell, Malfoy if I have to. Everybody."

"Realistic goal," Ginny commented sarcastically, making Hermione smile.

"Eight years ago, my goal was to help an eleven-year-old boy defeat the Darkest wizard to ever live," she grinned, her entire face alight with mischief. "Compared to that, this one's easy."
Chapter Forty-One: The Most Awkward Couple

Chapter Summary

Hermione and Remus are painful to watch but the Author still loves them.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Where the hell have you been?" Lavender snapped from her armchair, scowling in Hermione's direction. "I've been waiting for you. You said ten! It's now half-past eleven!"

"I got distracted," Hermione admitted, dumping her pile of parchment and books onto the closest flat surface. Ginny, behind her, muttered 'distracted, right' in a scathing tone under her breath.

Lavender huffed. "Well, if you say so. The fact still stands; while you were 'distracted'," she said that word scathingly, as though Hermione's lateness had ruined her day, "I've been here keeping lover-boy on ice."

"Lover-boy?" Hermione repeated blearily, looking up. Remus was sat opposite Lavender, on one of the moth-eaten settees the room had come with. He caught her eye and smiled faintly. "Ah…"

"He's not the most scintillating conversationalist," Lavender continued, "but we did alright. Covered all the bases; the weather, our health, his shitty hair-cut." She turned back to look at him and said, quite sincerely and with great generosity, "Again, I would be perfectly happy to cut it for you. Just say the word and we'll neaten that mop right up." She leaned in closer and added in a confiding tone, "Help mask those problematic ears."

"Thanks, Lavender, but I think I'll pass." Remus replied, looking – thankfully – mildly amused. Brave man, but then, Hermione had already known that.

"Well, alright then," Lavender shrugged. "Your loss."

"Can I talk to you, please," Remus asked Hermione. "Alone?"

"Oh." Hermione blinked. "Yes?"

"We'll just leave you to it," Ginny added hastily, beckoning to Lavender.

Lavender frowned, looking from Remus to Hermione even as she stood to join Ginny at the door. "Do I have to? This seems like it could be interesting. Wolfie is as jittery as Ron when someone mentions spiders and, I'm not an expert but that, to me, signals something exciting."

Rolling her eyes, Ginny waved at Hermione and said to Lavender, "I needed to ask you a question, anyway. Who's Samuel L. Jackson? Hermione mentioned him earlier and I'm still confused." The look she threw Hermione said exactly how much of a sacrifice she was making to ask.

"Only, the most attractive man in cinema!" Lavender squealed, and Ginny winced as though the sound had perforated her eardrum. "He was in Die Hard 3 – him and Bruce Willis lit up the screen. I couldn't breathe, I was so turned on."
"Ri-ight," Ginny said, suddenly upping the amount Hermione owed her for this sacrifice. Lavender excited was the worst. She glanced back at Hermione in the hope that she might save her at the last minute, but – nothing. Hermione was too busy watching Remus apprehensively. "That helps."

Lavender linked arms with her to drag them out of the room, starting to natter; "I mean, I also like Bruce, but he's just not got the pure sexual magnetism…"

Their voices trailed off as the door snapped closed, leaving Hermione alone with Remus for the first time since the morning of the full moon. Suddenly nervous, Hermione cast wildly around for something to say or do. Spotting the book in his arms, she brightened up and grinned. "Oh, is that Howl, by Agnes Nikolova? I love that book – it's so well researched, and possibly the kindest portrayal of werewolves in modern history. I mean, I know she was based in one of the Eastern packs, but you can apply much of what she learned to the British quite easily, I think."

"Err…” Remus blushed. "Right, yes."

Hermione paused then backtracked, frowning. "Of course, you'd know better than I. It could be complete rubbish for all of my experience." She let out a nervous titter.

"Oh, well… yeah. It's pretty accurate. Actually, I kind of wanted to talk -" Hermione had stopped listening, her mind reminding her quite rudely of certain passages in the book, passages she'd never quite got to explore with older Remus, because they hadn't been mated, but were now, for some ridiculous reason, being imagined in great detail. Her breath left her and she cursed her active imagination. "Hermione?"

Snapping out of her trance, she was mortified to realise she'd been staring at him breathlessly, likely all starry eyed because of her perverted imagination. She shook her head briskly and shot him an apologetic smile. "No, sorry, do go on."

"Are you alright?" He frowned. "I can come back later…"

When, Hermione wondered, did their conversations get so bloody stilted? They'd never had this problem in either incarnation. They had so much in common that their chat had always had a sense of ease, even when they were all pent-up about war or family or sex. Perhaps it was that she didn't know him very well, or perhaps it was because of his age and the awkwardness of the situation, but whatever it was, she wasn't keen on the way her shoulders seemed about to crack, her spine painfully straight. "No, no it's fine."

He shot her an enquiring look, but let it go. He rolled his shoulders, letting Hermione know that she wasn't alone in feeling the pressure. "Er –" he seemed to be looking for a way to start, his eyes darting around the room, and that, of everything, was the part that cracked Hermione up.

"Oh, Gods," she sighed loudly, giggling when he started. "How about we just ban 'err', 'erm', 'oh' and 'sorry' from this conversation? Otherwise we'll get nowhere."

He seemed to slump a little in relief, sending her a bashful look from beneath his fringe, the discomfort of the situation evaporating to leave only the usual nervous tension. "You're right, sorry-yeah. I'm just – a little nervous."

"Well, stop," Hermione said briskly, "because it's rubbing off on me and I can't think properly when that happens." She made for Lavender's armchair, then stopped, looking between the couch Remus was sitting on and the chair a few feet away. Should she be sat with him? What sort of discussion were they about to have? She was fairly certain it wasn't going to be a break-up sort of thing,
considering their lack of a relationship, and he'd kissed her for goodness sake, she hadn't pursued him in any way, so they couldn't have an issue over that. She was intrigued, however, by his apparent nerves. Was he about to dress her down for the Lily thing? If so, he was a touch late on that.

What was she doing? Right, sitting down. Remus was watching her hesitate, his lips quirking up at the edges. Just as his nerves comforted her in some way, displaying hers seemed to make him relax by inches. True, he continued to be as tightly wound as a shiny new spring, but his posture was slumping bit by bit. And if that was the case, then she might as well give him something to go on. With a quick turn, she marched over the rug to sit on the sofa he'd previously occupied. His nostrils flared as she walked past, and he seemed to suck in a deep breath. Then, smiling more freely, he bent to retake his place.

"Sirius said I should come," he blurted out, dropping the book on the coffee table.

"So – what? You don't want to be here?" Hermione felt vaguely affronted by the idea. She wasn't that awful. Really. Was she?

"Oh – sorry – shit!" He winced, and it was satisfyingly real. "It's just – I don't know how to broach this. Talking to – well, girls – isn't my thing."

"Women," Hermione corrected, biting back a smile.

"What?" Remus said vaguely, his attention rivetted to where her teeth had dug into her lip.

"I'm a woman, Remus. I'm twenty." She smirked. "Only just, but still. I'm the proverbial 'older woman'."

His eyes flicked back up to hers, amusement turning them warm. "Right. I'm your teenage toy-boy, then, am I?"

Hermione let out a laugh. "Hardly. I don't think a kiss qualifies as some torrid affair." She regretted that the moment she said it, for he stiffened and his eyes skipped away. "Hey, it was a joke."

"No, I know." He muttered, and he looked straight into her face again. She almost swallowed her tongue when she caught sight of his pupils, dilated so wide they almost swallowed the green of his eyes – green tinted with streaks of gold, a sign that his wolf was interested in this conversation, too. She remembered seeing that same sight repeatedly back in the future, before their… assignations. Seconds before he'd kiss her, or touch her, or throw her against a wall and...

She shut out the thoughts, hard though it was. Yes, she'd loved older Remus and yes, she'd enjoyed their affair, but it had been messy and tainted, and she refused to allow it to taint this Remus, and whatever would happen here – if anything. Besides, she'd been with Remus the man so rarely, it barely merited mentioning. Moony, however...

Which was odd, now that she thought about it. If Tonks was his Mate, then surely… and she hadn't even been Pack, nor a werewolf, none of the things you'd expect to tempt a werewolf into … well, sex.

She had so many questions that would remain unanswered about that part of her life, which was why she liked to keep it locked away, only to be confronted in dreams and moments like this. Remus… well, he needed to know, but would she ever get the courage to tell him? And what if they started something. Keeping it from him would be the ultimate betrayal. Telling him… might ruin everything before it started.
"You're a Gryffindor, Hermione Granger. She scolded herself.

"I slept with you," she admitted suddenly, effectively shattering the atmosphere. He jerked back so quickly he almost toppled over the edge of the chair. She didn't blame him for his surprise. She was surprised, too.

"I – what?"

"In the future. Older you. When I was seventeen, right up until – well. You were married. I don't know why it happened, but it did, and I thought you should know." The words tripped over themselves to get out even as in her head something was screaming (in a voice that sounded oddly like Ginny); what the actual fuck what the fuck why did you just say that what the fuck do you enjoy destroying your personal life who the fuck what the actual fuck, Hermione! STOP TALKING! "Before anything happened, if anything were to happen. And – well, I know I'm not your Mate, but I like you, and that -"

"I was married?" Remus asked, astounded.

Irrational irritation itched in her chest. "That's what you're taking from this?" she snapped, equally astounded.

He shook his head, smiling slightly. "No, no. I got the rest of it. But, seriously, I was married? For how long?"

"A year? Less?" Hermione let out a huff. "Does it matter?"

"I think it matters to you," Remus said logically, but he was still smirking, so proud of himself, the git. "Any kids?"

There was a pause as affection and guilt swelled up in her chest. "Yes. Teddy. He was… only a few months old when you died." She glanced away to mask her expression. "It… I'm not proud of what I did, but I helped Teddy after you died. I loved him."

His expression, what she could see of it from the corner of her eyes, was conflicted. "Wow." He took a deep breath, staring down at his lap as he flexed his hands there. "I – I suppose this is why people aren't supposed to know the future."

Her mouth stayed resolutely closed despite her instinct being to immediately rattle off a lecture on how that future no longer exists due to discrepancies in the timeline they'd taken advantage of. Instead, she kept watching him as he battled with the information he was given. Finally, he looked up. "Did I love her?"

"I…" she shrugged. "I think so? I mean, why else would you marry her? I know there was a lot of pressure on you at the time, but you never said that you didn't love her."

"But if I loved her, then why would I… cheat?" He seemed to have trouble getting that word out, and Hermione didn't blame him. Yes, he was only a teen now, but he was so pure and good, she couldn't imagine him taking those steps away from what he'd consider his duty. The older Remus, however, had been broken and worn, tired from years of being in perfect control. Hermione had idolised him, from the very first second they'd met and she'd realised he was a Professor. Devotion like that… well, even the best person likely wouldn't be able to resist it for long. She had been the temptation, the lure away from his family in a time when he was so stressed, so strung out, and even Tonks wasn't a safe harbour. There, he was under more responsibility, more obligations. Hermione was the only person who didn't ask anything of him. It was nobody's fault but their own, and
Hermione accepted that, only… rationalising it came easily, as them, together, had always felt so right.

Without waiting for her to answer, he closed his eyes. "Actually, no. Don't answer that. I know why I would cheat."

Really? Well I don't! She throttled down that question, too. He probably didn't want to talk about it. The Gods knew she didn't. This was probably the most awkward conversation she'd ever had, and it wasn't going to get better anytime soon.

"This changes things," Remus muttered quietly, and then blushed. "I didn't expect you to be a virgin, but this is just… odd." He then looked up, his jaw slack. "How old was I?"

"Not that old!" Hermione defended tartly. "Thirty-six? Thirty-seven?"

"And you were seventeen…" he checked, then blinked hazily. "Bloody hell. I don't know whether to condemn myself or congratulate myself."

"You're joking," Hermione said, meeting his eyes. Nope, not joking. "This is the house where feminism comes to die." She complained, throwing her hands over her eyes. "You've got the one-night-stand king, you've got the woman who pretends to be stupid so people will like her, you've got the stay-at-home mum who encourages that out-dated, ridiculous attitude, the fiancé who thinks his perfectly-capable girlfriend is made of glass, and the alpha-werewolf high-fiving his future self for fucking a girl twenty years his junior. Why, Gods, why?"

He shot her a smirk. "This is 1979. I don't know what things are like where you're from – though, obviously, they were pretty exciting – but here, Feminism is still a dirty word."

"Yeah…" Hermione drawled, scowling. "It's not that different in the nineties, actually."

Smiling at her, he let out a chuckle. "We seem to have gotten off track."

Hermione widened her eyes innocently. "I don't know, Remus, I think I like it off track. Let's forget about whatever I was saying before and instead debate gender politics. I'm good at gender politics."

"Nice try." He rested his head against the back of the sofa and hummed. "If we're being bluntly honest, I should tell you that you're my Mate."

"No, I'm not." She replied automatically, waving his statement off. He shot her a wry look.

"Yes, you are. I should know, I'm the werewolf."

Hermione stared at him in disbelief. "Well, then, you're wrong. We can't be…"

The air hissed out from between his teeth as he scrunched his brow in frustration. "Merlin, when I came here I wasn't expecting a debate. Some snogging, yeah. Not this – I feel like we should be in a boardroom."

"You don't understand," Hermione said, standing up and stamping her feet, uncaring that it seemed childish. "We – well, we had sex. We f*cked. Made love, once or twice, but we never – we didn't Mate. According to the book, a werewolf can't control when he gives the mating bite, ergo: not your mate."

"The book is written based on wild werewolf packs in Eastern Europe. There's no reason for them to hold back on giving the mating bite – no reason like, for example, being married." Remus glared.
"Trust me, Hermione, you're it."

Suddenly feeling faint, she collapsed back onto the couch, eyes fixed on his face. "But…"

A growl rumbled from his chest, more gold bleeding into his eyes. Hermione thought better of arguing.

They stayed staring at each other for a few minutes, Hermione considering the eyes of both Remus and Moony, wondering where that all left them. She was pretty sure the atmosphere wasn't conducive to kissing and making up, were she to want that – and she did, but also didn't. What she'd just told him was a lot to take in, and if he made any decisions now, the likelihood was that he'd regret it once everything had time to sink in. If she was, indeed, his Mate – and boy, if that didn't send a shiver of pure, piercing joy through her heart – then they needed to take this slowly. Be careful about it.

Hermione had no intention of Mating with him if there were things left unsaid, things he'd regret later. She knew what it was like to live under the burden of constant resentment, both towards her and outwards, and she didn't fancy that as her life. Besides, after years of denying vehemently the possibility of her and Remus being anything more than… whatever they were, she needed some time, herself. Coming to terms with this new revelation would require overturning everything she'd thought she knew about their relationship and her life up to then. And Merlin knew, if there was anything Hermione hated, it was being wrong.

It felt like that was becoming increasingly frequent.

Eavesdropping. Again.

Ginny wondered what exactly it said about her that she'd suddenly resorted to such underhanded tactics, but then she remembered the first war, and all the things they should have been told but hadn't, and how it was her eavesdropping that alerted everybody to something being wrong in fifth year in the first place.

Plus, you know, it was fun.

Guilty conscience satisfied, Ginny tried to – discretely – press her Extendable Ear farther under the door. Luna had given her it this morning with a blank smile, pressing it into her hands before she'd left for her jog. 'You'll be needing this,' she'd said, and she was right. All she had to do was keep it secret, not let anybody else know it existed, with the obvious exceptions of Luna, Lavender and Hermione, to protect the future of WWW. None of them wanted Fred and George's genius to go unacknowledged into history, and in a house full of pranksters, letting slip even one of their inventions would be a dangerous game.

"…and to be honest, I don't even like the sodding necklace, a load of fuss for nothing if you ask me. Anyway, why would you make a romance without a happy ending? I don't buy things that make me cry! Give me a good old comedy, or some action, any day. Don't you think, Gin?"

"Lavender," Ginny whispered, because she was closer to the door and paranoid of being discovered, despite their having hidden behind the drapes in an alcove. "I don't want to be rude, but I am literally the world's most disinterested person."

"Excuse me?" Lavender retorted snippily.

"Seriously." She turned to look directly at her. "You wanted to stay and listen, that's what we're doing."
Lavender scowled. "Well I'm so sorry to bore you, but you did start the conversation."

"That was before you gave me a half-hour lecture on the sinking of some bloody boat!" she snapped back. "Lavender, I don't even know what a film is, for Merlin's sake!"

Lavender let out a harassed huff, scowling. "Well, why didn't you just say so? What is wrong with you, Ginny Weasley?"

"Shush," Ginny said, suddenly going on the alert, pushing her hand back to cover Lavender's mouth. There had been a long silence on the other end of the wire, but a scrambling noise had just begun, so Ginny thought they were either kissing or preparing to leave. Her concentration was absolute as she listened, straining her ears for the tiniest sound.

"I just need time to think," Hermione said finally, her voice a bit weak. Ginny felt bad for her – any time she and Remus got a chance to talk, obstacles were thrown in their way, mostly of their own making. Poor buggers.

"That's probably best." Remus's voice was distant. "This is a lot…" There was a creak of the ancient sofa, a shuffling as he moved.

"No, Hermione, don't leave it at that!" Ginny hissed, feeling rather helpless and infuriated with the pair of them. "Remus, for fuck's sake! – OI!" She snatched her hand back, turning again to glare at Lavender, who was smirking smugly. "Did you just lick me?"

"Lick you?" Lavender blinked her gigantic eyes innocently. "Of course not. What's happening?"

Ginny scowled, using her quidditch reflexes to throw her hand out, wiping the trail of saliva down Lavender's cheek and darting out of the way when she moved to attack. "I think they've stopped talking." She said through barely concealed amusement, looking at Lavender so that the other girl could see the frustration writ over her features and Ginny could more easily dodge further attacks. "They're both incompetent. Hermione's upset."

"Do I need to break his face?" Lavender queried, her face perfectly solemn, and Ginny had the oddest feeling that she was being perfectly serious. "I can, you know. Maybe not with my bare hands, and not purposefully, but I'm sure an accident can be arranged."

"Circe, Lavender, what the fuck?"

Lavender just shrugged, perfectly peaceful. "Well?"

"I knew there was something wrong with you," she shook her head ruefully. "But everybody was like "no, Lavender's perfectly normal! Not a stabby thought in her head!" Lavender stuck her tongue out childishly, but Ginny couldn't complain, because she was squinting her eyes and holding her thumbs to her head like antlers, waggling them and gurning grotesquely herself.

"Wait – Remus…" Hermione's voice was hesitant. Ginny, dropping the game, whipped around to listen further. "I don't…"

"Hermione?" Remus was closer to the Ear now, nearer the door.

More shuffling, presumably as Hermione moved to join him. Lavender began to wave her hand in front of Ginny's face, clicking her tongue impatiently. "Hello-oooo?"

"Remus is leaving, Hermione's trying to stop him."
"That girl," Lavender's voice was infused with long-suffering. "No wonder she's always single."

"Just in case things don't work out," Hermione muttered lowly, and then there was a pause, and then the soft sound of them kissing. Ginny began to spool her gadget back, a satisfied smile on her face.

"They'll be fine," she told Lavender.

"They'd bloody better be," Lavender snorted. "Gods, it's like dealing with children. They're on, then they're off, then they're on again. Why can't they just have a nice, stable relationship? Win the war, settle down, have some puppies?"

"You do know that the werewolf jokes don't have the same bite when you, yourself, are a werewolf?"

Lavender shot her an incredulous look. "The reason I can make werewolf jokes is because I am one. You know how touchy that boy is, it would be like picking on a House-Elf otherwise. Just plain cruel." She smirked. "Bite, though. Good one." Ginny rolled her eyes and prayed, yet again, for patience.

The problem with good intentions is that once you're off the road, you stay off it.

Or, at least, that was the thought Remus had as he found himself, once more, kissing Hermione. At least she'd kissed him, this time. That sent a perfectly clear message.

Her lips were soft and sweet, hesitant in a way they hadn't been the first time. Her hands had stayed in perfectly respectable positions, as did his, and the only place they were joined was at their lips. It was chaste, so very chaste that he could barely taste her, but for the faint remains of her morning tea on her lips. It ended, too, much too quickly, and he found himself staring down into her eyes.

"You're very short," he found himself saying. And she was. Standing up, her mass of hair cleared his shoulder but that was only through pure volume. Looking up at him when they were this close together did something to her neck that he found quite nice but would probably cause problems in later life. Still, it was amazing that so much… well, everything, could be packaged in such a tiny body.

"Thanks for pointing that out," she said dryly, looking down at herself. Her lips were quivering though, and her amber eyes were alight with humour. "I never noticed. Next, you'll be telling me I have hair, or feet, or other equally unbelievable facts."

"Feet? Really?" He made a show of looking down and gasping. "By the Gods, I have them too!"

Hermione stared at him for a moment and then burst out into peals of giggles. "Oh my," she tittered, the sound uplifting after the heaviness of their conversation. "How is it possible that at nineteen, you make the same jokes as when you're almost forty?"

He shrugged one shoulder sheepishly. "Like fine wine – they get better with age?"

"I don't think they were ever good." Her blinding smile took the sting out of it, though, more so when she punched him lightly on the arm and said, "it's a good job you're handsome".

She thought he was handsome, one part of his brain said, preening.

The other part – the cynical, awful, rational part – replied with she also slept with you, helped you cheat on your wife, and raised your child despite not being his mother. Well. That sobered him up.
Hermione took her cues from him, stepping back, the light in her eyes fading. He was sorry to see it go, but she was right. They needed time to consider things. After all, you couldn't build a successful relationship on simply liking a person's smile. Especially not when there were other such important issues to address.

The door was only two steps behind him so he was there in no time, his hand on the knob, turning it. Hermione stayed where she was, silent except for when he'd gotten the door open and was about to step out. "We'll talk later?" she asked then, her voice filled with a morbid hope that Remus recognised much too well.

He looked at her again, took her in stood in the centre of that awful, nicotine stained room. She was bright even in the candlelight, because they still hadn't managed to get the drapes clean, leaving the room in a sort of suspended twilight. She wore nothing special, jeans and an oversized jumper, her hair as unmanageable as always, springing in every direction. Her eyes glowed amber, lively, expectant, and her long fingers twisted nervously in the belt-loops at her waist. This was her natural environment – the dusty, old rooms nobody else appreciated, surrounded by books and research in comfy clothes, devoid of ornamentation.

Still beautiful, he noted. Still everything he could look for in a woman, only more complex. A woman with a history, one he'd have to learn how to deal with. He hadn't ever had an adult relationship before. He'd never had reason to learn how to accept another person in his life, to carve out a space for them. Sirius had found his own way in, not taking no for an answer, dragging a grinning James by the hand and Lily on behind them. But, he'd never done it himself. He didn't know if he'd manage it, to be truthful. Opening up sounded painful and fruitless.

But she was so beautiful, and she would be his, if only he'd take her. If only he could get over himself and do this thing, find a way.

"We'll talk later," he agreed, closing the door and wondering what the hell he was getting into.

Chapter End Notes

Hi!
Here's some shameless self-promotion: I've started a lovely new Lavender-centric fic for the Lavender lovers reading this fic. It's called Alihotsy, Aconite and Amortentia and I've posted the start both here and on FFN. The Lavender is very much similar/basically the same as the one here, so if you want more of that, head over there and give it a go! I've been told it's snarktastic!
Love always, Eli x
Chapter Forty-Two: A Little B&E

Chapter Summary

Hogwarts, contrary to Propaganda, is really not all that secure, and neither is it so terribly safe. There is, after all, a Basilisk in the plumbing.

Chapter Notes

Hi!
I'm trying to speed things up for now, so we're going on an adventure. Forgive the lack of Action! Hermione, but really, it didn't make sense to have her kill the giant snake. That's more of a Ginny thing, I reckon.
Enjoy!
Love always, Eli x

"Horcruxes!" Hermione called over the din, waving her hands for attention. Ginny, seeing she was getting nowhere fast, let out a piercing whistle. Immediately, the canines – poor Sirius, Remus and Lavender, clapped their hands over their ears with pained shouts, which had the fortunate side-effect of shutting them all up. It was so helpful when the troublemakers had exploitable weaknesses.

"Thank-you, Gin," Hermione said more calmly, glaring at the inhabitants of the room as they calmed. "As I was saying; Horcruxes. What can you tell me about them?"

"I didn't realize we were back at school," James said to Sirius under his breath, who snickered back.

Hermione fixed them with a glare. "Do you, or do you not want to be involved in this discussion? You can always leave. It's your house, you know where the doors are."

James opened his mouth then closed it again as Lily kicked his shin, slumping down in his chair.


"Now, as I was saying – does anybody here, outside of Luna, Gin and I, and possibly Regulus, know anything about Horcruxes. No? Okay, good. That means I can start from the beginning when I'm catching you all up.

"A Horcrux is a powerful piece of dark magic, used to bind a piece of one's soul to an object – be it animal, vegetable, or mineral. They're rare, simply because of the amount of power one must expend in creating one, and how very dark – inky black, even – the spell to create one, and later, use one, is."

"What do you mean, 'inky-black'?" Lily piped up, glancing at Hermione over the top of her quill.

"You must commit an unspeakable act in order to create one," Regulus answered, settled on his own settee with Luna's ankles lolling over his knees. He, too, was taking notes, with Luna beside him to
mutter corrections and extensions. "That is, after you've killed a person to sever your soul, you must commit another atrocity of such proportions that even the books at Grimmauld didn't explain the process."

There was a lingering pause as, presumably, both Regulus and Hermione mourned the loss of such a glorious library.

Regulus cleared his throat to add, "So, it's worse than dark – the darkest, most black magic you can conceive of."

Then, Sirius, with typical insensitivity; "why were you even looking?"

Regulus shot him a dark look, but Hermione was already responding, stepping into Sirius's line of sight and raising her eyebrows at him. "I thought we'd settled this – your brother's experience with the dark is part of what makes him so valuable to us. He's a Death Eater – big deal. I suggest you go outside and work out any lingering aggression you have towards him because, from this moment onwards, I won't be tolerating any wisecracks or other signs of passive aggression. We need to be a team, all right? It's too dangerous to be any other way."

She fixed the man-child with a gimlet stare until he forced his eyes away, nodding stiffly in defeat. Still puffed up with adrenaline, she transferred her look to everybody else, one by one. "That goes for all of you, too. Leave your problems at the door because, frankly, I don't give a damn – shut up, Lav." Lavender sent a rueful look towards Hermione as she closed her mouth, but the other girl was already moving on.

"Ginny, Lavender, Luna and I have collated all of the research we've been doing on the War, Voldemort, his allies and his Death Eaters into this document." She used her left hand to pat the thick pile of folded parchment she had on the desk, nodding at Luna as she added, "thanks to Luna's impressive spellwork, it provides us with a comprehensive plan for how to end this war with as little bloodshed and outright battling as possible. Of course, not everything is accounted for – we still don't know how to deal with Dumbledore, for example, nor how to avoid the Order indefinitely, but we'll figure it out. Right now, what we need to do is find a starting point, something we can actually do.

"And I thought we might as well start with Horcruxes."

Hermione leaned back on the desk with a solemn expression on her face. "Destroying a Horcrux is exceptionally difficult unless one has access to rare potions ingredients, or is able to summon and control fiendfyre. I'll take a risk and assume that nobody here has that ability?" They all sent her identical incredulous looks, to which she nodded her understanding. "Well, then. We need Basilisk venom."

"I'm sorry – what venom?" Lily asked, glancing up from her notes through a curtain of fiery hair. "Basilisk? But they're extinct."

Ginny grimaced. "Not... exactly."

"What do you mean, 'not exactly'? People would know if there was a basilisk out there. They're not small." She scoffed, thought it wilted a little upon seeing Hermione's face. "Right? I mean, it's not possible."

"There's one still out there," Ginny said decisively. "And we know where it is."

"Our first order of business is to get our hands on it. That could be... difficult, but necessary." Hermione glanced down at her notes, and nodded to herself. "It's sleeping right now, but there's no
guarantee it won't wake up once we enter it's lair. It could be a very dangerous undertaking."

"How dangerous?" James asked, perking up. There was that Gryffindor fire in his eyes, the one uniquely found in the lads of their house, so reckless and excitable.

"Dangerous, as in, this is a creature who would just as soon kill you as look at you – mostly because looking at you would kill you." Hermione smiled a little at her joke, turning to Lavender with bright eyes, who smirked back at her. Ginny rolled her eyes.

"Okay, so how are you supposed to milk it if it's that dangerous?" Sirius asked. Beside him, Remus nodded solemnly, a confused wrinkle on his brow.

"We kill it." Ginny said simply.

"And… how do you propose we do that?" James raised an eyebrow in question.

"With roosters," Lily said slowly, with an air of realization. "A rooster's crow is deadly to a Basilisk. It's the only way to kill one without getting close enough for it to react."

Hermione nodded her agreement, sharing a brief conspiratorial smile with Lily. James frowned at his fiancée, but didn't ask, instead turning back to Hermione and saying, with great interest, "so where is it then?"

Hermione told them.

Dear Mr. Sirius Orion Black III,

As Black family patriarch and following the recent passing of Mrs. Walburga Black, you are named as the next of kin for Hogwarts student Regulus Arcturus Black.

In regards to this position, your presence has been requested in a meeting with Hogwarts' Headmaster Albus P.B.W. Dumbledore, this Friday, at eleven a.m. in his office to discuss a matter of utmost urgency.

Headmaster Dumbledore understands that this summons comes at short notice and therefore has included a letter to be passed on to Head Auror Moody to explain the situation. Please ensure we receive your acceptance by return owl no later than five p.m. on Thursday.

Our condolences on your loss.

Kind regards,

Minerva McGonagall

Deputy Headmistress

Sirius stared up at the wrought-iron gates to the school and took in a deep breath, holding it in his chest until his lungs began to strain, the tight ache grounding him to the moment. Beside him, James fiddled anxiously with his wand, staring back at the path towards Hogsmeade, shuffling his feet every now and again. One strand of hair flopped into his eyes and he blew it away with a frustrated huff.

"When are we going in?" he demanded, turning to Sirius with a scowl.
"Calm down, Prongs," Sirius snapped, then shook himself again. All of their nerves were stretched
to breaking point. The 'mission' – and he felt bloody ridiculous calling it a mission – had been thrown
together in a matter of days, their roles sketched out quickly. It was by no means infallible, and
considering they were about to break into the most secure school in Britain, they would all have
preferred infallible. He didn't say that to James, though. He was twitchy enough as it was. "It's a
good plan. Stick to the script."

James grimaced, and Sirius could almost hear his mind whirring, the Lily-part throwing up objection
after objection. To stave it off, he turned and grabbed his friend by the shoulders. "Listen, mate.
We've carried off some of our most memorable pranks with less planning and more danger. Get it
together!"

"Yes, but when we pranked people, it was just the four of us, they weren't deadly and – oh, guess
what? Nobody got killed."

"Nobody will get killed this time, either," Sirius said firmly, with strained patience. "You heard
Hermione. They've done worse things and gotten away with it. I mean, they've never gone up
against Dumbledore, but goblins are equally as terrifying."

James scoffed. "I still think that Gringotts story was a lie. A dragon? Seriously?"

A sharp whistle rent the air and Remus came jogging up out of the trees, his face red from running.
"There's a Quidditch game on," he panted. "Just started. If we're lucky," he said lucky with a wink,
"they'll end the game just as your meeting lets out."

"Let's hope they're lucky, then," Sirius grunted, before raising his wand and summoning his
Patronus.

"A lot of it will be about timing," Hermione said, stabbing a finger at the map spread out across the
floor. The Marauders' Map, even – complete with sullen teenage boys irritated that they had to share
their prize. "Timing our entrance with Sirius's exit. Making sure you're where you're needed, that the
props are where they're supposed to be."

"Not a problem," James said smugly, pointing at a name on the map. "He idolises us. Two words to
him and he'll have everything we need prepared."

"Not by owl," Hermione reminded him. "It could be intercepted."

"I hardly think the Ministry is reading our letters, Hermione," Lily said in a snooty voice.

Hermione didn't even bother to look up at her, instead sorting through cards she had in her lap until
she found what she was looking for and handed it over to Remus, who read the card and nodded, a
mischievous glint appearing in his eye. "Good job it's not the Ministry we're hiding from, then, isn't
it, Lily?" she replied, not stopping her work.

"Black! Shud'a known it'd be you!" Hagrid beamed, approaching on the other side of the gate. "And
ye brought James and Remus too! Ah, Eadmater'll be right pleased."

"Hagrid!" Sirius greeted him with a grin, waiting for him to open the gates fully before starting
forward. If there was an unexplainable flutter in the air, nobody mentioned it – in fact, they highly
doubted Hagrid saw it at all. "Got yourself that dragon yet?"

"Eh, 'fraid not," Hagrid said and, not noticing anything odd or unusual about the group, closed the
gates behind them and began to lead them up to the castle. "Only a matter o' time, though. Now, sad business this…"

"So, if we're meeting with Dumbledore, then what…?"

Ginny took over, pointing at their destination on the map. "I'll be making my way here, with Lavender as a lookout."

"You'll have to use the cloak," Hermione hummed, rattling through her little beaded bag, occasionally picking out a vial and shaking it to check the potion's efficacy. "We only have three lots of Polyjuice, and I'd rather save it for when it's really needed. Is that alright, James?"

James shrugged. "Yeah, fine, just avoid Dumbledore and McGonagall. They can both see through it."

Ginny didn't think she'd ever been this close to another woman in her life, and she played Quidditch for a living. She'd lived in dorms, she used communal showers on the daily. Never had she been so wrapped up in another woman like she was forced to be now, with Lavender, under this bloody cloak.

"I somehow doubt this is how Ron and Harry did it," Lavender muttered under her breath, but as Ginny was so bloody close to her, it was clear as a bell.

"I don't think men can be this close to one another without certain things entering certain areas," Ginny murmured back, wincing as Lavender stepped on her toes. They weren't the most in-sync team in the world, what with Lavender being three-to-four inches shorter and probably about five inches wider. Ginny had her arms wrapped around her shoulders, her entire front pressed up against Lavender's back, as close as they could possibly go. If she'd had much breast to speak of to begin with, it was safe to say they would have been forced back into her chest. Their legs were supposed to be moving in tandem, but Lavender kept missing beats. The cloak wasn't very big, not when you were a grown woman, and even pressed as close as they were they had to be very careful about keeping themselves covered.

"Next time, we use Polyjuice," Lavender swore vehemently as she almost tripped over Ginny's feet. Ginny snorted her agreement as they scuttled around the edge of Hagrid's cabin. "How do we do this?"

"If I remember correctly," Ginny hummed, glancing around as she carefully cracked open the box in her mind she'd kept mostly closed since her first year. Flashes of blood and feathers chased across her mind as she hunted for the memory she needed, before forcing them back in. "They're over there," she said, pointing to the opposite side of the pumpkin patch, where the trees met Hagrid's land. They shuffled over carefully, one step at a time until the chicken run came into view.

It was a mesh run, boxed in on all sides, with three coops separated by more walls of mesh. There was, Ginny recalled, one rooster to service the hens in each coop, though Hagrid had to replace them often. Hagrid, as was his way, was as inept at breeding chickens as he was with nearly every other area of animal husbandry, and every once in a while he thought that perhaps all of the roosters might like to be friends.

Really, if Riddle had just waited for Hagrid to have one of these intelligence blips, there might never have been need to make Ginny kill the damn things – they did it quite efficiently themselves, thank-you very much.
(The fact that a gamekeeper obsessed with dangerous magical creatures just happened to raise chickens doesn't ring any alarm bells unless you know that after the Basilisk was killed in Ginny's first year, the run was replaced by an extended pumpkin patch, even though Hagrid had been raising chickens since the forties. Suspicious? Very much so.)

Lavender opened Hermione's little beaded bag, which she'd belted at her waist, and pulled out three wood-and-mesh crates, dropping them on the floor before glancing around to check they were unobserved. When she was certain that nobody watched, she threw off the invisibility cloak and knelt down beside the runs. Ginny brought out her wand and began peeling back the anti-predator wards someone – likely Sprout, who often assisted Hagrid with the more logical side of his projects – had covered the coops in.

Once done, Lavender unclipped the cage doors and attached the opening of the crates to each open entrance, before backing away from the chicken coop altogether. Ginny cleaned everywhere she'd touched of her scent, and then Lavender returned, this time on the opposite side of the coop, where the roosters napped.

"Ready?" she asked, glancing up at Ginny, who valiantly ignored the slight queasiness on her features. They weren't killing the things, after all. Been there, done that, burned the t-shirt.

"Ready," she said instead, casting the final ward across the centre of the runs, the ward that would ensure their theft was a success.

Lavender nodded, kneeled down in the mud (with her signature 'urgh' of disgust) and reached her arms forward, linking her fingers around the holes in the mesh, wincing at the remnants of feathers and other dirt. In one smooth motion, she lifted her hands and tore the mesh apart, the metal snapping with a high-pitched squeal of protest. Suddenly, the air filled with terror-filled squawks as Lavender leaned forward, punching a hole in the back wall of the coop, waving her fist to spread the terrifying scent of predator into their homes. Chickens appeared from every direction, charging down their runs, ruffling feathers and screeching in horror, even from the untouched coops.

Ginny grinned up at Lavender as they barrelled towards her, only to run into an invisible wall. All except for the roosters, of course, who stormed through to disappear into the provided crates, which Ginny slammed shut immediately. With a swish of her wand, Lavender fixed the damage she'd created, and Ginny obliterated any scent remains. Almost immediately the chickens calmed down.

"Very good," Ginny said, nodding in an impressed way.

Lavender scoffed. "That's me – Lavender Brown, animal nightmare extraordinaire. It's a wonder we have a door left with all of the people pounding on it, begging to hire me."

Scoffing, Ginny locked the crates together with their specially made clips and silenced the whole lot. "Take a compliment, woman," she groaned.

"Maybe later," Lavender said, tossing the beaded bag over to Ginny so that she could take charge of the chickens. "Right now, I'm going to wallow in self-pity. Oh, woe is me, why do chickens hate me, whatever will happen to my lifelong dream of being a farmhand now?!!"

The crates sealed into the purse, Ginny stood up and clipped it to the waist of her jeans, then picked up the cloak. "Are you done?"

Lavender tilted her head one way and then the other. "Hmm… Yeah, think so."

"Good," Ginny said shortly, checking her watch. "Ten minutes left. You'd best head to the
You need to respond to the letter,” Hermione told Sirius directly. "The contract between school and parent requires that parents-or-guardians be notified no later than a week after any incident involving their child. In the case of extreme injury or disappearance, the guardian must receive an invitation to a mandatory in-person interview within a week. The actual date of the interview is at the Headmaster's discretion, and generally he skirts the rule -" she scowled, remembering all the times she and her friends had been deathly injured at school only for their parents to be clueless as Dumbledore decided the injury 'wasn't bad enough', "- but he knows you, he knows your relationship with Regulus is strained, and he knows you trust him. That's why it's so soon, and that's why you need to go."

"What am I supposed to do?" Sirius asked, his face a mask of nervous concern.

"Just be you," Hermione soothed him with a smile. "He's expecting you. Act informal and clueless and then, later, reckless and angry. Don't give him any reason to think something's off."

"But things will be off?"

Hermione shot him a sly smirk that explained eloquently exactly how she came to be friends with girls like Ginny and Lavender. "Oh, yes. Things will be off."

"My brother is gone?" Sirius repeated, by all appearances at a loss to find any other words.

"Sirius – I am sorry. But you understand, there is no way I can keep a child here if he really, sincerely wants to leave us." Dumbledore peered over his half-moon glasses with all appearance of sincerity. Sirius, fixing his eyes on a spot just above his ear, found he didn't have to work all that hard to feign fury. Whether he knew where Regulus was or not, he still could have died. And it had been over a week before Dumbledore had contacted him to let him know he was even gone!

"I can assure you that the Order and Hogwarts are both doing everything in our power to locate your brother," Dumbledore was saying, his face solemn. He had his fingers pressed together in an arch beneath his chin as he pinned Sirius with his gaze. "However, I am sure you know, Sirius, that your brother was involved with Lord Voldemort, and so… recovery may not be possible."

Can't you even say his name? Sirius thought furiously, not having to act as he clenched his fists on the arms of his chair. Regulus. Regulus Arcturus Black. Being a Death Eater does not stop him from being a person.

"I want to be involved," he hissed through his teeth, keeping to the script. "I want… Reg… I need to help search for him."

"I'm afraid that won't be possible," Dumbledore said in his even tone. "You know that. You're too close to this, Sirius, and we need you on other things. You're training to be an Auror. It's imperative to the cause that you pass your tests."

With a pitiful look at Sirius, he said, "I understand your concerns, Sirius, but this is the way it must be. We will keep you updated, of course."

There was a clear dismissal there, and Sirius didn't dignify it with a response as he stood abruptly, the movement shoving the delicate chair he occupied back a few feet. Without a word, he turned and stormed toward the door.
"Take Remus, too," Hermione suggested, looking between the three marauders.

"Why?" Remus asked, looking startled to be addressed.

Hermione bit her lip, using a complicated gesture of her wand to pull up details on Hogwarts from Luna's parchment. "You're his pet werewolf, if you'll excuse the term. He'll want to talk to you about travelling in the werewolf packs, to help the Order."

"What?" he stammered. "But – I can't! I'm not – I'm not pack. They'd kill me. Especially if I'm unmated, that's even worse. They'll think I'm out to steal their women!"

Both of them studiously looked elsewhere on the word 'unmated'.

"Don't give him an answer. Be noncommittal. But you need to be there, so that he doesn't have chance to escort Sirius and James off the grounds."

"So I'm the distraction?" Remus demanded, looking offended. Hermione smiled sweetly, reaching out to pinch his cheeks.

"A very handsome distraction," she confirmed, laughing softly when he blushed.

"Remus, if you please, could you stay behind for a few moments?"

All three marauders paused, looking back with well-faked surprise. Dumbledore was still looking stern and regal, though he was now fixed on Remus, who shuffled his feet awkwardly. "Okay, sir," he relented, shooting James and Sirius confused looks. All three of them moved to return to their chairs, but Dumbledore held up a staying hand.

"Only Remus, I'm afraid. Why don't the two of you go and wait in the kitchens? I know the elves will be only too happy to see you again." His eyes twinkled brightly.

James bounded into the room, grinning widely. "He said yes," he announced, excitement thrumming through his tone.

"Really?" Lily said, her own disapproving as she pinched her lips.

"Really! He said he'd be happy to help, it'd be an honour, even!" James punched the air. "And it didn't even cost that much!"

"Brilliant, Prongs!" Remus beamed, and Sirius let out a throaty howl that had Lavender throwing paperweights at his head.

Sirius looked at James as they stepped around the gargoyle into the corridor, ignoring it as it leaped back into position.

"I feel like we're abandoning him," James confessed, mouth twisting with guilt.

"He'll be fine," Sirius said without much conviction. "We've all got our parts to play."

They hustled down to the third floor, coming to a halt at the statue of the one-eyed-witch. There, slouched against it, was a scruffy looking seventh-year wearing a silver and green tie whose eyes lit up at the sight of them. He lifted a sack in greeting, and Sirius grinned back. "All right, Bas?"
"All right, Sirius. I'll show you mine if you show me yours."

James gave his arrogant smirk and strode over to the statue, ushering Basil out of the way. "This is just between us, alright?"

"I get it, I get it. I won't tell anyone, I understand the value of information. Hurry up, though, will you? It's Dor's birthday tomorrow and if I don't get her those chocolates, I'm done for, mate." Basil, usually so very lethargic and slow, had a mask of utter terror on his face at the idea of disappointing his long-term girlfriend. This reaction was the only reason Sirius and James got along with Basil; a healthy fear for the normally perfectly amiable Dorcas Meadowes's displeasure could unite all sorts – even Slytherins and Gryffindors.

"Oh yeah? Then watch and learn." James waved his wand in an unnecessarily flamboyant manner before smacking the tip lightly against the hump at the back of the statue. "Dissendium," he sang, and stepped back with a flourish as the hump pulled away with a dull grating noise, to reveal the slide beneath.

Basil gave a slow smile. "Cool." He handed the sack to Sirius, who weighed it in his hand when it appeared light. "I got it from ol' Sluggy," Basil explained with a gleam in his eyes. "And shredded Dorcas's bedspread for the rest of it. Though, I'd prefer you kept that last bit to yourselves, given as she has such a volatile temper and all."

"Not one0 word," James promised. Basil winked and pulled himself up into the passageway, and then he was gone, the door closing behind him. In the distance the dull roar of students returning from the Quidditch pitch rang up the corridors. Sirius and James exchanged a look, smirking. "Best get to work."

"I can speak Parseltongue," Ginny whispered to Hermione.

She jumped, turning to stare at Ginny, her mouth opening and closing rapidly as she searched for words. "What – how?"

" He lived in me for a year," Ginny said with a forced bored tone. "Does it matter? I can get us down there."

"Ginny…" Hermione said, her face pinched in concern. "Let someone else do it. Please."

"Can anybody else speak parseltongue?" She asked bluntly. "Does anybody else know the layout of the Chamber? Can anybody else get in?"

Hermione gave a troubled frown, glancing down at her papers. Ginny could almost hear her mind whirring as she tried to find another way. "It'll be too dangerous for anybody else," she said, sensing weakness on Hermione's part. "I'm not twelve anymore. I can handle it. Let me. Please."

Giving a pained grimace, Hermione nodded reluctantly. "Fine. But you're taking Lavender."

She snorted a laugh, looking across at where Lavender was stood in front of a conjured mirror, ignoring everybody else in the room as she attempted to tame a stubborn cowlick from her hair. She was all ribbons and hairbands and bouncy curls, not at all looking like the nightmare creature she could be when she really fancied it. "Really?"

"Give her more credit," Hermione scolded. "She saved countless lives at the Battle of Hogwarts."
"She can't even use magic," Ginny retorted. Then, upon receiving Hermione's disappointed look, she added, "right, that was bitchy. Sorry." Hermione raised an eyebrow, but thankfully didn't press any further. Not at that time. Which was good, considering Ginny thought she might just be having more trouble with the idea than expected.

"Done," Lavender's disembodied voice said as she stepped into the passage. It was one of the ones which were blocked off in their time, but here and now, it led from the side of the castle facing the Quidditch pitch all the way up to the second floor, releasing at the opposite end of the castle from the bathroom, behind a portrait of Anne Boleyn. Lavender dropped the cloak to the ground, scowling. "It's too sodding warm under there," she added, giving the material a death glare.

Ginny shrugged easily. "Sorry, but it's the only option. We can't risk a disillusionment charm while your magic is all funky."

Lavender moved her glare to Ginny, but kept quiet. Really, though, it was becoming a pain to be wandless. "Why can't Luna do this shit," Lavender grumbled instead, kicking at the priceless Potter family heirloom.

"Luna, as you well know, disagrees with killing any animal, no matter how murderous it may be. And before you ask, no, we can't send Hermione down into the 'All Muggleborns Must Die' centre of the school."

Lavender grimaced. "Yes, fine. Whatever. Let's go." They set off down the corridor, Lavender dragging the cloak behind her until Ginny huffed and grabbed it herself. "Wait -" Lavender said as they turned a bend, "-I'm pretty sure I saw her eat roast beef the other day?"

Ginny snorted. "She doesn't like killing any animal, I should have said. Even Luna can be a hypocrite, Lavender."

"And here I was thinking she was perfect," Lavender replied, and the funny thing was – she sort of sounded sincere.

"I'm about to let you in on one of the best-kept secrets of Hogwarts," Luna sang, her legs swinging beneath her as she sat on a desk like a little fairy ornament. James and Sirius exchanged raised eyebrows. Was there anything they didn't know about Hogwarts?

"The Come-and-Go Room," Luna said, then turned her giant eyes on Sirius, as though she was addressing her words directly to him. "It's my birthday soon."

"It is?" Sirius looked massively bewildered.

"Oh, yes. I'd like a diadem."

"A diadem?" James said sceptically.

"Yes," Luna grinned as though he'd done something particularly smart. "Very good, James."

And then she wandered off to fall asleep on the couch, leaving James and Sirius to wallow in their utter confusion.

While Lavender and Ginny made their way to Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, Sirius and James sloped up to the seventh floor, where a tapestry of Barnabus the Barmy teaching trolls to play ballet hung.
They observed it for a moment, ostensibly moving back and forth to catch it at the perfect angle. When a door appeared behind them, they slipped inside without ceremony.

"Wow," Sirius stopped in his tracks at the rows upon rows of assorted clutter.

"Bloody hell," James said from behind him, eyes wide. "I'm not ashamed to say I thought this might have been a drug-induced hallucination. How are we meant to find it in all of this?"

"I don't know," Sirius drawled, picking up a sealed bottle of elf-made wine and waggling it at James with an impish grin. "But I bet the search will be fun."

"And the Basilisk?" Sirius asked as the plan came together on paper. "Who's going to kill it?"

Ginny gave a slow, menacingly bitter smirk. Hermione shot her a vaguely worried look, but said all the same, "Ginny will."

"We have unfinished business, Snakey and me." Ginny offered as an explanation, still smiling that bone-chilling smile.

The girls' bathroom on the second floor, nicknamed 'Moaning Myrtle's Bathroom', hadn't changed in the decade-or-so between now and the last time Ginny had seen it. Decorated in greens and ivories, with a habit of reflecting echoes back to the inhabitant when no sounds were around to be heard. The central pillar, surrounded as it was by sinks, haunted her nightmares, the visions coming thick and fast as she approached. The first glance of her face in the dingy, grimy mirrors above the basin sent her reeling, the lank hair, pale face and giant eyes shooting her right back to where all of this had begun.

Of course, when all of this had begun, Lavender hadn't been there. And Ginny didn't think she'd ever been so grateful for the other girl's frank attitude as she was at that moment, when Lavender strode over to the mirror, reached across to scrub a section clean, and let out an ear-splitting shriek.

"What?!" Ginny demanded, scrambling to her feet again and running across to her friend, who turned a horror-stricken face on her.

"Oh, my gods. Have you – does nobody clean these mirrors?" turning back, she prodded at her cheeks with one hand, her eyes locked on her own reflection. "Tell me this isn't what I actually look like, Ginny, tell me please."

"What are you on about?!" Ginny fisted a hand over her heart to slow the pounding her scream had induced.

"I look like a plate!" Lavender wailed, and that was when Ginny slapped her.
Chapter Forty-Three: B&E Part Two

Chapter Summary

Ginny confronts her ophidiophobia, while Sirius finds out why James was never given the important missions.

"Get yourself together," Ginny hissed, shaking Lavender by the shoulders. "We've just broken into Hogwarts, under the nose of the most powerful wizard in Britain – who, by the way, isn't likely to be very nice to us were he to find us – to kill a giant, deadly, mythological snake. And you're worried about how you look?!!"

"Looks are important," was her unrepentant answer, prompting Ginny to groan and push her away.

"Stand there and try not to touch anything," Ginny commanded, pointing to the space beside the door. "If anyone tries to come in, stop them. If it's a teacher, hide. And if Myrtle turns up, for the love of Merlin, be nice."

Lavender gave her dead-eyes, something she had a habit of doing to people who say things she deems too stupid to respond to. Heaving a sigh, Ginny turned back to the sinks. It had been a while, but once she got past the terror it was actually quite pretty, and she located the little carved snake with ease. Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and reached back into that part of her mind Tom had carved out as his own. She'd not been lying when she told Hermione she could speak parseltongue; she could. The fact that she could only do so when she allowed herself to be overcome by the remnants of Riddle's shredded soul was immaterial.

The familiar sensation of weightlessness washed over her, lulling her into complacency, a tiny voice in her head whispering pleasantries inducing her to let go. At eleven, the voice had been everything. Loud, much louder than now, but soft and inviting, like silk brushing over her skin. At eighteen, the sensation was more akin to razorblades, not because of the feeling but because of the memories, of her deep-seated distrust. She battled that now, breathing deeply, trying to keep herself connected even as she let herself float. It was harder than she'd expected – the piece of soul that had originally possessed her had been effectively exorcised, after all, and now she only had a few fluttering scraps, fought against by her own will. She found she had to feed it her darkness, which was dangerous – too dangerous to risk in any other circumstance. The last time she'd given in to her darkness she'd come aware to hands bathed in blood and the glassy, staring eyes of –

No. She wouldn't think about it.

But she was safe enough here. There were no stressors, aside from Lavender's discordant humming, which was comforting in that it told her she was no longer alone. She had a goal fixed in her mind, the plan of how to reach it fleshed out and tangible. At her waist Hermione's beaded bag was a welcome weight, warm from heating charms she'd cast to keep the roosters comfortable on their trip.

She reached inside herself, not tentatively, for even her own darkness would be prone to strike if it sensed weakness, but with confidence and authority. She cracked the shell encasing that part of herself, and using willpower as a funnel, piped the magic into the hissing remnants of Riddle's soul. She cut the channel off just as soon as she opened it, the moment the feeling of weightlessness became more heady and seductive, before it could draw her in too far. Once more she sealed away
her darkness, only this time it was done with a feeling of despair, futility.

She pushed that problem away for consideration another time.

Riddle's influence crawled through her, emanating a sense of satisfaction as it settled itself in her consciousness like she were its favourite old armchair. It reached for the controls, but Ginny wouldn't let it get that far. She smacked it back, keeping a thin shield between it and her, retaining control while dangling dangerously close to the edge. She kept breathing steadily, ignoring the weighty sensation in her arms and legs, and thought open.

The amorphous Darkness surged, and her mouth opened and she was hissing. Wriggling, the snake on the faucet made a croaking noise as the whole sink lifted into the air, baring the passageway to her. The stench of must and damp emerged, and unidentified slime. She held her breath as she stepped forward, and slid down.

The antechamber she landed in matched a vague recollection, as did the raw white bones lining the walls, and the smell of death was even stronger here. It was cold, too, and Ginny pulled her jumper closer around her, forcing herself to ignore it, not to shiver because if she shivered she just might break. The darkness in her mind was exultant, recognising the place from which it originated, tempting Ginny to stop and take in all the details. She did not, instead brushing a hand against the beaded bag at her waist as a token of her mission before marching forward into the darkness.

She was halfway through the first passage before she realised she was walking in the pitch-black. Her feet were steady, her direction sure, and yet she could see no further than the end of her nose. The implications of that – that the episode from first-year was embedded deeper in her than she'd thought, that Riddle's soul was stronger within than she'd believed – had a scream building in her throat.

Swearing harshly to release some tension, she lit the tip of her wand, only to immediately regret it as the bright, pure light reflected back to her from the slime coating the walls. The fading grandeur of the chamber only saved to emphasise the desecration; Basilisk skin and other old, rotting sections of human flesh was held suspended in a clear, congealed substance which had hardened over the decades – centuries – since the prey had been slaughtered and devoured. The green of the walls glinted dully through it, the occasional Slytherin seal prominent, framed by the gore.

Ginny, with the control of her own mind that she had lacked during her last 'visit', saw the evidence of such horrors and wondered exactly how many unsuspecting muggle-born had been fed to this beast during Slytherin's tenure, and further; how many enemies his successors had dispatched down here before the Chamber became a myth. As a pureblood – despite how terrible a one she may be – it was antithesis to who she was and what she had been taught to wish for the ending of a line, but here and now she couldn't help but be grateful for the end of his original bloodline.

She would feel better once the snake was dead, and to be the one who killed it might soothe a part of her soul that had remained raw and aching in the wake of her possession. She hoped so. If not, she feared there would be very little hope for her – she'd tried every other recourse available to her; love, marriage, friendship, family, and none of them had sealed her back together. She might have mastered the art of pretending perfection, but she feared that unless her act proved true at some point, she would break.

Her musings had successfully distracted her from her path for long enough to reach the main chamber. She thought that perhaps she had been walking for ten minutes, maybe less, because there was an anxiety in the back of her mind for her to finish this job in a suitably timely manner. Her memory of this place was crystal clear, as was her awareness now, her mind conspiring against her to force her to face her fears.
Slytherin's great, carved semblance rose intimidatingly above her, the central eyesore of a hideously bejewelled room, his mouth, thankfully, closed tight, though his eyes gaped wide and empty. If he weren't so terrifying he might have been comical; the amount of vanity one must possess in order to have a thirty-foot high model of your own face and admittedly impressive facial hair commissioned was unfathomable, and yet still completely ridiculous.

And here, people thought Gryffindors were the arrogant ones.

That she was present enough for her mind to be making 'overcompensation' jokes would have been calming except that before she could process her sanity it skipped over onto the next thing, throwing up the giant snake as evidence, and suddenly she was laughing more than a little hysterically, slipping to her knees and shedding tears that mingled with the ever-present goop on the floor. This was definitely her body's reaction to standing in the centre of all of her nightmares at once; she was lucky jokes had formed in her mind, rather than horrors, for she thought that perhaps if she started screaming she wouldn't stop until she was dead.

The lucky thing about this was that the snake was sleeping, and would remain so as long as Riddle didn't appear and order it to wake. It offended a very Gryffindor part of her that she would be sneaking up on and killing a beast that could provide such a stimulating battle, which, when awake, would be such a formidable foe, but for the sake of her own sanity and continued survival she pushed all such thoughts away.

Pulling herself together, she left her jumbled emotions on the cold, hard floor and approached the bust. She knew from experience that the Basilisk's nest was situated behind the face of the statue, in a dark, tight space that satisfied the part of its brain that was more snake than murderer. To access it, one must go through the mouth – which released onto the ground level of the Basilisk's nest – or the eyes, which released onto two balconies that ringed the sub-cavern in semi-circles a few feet farther up. Of course, the Basilisk could access all three entrances, but as a human Ginny would aim for the eyes.

She scanned the statue and plotted her route, aware of her time limit. Biting her lip, she backed up a few steps, and then charged forwards, pushing off into the air with all of her gathered strength and momentum, throwing herself at the man's moustache. She hit the rock a few feet below, closer to the chin, and had to battle her winded chest in order to dig her fingers and toes into the indents made by the detailing on his beard.

The rock was old, eroded and covered in the same substance that covered the interior walls, though thankfully here it was devoid of human remains. Her fingers sank deep as she searched for a new grip, and as she removed them to climb higher a disgusting sucking noise was made, and a truly repugnant smell – like that of rotting eggs, only condensed and amplified – was released into the air. She scrambled up, up, until she reached the ledge that was Slytherin's lower lip, and pulled herself up into the scant space. There was a path up here, she knew, but it was a slope and it was slimy and messy to boot. Navigating it would have taken more time than climbing, so she'd made the judgement call.

Taking a few breaths, and using the time to take a quick drink from the flask she'd packed in her bag, she gazed out over the chamber.

It really was rather tasteless. She liked the colour green, but... too much of a good thing was represented here. Shaking her head with a wry smile, she tucked her drink away and began to climb again.

It took little time to reach the eyes – the stone at this height was less touched by the slime, instead being merely clammy and uncomfortable to hold – and she didn't pause before entering, for fear that
stopping might end her mission forever. She also refused to look down, not until the job was done.

The roosters, happily, were most disgruntled, making little angry chicken noises as she dragged them from the depths. She clucked at them amusedly, dumping the cages on the floor and dragging out a bag of chicken feed.

"Alright, fellas," she tutted quietly at them, waggling a finger in their faces. All three creatures watched her with disdain in their beady eyes. "Let's keep this nice and anticlimactic, shall we?"

Then she poured herself a handful of seeds, and dumped it through the bars of cage one. The rooster took a second to glare suspiciously, before pecking once, twice, three times. Finally, he ruffled his feathers in a satisfied way and released a long, loud crow.

Delighted, Ginny didn't even flinch as the other two joined in their song, angrily challenging the other roosters to their food, their territory, their women – whatever it was roosters actually cared about. Ginny, disinterested in their masculine squabbled, turned around to watch the snake die.

It was, in fact, anti-climactic; just the way she liked it. The Basilisk rustled, slithered a bit, lifted its head from its position beneath three coils of tail – and thank you very much for the consideration, Madame Snake – blinked once at the opposite wall, and crumpled.

"Die, bitch," Ginny whispered euphorically, grinning at the carcass even as the roosters continued their noisy squabble.

"How hard can it be to find a crown?"

Sirius's own words came back to haunt him as he picked through piles upon piles of crap. Broken broomsticks, empty bottles, jars of fermented eyes, ears, fingers and one penis (which James had shrieked to high heaven upon finding, threw against the wall in shock and then had to sit down and drink some suspicious looking sherry in order to calm down; problem being that once he started, he just couldn't seem to stop – damn spiked brandy), old uniforms, bustiers, broken chairs, a house-elf head Sirius was pretty sure had been stolen from Grimmauld, wigs, bracelets, earrings, all manner of jewellery and accessory – but no crown.

Or, sorry, diadem.

He was halfway through, he thought, and no sign of stopping. Really, he thought it might be a fools errand, and so wasn't paying as much attention as he ought to have been. James, distracted by the booze, had given up and was now singing songs loudly a few aisles down (and not good songs. Irritating ones. For example; 'How much is that doggie in the window' is only charming up until the fifth or sixth time the man points at you and hoots – "hahahahaaa- Padfoot how much are youuuuuuuuuu?! Are you for saleeeeeee? Isn't this song funny, Pads? Pads? What are you doing, Pads? Don't hit me-)' or, you know, whatever).

As such, neither was expecting his reaction when he made contact with the barest sliver of forged silver.

He screamed. He might deny it later – would deny it later – but he definitely did scream. For all that he was a Black, he had made it his business to avoid any interaction with Dark artefacts, and as such he'd never become used to the crawling, oozing feeling of the darkness attempting to find root in your soul, the pain as it forced its way into your head. He screamed, and then he threw up – all over a pile of silk damask curtains, which would never be beautiful again.

James found him about his third round of vomit, after hearing his hoarse shouts for his help. Still a bit
drowsy from the boredom-induced drinking, he didn't quite register what was happening for a moment. Sirius was sort of – slouching? And flailing his arms? No, he was forming words. No, he was pointing. Pointing! That was right!

Now what was he pointing at? Ah! Pretty! Pretty shiny!

"Hey, isn't that the Lost Diadem-"

"Don't touch it!" Sirius lunged between James and the tiara with startling speed, leaving James blinking in shock. "It's – cursed," Sirius panted, turning to look at it in horror.

"We have to touch it," James said patiently, his eyes fixed on the pretty shiny, "it's our horcrux, isn't it?"

Sirius retched again at the memory of the thing's darkness. "Whatever is in that thing isn't much of a soul," he said, his voice somewhat shaky.

"Well, no," James replied in an easy voice. "It's Voldemort's soul, so it wasn't going to be squeaky clean, was it? Gods, Pads, sometimes you can be so obtuse," James added with an exasperated sigh, his eyes rolling in his head. Sirius raised an eloquent eyebrow at his hypocrisy, but couldn't reply as the alcohol fumes coming off of his closest friend triggered his gag reflex once more. James, oblivious, pulled a carved wooden box from his pocket and enlarged it on the ground, before pulling his handkerchief from his breast pocket and wrapping it around his fingers. He then picked up the diadem – the Rowena's Lost Diadem – and dumped it in the box with very little ceremony. He snapped the lid closed and grinned at Sirius a little woozily. "Phase Two complete!"

"You spend too much time with Lily," Sirius grunted half-heartedly, his eyes fixed on the box that they'd been given for the mission. Ginny had built it with the wood of an apple tree in the orchard (and how sexy was a woman who knew how to woodwork?), Lily and Hermione had carved protective runes into the sides, and Luna and Lavender had completed the charms work, Lavender pouring some of her Werewolf-tainted blood into the wards to counteract the darkness of the horcruxes which they would store within. None of them had been sure it would work, but Sirius could no longer sense its presence, which was presumably a good sign.

They locked it tight and shared a predatory smile as they realised what the completion of this task meant. James shook the bag Basil had given them gleefully. "Prank time!" he declared jovially.

"It's about time!" Lavender whined when Ginny reappeared, crawling up through the hole in the floor, covered in all sorts of disgusting gloop and smelling like a slaughterhouse.

"Shut up," Ginny snapped back, shaking off her hands with an expression of supreme disgust. She set about siphoning off the grime, muttering under her breath – and Lavender, curious, tuned in to hear her say "what is it with that man and giant fucking snakes?!".

Snickering, Lavender held out a hand, into which Ginny dumped the beaded bag. Looking inside, Lavender's eyes widened at the collection of fangs – still holding remains of the Basilisk's jaw. "Bloody Hell," she whistled lowly. "What did you do?" she held up a tooth that glistened with blood and meat. Ginny glared at it, a sly smile playing around her mouth.

"I got closure," she said in a menacing voice. Lavender thought perhaps it was best not to pry any further. Instead, she pulled the invisibility cloak from its depths, and the roosters, before closing it back up and turning to a now-clean Ginny.
"Ready?"

"Yes," she replied firmly. The two of them released the roosters with a spell and vanished the crates, opening the door. Ginny checked her watch – "ten minutes left," she said, and Lavender nodded, preparing for a run.

They launched themselves into the corridor after the roosters to head back to their passage, which would serve as both entrance and exit, only to stop dead at the sight before them.

"Ho-lee shit," Lavender whispered.

The walls were feathered. Feathered. The three roosters were ambling down a corridor which Lavender was pretty certain was decorated by the remains of their ancestors. Or, like, their billed cousins. Whichever it was, the previously grey stone walls were now a downy white, blue and green, with some red thrown in, you know, just for variety. They fluttered half-heartedly in the breeze from the roosters' passage, but didn't move any further than that, for whatever was sticking them to the wall was entirely solid.

"Hey, I'm sure I made this once," Lavender said, ill-advisedly prodding at a section where the greeny-grey gloop was visible. "Isn't this what happens when you overboil Pepper-Up?"

Ginny shook herself out of her daze, turning to Lavender with a frown. "How would you know?"

Lavender rolled her eyes. "If there's one thing I know, Ginny, it's botched potions. And shoes. Mostly botched potions, though."

"Yeah – right, whatever," Ginny shrugged it off and grabbed Lavender's forearm, towing her along the corridor. They were losing time now. "Maybe we should have put restrictions on the type of prank they can do. Do you think it goes all the way through the castle?"

"I highly doubt they did it by halves, if that's what you mean," Lavender sniffed, skipping with odd grace through congealed mess that was the floor.

"Ugh," Ginny said, recoiling as a feather caressed her arm. "If I never see another chicken in my life, it will be too soon."
Chapter Forty-Four: Winding Down

Chapter Summary

As our intrepid protagonists wind down after a long day, Severus Snape prepares for an even longer night.

Chapter Notes

Hi!

Quick Note: I don't have a fancast for Viktor Krum, more a vague image based on the book's description of him, so when they talk about him in this chapter I would like to make it clear that I'm not referring to Stanislav Ianevski or whomever else one might have as a fancast.

Just - I would never be that cruel about an actual person! Lavender would, but me - no so much. Cue angelic look///

Love, Eli x

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"What do you know of our Lord's plans?"

Lucius's smooth, cultured voice drifted into the room in advance of him, disturbing Severus from his studies. He was sat in an armchair in the Malfoy Manor library, surrounded by books and parchment. Lucius had donated the resources to his cause as he prepared for his interview with the Headmaster; though, like any good Slytherin, the older man appeared to have ulterior motives.

"No more than you, I am sure," Severus replied, checking a passage in a book as he annotated his writing. Lucius huffed from where he filled the doorway, using the hand that did not clutch his new walking stick (new to Lucius, Severus should say, considering it was a five-hundred galleon antique passed down through the generations, bequeathed to Lucius upon Abraxas's recent death. Lucius held the record as the first Malfoy male to require the use of a walking stick at the young age of twenty-five) to flick at a strand of white-blonde hair. "What is the matter?" Severus asked disinterestedly, more because it was polite than because he really cared.

"He has taken Narcissa's elf," Lucius's voice was just this side of a grumble, his mouth twitched downwards. "She is most displeased with me for allowing it. I simply wonder whether you know exactly for what he will be used, and when he might return."

"I wasn't aware you were so attached to your servants," Severus asked, cocking an eyebrow. Lucius gave a rolling shrug.

"He was a wedding gift from her Aunt Walburga. Cissy has grown fond of him, despite his general ineptitude at anything resembling his job." Lucius scoffed, moving into the room to sit himself in an
adjacent armchair. "She has such a soft heart," he complained, though there was an affectionate undercurrent. Severus wondered at it – he had always been rather terrified of Narcissa; her ice-cool demeanour and abnormally beautiful looks mixed with her Black blood left a sour taste in his mouth. Of course, it was so very much like Lucius – foppish, pampered Lucius – to fall in love with a woman just the right side of psychotic. If Bellatrix weren't so much older, and already wed, Severus often thought Lucius would have gone after her instead.

"Spare me the drama of your happy marriage," Severus sneered through his thoughts, more than a little bitter, as he snapped a book closed. Because, yes, Lucius might go to sleep every night with the threat of a slow, prolonged, torturous death hanging over his head, but at least he slept, and with a woman who loved him, too. "If you plan to moon over your wife all afternoon, I shall simply return home."

"Don't be bitter, Severus," he smirked. "You'll marry someday, and then you'll understand. In the meantime – are you telling me you are unaware of his plans for the creature?"

"I am rather distracted at the moment," he gestured to his collection of books. "Truly – are you sure this conversation cannot wait until tomorrow?"

"Severus, if he kills that elf, Narcissa will avada me." He was entirely serious, and Severus could understand that. While she was not as prone to violence as her sister, she had certainly been cooling towards Lucius lately as their quest for a child continued to lack fruit. The death of a treasured (pet? Slave? Severus had never quite adopted the vernacular of the privileged) would be the final straw, and Lucius's murder would become no longer an amorphous event in a possible future, but something that had happened.

Still… "I am uncertain as to what you want from me," he sighed, dropping his quill and leaning back in his chair to watch his friend.

"The Dark Lord likes you. He holds you in his confidence. A simple question, well placed…"

Sometimes, this normally intelligent man's stupidity conounded him. The Dark Lord was unstable, and only grew more so by the day. A question such as that, wrongly delivered, could mean his death. "Do you understand what you ask of me, Lucius?" he purred lowly, taking satisfaction in his friend's discomfiture at the question and tone. "I would be risking my life if I do this thing for you."

"I would owe you much," Lucius replied quietly, his silver eyes boring into Severus's. He felt the bond snap into place, and released a small smirk.

"Very well, then," he sighed, waving a hand in the air. "I shall ask. But you must give me this night before my obligation comes due. I have my own mission." He nodded to the books.

Lucius's face relaxed, and he nodded curtly, using his cane to pull himself to his feet. His limp was slight, barely there, having healed exceptionally quickly from the beating he had taken the week before. A twinge of guilt flickered in Severus's chest at the sight. Were it not for he and Regulus, Lucius would be unmarred.

"Do not pity me," Lucius snapped, jerking Severus's gaze up to his face. "This is not your burden to bear." He knocked the silver-tipped point of his cane against his lame knee. "It was my disobedience that warranted this punishment."

"And I thank you," Severus murmured with deep sincerity. "We owe you, also."

"Do not speak of it," Lucius said smoothly, moving to the door. "We are friends, are we not? We
look out for one another. All I expect is that you inform me when the time comes."

Grimacing, Severus turned back to his books. "I shall," he murmured and, after a pause, listened to the tapping of Lucius's cane as he departed.

"It's beautiful," Lily gasped, reaching out her fingers. Hermione slapped the back of her hand lightly, receiving a glare in return.

"And dangerous," she said, unrepentant. "More dangerous than you can understand right now."

"Desecrated," Luna said sadly from the outskirts of the room. She'd refused to come any closer, to even look at the Diadem, despite how much allure the artefact must have had to her as a Ravenclaw and a scholar. Regulus stood beside her, her pillar of support. "Rowena would have killed herself rather than see her legacy tarnished thus."

"Oh-kay, then…" Lavender drawled slowly, rolling her eyes. "On that delightful note, what are we going to do with it?"

"Destroy it!" Ginny suggested, staring at it with a disturbingly bloodthirsty expression in her eyes. Hermione eyed her askance. She'd been acting so strange ever since she'd come out of the chamber; freer, in some ways, but also slightly wilder. Hermione put it down to the thrill of relief, and prayed it'd wear off.

In the meantime, she shook her head. "We can't destroy it yet, not when we don't know when or if we'll be able to get the rest of them. We don't even know if he's placed the locket yet, and we can't risk him learning what we're doing and moving them." She glanced at the map she'd gotten out, open next to her, the Horcrux information pulled up. She'd added a note to the Diadem to say they'd retrieved it, but she couldn't cross it off until it was properly destroyed. They had the ring, the locket, the diary and the cup to retrieve before they could start bringing him down.

"Do we know if he has the snake, yet?" Hermione suddenly asked, her eyes fixed on Nagini's entry. She knew that Nagini wouldn't become a Horcrux for another fifteen years, but if she existed and was close to Voldemort, she would need to be a consideration.

"Snake?" Sirius wondered, looking at his friends, who shrugged. He leaned back in his chair, legs crossed languorously, and took a sip of the firewhisky he, Remus and James had insisted on dragging out in celebration of the successful completion of their first mission. "No, we don't know anything about a snake."

"He didn't have a snake the last time we saw him," James nodded, pulling Lily closer under his arm reflexively at the mention of the events. Lily rubbed her head against his cheek like a cat, snuggling closer. "That was a couple of months back, though."

"I've never seen a snake with him," Regulus added. "Not one single snake, I mean. He – well, he can talk to snakes, so there are often loads just slithering around, but he doesn't have a particular favourite that I've noticed."

"No giant ones?" Hermione checked, her wand next to Nagini’s name, her voice laced with hope. Horcrux or not, she was still a vicious thing Hermione had no wish to come up against.

Regulus cocked an eyebrow. "There was once a particularly long grass snake."

"I'll take that as a 'no', then," Hermione crossed Nagini off with a satisfied smile. Sometimes, only sometimes, being in the past was much better than being in the present. She might have to navigate a
whole new social set, and she might be surrounded by ghosts, and her friends might not have been born yet, but at least there weren't any giant snakes. Well, not anymore.

"I think we should tackle the ring next, just because it'll be the easiest to get at. I think for this one it would be best if-

"Er, Hermione?"

"Yes?" Hermione looked over at Sirius, who was watching her wide-eyed over the rim of his tumbler.

"D'you think we could just, take the night off?"

She blinked. "What?"

"It was a stressful day," Sirius said slowly, as though she might not understand. "We should leave this for the morning, and just… relax."

"Relax?" She glanced back at the map she had open, at the plans she could be making, and then at Sirius, who had widened his eyes pleadingly. Sweeping her gaze over the rest of them, she could see how tired they all were for the first time. And then, as if a switch had been flicked, her own exhaustion caught up with her. She hadn't been in the Castle, no, but she'd been on a hill nearby, watching as much of the goings-on as she could see with a set of omnioculars. She and Luna had been up there all day, on alert, in case something had gone wrong and they needed back-up, or a swift exit. Regulus and Lily had been back at Potter Manor, Regulus still lying low, watching the Marauder's Map with one of the DA galleons close so that they could warn everybody of trouble. She'd flown up on the back of Luna's broom, and flown back the same way, and she realised that her muscles had never untensed. There was an aching pain in her shoulders from the constant strain, and she had a headache in her temples.

"You're right," she sighed, pressing two fingers to her temples to massage away the sudden pain. "You all did well today, you deserve a break."

"You too, Hermy," Lavender said brightly. "Don't sell yourself short, you did well too. I mean, not as well as Ginny and I, or Sirius and James, but you know, what you did you did well."

"Thanks, Lav," Hermione gritted out. "Don't call me Hermy."

She shrugged, and offered her a bottle she whipped out from beneath her bottom. "Firewhisky?"

"How long has that been there?" Ginny asked, leaning forward with an amused quirk of her lips. Lavender shrugged.

"Always be prepared," she said sagely, and then capped that off by taking a swig.

Two hours in, and there were empty bottles strewn across the floor. It was still light out, not that it mattered to the Marauders, who knew a party could happen anywhere at any time. Sirius had happily sacrificed some of his whisky stash to the cause – the size of this stash being more than slightly concerning, but probably not an issue to bring up at a party – and even Hermione had indulged after some cajoling. Ginny didn't really blame her for her reluctance, after all, the last time Hermione got drunk Lavender had become a werewolf and they'd broken time.

Ginny had a nice buzz going. Not so drunk as to be stupid, drunk enough that perhaps her judgement wasn't quite what it should have been. She danced with Lavender, sang loudly and tunelessly with
Luna, tolerated Lily when the girl had spent ten minutes intermittently hugging her and stroking her hair (Lily, surprisingly lightweight, for who her boyfriend was. Though, from the way she poured herself all over him and his resulting satisfied grin, Ginny had to think it was perhaps more by design than accident). Really, nothing had gone wrong until Sirius came to chat.

Sirius, in the way of all budding alcoholics, could handle his liquor and look good doing it. In fact, he possibly looked better a little bit sloshed, or maybe that was when Ginny was sloshed? She didn't know. Didn't care, really, either, not right then. James and Lily were snogging, which seemed a bit déclassé with near-strangers in the room, but whatever. Each to their own and all. Blood Traitors weren't meant to have class, anyway. The problem was that since they were snogging, it was giving Ginny ideas. Unwelcome ideas. Not unclear ones, either.

*SNOG HIM T'FUZZ* was not in any way subtle.

Nor did she think it was so terrible an idea, which of all things was probably the best indicator of her general lack of sobriety.

Still, he was right there, with that face and those eyes, and the cute little nose, and that scar he got fighting feminists in Scotland (for a clever bloke he really was unforgivably stupid sometimes), and his lips were all quirked up at the edges as he examined her through half-lidded eyes.

"All right, Gin?" he asked.

Actually, it was more like a purr. Damn. She couldn't even imagine how fucking hot he'd have been in the future if he hadn't been to Azkaban. Sexy like that only grows with age.

"You should know," she said – slurred, maybe, definitely, don't judge – with a little prod to his chest, "I don't like you. Well, actually I do, but mostly I don't. You're still so fucking sexy, though." She turned her prodding into an outright grope, flattening her palm against his chest and taking a handful of pectoral muscle, observing her hand as she squeezed and he let out a discontented hiss. "Like, what is this? You don't work out. I would know if you worked out."

"Merlin, woman!" He used his right hand to hook Ginny's hand away from his chest, folding his own fingers around it and stretching it out for his examination. "Watch where you're putting those claws!"

"Claws?" Ginny scowled, snatching her hand back and wobbling precariously as she did so. "I don't have claws!" How dare he insult her nails!

He rolled his eyes, and then –

Well, he took his shirt off.

Ginny felt like perhaps she'd missed some vital moments between their conversation and this conclusion, though she wasn't complaining because seeing his chest was always a treat.

"See?!" Sirius was saying, stabbing himself viciously in the chest with his index finger while the other hand held his shirt up. Oh, so not off then. Pity. "You're *drawn blood*!"

Pfft. Blood? Okay, so maybe there were some red pinpricks – *pin pricks* – but that was all. Melodramatic puppy. "Stop doing that," she snapped, grabbing his wrist this time to stop him from poking himself again. "You'll bruise it."

"*If*?" He said, incredulously, or something like that. "Ginny, you do realise that my chest is a part of me, right?"
"Sadly, yes," Ginny nodded, reaching out with her other hand only to be stopped by Sirius again. The released shirt fell down to obscure her view. How rude. "If only your chest came attached to someone else." She let out a wistful sigh. "We could have so much fun…"

He made a disgruntled noise in the back of his throat. "I'm feeling really appreciated, thanks."

"You're welcome," Ginny said brightly.

"I come over here to talk and all I get is abuse," he grunted sourly. "I don't even know what I've done. I thought we were getting along quite well."

"I suppose we are," she relented. "But how long will that last, d'you think? I'm not betting on forever."

"All the more reason to make the most of it now?" Sirius said with a cheeky smile. "I find you attractive, you find me attractive…" He winked, flicking a few strands of hair off of his face with a practiced twist of his head. "It's been a long day, we've got all this pent-up energy…"

"That might be the worst proposition anybody has ever given me," Ginny scoffed. "And yet… I find it strangely appealing."

"It's my special skill," Sirius said solemnly, using one finger to push some hair from Ginny's cheek, the slight touch making Ginny's heart beat faster. "Sirius Black: Helping Women Make Inadvisable Life Decisions since 1959."

Grimacing, Ginny gave into the urge to lean in to his hand, not even kicking him when he smirked at the action. "I really don't like you," she repeated, just to make certain.

"I got that," Sirius winked, and then he kissed her, and that was perfectly okay. It turned out that while emotionally they might not match, physically…

Well.

"Damn," Lavender said from next to Hermione, her attention wandering. "I owe you two galleons."

Hermione craned her neck to where Lavender was pointing and grinned at the sight of Sirius and Ginny practically eating each other's faces. "I did warn you," she said, nudging Lavender in the side with her elbow. "I've known Ginny for years. She never could resist the dark and handsome thing for long."

"I notice you didn't say 'tall'," Lavender hummed, turning back to their game of Exploding Snap. "Wise choice, under the circumstances. 'Average-height, dark and handsome' doesn't have the same ring to it." Her eyes flicked up again, a wicked glint to them. "Of course, you don't really go for the 'tall, dark and handsome' bit, do you?"

"Not true," she said smartly. "Viktor Krum."

Lavender snorted indelicately. "Tall and dark, yes, but handsome was never a word people would use to describe ol' Vik. He looked like a Mr Potato Head someone'd been beaten to death with the Surly Stick. If that man hadn't been an international Quidditch player he'd have been excluded from the gene pool."

Somehow, Hermione mused, Lavender could say the most awful things in such a tone as to make them sound almost acceptable. Made all the worse by the intimacy of her use of Muggle references
and Muggle colloquialisms, which linked the two of them together in a conspiracy as tightly as if they'd been speaking another language. After all, nobody here would understand a word of what she'd just said, and Viktor, less even than them. "That's not fair," she replied, carefully hiding her amusement. It would be bad to laugh. It would. Viktor was a sweetheart, a complete gentleman, everything one could ask for in a man, including a sexy accent, a sculpted body and a pure heart. And Hermione wasn't the sort of person to care about looks, anyway!

Which was lucky, considering Viktor's face.

Oh, Gods, when did she get so cruel?

"You're right," Lavender agreed seriously, flipping a card onto the table. "Allowances must be made. He is, after all, filthy, stinking rich. Snap!"

They both ducked to avoid flying shards of card, and when they came up, Hermione gave Lavender a bemused look. "How you ever came to be marrying Ron is beyond me."

"He's bitchier than he looks," Lavender admitted with no guilt. "And such a gossip, too. I'm not generally fond of my men waxing poetic about the women they saw before I came along — I prefer they think the sun rises and sets with my existence — but he had the most delightfully horrific story about Padma Patil and her hairy arse mole." She sighed happily. "He'd tell me it whenever I was feeling down or insecure. You know, 'I know you're all slashed up, love, but at least you don't have to shave your crack three times a day' sort of thing. Apparently it was the size of my thumb."

"You two had such an odd relationship," Hermione smiled fondly. She might not have liked Lavender very much back then, but she had seen that Ron was happy, and that had always shown Lavender in a good light. Originally, she'd thought Lavender too high-maintenance for Ron. With time, however, she'd seen that a relationship requiring constant attention, in which Ron was required to be both comforter and provider, had been exactly what he'd needed. at the time, anyway. He'd matured, gotten a good job, grown into himself and shrugged off most of his inferiority complex, and all because he had a girlfriend who, despite her flaws, adored and needed him.

"He was an idiot," Lavender said, contemplating the inch of liquid remaining in her glass, "but he was my idiot." She tossed it back.

Hermione couldn't stop herself from reaching over to clasp Lavender's hand in hers. "You'll find someone else," she murmured. "A Mate. Someone new to love and be loved by."

"I don't want to replace Ron," Lavender muttered, a bitter twist to her mouth. "He'd hate me if I did."

"Only for about two days, until something shiny distracted him," she joked, and there was some truth there, too. There were many truths she didn't say, too, like how she knew Ron better than Lavender did, and in time the cracks would have started to show. How, even if they went back right now and things hadn't changed, Lavender had. Ron could never handle a werewolf wife. He was too impulsive, explosive, impatient. He had the pureblood mistrust of anything different to him, which was partly why he and Hermione had never gotten together. Lavender, too, lacked the patience required to nurse Ron's ego for the rest of her life. She wasn't soft enough, not anymore. Ron had nursed her through her recovery, and it had been noble, but he'd known she'd get better. Lavender was damaged, not broken. Now... she was damaged, not broken, still, but it was a different damage. She was torn up, remade, a whole new woman in many ways. She loved Ron; the ghost of Ron, the Ron that had been. If Ron were here now, though, the sad truth was that the reality of him, of them, would have torn them apart.

She would never say that, though. Lavender deserved the memories untarnished.
"Thank you," Lavender said suddenly, and Hermione jerked, thinking that somehow she'd read her mind. Instead, she found that Remus had appeared and refilled their glasses.

"It's alright," he said with a smile. "Thought I'd join you, given that everybody else is occupied. You don't mind, do you?"

"Nope," Lavender said, giving him a smile. "In fact, I was just off to – err – chat with the back of Lily's head, I guess." She nodded in the redhead's direction, where she was sat in James's lap with their foreheads pressed together chatting quietly. "I've been meaning to ask it how it keeps its hair so sleek. Later!"

Lavender hopped up just as Remus sat down, weaving her way around the room. Thankfully, she didn't stop and chat at Lily, instead pilfering their half-empty firewhisky bottle and slipping out the door. Hermione settled back in her seat, glancing sideways at Remus, who was refilling his own glass. "Subtle," he commented. He was slightly blurry from drink, his cheeks pink and green eyes sparkling invitingly, a secret smile on his lips.

"How did your chat with Dumbledore go?" Hermione asked, jerking her gaze away as it lingered. She had never been terribly subtle, either, which Remus seemed to get if the look in his eyes was any indication. "I only saw the first half, then James and Sirius started causing trouble."

Remus nodded slowly. "You were right, he wants me in the werewolf packs." There was a beat of silence, after which he looked up at Hermione, seeming to realise she was waiting for him to continue. "Oh, I won't do it. I said I couldn't, but he just kept at me and at me, so we ended on 'I'll consider it', which… I won't." He smiled when Hermione worried her lip between her teeth. "Stop that, I mean it. I won't do it. I haven't got a death wish, you know."

"Dumbledore can be… convincing." Hermione said.

He crossed his ankles and uncrossed them, shifted his legs, and stretched out beside her. "Can I assume I said yes the last time, then?" he asked with an edge to his voice. Hermione looked away quickly, but that in itself was an admission of guilt. Remus sighed, and used his thumb to pull her face back around to his.

"I'm not him," Remus told her urgently, keeping eye contact, green on brown.

"I know that," Hermione replied, jerking her head back. Remus dropped his hand but didn't look away, his eyes still boring into hers.

"You do, but you don't. Look, we're the same base people, I get that, but he was twenty years older than I am. Twenty years is a long time, Hermione."

"I know that, too," she snapped, irritation heating her blood. "What's your point?"

He exhaled on a frustrated growl. "I'm not him. I might never be him. You look at me sometimes, and it's like you're searching for him in me."

"I don't."

"Hermione," he shot her a disappointed look and her mouth slammed closed, her cheeks heating from automatic shame that he'd so easily caught her in a blatant lie. "Look," he shrugged, "Dumbledore aside, this – whatever it is, failure of distinction? – it's a problem not just for the war, but for us. On a personal level."

"I can get over you sleeping with other me, though, Merlin, is that weird…" he grimaced. "But this..."
in the long run, I don't want you to end up disappointed, and I don't want to grow to resent you for loving someone I'm not.” He swirled the liquid in his glass and tossed it back.

"I like you, Hermione. I do. Mating aside, you'd still be the person I'd want if things were normal. And I'd like it if, for a few minutes, or an hour, or, possibly forever – that would be good – you could forget about the him like you would any other ex-boyfriend, and just…” he gave her a melancholy smile. "Give me a chance. Me. Not him. And we could see how that goes."

She opened her mouth to respond, but he cut her off with a shake of his head. "Don't answer right now. Take a few minutes to think about it. I'll be outside." He shot her a quick grin. "Ginny and Sirius have gone missing, and someone has to make sure they don't kill each other."

Chapter End Notes

I have a headcanon in which Lavender's dad, much to the distaste of his perfect pureblood wife, was fascinated by Muggle stuff, only in a much more competent way than Mr. Weasley. Growing up, he'd bring her random things he'd picked up on his walks through Muggle towns or just on his way home, and they'd figure it out together holed up in his study by pulling them apart and trying to put them back together. When Lavender and Ron's parents met for the first time, Arthur was delighted to discover he wasn't the only wizard with an abiding love for their sister culture, and they spent hours in his shed where Arthur randomly shoved things at Mr. Brown and Mr. Brown would explain what it was, fiddling with the collection as he did so. It was all going very well until one memorable night when they teamed up to try and take apart and rebuild a car battery, and they almost burnt the house down. After that, all visits were chaperoned.
Chapter Forty-Five: Strange Bedfellows

Chapter Summary

Hermione and Remus work some things out. Lavender does a stupid thing that comes back to bite her all too quickly.

Chapter Notes

I added a relationship tag. Didya see? Huh? HUH? DIDYA????

(Overexcited Author is overexcited)

Enjoy!!
Love, Eli x

Hermione liked to think she wasn't a stupid woman, but often actions would indicate the opposite. Like, right then, when Remus had just bared his soul, and now she was just sat staring.

"Hermione?"

She lifted a finger in an admittedly imperious gesture to ask whoever it was to give her a moment. Just a moment, though a moment didn't seem nearly long enough. The emotions that swam through her…

She was confused. It was okay to be confused, wasn't it? It didn't mean she didn't like him that she wasn't running and jumping for joy that he wanted to give them a chance. This must be much easier for him, after all – he had a biological, magical, fate-directed imperative to be with her, despite her complexities and secrets. But for her…

Knowing that she was his Mate made this no more simple. If anything, it made it harder, because she had to apply that knowledge to her memories of Older Remus, of what they'd done together, of the circumstances. It made more sense of their original first time, however – it had been fast, passionate, regrettable but unavoidable. Completely cliché, too. He’d come to collect her after she'd oliviated her parents, and he'd been her shoulder to cry on. He'd held her and comforted her for hours at the near-abandoned Grimmauld Place, and then, later, he’d held her and comforted her in a different way. She remembered thinking how good he was, how kind.

This was before she'd known he was married.

Shaking her head, she tried to shrug off her thoughts of him. Remus was right. The two men were different from each other, in so many ways that they might as well have been different people altogether. Older Remus was, in many ways, just a disastrous ex. He was gone, their relationship was done, and Hermione could move on, now.

With Remus, hopefully. She refrained from referring to him as 'his younger self' even in her head, as
it occurred to her that setting a precedent like that would be dangerous. She would already have to work to get the two of them straight – a difficult task, but as with everything else, one she would accomplish.

Boiling it down to the basics; she liked Remus. *This* Remus. For everything he was now as opposed to then. She was attracted to him, unsurprisingly. Certain looks in her direction had the ability to make her blush, certain touches had a way of flushing her body with heat. She would find herself struck, at breakfast, by the adorable sight of him in his pyjamas, yet at the same time her heart would beat faster at the flesh on view. He made her laugh, he made her giggle like a little girl, around him she felt worth something for reasons other than her intellect.

And he understood her. Better than anybody else around, except perhaps Ginny. That was not a quality to be taken lightly, and Hermione never would.

"Hermione?"

She blinked herself out of her trance to glance up at Luna and Regulus. Luna was the one talking, while Regulus stood at her side, impassive except for the affectionate arm he’d wrapped around her waist. They really were well-matched; despite the oddness of the situation and the youth of their acquaintance, they appeared to have fallen into the relationship with enviable ease. They hardly seemed to talk to one another, and yet were always in tune. Regulus, admittedly, could be found looking utterly bewildered by the situation at times (and once, she’d overheard him saying to Sirius, "I have no idea what is going on. None. But I don't seem to care. Why don't I care?!") and he struggled, too, but they worked through those things behind closed doors and the majority of the time they were utterly content.

"Yes, Lu?"

Luna cocked her head to one side, doing her Luna-frown (which is not at all like a normal frown - that is to say, her lips were not turned down, but her eyes had dimmed a little and her nose was scrunched). "Don't you have somewhere to be?"

"No, I-" Hermione glanced at the clock in the corner and her eyes widened. Apparently, she’d been lost in her own head for half an hour. Half an hour! "Yes, I do," she said blankly, then shook her head as if to jumpstart her thought processes. "Thanks, Luna!"

"You're welcome," she said happily, as Hermione headed for the exit. "Young love," she then told Regulus with a wistful note to her voice, and mischief twinkled in her eye when he scowled at her in offence.

Hermione caught up to Remus at the entrance to the family wing. He was closing the door behind him, until he caught sight of Hermione, and his eyes lit up. "You came," he said softly, then pressed a finger to his lips. She shot him a questioning look, to which he sent a pointed look at Sirius's door, and she grimaced. That was not a thing she wanted to think about right then. "In here," he opened the door to his room and ushered her inside.

Hermione could admit, at least to herself, that the past few times she’d been in here she’d been a little too preoccupied by the man in the bed than by its décor, and so she took this opportunity to peruse it. The walls were painted a light green, the carpet a plush forest-green, the skirting boards a polished oak. She wandered into the room, taking stock of his belongings – his trunk, still mostly packed, with clothes spilling out of it, a bookcase full to bursting with texts, and three frames on the wall. She moved closer to admire those: one was a signed and mounted Quidditch jersey from the Wales national team, the enchanted daffodil on its breast shimmering in the candlelight; another an
exquisitely detailed black-and-white drawing of a wolf, dog, stag and rat, gathered in a pool of moonlight before a backdrop of trees in a maple frame; and the last a tattered old Tottenham Hotspur poster in a plain black frame, protected by unbreakable glass. Hermione paused at this last one, her grimace so reflexive she didn't even notice she'd pulled a face until she heard his chuckle.

"Not a fan?" he murmured. She could tell he was stood in the centre of the room, just watching her, waiting for her to be ready to face him. She appreciated that more than he knew, for nerves had begun to trickle into her as she'd crossed his threshold.

"'Not a fan' seems a bit of an understatement," she said under her breath. "I don't know if we can get past this," she joked, looking back over her shoulder.

He rolled his eyes in amusement. "Ah, muggleborns. Werewolves, fine, sure, you'll give them a go, but Merlin forbid I support the wrong football team…"

Hermione scoffed. "There's the wrong football team, and then there's Spurs." She smiled at his good-natured laugh, and moved back to the sketch. It was so beautiful as to be unreal, otherworldly. All of the components were correct, but there was something about the way the wolf tossed its head back to howl, something elegant in the slope of the stag's antlers, something formidable, powerful, in the dog's pitch eyes. "Who drew this?" she asked, her voice low from awe.

"Sirius," he said, and Hermione jerked in surprise. Remus's voice turned wry. "He does do other things aside from look pretty, you know."

"I know," Hermione said defensively, and glanced back at the picture. She could, now knowing the artist, identify what that elusive quality was that made the image so provocative. It was emotion. The emotion he'd poured into the lines, the enchantment, how he'd shaded it while thinking of the friends he'd immortalised there.

"It was a birthday present, fifth year," Remus had to clear his throat as his throat grew tight at the memory. "He'd been working on it for weeks, disappearing from meals early, hiding himself behind his curtains hours before curfew. I thought there was something wrong but whenever I brought it up James and Peter would just wink and brush me off. I remember being so angry with them, thinking they didn't care, and then on the morning of my birthday I woke up to him sat beside me in bed, and he just said 'alright, Moons?' and dropped it on my face." He paused when Hermione let out a snort of laughter, turning to face her. He'd moved closer to admire the picture and was now only a few feet behind her, looking down on her with a smirk. "The corner of the frame caught me in the eye," he said, indicating the area with a reminiscent smile. "I was bruised for a week."

"What then?" Hermione murmured, eyes sparkling with humour.

"I punched him," Remus said easily, ignoring Hermione's gaping mouth. "Of course, I felt bad when I opened it and saw what it was, but at the time I was grouchy and the full moon had just gone. I don't like being woken up," he explained.

"I'll bear that in mind, then," Hermione said without thinking, then stopped abruptly when his eyes shot to hers and darkened. She felt her cheeks flush with colour.

"Oh, I don't know," he said, "I think I would quite like waking up to you."

She opened her mouth on impulse to change the subject, snapping it closed again immediately. She didn't want to change the subject. That was a thing she used to do, yes, when she was uncomfortable in a situation or wanted to ignore it. That was the sort of reaction that stopped her other relationships in their tracks, and not at all in a sensitive way. Neville hadn't spoken to her for a month after she'd
met his romantic declaration of affection with an exclamation of "oh, so that's what mandrakes look like when fully grown!". Discomfort aside, she couldn't let that happen with Remus.

Instead, she smiled, unable to resist a glance at the bed. It seemed to have grown three times its size in the past few seconds, but she was certain that was just nerves. Gathering her courage, she looked him in the eye. "You think? Or you know?"

A split second of shock flickered across his expression at her words. It seemed he'd thought she'd brush it off, too, and wasn't that indicative of how well he had come to know her in such a short space of time? "I know," he said matter-of-factly. "Does this mean..?"

Hermione put her back to the bed and faced him full on. "I won't forget the other Remus," she said abruptly. "I can't. He's too much a part of me. But I understand what you mean, and I... well, I can do that. Separate the two of you. You're really not all that much alike, actually."

He pulled a face. "That's a good thing?"

She took a deep breath, and let out all of the thoughts that had been building since she'd left the library in search of him. "Yes." It was definitive, and he looked taken aback, so she rushed on. "I'm glad you're not him, Remus," she said. "He was a wonderful man, but he hurt me immeasurably, and together we were toxic. You... you're different, and that's a good thing. A wonderful thing."

She brushed an affectionate hand over his cheek, her mouth curving of its own accord when he turned his face slightly into it. "Don't get me wrong, I loved the old Remus, but you are... everything he should have been. You're free, and happy, and we're in similar places in life. We stand a chance of making it work." She faltered. "If... if you want to, that is."

Remus took a step towards her, and they were toe-to-toe, almost touching. He searched her eyes for a moment, and smiled back at her. "I do," he said quietly. "I really, really do."

A spurt of joy burst up inside her and she grinned. "Good. That's really, really good. I mean, I hoped so, but you just... well, you never know. But that's great! That we can try. I mean, I don't think you should mark me yet, of course, but just trying is-"

"Hermione," he huffed, happiness and frustration humming through his words. "Stop talking."

Outrage rose, and she opened her mouth to start again, but with a little laugh he dove to capture her mouth and talking was the last thing on her mind.

It started out soft. All sweetness, the relief of everything being in the open, and the freedom to take their time. He brushed his lips against hers gently, and she craned her neck to take them back when he went to move away. His breath against hers seemed another kind of intimacy, warm and spiced from the firewhisky they'd both partaken of, but not so heavily as to dull his natural flavour. His nose butted hers, and they both breathed a laugh, not separating so much as decreasing the pressure for one short moment, before they were back again, fused together at the mouth.

He pulled away for a moment to look at her face, running his fingers over her cheeks and down her neck, before pulling her close so that she was tucked under his chin, his arms wrapped tightly around her. She felt him bury his face in her hair and shudder, the twitching of his muscles fascinating to feel. She made a questioning noise in the back of her throat, and he pulled back, grinning somewhat goofily. "I've wanted to do that for ages," he said, twin spots of colour appearing on the top of his cheeks even as he tried to play it off.
"Smell good?" Hermione asked, for a lack of any other, more suitable response. He tugged on a curl fondly and nodded.

"Oh, yes."

More kissing. Not at all unwelcome. His lips were a direct contrast to the firm lines of his body where he’d tucked her against him, stretched as she was up on her tiptoes to reach his mouth. Her fingers smoothed over his neck, his hands danced over her waist, all very proper, until his tongue flicked lightly against hers and all of a sudden… it just wasn’t. Something about her active participation had stirred a fire in him, and in turn heat flashed through her, and they just… combusted.

They tumbled backwards as he fist the material of her shirt, her nails scratching the back of his neck as she tunneled then into his hair, relishing the feel of his against her fingers. His teeth nipped at her bottom lip, she licked into his mouth, and their tongues tangled with a newfound urgency. She was aware of the change of position on only the highest of levels until he was over her, and the weight of his body pressed against hers pushed her deeper into this new, fantastic place where there was only she and him and the bed beneath her back.

She greeted the separation of their mouths with a mewl of utter dismay but the feel of his lips on her neck was a good replacement, having her arch up into him, clutching the fabric of his shirt desperately to keep her hold on reality. The sting of his teeth when he bit her gently was both pleasure and loss – she tilted her neck on autopilot, the fingers still in his hair pushing him closer, begging him to bite harder, made him groan against her flesh.

"Hermione," he chastised, sounding wrecked, as he pulled her hands away with his, linking them together against the mattress. She blinked at him blearily, not quite understanding – wasn’t there something she was supposed to remember about biting? – and her expression only seemed to pain him more, so he buried his face back into the curve of her shoulder and set about blazing a path from there across her collarbone and down, until he was nudging her blouse down off of her breasts and licking at her nipple through her bra, catching it with his teeth and suckling.

It burst a dam somewhere within her. It was like, up to this point, there had only been a certain level of sensation she could reach, and now she was climbing higher and higher, despite what her body was telling her she could handle. One hand – his left? – released hers and crept beneath her clothes to reach bare flesh, and he mimicked his oral ministrations with his fingers on the other breast, and she couldn’t breathe for a moment as she became overwhelmed. A high-pitched, needy moan broke from her lips, her hands hooking under his arms to do what, she wasn’t sure, so she abandoned that path and instead, followed another. A more logical path – and it astounded her that she was still capable of logic, but on this level of thought it was a helpful logic, one whose goal was better access and pointed out the myriad ways to achieve it. She pulled her shirt over her head, throwing it away somewhere, and pulled at his, too, for good measure. His bare skin settled against hers, chest to chest, his sparse hair adding wonderfully abrasive texture, the hard lump of his erection pressing into her hip, and she writhed, eager for more.

Remus pulled away, holding himself above her, breathing deeply. She frowned at his retreat, trying to find words in her mind for questions and eventually coming up with "why?".

"Hermione," he said again, his eyes devouring her as they spread from face to chest to stomach and hips, stopping at the waist of her jeans. He traced a finger along the material, triggering gooseflesh beneath his touch, at which he smiled smugly. "Are you sure?"

Her first instinct was to growl at him – how dare he stop now?! Her more primitive brain was screaming – but she set that aside for later examination and instead gazed up at him. Despite his
question she could see the strain in his face, the eagerness in his eyes. He kept getting distracted, his eyes flitting to a mole she had, or a scar he'd not noticed before. She knew they didn't bother him – how could they? – but it had been reassuring earlier to feel him lick his way along the remains of her cut throat, and it was still comforting now to see the desire still imprinted on his face as he studied her. Above her he seemed confident, in control, and fully involved, his genuine affection for her (she wouldn't say love, not yet) stamped there for all to see.

"Yes," she finally said. It was right. They were there.

Tension eased out of him and he shot her a playful, lusty grin that warmed her from her bones outwards. They reached for their trousers at the same time, and then they were free of them, too, and Remus was kissing her deeply. His hand slipped between her legs, her thighs falling open in invitation.

She hissed at the first touch, and he let out a shuddering breath, pulling back to look at her with reverence in eyes that had darkened nearly brown. "You-"

"Yes," she said again, reaching up to his lips and inadvertently pressing herself closer to his fingers, too, causing another moan to escape. "Please."

"Merlin, Hermione," he groaned. They shifted, and he was between her legs, his cock sliding through the wetness of her. He pressed his lips to her forehead, her cheek, her lips, and nuzzled at her neck, his teeth grazing her again. She tapped his shoulder in warning, to which he growled lowly, grabbing her hips in his hands and snapping his own forward, holding her still so that he could sink into her. He paused, taking a moment to appreciate the sensation; she was tight, the result of less foreplay than was probably advisable, but the discomfort passed quickly to leave… She gasped at the change, the beautiful fullness she'd been craving, the pleasure of him as he stretched her. And then he moved, setting a leisurely pace that took him deep but kept them pressed as close as possible, and she only flew higher. He kissed the joint of her neck and shoulder once more, but pulled back, staring down into Hermione's face.

"You…" he brought his thumb up to brush against her lips, and a strained smile twisted his face. "I'm not going to last."

Hermione smiled, arching her back and squeezing tight around him so that he cursed and clutched at her hips. "We've got all night," she promised, and for once, it was true.

Lavender was bored. Very bored. Even, extremely bored.

Back in the future – and doesn't that sound funny, back in the future – Ron and Parvati would always take great pains to prevent her from being bored. They would always entertain her. Not just because they loved her, though they did, but also as a matter of necessity. Since the first attack, see, Lavender had become somewhat… distractible. And distraction led to boredom. And when she got bored, she drank. And when she was drunk, she became what Parvati (though she reckoned it was Padma who came up with it) delicately referred to as 'destructively reckless'.

That meaning that she did whatever she felt like doing, and damn the consequences. Which once had led to Parvati finding her curled up asleep in the Giant Squid's tentacles on the bank of the lake at Hogwarts, wrapped in seaweed in lieu of clothes. Lavender couldn't remember how she got there, but she remembered the Squid being rather put-out when she woke up.

Anyhow, she was bored now, and even though she knew exactly what she was supposed to be avoiding doing (see: Drunk, Destructive Recklessness), predictably, she did it anyway.
To be fair to her – and Lavender was always fair to herself – she didn't drink the whole bottle of firewhisky. That would be stupid. And she did have a werewolf's metabolism, so she wasn't super drunk. Just, a little buzzed. Buzzed enough for boredom to escalate into extreme boredom, and to be pissy that everybody else was occupied.

And when she said occupied, she meant occupied. Regulus and Luna were snuggling, oblivious to her existence, Ginny and Sirius were a tangle of limbs so tight that they hadn't noticed when she'd entered the room – Sirius's clenching arse cheeks were not a visual she would soon forget, thank you – and Remus and Hermione were locked in his room probably doing their geeky foreplay thing, where they stared at each other, blurred and looked away, only to do it all over again, and get mad if anyone interrupts (Lavender wasn't sure they even knew what sex was, and if they did, it would probably be all scientific and weird rather than pleasurable, and involve a lot of handholding and declarations of love. Which was cute and everything, but sometimes a girl just wanted her arse slapped and her hair pulled).

James and Lily, well, they were planning a wedding between wet snogs, and involving herself in that would be wrong on too many levels to count.

So she wandered around the Manor, taking sips from her Odgens and looking for inspiration. Then she took to the grounds, walking in circles around the perimeter of the house and then the forest. And eventually, when she reached the front gates, she was drunk enough that leaving seemed like a good idea.

A great idea, actually. There really wasn't all that much to do in Potter Manor if you didn't like reading, gardening, or voyeurism, and Lavender wasn't fond of any available option. In the outside world, though…

She decided to go to the pub. Not too far away, and she wouldn't stay too long, she just… wanted some human company of the casual, fleeting kind, where nobody could remember the 'Won-Won' years and didn't pity her for her affliction. That was a reasonable request, wasn't it? It wasn't asking too much?

The gates were locked, of course, but that wasn't going to stop Lavender, oh no. She followed the fence a few yards until she found a weaker section of ground, soft and wet and holding the wild, feral whiff of badger. Using the heel of her boots – dragonhide ones she'd borrowed from Hermione for today's trip, and never took off – she caved in the roof of the burrow, leaving a deep furrow in the earth that led under the fence and beyond. She was pleased to note a significant lack of insect life, even as she clawed the trench deeper to fit her – worms did not a cute hair accessory make.

Shimmying on her stomach, she punched her way beneath the fence and through the wards, giving herself a silent cheer when she made it to the other side. Until she realised she left her drink behind.

There were an emotional few seconds while she mourned its loss, and then she cleaned herself off with a few flourishes of her wand, and apparated away.

Lavender wasn't sure where the pubs were located in this time, but she knew one which would be open, so she headed there, and damn everywhere else.

The sound of her apparation was muffled by the low hum of conversation, the plodding of footsteps and the laughter of residents as they traversed the streets of their home village. She was comforted by the familiar route, the cobblestone streets embedded so deeply in her memory that she could have almost been back in the '90s, when life was simple and relatively safe.

The pub was darkened by the swirling dirt on the windowframes, and stank of cigarette smoke and spilt drinks. Lavender coughed delicately upon entry, immediately mourning the loss of the cool
evening air on the streets, but the musty atmosphere of the place seemed to suit her mood, if not her lungs. Staggering slightly from the whisky, her metabolism apparently not having helped her balance, she wasted no time in hoisting herself onto a bar stool and ordering another shot of firewhisky from the scowling owner. Bravely ignoring the strangely textured sections of her glass, she tossed the whole lot back. Ordering another one and savouring the burn, she glanced around the pub.

She'd come out hoping for company, but there were very few people in – a crippled old man in the corner, a pair of old hags near the restroom doors, and a man dressed in all black a few seats away from her that might as well have warded himself, such was the strength of his 'stay back' vibe. Sighing, Lavender slumped in her seat, dropping her head into her arms. Maybe she should have gone somewhere else. It was a long shot looking for 'normal' people here, of all places, anyway. She'd had a momentary lapse of intellect in which she'd forgotten that the Hog's Head, in this time, was still just a weird dark pub whose owner had a goat fetish. After the war in her time, it had become the DA's haunt of choice when they wanted to get away from the world, and as such it had been marginally cleaner than now and the goat had been relegated to a pen out back (Aberforth still scowled whenever Hermione crossed the threshold – her lecture on health and safety standards was likely burned into his brain after the length and sheer shrillness of it had beaten him down in the first place).

At least he always had good alcohol. He never scrimped, did Aberforth, even though it had threatened to run him into the ground on more than one occasion. Smiling, she signalled for another drink. If she couldn't talk, then she'd drink.

"Bad day?" A voice sneered to her left. Instinctively, Lavender stiffened, and turned to look at him. It was the unfriendly bloke from two seats away. He was eyeing her contemptuously, and, well, she still had pride. Pride, and no filter.

"Merlin's saggy balls!" She scowled. He looked startled, his eyes wide behind a curtain of lank black hair, but Lavender didn't stop. "Do you know what? Yes, I've had a bad day. I'm tired – fucking exhausted, if you must know. Not that you particularly care – you don't, do you? Men never do. Insensitive load of bastards, the lot of you." She peered at him closely, shuffling over to the seat next to his to better rant at him, her nose inches from his. His expression had become shuttered, but she could see his eyebrows were dipped slightly – confused, or suspicious, or hurt. She didn't know which, and didn't particularly care.

"Do I know you?" He asked, leaning back slightly. She probably looked like a crazy person, she realized. Wrinkling her nose, she pulled back and shook herself. This was also what Parvati and Ron had tried to prevent. Mostly Ron for this one, she thought. He'd hated it when she'd gotten 'all sexy' (direct quote) for another man.

"No." She replied, glumly swilling her whiskey in the glass. "Sorry."

"You're forgiven." He drawled, raising a finger for his own refill. "Though my ego is a little dented; it has been a long time since a woman has screamed in my face at first sight." He looked down at the scarred bartop with a smirk. "Reminds me of school."

"I wish I was still at school," Lavender mumbled morosely. If she hadn't already been on the edge of depressed from her thoughts of Ron, his attitude would have sent her straight there. He might have been smirking, but his aura was basically a shit-load of woe-is-me. "I was great at school – popular, pretty, with a great boyfriend. Now I'm alone, scarred up, and my geeky friend is the one deeply in love." Lavender shook her hair out, scowling, and turned to face the man properly. In for a penny.

"She's not even pretty, you know. I mean, she's fixed her teeth, but she's still plain and bossy and
swotty. Even with this—" she waved a hand over her mangled flesh "—I'm still more attractive than she is. What does he even see in her, I ask you?

"I mean, she's clever, but you don't fuck clever, do you? She has all this hair – it's a mess, an actual mess. She tried to brush her hair once, in third year, and we never saw the comb again. Why would you want to tie yourself to that for the rest of your life?" She stopped and eyed her glass suspiciously. Already, she was regretting her tirade. Who knew she still resented Hermione? She certainly hadn't, but there you go.

"Maybe she knows when to shut up," the man muttered, drinking deeply and looking like he also regretted the conversation entirely.

Buoyed up on alcohol, Lavender didn't notice. Or, rather, she did, but she didn't care. He wasn't really a person to her anymore, just a faceless sounding board for her bitterness and insecurity. It wasn't like she was likely to ever see him again, anyway. "Nope! Never. She's always bloody nattering on, and it's never about things I care about, either. Nothing interesting, it's all research and books. Grump's Law, and all that."

"Gamp's Law."

"Right, whatever." Lavender rolled her eyes, having to pull her eyelids wide apart to do it. It took a lot of strength, but it was worth it. "Strewth, I'm surrounded by swotty nutters."

The man studied her for a minute, his eyes calculating. She probably looked a hot mess, but since he was certainly no prize himself he could piss right off with his judgement. "So you're jealous." He said bluntly.

"No!" She cried, probably a bit too loud, but she'd not eaten much today and was now on her fourth firewhisky, so she didn't care. Not caring felt great. "He's not good looking either, I mean, who likes blonde men? And his eyes are all droopy, like one of those big-eared dogs. His personality, too, if you don't mind me saying, is a bit—" she took a huge slurp of her drink, searching for the right word here. "Wet."

There was a rusty sort of snort from his direction, and Lavender watched his shaking shoulders dubiously. Merlin, was he crying? This was the last time she spoke to strangers in pubs.

But when he looked up at her, his eyes were shining, and his over-large mouth with its dodgy thin lips was stretched into what could somewhat dubiously be labelled a grin. "You're drunk," he pointed out.

"Duh," she responded, doing that rollie-eye thing again. It seemed much harder this time, and it took a few seconds to wrench her eyelids apart. "Isn't that the point of going to a pub alone? To get pissed and mourn the state of your life?" She looked over his robes – dull, plain black, buttoned from waist to neck. Cheap, and hardly what she'd call party clothes. "Isn't that what you're doing?" She asked, quite nosily.

"I'm here for a job interview, actually." He told her, laying a hand on her shoulder. She was about to tell him off for his uninvited touching and then she realized that the world – which had been swaying quite… dizzy-making-ly? – had steadied itself once again. She had been falling off her chair. Imagine that!

Eyes full of wonder, she grinned up at him. "Amazing! How did you do that, then?"

"You are a very odd creature."
She shrieked with laughter, all of a sudden feeling like she was the happiest woman in the world. "Oh, you don't know the half of it, matey – wow!"

Now she was running her fingers over his face, and he was looking bewildered. She'd be mortified when she woke up in the morning. Right then, though... her wolf had woken up, and she was taking a very hands-on approach to the situation.

"Do I know you?" She asked, seemingly mesmerised by the contours of his face. "Only, you've got a very familiar nose, now I look."

"I've got my mum's nose," he said blandly, trying to tug her digits away from their exploration.

"Fascinating..." She watched him battle with her hands, as he tried to extricate himself and for some reason she tried to hold on. "I reckon she's a handsome lady, your mum."

"Not at all," He said with a sense of finality, finally pinning her roaming limbs to her thighs. Unfortunately, this put him within range of her face, and she darted in to place a quick kiss against his eyelid. It wasn't where she was aiming, but it was nice enough, and warmed her cheeks and belly. Somewhere in her head the she-beast that possessed her purred, sort of.

"She likes you!" Lavender exclaimed delightedly, right next to the man's ear. He flinched back, scowling fiercely.

"Damnit, woman! Will you stop!"

"I don't think I can, actually," Lavender laughed, lunging forward again. It was like she was a puppet, or a doll, and completely out of control of her actions. His half-arsed attempts of fighting were making her wolf – for lack of a better term – wag its tail in excitement. "Haven't you ever been propositioned in a bar before?"

His eyes widened in shock, probably at her audacity. Lavender was fine though – the whiskey was burning through her veins, and she felt so alive! And joyous, ecstatic, contented. If only he'd stop moving, so she could bury her face in his neck and never leave! "Never quite like this, no," he said, standing from his seat. The second he was out of reach her wolf was whining again, the dark clouds drifting forward, and to her horror there were tears in her eyes.

"Right, then..." She said, slowly standing herself. The world had slammed back into place, though a bit wobbily, and she realized she'd been sniffing him. She looked at her glass again, and then at Aberforth, who was watching her with amused eyes. Not drugged, then. Whatever.

Either way, she was definitely leaving right that minute. Looking around to locate her bag, she noticed that she'd gained the old man's attention and the hags at the table had looked up from their pints. Luckily, there didn't seem to be anyone else around to witness her humiliation. "I'll be off, I suppose," she said, watching the man she'd so recently mauled as he returned her gaze somewhat guardedly. Of course, not to be chased out of anywhere without the last word, she turned to the bearded man behind the counter and shot him her most disarming grin. "And he'll get the drinks," she said brightly, edging towards the door. "For my troubles."

And then she was gone.

Severus Snape watched the pub door swing shut behind her, and turned to Abe, behind the bar. The other man grinned toothily at him. "Lost a right one there, son," he said in his rolling brogue. "That'll be two galleons and five sickles, if you please."
Shortly thereafter, the Headmaster appeared from a side door, looking somewhat pale. He ushered out a woman draped in paisley scarves with the hugest glasses, who scurried across the floor with a quick nod to Abe, and disappeared into the night. Dumbledore fixed his blue eyes on Snape, for once devoid of that hated twinkle. "Terribly sorry for the wait," he said softly, like he was still thinking. Snape jerked his head once, then allowed himself to be ushered up the stairs.
Chapter Forty-Six: The Early Hours

Chapter Summary

Remus and Hermione bear the brunt of the fallout from Lavender’s strange meeting while Sirius and Ginny figure out where they stand.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There was a pounding at the door. It couldn't have been later than six, even five in the morning, and someone was banging at his door. Remus groaned as he surfaced from blissful slumber, tightened his grip on the warm body that lay beside him, and determinedly reached for sleep once more. It couldn't be that important. Important things never happened at night – or, at least, shouldn't happen at night, or if they did, at least a decent hour of night, like eleven or midnight and not two or three. He thought you could probably ignore a knock at three in the morning. If it was that late, it could probably wait four more hours, right? Except, then she started shouting.

"Remus Lupin, you open this door right now!" Lavender Brown was yell-slurring from the hallway, emphasising her words with more obnoxious knocks. In his arms, Hermione let out a moan and turned to face him, blinking amber eyes blearily up at him. "Whu-ut?" she mumbled, nuzzling into his chest. He smiled down at her, buried his nose in her hair. He wanted to stay here and appreciate this moment; the peace, the lack of tension, self-recriminations. She was warm in a sleepy way, just a physical manifestation of the temptation to crawl back under the covers and cuddle close. Maybe Lavender would just leave…

"REMUS LUPIN!"

That time it was a scream, so loud it jolted Hermione into an upright position, Remus's quick reflexes the only thing saving him from a headbutt to the face. "Lavender?" Hermione asked, even as Remus frantically shushed her. He wasn't nearly awake enough to deal with Lavender. His bed was warm, inviting, as was his mate beside him. 'Loath to give it up' did not begin to describe how he was feeling.

"Hermione!" Lavender yelped excitedly. Remus clasped his hands over his face and groaned loudly, praying for patience. "You're in there? Dirty girl! Get your boyfriend to open this sodding door before I start shouting your secrets to the night!"

"What secrets?" Hermione frowned, the little line in her brow that denoted confusion appearing. He reached out to smooth it with a finger.

"You know, secrets. Like that time in second year where you brewed Polyjuice Potion and turned yourself into a..."

"Bloody Hell, Remus, didn't you hear the woman?" Hermione said quickly, shoving at his shoulders until he toppled out of the bed. "Open the damn door!"

"Then there was that time in fifth year that you mixed your Sleekeazys up with Parvati's Hair Removal – oh, hello there, Remus!" She gave him a wolfish grin as he opened the door. "Want to
see Hermione bald? I'm sure I've still got a pretty clear memory of it. Mind, you seem to prefer fur, so I've got one of those too…"

"Stop it!" Hermione snapped, wrapping his robe around herself and coming to join Remus at the door. "What is wrong with you?"

Lavender, who was a real mess, if Remus was going to be uncharitable about it, tugged a hand through her curls and forced a smile. "Oh, I don't know. I've drank my body weight in whisky and my brain-wolf is crying. I don't know what's going on. You've got to help me!"

After a few seconds to translate – brain-wolf? – Remus got the gist of her concerns. "What happened?"

"Okay, so I was in the pub," she began, elbowing past them into the room and plonking herself down on the foot of the bed, then seeming to think better of it as she cast a disgusted look at the sheets and hopped up again. "And there was this guy there -"

"Wait," Hermione demanded, a note of warning in her voice as she planted her hands on her hips and glowered at Lavender. "What pub?"

"The Hog's Head," Lavender said unrepentantly. "Does it matter? So I was in the pub -"

"Yes, it matters! What the Hell were you thinking?!" She stopped, shaking her head. "Oh no, wait, you weren't thinking, of course not."

"Do you want to hear my story or are you just going to keep chewing me out all night?" Lavender asked impatiently, tapping her foot. "I'm here, I'm safe, and I have real problems to deal with."

"Actually, I'm not done with scolding you," Hermione told her primly, stabbing at her with her left index finger while planting the other firmly on one delightfully rounded hip. She was quite cute when she was stern – with anybody else but him. Fearsome, but adorable, like a particularly furious kitten. Of course, if he were on Lavender's side of The Finger, he'd be quailing, surrendering his every secret. Lavender, however, simply scowled, grabbing The Finger and holding it away from her body.

"That's fine, you go ahead, I'm not here to talk to you, anyway." Lavender swivelled on her feet without releasing her finger to face Remus head on, grimacing slightly as she did so. "Do you ever wear a shirt?"

"It's my room," Remus reminded her blankly. He envied Hermione her ability to deal with Lavender seconds after waking – at this precise moment, that talent seemed so much more useful than quick reflexes (even if said talent was currently manifesting as his beloved mate shaking her arm violently in an attempt to dislodge Lavender, who was holding on like it was her lifeline). If he had a broken nose, then maybe Lavender would have gone easy on him. Not likely, but a man can dream.

"Put a shirt on, please. This is a serious problem, and I can't discuss it with your nipples staring at me. I feel obligated to pay them attention and that is just… uncomfortable for all involved."

Blushing, Remus set about digging a shirt from his trunk while Lavender turned back to Hermione, who was purple with anger.

"You didn't even tell anyone you were gone!" she snapped, her concern manifesting as fury as she finally released her hand. "Bloody Hell, Lav. Death Eaters aren't the only dangerous things out there, you know? Especially to drunk, vulnerable young women who really should know better!"

Without responding, Lavender swivelled on her feet, nodding satisfactorily as Remus gestured to his
shirt. "It'll do. Anyway, so I was at the pub, and there was this bloke there, right? And we were chatting; perfectly normal, nothing odd about it." Remus and Hermione exchanged another look over her shoulders, this one protesting the truthfulness of that statement. Lavender didn't notice. "And then, suddenly – well, actually, I'm not sure I can say what happened without your innocent little ears bursting into flames, but suffice to say, I found him rather attractive. Which was ridiculous, really. He wasn't attractive at all."

"Was he actually unattractive, or does he just not live up to your lofty standards?" Hermione asked curiously, rounding her to stand next to Remus again, her head cocked to one side.

"Actually unattractive," she replied firmly. "Like, dark, dark brown eyes, really quite cold, like a dungeon, and shoulder length black hair, but not all sexily rumpled, you know, like Sirius's-" Remus couldn't suppress his growl of irritation when Hermione nodded knowingly. "Sexily rumpled? Remus didn't think there was anything attractive about a bloke who spent two hours on his hair and shrieked like a fishwife when a single strand was dislodged, and he'd make sure Hermione agreed the first chance he got. ".-but lank. Thin. Needed a good wash."

She paused for a moment, obviously thinking hard, and Remus flinched as the sudden scent of her desire smacked him in the face. Catching his expression, she threw her hands up in the air. "See! That keeps happening, whenever I think about him. I only said he needed a wash and suddenly my mind is jumping all over the place – wash, shower, naked, showering together, washing him, running my hands all over his scrawny fucking chest. It's indecent!"

Remus would have been amused if he wasn't currently fighting off the nausea her intense lust triggered in him. She was the weakest member of his pack, the runt, which made her like a sister to him, if a somewhat vulgar one. He didn't need to know the precise scale of her attraction to this unknown man on such an intimate level. He could really do without that, actually.

His mate had no such problem, giggling away to herself. Mind, she did have to spend day-in, day-out with these nutcases. She was probably used to laughing in the face of utter insanity.

"It sounds like he's your mate," he thought aloud, "but that's ridiculous. You've only been a werewolf a month and a half, and some werewolves go their entire lives without finding one. Greyback hasn't even found his, and he knows most of the werewolves in Britain."

"And he's unattractive," Lavender repeated. Remus wondered whether she'd even listened to him or if she'd just heard the word 'mate' and gone off on her own little tangent. "I'd never have an unattractive mate. I mean, I can't speak for the wolf in my head, but I'm a woman of rather discerning tastes."

Hermione coughed loudly, the sound suspiciously similar to the word 'Ron'. Lavender shot her a glare, to which Hermione blinked, wide-eyed with innocence. Ignoring the interplay, and boy, was he ignoring a lot tonight, he asked, "so, you just suddenly found him attractive? Nothing else happened? And was he the only male around? Because it could also be hormones – some female wolves get … excited around their … fertile time?" His face was on fire but he could soldier through. It was only Hermione and Lavender, after all. If he couldn't talk about the female reproductive cycle with Pack, then who could he talk about it with?

"I wish," Lavender moaned. "There were other men there, but I didn't fancy anyone, which is a pity, really, because Aberforth is looking alright these days and if I thought it might help I could definitely go for him." She grimaced. "As long as the goats were far, far away, and he didn't ask me to 'baa.'" She left that supremely disturbing (in every way) sentence there for them to think about while she searched through her memory of the evening. "He touched me," she remembered, nodding once decisively. Then, copping a look at Remus's face, she wilted. "That's bad, isn't it."
"Well, no, not exactly…" Remus said slowly, pulling Hermione closer for protection (for him, not her. The canine protective instinct only went so far against lunatic blondes) and trying to think of how to phrase this that wouldn't get his head torn off. "Lots of people would say you're quite lucky, actually," he went with, smiling at her.

Wrong choice.

"Oh, Merlin," she whined in a pitch so high he was relatively certain he and Sirius were the only ones to hear it. "He's my mate? But I don't even know him! I didn't even get a name! And," she added less hysterically, "I don't want him."

Remus was unconvinced, but okay. He could play that game. It wasn't his mate on the line, after all.

Speaking of his mate, she had an evil little smirk on her face which he found at the same time sexy and spine-chilling. "I'm sure we can find him, Lavender," she said in a reassuring tone. "Don't stress. Why don't you tell us more about him. You met him at the Hogs Head. Why was he there?"

Lavender looked at her suspiciously. All traces of Hermione's evil plot had been wiped from her face so thoroughly that Remus would have thought he'd imagined it if it weren't for the distinct scent of her dark amusement, leaving concerned eyes that peered over at Lavender patiently. "He had a job interview," Lavender answered hesitantly, suddenly wrong-footed.

Beaming ever brighter, Hermione prodded. "A job interview? With Aberforth?"

"I doubt it. He was dressed too posh – posh for the Hog's Head, not anywhere else. Black robes." She paused to sigh dreamily. "Same colour as his eyes… oh, for fuck's sake!" She scowled across at Remus as though this was all his fault. "What the fuck, Lupin?"

"Hey, hey, don't you pick on him," Hermione snapped before Remus could get a word in edgeways. He was starting to wonder if he was even needed here, or if he had become surplus to requirements at some point and just not noticed. "It's not his fault you can't control yourself."

"It'll be because you're drunk," Remus reassured her hastily, because he did actually have an explanation for this and that meant they could forgo a fight. "Also, because of how your body is handling the curse. The Lycanthropy is overwhelming for you, which means you have less control over your instincts. Mating is one of those instincts."

"What you're saying is, either I sit here and pine away for him for the rest of my natural born life, or I find him and scare him away by slobbering all over his gigantic nose? If I even can find him. She sneered at him. "Great choice there."

"He has a giant nose?" Hermione confirmed in a strangled voice. Her face was shining with pure joy, as if all her Christmases had come at once. Catching his puzzled look, she shook her head slightly and whispered, so quietly that it was barely there, "wait for it. It'll be so much more fun if she realises on her own."

His mate had a cruel streak, and he would wager it was pretty well defined. Shouldn't he, as a good person, be upset by this? Disgusted, even?

He wasn't.

He'd feel worse about this if he hadn't been friends with James Potter and Sirius Black for eight years. The two of them pushed the line of cruelty on a regular basis, and neither of them looked nearly as good as Hermione did when they did so.
It helped that Hermione was draped in his robe, and only his robe, and he could see the bruises blooming on her throat and shoulder where he'd bitten her in lieu of a mating mark, and she still smelled of sleep and sex. He was pretty sure he'd overlook anything as long as it was presented in such an appealing package.

He grimaced inwardly. He hadn't been this obsessive twelve hours ago, he was sure.

Whatever this meant, the fact remained that this little meeting had suddenly become torturous, Lavender Brown the focus of wild resentment, because what could be worse than standing, stiff with arousal, in his bedroom, next to his bed with his mate in his arms, and yet be unable to act on any of that because some crazy harpy was concerned that her own Mate might not be Wizarding Britain's Most Eligible Bachelor?

"Hello? Fido? I was talking to you!" Lavender huffed. "Stop perving on Hermione and help me."

Feeling the growl building in his throat, Remus met Lavender's eyes. "Leave," he rumbled, and – well, she did.

Hermione watched the door close behind Lavender pensively, before using her wand to ward it. "She won't like that," she murmured.

"I can't believe it worked," Remus said with no small amount of awe.

"Of course it worked," Hermione scoffed, turning into him and resting her chin on his chest to look into his face. "You're Alpha. It was in the book. Still, there'll be hell to pay tomorrow."

He glanced at the door, thinking about the runt of a werewolf on the other side, no doubt furious and vengeful. Then, he looked down at his little mate, who smiled up at him with affection and a hint of heat. "Worth it," he said, pulling her back to bed.

"Why don't you like me?"

The question wasn't whiny, only curious, but the situation made it odd. Ginny wriggled herself lower in the bed, relishing the feel of his absurdly soft sheets on her skin, and breathed in the scent from his cigarette. The post-coital smoke was such a cliché; she wasn't complaining, though. It added to the general air of debauchery in a way she could appreciate.

"I don't know," she replied honestly, rolling over onto her front so that she could look him in the eye. He was propped up against the headboard, rolling his cigarette between two fingers as he watched her, his face relaxed. "I guess you just rub me up the wrong way."

He let out a snort of laughter, amusement crinkling his eyes, and Ginny rolled her own. "Oh, I don't know," he drawled with a satisfied smirk. "I thought we rubbed along quite well."

Ginny took a moment to appreciate the fact that despite the day she'd had, the complete overturning of her world and existence, the copious amounts of alcohol, and the haze resulting from his particular talent for coaxing her into multiple orgasms; she could still think he was a dickhead.

"I killed a Basilisk today," she said instead of reflexively insulting him, relishing the fact as she spoke it aloud, each repetition loosening something in her chest, healing an old wound. Usually she wouldn't recommend bloodshed as a method of closure but in this case, she didn't think any amount of therapy or self-discovery would have felt as good as digging her fingers into the monster's jaw and ripping out its precious teeth with her bare hands. She still had some dried blood under her nails, whether from the snake or Sirius, she wasn't sure, but whichever it was, looking at it gave her a
perverse feeling of satisfaction.

"You did," Sirius hummed around a lungful of smoke. "Impressive."

"Thanks."

They lay in silence for a while, just basking in the afterglow. Eventually, Sirius's cigarette burned down to a stub and he vanished it with a flick of his hand. She took in the show of magical prowess with a raised brow, liking how it made her tingle. Now that she was no longer running from her attraction to him, the sensations he created in her body took on a whole new note – pleasant, welcomed. Another discomfort obliterated, another box checked on her list of things she'd wanted to change about herself.

"I don't dislike you," she finally admitted. She was naked, and by all rights should feel uncomfortable, but she didn't. There was something so easy-going about Sirius in that moment. Something she liked and wouldn't mind seeing more of. No offence to him, but she thought that the Sirius he'd been showing them since their arrival – protective Sirius, who just came off as an arsehole – was probably the worst incarnation of himself.

He slid down in the bed beside her, so that they were face to face, her brown eyes level with his grey. "That's good to hear," he said, and it was genuine. There was no pressure to admit anything further – like whether she liked him, loved him, hated him. He was happy with what he'd been given; a statement of, at best, ambivalence to his existence. She couldn't help smiling. He was what she needed just then. Undemanding. How very dog of him.

"Ginny?" he asked suddenly, his face solemn. She frowned down at him, startled by a feeling of foreboding.

Oh, she thought. Don't ruin this.

"Yeah?" she asked, attempting to keep the apprehension from her voice.

She must not have done a good job because he raised an eyebrow, but shook it off just as quickly to ask, equally seriously, "Is the sex part over for the night?"

"Yeah," she laughed, half relief, half genuine amusement. "I think so. Mood's gone."

"Oh, good," he sighed with a smile, grabbing her hand and pulling it up towards his head. "Because I've got this itch, right – yeah, that's it."

Ginny smirked as she scratched him behind the ear at his direction, fondness blooming in her when he went cross-eyed with pleasure. Her fingers then migrated upwards, through his tousled hair, down over his scalp to the back of his neck, and around again. He made a contented noise at the back of his throat, closing his eyes, then re-opening them a slit to pause her in her movements and eye her speculatively.

"What?"

He opened his mouth, then closed it again, his cheeks tinted pink. Intrigued, Ginny made a 'go on' gesture with her hands. "Can we cuddle?" he asked, finally.

"Okay…" she replied, moving in closer, only to be stopped by a hand to her collarbone. She paused and he turned over so that his back was to her. Reaching around, he grabbed her arm and yanked her forward so that she was plastered against his back, with a mouthful of silky black hair. "Better?" she asked archly once her mouth was free of his mane.

"Yeah," he sighed, and she giggled. There was a beat of silence, and then his giant hand was
groping behind his head again. She gave him her free one and he rubbed it into his hair again.

Scratch that 'undemanding' part. "You're going to be high-maintenance, aren't you," she murmured softly as she stroked his hair, snorting when he snuggled back into her, steadfastly ignoring the warmth somewhere in the region of her heart.

"Don't stop," he ordered in lieu of answering, wrapping his arm around hers where she had it hooked around his waist and settling into the pillow. "Just keep doing that and we'll be fine."

Chapter End Notes

Because what dog doesn't like pets? Much pet for Padfoot. Even smokers need snuggles.

Love, Eli x
Interlude: Minerva McGonagall

Minerva McGonagall often thanked the Gods for making her a cat. It was an animagus form that had its upsides and downsides – needing two naps a day was a pain, but being her own portable shower helped make up for it – just as any other did, but she muddled through, and never once had she been ungrateful for her secondary form. It was helpful, to be a cat in a school. Cats could help out where humans often could not without great effort and sacrifice.

When her chambers had mice, for instance.

When Mrs. Norris was being troublesome, too.

Most of all, however, it was when she was summoned by Albus Dumbledore in the early morning, and she had to harness all of her feline patience to deal with whatever he had brewing.

She stood across the desk from him in her nightgown, waiting. She'd been his Deputy for eight years now, and one of the first things she'd learned was not to push him when he did not wish to be pushed. Brilliant wizard, he was – slow tempered, he was not.

So she stood, and she waited, and she stood and waited, and stood and waited over and over. With the amount of hours she spent standing around and waiting for Albus to deem it necessary to engage her in conversation, she could likely have discovered a second animagus form. Or, more realistically, caught up on all that marking she had piled up on her desk, or found a competent Potions Master, or…

Well, the list was endless. And pointless to make, for regardless of what she could be doing, the fact remained that she was here, waiting for the greatest – and possibly, most narcissistic – wizard in Britain to deign to acknowledge her presence.

No, Minnie, she sharply scolded herself for her uncharitable thoughts. A matter of course, nowadays. Not because she was trying to be a better person – at forty-three she was more or less stuck in her ways – but because she wasn't an idiot, and she knew what those persistent stabbing pains meant. Poppy can call them cluster headaches all she likes, Minerva knew legilimency when she felt it. Not that it wasn't already a pathetic cover story; whoever heard of an entire staff, with the possible exception of the less bright, suffering from the same non-infectious neurological affliction? And those were only the times he was being less subtle about it.

Damnit, Minnie!

Thinking about something different… Regulus Black still hadn't been found. Perhaps he'd been killed. It would be a shame if he had, he was a true prodigy in Charms. Not her subject, she knew, but one could still mourn the loss of a great mind. Like Severus Snape, who she had never liked so much as pitied, what with him having such awful parents and the relentless abuse he'd suffered at their hands. Another thing Albus hadn't – Minnie!

Right. Well. Happy things, then. Lily Evans and James Potter were to be married later that spring, nearing summer. That should be a joyous occasion. She could still remember little eleven-year-old James following Lily from class to class with a somewhat rumpled daisy in his outstretched hands, ever the devoted suitor. She wondered if they would have daisies at the wedding. Definitely not lilies, Dorea would never allow anything so trite. Would they marry at the Manor or Godric's Hollow? Were it not for the war, she would think the Manor would be the best choice, but it was the family safe house and as such perhaps shouldn't be compromised for what was, essentially, a party.
James and Lily would be hand-fasted in private beforehand, anyway, so perhaps they'd forgo the party altogether. Albus wouldn't like it; his response upon hearing of the wedding was to immediately try to spin it for propaganda purposes, and he couldn't make a wedding a symbol of Light if nobody was invited.

She felt the urge to itch her nose but ignored it. She was good at standing still, serene, always had been. She'd used to have a governess who would walk around her, smacking her legs and back and breasts if they weren't perfectly poised, making her stand for hours on end, adding hours more if she happened to wobble. She'd loathed her, of course, and the lessons too, but she had to admit that the hours of coaching had paid off; she'd grown into a powerful witch, some would say beautiful, definitely confident but not so much as to be unladylike. Her father would be proud.

Finally, Dumbledore looked up from his desk, effecting a look of surprise at her appearance. "Minerva! Good, good. Take a seat, won't you? Lemon drop?"

"It's four in the morning, Albus," she said blandly.

"Is it?" he made a show of looking shocked when his eyes flicked to the clock. She didn't know why he bothered. It was like she was watching a rehearsal of the show he would put on later, for those who didn't know him quite as well as she.

"And well you know it," she said smartly, sitting and smoothing her nightgown over her knees. "What is it, Albus?"

He hemmed and hawed for a moment, then settled. "Have you heard from the Potters lately?"

She hid her confusion behind a mask. The Potters? What did he want with the Potters? If there had ever been a family more totally devoted to Albus and his 'Greater Good', Minerva had never met them. "No," she said slowly. "Why?"

"I had an interesting meeting this evening," he divulged, popping one of the hard-boiled sweets in his mouth. She wondered if they contained Veritaserum. It seemed like something he'd do, but then again, it would be a useless effort. Those same sweets had been on his desk for something close to ten years, and would likely be there for ten more. Nobody, not even those who enjoyed them, seemed to accept his offer. "In the Hog's Head."

Minerva thought back through his schedule, and nodded. That made sense. He'd had a job interview with Severus Snape, and he'd always been… interesting.

"With Sybill Trelawney," he added, and Minerva almost choked on air.

"Excuse me?" she said before she could stop herself. "That old fraud?"

"Now, now, Minerva." He chastised lightly. "She's the granddaughter of the great Cassandra, you know."

"For the last time," she seethed, "her talent is Prophecy. Prophecy cannot be predicted, nor summoned at will. Trelawney is not a Diviner, she is a Seer. By all means, keep her closeted away somewhere you can make use of her talent, but do not inflict her on students who might well have those skills she so lacks!"

It was an old argument, but one Minerva felt quite strongly about. Since she'd seen Trelawney's name on his list two years ago, they'd been having words.

"Oh, but I must hire her, Minerva," Albus said. "For she Prophesised, right there in front of me!"
Minerva paused to think about this. Oh, *Circe, Morgana and Nimue!* She was going to have to put up with the daft bint. Likely, everyday for the rest of her life, because Merlin knows you'd have to pry Hogwarts from Albus's cold dead hands to get him away from it, and he liked consistency in his staff.

Well, as much as could be achieved, what with the curse on the Defence position.

She was pulled from the waking nightmare that would be breakfasts with Trelawney by Albus's humming. Humming, when it came to Albus, was bad. It meant he was about to do something that would likely end in someone's death. Not by his hand, of course, but ever by his will.

Minerva would leave if she could, but she was still hoping that Albus might eventually retire – his being ninety-eight and all – and she could take up the reigns. She loved the school, and the students, and even if he didn't eventually retire (or disintegrate into dust one morning, as she sometimes viciously hoped he might) as the only person who had some measure of control over Albus (though she often wondered whether she'd imagined even that) she owed it to them all to exercise it as frequently as she could.

As she tried, then. "What does that have to do with the Potters?" she asked.

"They've been hiding things from me," he said mysteriously, though she didn't miss the undercurrent of anger. "The prophecy – the gist of it was that some weapon the Potters had in their midst would be the end of the… war."

She wondered at the edit he'd made to the end there, like he was going to say something entirely different. *The end of what?* She wondered.

He steadied himself and turned burning eyes on Minerva. She left her mind blank and focused on his words, even as the 'headaches' started up again. "I will be visiting them soon - this morning, perhaps. I would like you to attend me on this matter."

"Of course, Albus," she said dutifully, her mind still empty of everything, even as he rummaged around. "You know I'll do anything I can to help."

He dismissed her shortly after, and she marched purposefully back to her room. The Potters? Hiding some sort of weapon from Albus? She had absolute trust in her old friends, and if they thought something ought to be hidden from Albus, then she agreed. And there was no way she'd allow him to find it, then punish them in whatever cruel, insidious way he chose. Not if it could help. Not if *she* could help.

Her loyalty, superficially, might be to Albus, but she had three greater loyalties he often failed to take into account - to Scotland, to family, and to *peace*.

Albus was many things, but in this war? He was a General. And the thing about Generals - they don't want the war to end, they just want to win.

Which, in her book, excluded him from any of the above categories.

She needed to play her part in preventing this 'weapon' from falling into the wrong hands. Trusting her actions to the guiding hand of Fate, she grabbed her quill, scribbled out a message, and threw it through the Floo.

Pushing back onto her heels, she felt with an eerie certainty that she'd just done something she could never take back.
They couldn't have had longer than an hour's sleep before they were woken again, this time by Dorea shouting Remus's name from outside their door. Hermione flung it open, the adrenalin punch through her gut propelling her out of bed before she'd even had to think about it. "Hermione, dear," Dorea stammered, looking taken aback. Then, quickly, she pulled herself together. "Get dressed, and then get out. I need you all gone – all of you, even James – by breakfast. Don't ask questions, just do it."

Dorea disappeared and Remus, halfway out of bed, turned to look at Hermione, shocked. She steeled herself quickly and nodded at him. "You heard her. I'll meet you in the hall in ten. Ginny!" She shouted the last as the redhead darted out of Sirius's room towards her own. Hermione joined her, the two of them jogging towards their destination. "Any idea?"

Ginny made a noise in the back of her throat that Hermione took as a no, and then they were at their rooms again. Hermione grabbed her beaded bag and shoved the few stray pieces of clothing she'd left lying around into it, before sprinting down the stairs to their 'war room', as they'd nicknamed the disused smoking parlour they'd made their own. All of their research was there, having eventually been relocated from the library, and she found Charlus there too, piling their research onto a chair. They exchanged harried nods, Charlus's expression tight.

Throwing the lot into her bag, not bothering with organization, took less than a minute, and Charlus began to meticulously layer the dust back over the furniture with his wand. That couldn't possibly be a good sign, but she didn't want to ask. There wasn't time.

Ginny, Luna, Regulus, Lily, Lavender, James, Sirius and Remus had all gathered in the entrance hall by the time she arrived back; holding trunks nearly bursting at the seams with their belongings, they turned as one to eye Hermione's bag dubiously. To be fair to them, so was she. Sure, it had an extension charm on it, but that only meant so much.

"Here," Dorea called, running down the stairs in her nightgown, housecoat billowing behind her.
She tossed Ginny a tote with a cross-stitched kitten on the front. "I hope you don't mind, but I borrowed your charm-work," she informed Hermione matter-of-factly without looking at her. "It's an experiment, but it should work."

Shoving her arm in up to the pit, Ginny grinned delightedly. "Thanks, Mrs. Potter!"

It was decided that Ginny would take luggage, and Hermione would take the essentials they might need on the go – books, research, the horcrux chest, the box of basilisk fangs, as many potions as she could fit into another chest, a vast quantity of elf-made food and drink, her tent (which, if it had been small when there had just been Harry, Ron and her, would now be positively microscopic), a water filtration system, potions ingredients, three back-up wands (that had been with her since the nineties, or, to be exact, the 2nd May 1998 when she'd stolen them from Death Eaters she'd defeated and kept a hold of because if there was one thing Hermione was it was prepared), four broomsticks, a box of old shoes (for emergency portkey purposes), cauldrons, arithmetic apparatus and a whole host of general debris which may or may not become useful at some point.

Peering into the bag once everything was packed, Hermione wondered if perhaps Ginny had gotten the better end of that deal after all. There were only eight suitcases, whereas the inside of Hermione's bag looked rather like Dr. Frankenstein's lab if Dr. Frankenstein was also a hoarder.

"Where will we go?" James was asking his mum, who was ignoring him in favour of examining the picture of Roseberry Topping that hung by the entrance to the formal reception room.

"What colours," Dorea hummed appreciatively in return, which was basically the upper-class adult version of sticking your fingers in your ear and singing "LALALALALA" until the person speaking to you goes away.

"I have a tent," Hermione said, meaning to be reassuring but failing completely.

James stared at her in horror. "A tent? Just the one?"

"It's quite big," Hermione sniffed.

"Big enough for eight?" He prodded. "Comfortable?"

"It used to be the Weasleys'…" Hermione replied evasively, and James scoffed.

"No. No tents."

"Do you have a better idea?" she demanded.

"We could stay at my parents' place…" Remus offered hesitantly, with a look on his face that said he wanted them to say no. Hermione didn't blame them – his parents, Lyall and Hope, had died only the year before, and she could tell the wound was fresh. But if they had no other option…

"Or," Regulus piped up, his eyes fixed on Sirius, "we could just use Sirius's house."

Everyone turned to look at him at that, even Dorea, whose surprise was apparent. "Didn't your house burn down?" Lavender asked bluntly. "Because I'm pretty sure it did."

Sirius made a noise in the back of his throat, glaring weakly at his brother. "Not Grimmauld," he admitted quietly. "I have another house. It used to be Uncle Alphard's."

"And it's been yours for five years," Regulus said impatiently, a modicum of his haughtiness coming into his tone. "You've really not told anyone?"
"I've not been," Sirius replied quietly. "Why should I?"

"Oh, I don't know," Regulus scoffed in clipped tones. "Perhaps because that is, after all, the point of a house – to live in it."

Something flashed across Sirius's face – pain? – but it was gone too quickly to decipher properly, and then he was blank and shrugging languidly. "I suppose we could use Alphard's place." He became a little more animated as he went on, "he'd have loved that, his house being the headquarters of a resistance – a resistance to the resistance, even. He never did like Dumbledore. Said he was a pompous old git."

"Quite right of him, too," Regulus sniffed, flicking a non-existent piece of lint from his sleeve. "But then, he always was smarter than you."

"That's settled then," Dorea said loudly, cutting into the start of Sirius's snarled reply. "You'll stay in Alphard's house. It's warded, I trust?"


"Excellent. Don't tell me where it is – plausible deniability, and all that. So long as I don't know exactly where you are, I can claim ignorance. Now," she checked her watch, tapping the face with two long fingers. "You'd best be off."

"But why?" James whined, pouting up at his mother, who, again, ignored him in favour of smiling kindly at them all.

"Be well," she bid them. "Hermione, dear, can I speak with you for a moment?"

Hermione was led to an alcove further down one of the halls leading off the entryway, where Dorea turned to her, all traces of gaiety gone. "I need you to do me a favour."

Hermione expected something obvious, like looking out for James, or perhaps an errand Dorea couldn't get to because she wasn't as invisible as Hermione, or, even, for her to look her in the eye and say "kill the bastard", like they do in films. So, when Dorea made her request, Hermione was shocked, rocking back on her heels from the force of the emotions spiralling inside her. Guilt, alarm, disgust, horror…

"No."

"Hermione, you must."

"I said 'no', Mrs. Potter. I will not." Hermione closed her eyes, breathing deep to calm herself. "You can't ask me to do that."

Her lips crimping at the sides, Dorea stared at her for a few moments. "Hermione," she said slowly, eventually. "It would not be for long, and it would be consensual. You understand that, yes? It's absolutely necessary."

Ignoring all of that, Hermione asked instead, "why? And why are we leaving?"

"I got a letter," Dorea said smartly. "Or, rather, Charlus got a letter – she always did like him better – from Minerva. You know Minerva?" Hermione nodded. "Well, we're not terribly close, but we're friends, and she thought I ought to know that Albus was on the warpath. I think, and you'll agree, that it would be better for everyone if you were gone when he arrives."
Stunned by the idea that McGonagall would go behind Dumbledore's back for something like this, Hermione could only nod again. It seemed she was continually underestimating the people of 1979—though that was only to be expected. All she knew of these people were stories, retellings of events, and no matter how well described they were the fact remained that she didn't know much more than a vague outline, and the people were somewhat one-note. To ask the older generation about the major players of the time in the 90's was to receive some platitude—"he was a good man", or "she was beautiful and clever". It didn't help that most of them had been dead, which in Hermione's experience only made people less inclined to be truthful about a person, and to Hermione, a person never seemed real until she knew about their flaws.

"You must do this, Hermione, not for me or Charlus, but for my son and his friends. My sons. Albus would not be forgiving if he uncovered this little plot, not at all, and the least we can do is delay the discovery until you all have some protection." She smiled wickedly. "The protection of having won a war, as I've no doubt you will."

"Mrs. Potter -" Hermione began again, her voice strained. "Don't you think it would be suspicious if he arrived and you and Charlus were... well, you know. He'd notice."

"Not hardly," Dorea sniffed. "I think you underestimate your own talents. He'd read my mind and find the truth—or, what will be known as the truth, once you do this thing. He'll leave, unfulfilled and impotent, which I'm sure will be prize enough for me to watch. Then, when the danger is passed, you'll fix it."

"What if I die, Mrs. Potter? What then?"

"Such dramatics," Dorea drawled. "And so little faith. Do you really think Remus would just let you die?" Without waiting for a response, she reached into her pockets and drew out a set of vials, clinking them together in her fingers before passing them over to Hermione. She took them without thought, then tried to push them back, her eyes carefully avoiding looking at the silvery-white substance contained within.

"No. Don't make me do this, Dorea, please."

Dorea plucked the vials out of Hermione's hand and dropped them into the bag at her waist, Hermione frozen with sheer anxiety. "We don't have time to squabble over this any longer. I was under the impression, when you arrived, when I watched your memory, and when we chatted later, that you were willing to do anything to win this war. Has the definition of 'anything' changed, or did you, in fact, only mean 'anything' as it pertains to your personal agenda?" She affected an innocent look that was anything but as she sang, "my, my, what a very Dumbledore way of doing things. Others might call it hypocritical, of course, but... well, I find your ruthlessness admirable."

Her fist clenching around the grip on her wand, Hermione grit her teeth and nodded. "Fine, I'll do it," she snapped, her voice tight. "Just—just shut up."

Dorea smiled benignly, but even she couldn't mask the gleam of victory in her eyes.

Albus landed directly outside of the Potter Manor wards, Minerva landing simultaneously at his side. The two of them peered through the gates at the house in the distance, the sun shining weakly beyond it, the clouds shadowing the light lending the house a sleeping air. The windows were dark and empty, the grounds quiet. Not at all what one might expect from a house filled with teenagers, Minerva thought to herself as they pressed forward.

The gates slid smoothly open for them, a sign that someone within was adjusting the wards as they
passed through, and they crunched up the gravel together. Minerva wanted more than anything to ask more questions, but Albus had shown a marked reluctance to discuss anything about the issue – the prophecy, the Potters, the Order. Instead, they had gone through the motions in utter silence.

Charlus waited in the doorway, squinting off into the distance as they clomped up. His casual demeanour – the way his arms were folded across his chest, sleeves rolled up to just below the elbow, ankles crossed as he leaned one shoulder against the doorframe – spoke of a man with nothing to hide, nor did he seem terribly anxious to see them, shooting Minerva that famous Potter smile, a crooked grin with sparkling eyes that spoke to mischief and impending mayhem. He might be twenty years older than her, but it was an invisible twenty years, and Minerva had the same flutter in her stomach she had had as a girl twenty-seven years ago when he'd come to guest lecture her class on the merits of Apprenticeship.

Luckily, the familiarity of the intervening decades had taught her how to deal with such silly things as hormones, and she no longer became a puddle of lust upon direct eye-contact. Which was helpful considering she and Charlus played in the same Sunday Quidditch league (despite its having been disbanded after the abduction of the muggle-born captain), sat on the Mastery panel together, she had taught his son Transfiguration, and she, Dorea and Charlus all played for the Three Broomsticks in the annual British Wizarding Pub Quiz championships, held in September. While in her teens he had been an object of many a fantasy, nowadays they were just good friends.

"Albus," he nodded to the Headmaster first, cordially and with due deference. "This is a surprise." Then he turned his sparkling eyes on her, and she was mildly resentful to feel her knees go weak. "Minerva," he greeted her warmly, clasping her hands and pressing a kiss to her cheek. "A pleasure, as always. Come inside. Dorea's laying out the tea things in the parlour."

"It's terribly quiet," Albus noted idly, his head turning to take in the surroundings as they entered the home, led by Charlus. "I admit, with the boys home I expected more noise." He said 'the boys' with the sort of affection an uncle might have for his wayward nephews, which Charlus appeared to appreciate, his smile widening and touched with pride.

"James moved out last week, didn't he tell you?" Charlus responded blithely as they crossed into the parlour. "He's decided to try cohabitation with Lily, much to his mother's consternation." His eyes lit up when they fell on Dorea, who was, as expected, laying out the table with teacups. "Isn't that right, darling?"

Dorea rose to her full height, a slightly constipated look on her beautiful features. "Indeed," she purred in her carefully cultivated smooth tones. She frowned over at them, the pained look of a mother whose children had only recently flown the nest. "I can't say I approve, but the times have changed…" the insinuation being not for the better.

Minerva pondered all of this as more greetings were exchanged and they sat down. Everything seemed perfectly normal here, nothing out of the ordinary, nothing to be concerned about. Dorea and Charlus didn't seem to be acting the way she would expect of a pair who had committed an act of extreme betrayal, but that had been what Albus was suggesting. If anything, they were at ease, if slightly harried by the unexpected visit.

"James hadn't told me, no. The Order hasn't met in some time, so there haven't been many chances." Albus sipped delicately from a cup, smacking his lips when he came up for air. "Delightful tea, Dorea, as always."

"What is this about?" Charlus plunged right in, his manner as forthright as always, leaning back on the loveseat with a teacup held in one hand and the other arm thrown outwards across the back, his fingertips just barely grazing Dorea's neck.
"Just a social call," Albus hummed, eyes spinning from one area of the room to the next, as though there might be a notebook on the mantel titled 'Things We're Keeping From The Headmaster' and he just might have missed it on his first go around. "As I said, we hadn't heard from James in a while."

"Poppycock," Dorea replied, nibbling on some shortcake, her demeanour languid. She had, however, been taught by the original Black matriarch in matters of society, and Minerva had no doubt that she could hold that same bland expression while watching a man being strangled by his own entrails. "The day I believe you do anything without at least three ulterior motives will be the same day the Shacklebolts resign from Politics or the Queen regains control of the Wizarding populace. You forget, Albus, that I have known you my whole life." She sent him a look of genuine fondness, as though, despite his having two decades over her at least, he was a naïve child. The look that said 'you might play in deception, Albus, but I was born there, and I shall always win'.

"You've seen the news on the Black boy, I suppose," Albus said, turning on a sickle. "A pity, don't you think?"

"Regulus has always been a sweet boy, if somewhat easily influenced," Dorea nodded. She glanced at Charlus. "Though I can't say we've seen him recently, if that's what you're asking. Right, Charlus?"

"Yes, dear," Charlus agreed, snapping a chocolate wafer in half and dunking both sides in his tea. "The last time I can properly remember seeing Regulus was at his Testing." He smiled proudly at Albus and Minerva. "He was really very powerful. Oh, my apologies – you'd know that, wouldn't you, being his teachers and all." He popped one half in his mouth and swallowed the mess, adding afterwards, "we're very proud," as though Regulus was their own son. Minerva frowned, and Albus seemed to be thinking very hard in Charlus's direction.

"He's a troubled boy," Albus finally said. "He had difficulty connecting with his peers, and his relationship with Sirius was fractured, at best."

"Boys will be boys," Dorea waved off the concerns easily. "What is it the muggles say – blood is thicker than water? Given time the two would have mended their rift. And I know that what you say about his friendships are wrong, for Lily told me only last year that he was very close with the Snape boy, and young Crouch."

Albus turned his burning regard on Dorea. Minerva wondered if Dorea knew the man was using legilimency on her. "Other peers," Dumbledore said dismissively. "Ones less likely to lead him into trouble."

"The Blacks have an excellent sense of direction," Dorea told him firmly. "If he was led into trouble, I have no doubt he could lead them right back out."

There was a beat of silence in which their challenging gazes locked, and then it was just a social visit again, with Albus sipping his tea. "Familial loyalty is to be commended." He tilted his head towards Dorea in a minute gesture of goodwill. "Is Sirius around?"

"He's out with his new girlfriend," Charlus smirked cheekily. "Some little redheaded girl. It seems now that James has one, they all want one. We haven't seen him in days, they've been so wrapped up in each other."

"That doesn't sound like Sirius," Albus said, sounding concerned.

Charlus made a flippant movement with his hand. "All boys are unpredictable when they've found the right woman." He shot Dorea an angelic look. "I know I am."
"Hush," Dorea scolded, even as she blushed. Minerva suppressed an indulgent smile with difficulty. Albus was having so much attack of sentimentality.

"It is good to know that there can be some light, even in these dark times," he pushed. "Tell me, have James and his delightful fiancée set a date?"

"You'll be the first to know when they do," Dorea said diplomatically, not looking at Albus, instead gazing adoringly at her husband. There was a palpable air about them – the air of a couple who have found renewed attraction in the wake of their children’s having left, a couple who had obviously been enjoying their privacy before their interruption. Minerva, looking them over again, now noticed their respectively rumpled states. Two of Charlus's buttons were mis-buttoned, and Dorea's collar was crumpled, showing the start of a dark bruise on her throat. Her shoes didn't match her dress, as though they'd been thrown on in a hurry, and the back of Charlus's shirt hadn't been tucked in.

She felt her cheeks begin to burn at the implications, despite her not having blushed since she was a green girl, and looked away quickly, unable to help a pang of envy. Her marriage had never resulted in such scenes of steamy passion – and gods forbid any early callers found her in a state of such dishabille. There was something even more indecent about their lack of shame; in fact, it was almost like they wanted them to revel in their lusty glances and blatant impropriety. She looked back at them sharply, but nothing seemed off.

Eventually, she and Albus packed up and left, after Albus had disappeared for a half-hour long trip to the 'little boys' room'. Albus's face was hard with thought as they traversed the gravel drive. "Well?" she demanded once they were clear. "Did you get what you needed?"

"Not quite," he replied quietly, looking back suspiciously. Minerva, knowing him as she did, knew that this meant he simply found nothing incriminating but was unready to give up on his suspicions. After a morning spent sitting mortified on a loveseat while her old friends pawed at each other in the most proper ways society could permit, she was unwilling to listen to his complaints.

"Not really?" she scoffed, turning on her heel to face him, glad that she was tall enough to give him the gimlet eye without having to look up at him. "You should be ashamed of yourself, interrupting their morning with absolutely no warning. Not only was it unforgivably rude, but inconsiderate to boot!" She prodded his chest with a long finger. "And not just to them, either! Do you know how demeaning it was to have to sit on that sofa making unintelligent small talk while you snuck around like bloody James Bond! Don't look at me like that, Albus! Did you think we didn't know what you were doing? You broke a lamp, you daft pillock!"

She paused for a moment, pulling her rage back inside and raising up to her full height to glare at him. "Now, you either tell me what this prophecy is that has you alienating old friends and allies, or we will not speak anymore of this ridiculousness, and I shan't help you with anything again this year!"

He gave her a doleful look through his big blue eyes but she was unmoved. She was, after all, the woman who had broken the House record for most detentions given to a single student with Sirius Black, and he had actual puppy-dog eyes.

Also, she was a cat. Not a species given to be sympathetic towards sweet, defenceless creatures, on the whole. They made her a bit peckish, hence why she kept pepper imps in her desk for emergencies. Emergencies generally being first-year classes, where watching the students fail was like to make her either inordinately hungry.

"Something is happening," Albus rumbled finally, gazing off into the distance. She knew he thought it made him look wise, but really it made him look ditzy and ridiculous. "Something big, and I don't
know what it is." He turned back to look her full in the face, his eyes hard. "I do not like not knowing, Minerva."
Their new Headquarters, Solus House, was true to its name. Located somewhere so far up north that the terrain was rocky and sparse; the scent of the ocean hung thick in the air and the crashing of waves could be heard from any part of the property.

It wasn't inviting, like Potter Manor, whose entire being seemed focused on happiness and prosperity. Instead, it was ancient, made from grey rock similar to that of Hogwarts' walls, like a small castle, complete with two turrets flanking the darker grey roof. The wards extended out several kilometres around the front of the house, making their venture to the door almost unbearably long, though at the rear they only extended so far as the nearest cliff, perhaps a half mile of flat land. Still, it was grand, the wards nearly impenetrable, and big enough to support them all.

There were, however, in Hermione's eyes, certain downsides to living at a Black house. One of which popped into thin air as they approached the thick, wooden slab of a door.

"Master Regulus! Kreacher has cleaned the house, as The Other One commanded." He shot a sour look at Sirius, who stuck his tongue out childishly at the little elf. Regulus elbowed Sirius in the arm and looked back at Kreacher with a patient expression.

"Do any other elves remain, Kreacher?"

"Yes, Master. Elveses Tinker and Fritz both." He gave an emphatic nod, a grin stretched over his mouth.

"Tinker's still there?" Sirius asked absently, a soft look in his eyes. Kreacher nodded, still looking at Regulus, who said, "thank-you, Kreacher. You may return."

The elf disappeared with a -crack-, leaving the eight teens to contemplate the remaining stretch of
land between them and shelter. Ginny shivered, prompting Sirius to cast a warming charm in her
direction.

"Uncle Alphard died in '76," Sirius said quietly, though the words were easily discernible in the
bubble they'd cast to keep them free of the violent winds that tore across the estate. "I haven't been
here since – gods, '69? Ten years." He fell silent, contemplating the building. "It's probably nothing
like it was, on the inside. Uncle Alphard had a penchant for interior decoration. He kept moving
things around, replacing them with new things; he repainted the main foyer every other week." A
smile played across his mouth. "Honestly, it's a wonder there was anything left to inherit, considering
how much he spent on fabric samples."

Ginny gave a little laugh, Hermione an indulgent smile. Sirius had intermittently been telling them
about his uncle on the walk, as if them having knowledge of the man who owned the place might
make it less difficult to bring them inside. Regulus chipped in every now and then, the two brothers
sharing smiles as the good memories of their childhood twined them together once more.

Eventually, they reached the door, which was flung open by a tiny elf wearing – oh, and even
Hermione had difficulty not to laugh – a sort of patchwork tutu painstakingly crafted from the
remains of old teacloths. It had a line of pearls studding the edge of one giant ear, and on one spindly
wrist it wore a matching bracelet, the pearls interspersed with garnets. It peered at them suspiciously
until its eyes fell on Sirius.

"Master Sirius!" it crowed joyfully, the low pitch of its voice alerting Hermione to the fact that it was
male, something that shouldn't have shocked her – knowing Dobby and all of his queer habits as
well as she had – but did. "Tinker is so happy to see Master, yes he is! Come inside, Tinker keeps
you warm!"

The elf – Tinker – threw himself at Sirius's legs, half hugging him and half tugging him over the
threshold into a foyer which, as Sirius had said, had been painted several times in quick succession.
No doubt the paints were very expensive, but on one wall the magenta paint had thinned enough that
Hermione could see the sunshine-yellow from the previous pass peeking through, and on the back
wall, which was wallpapered in a rich paisley pattern of blues, pinks and purples, the corner had
peeled to reveal the white-and-gold stripe which would have had pride of place in a past time. The
walls were, as in Grimmauld, covered in portraits of Black ancestors, who all looked somewhat
disgruntled to have found themselves resident in this palace of colour rather than their drab, brown-
and-grey base. The backgrounds of these paintings too had been, well, 'upgraded' might be a word,
in that they were all greens and blues and whites as opposed to the typical greyscale. Hermione
rather thought, as she watched Phineas Nigellus Black glower out of a picture whose background
held a bright sunshine, three white peacocks, and a gold-gilt chair, that Alphard had had to do
something really quite drastic in order to make these people accept these portraits as their own.

And then she remembered that their previous home had been burned down, and had to stifle a laugh.
No wonder they appeared so very morose; bad enough to lose their original home, but to then have
to move… here? A place so gaudy it took all of her willpower not to shield her eyes from the crystal,
gold and – were those diamonds? – chandeliers that hung from the ceiling.

Sirius let out a sigh, his posture immediately relaxing as he took in the room. "Oh, Alphard," he
muttered with affection. The portrait over the mantelpiece, under which there burned a roaring fire,
of an elegant looking man in his late forties stirred, grey eyes opening to greet the world. "Sirius!" he
exclaimed with a great level of gaiety. "It's about damn time! I didn't will you this house just to watch
it moulder, you know."

"Sorry, Uncle," Sirius replied, suddenly retreating about ten years, scuffing his shoes against the
flagstone and keeping his eyes lowered.

"I mean, what year is it now? Sometime in the eighties?" Alphard brightened. "Tell me, is it as good a decade as I always thought it would be?" To the wider audience, he told them, "Eight is my lucky number, you know. Confirmed with Arithmancy."

"Uncle, it's 1979, and…" Sirius paused, still shying away like a little boy in the presence of a man he greatly admired. "We wondered if it would be alright to use your house-"

"Your house," Alphard corrected.

"-as the base of our operations. We…" He glanced at the other portraits. "Is it safe to talk here?"

"You think I didn't curse the damn things to silence the first chance I got?" Alphard asked with a raised eyebrow. "Nigellus is a terrible gossip."

"I say, old fellow!" A man with a monocle gasped from across the room. "You do me an injustice! I demand you make reparations!"

"Yes, yes, you dusty old coot," Alphard drawled, rolling his eyes. "It'll be swords at dawn, and all that." Snorting, he turned back to Sirius. "Really, nephew, what do you take me for? Even I cannot breathe a word. What happens in Solus House stays in Solus House." He shot an affable wink at the gathered crowd. "Something which will no doubt work in your favour, all these pretty women to entertain. Oh, my, is that little Regulus I see?"

"Hello, uncle," Regulus said, wincing when he realised he'd been caught out.

"How long has it been? Twelve years?"

Luna took Regulus's hand as he grimaced, clearly discomfited. "Yes, uncle."

Alphard scowled down from his perch a foot above Regulus's head. "I won't ask why you stopped visiting – that's quite clear. Always were Wally's little shadow, weren't you? Does she know you're here?"

Regulus's expression immediately shut down, smoothing out to a coldly handsome blankness. "I doubt it," he said, his voice clear and loud, "given as she's dead."

Stunned, Alphard's mouth worked for a moment but no sound came out. A pall fell over the group, where there had before been interested quiet there was now a suffocating, uncomfortable silence. Hermione shuffled back slightly so that her arm brushed Remus's, glad for the slight comfort. Ginny was discretely observing some of the other paintings with manufactured interest, dragging Lavender along with her, likely so that the famously insensitive girl wouldn't make the situation any worse. Hermione was extraordinarily grateful.


"The Dark Lord burned her alive," Regulus said, bravely soldiering on through the sentence in a tone so dry that it could only be affected to mask his true emotional response. Just hearing it was painful. "I'd like to say she didn't suffer, but…"

Luna moved closer, the lines of their body almost fusing, interrupting him mid-sentence. "Hello, Mr. Black!" she chirped brightly.

Alphard looked between her and his nephew, and then his other, his grief-stricken expression
melting slowly into confusion. "Err- hello, dear?"

"You have a lovely home," she said, waving a hand at the hodge-podge decoration, an eyesore only the early seventies could possibly have given birth to and only Luna could admire with any sincerity. "I especially like what you've done with the wittingbug tails," she added, pointing to where feathers had been hung in a curtain against a doorway. Hermione would have thought that if they were real, which was highly unlikely, they would have come from parrots, but of course Luna would disagree. "It was terribly bad of you to pluck them, though. Don't you know their feathers are the source of their power?" she frowned up at him sternly.

Regulus wrapped his spare arm around Luna's waist in the largest display of affection he'd ever demonstrated in their company, aside from that one kiss, and pulled her against his chest, scowling up at his uncle in warning and – though she might be wrong – Hermione was sure he mouthed the word 'turpentine'. "Good point. I shan't do it again," Alphard joked, winking at her as he gestured with one hand. "No arms, see. Nor legs. Can't catch any wittingbugs without legs, can I?"

Sirius, apparently unappreciative of this byplay, stepped forward again, drawing Alphard away from his assessment of Luna's many and varied peculiarities. "I hate to push, uncle, but we're in a bit of a hurry." He shot him a shy grin. "You know how it is – weapons to find, Dark Lords to kill."

"Headmasters to depose," Hermione mumbled under her breath, a sharp sting cutting through her gut as she remembered what she'd been forced to do at Potter Manor, and all because of that damned Dumbledore.

"Far be it for me to deny you use of your own House, Sirius," Alphard shrugged. "Though I do think it needs a bit of a clear out." Ginny, who had just at that moment dared to look behind the 'wittingbug' curtain, let out a disbelieving noise. Alphard smirked over at her. "I'm not sorry."

"Maybe we should start here, in the – what on earth is this room meant to be, anyway?" Ginny demanded, turning on her heel to glare up at Alphard, who shrugged and answered 'my office', which Ginny wasn't buying. "I'm sorry," she said shortly, "but I'm a Weasley and even I have never seen an office in which you need three beanbags, two budgies, no less than five – five! – mirrors and absolutely no bookcases."

"Why would I need bookcases in my office?" he asked, squinting. When Ginny opened her mouth to reply, Sirius shook his head vigorously, and she rolled her eyes.

"You're right, obviously books are the last thing you need in a room dedicated to working. My mistake." Sarcasm was thick on her breath, and she dropped the bag Dorea had provided her with to the floor. "Mind if we make a start, Sirius?"

"Knock yourselves out," Sirius said, waving towards the door. "Budgies?"

"Sorry, scratch that," Ginny said from behind the feathered monstrosity. "Stuffed budgies. Because that's so much better."

Sirius called for Tinker to take their bags to the guest wing, refusing vehemently to move into Alphard's quarters until they'd done a thorough clean out. He'd then, upon the discovery of his third dead spider – and four living ones – authorised Ginny to remove everything from Alphard's office, instead repurposing it as their new war room, and disappeared. Hermione would never have guessed him to be afraid of the things, but his agonized yelp had said otherwise.

With the help of Fritz and Hermione overseeing the movement of furniture from the basement, where
Alphard had dumped the furniture from previous owners, into the new room, they had it cleaned and prepared in just over two hours. They had to put up with the unfortunate orange and brown striped walls, but that was a small price to pay for the luxury of walking into the room without the feeling of hundreds of little beady dead eyes watching their every mood.

Together, she and Ginny salvaged a beautiful antique table, circular with room for ten seats, and moved it into the room and surrounded it with ten elegant but mismatched cushioned chairs. Fritz assembled never-before-used bookshelves which had, apparently, been bought for some previous incarnation of the house but been cut out of the final project. Hermione was especially pleased about this, as they had lockable doors and that meant she had somewhere to keep her research without the added stress of wondering what had come before. The cleaning of the office had given her many concerns in this area, and she cursed her quick mind for coming to logical but overwhelmingly distasteful conclusions.

Fritz led them on a tour, on which they were joined by a ruffled looking Lily and James, who had been organizing the bonfire on which they planned to burn the liberated furniture and knick-knacks, not trusting them not to be infested with all sorts of nastiness. Fritz had informed them that the elves were banned from both the office and Alphard's living quarters during his lifetime, and didn't want to break those orders until the new owner came to take possession of the place. Sirius had shaken off their questions, simply saying that Alphard had always been both 'private and eccentric', which told them nothing soothing.

Eventually, they met up with Sirius, Lavender and Luna in what was, in some past life, a trophy gallery, but presently held mementoes of Alphard's life. Sirius was vacillating between depression over the loss of his favourite uncle and joy as he relived his past with the man. Lavender, nosey as she was, was simply hunting through the man's possessions with glee, humming a vaguely familiar song with a mischievous smirk, and Luna drifted from place to place with no sure destination. She turned when the others entered, her expression bland.

"Regulus took Remus to help Kreacher cook us dinner," she informed them with an absent smile. "So nice of him. The dining room is through there." She pointed at engraved oak doors whose decorations had been copper-coated. Then, she returned to her wandering. Lily and James took a seat near the door, James watching Sirius with a concerned expression but not intervening.

Hermione ambled over to Lavender, drawn by the tune she was singing, only to stop in her tracks when she recognised it. "Lavender…" she said slowly. The other girl half-turned, her hair hiding her face but not the curl of her lips. She had a lime-green feather boa draped around her neck, her fingers playing with the ends. "Are you…"

"Yes, Hermione?" she asked with exaggerated innocence.

"What are you singing?"

"Oh, this little ditty?" she ramped the volume up a few notches, humming the jaunty tune from the back of her throat as she flicked her pilfered accessory back and forth in time. "Gosh. I just can’t seem to remember. It just… popped into my head while I looked through these pictures. Why, do you recognise it?"

Hermione narrowed her eyes at Lavender, flicking her gaze between the leatherbound book in Lavender's hands and her wide, guileless eyes. The picture she was showing her showed a young Alphard Black with his arms around Walburga, both of them dolled up to the nines and laughing, carefree. Alphard's eyes were expertly lined with kohl.

"Lavender," she began, then stopped, backtracked, and started again. "Are you singing 'Sweet
"Transvestite'?

"Oh, is that it?" Lavender said sweetly. "Gosh, it's just so catchy."

"You are so fucking offensive," Hermione groaned, rubbing at her eyes in stress.

"I love that play," Sirius said brightly, popping up between them. "Alphard took me to see it when it first came out! About… oh, fifteen times?"

Lavender gave Hermione a pointed look. "Or," she drawled, "am I fucking accurate?"

Hermione wanted to reply but she couldn't think of anything to say, mostly because Sirius had taken up humming the song now, knabbing Lavender's feather boa to drape around his shoulders as he went back to examining the many pictures that lined the room, bobbing his head in time like some demented ostrich. She and Lavender observed him for a moment, before Hermione said, "I just… can't."

"I've had dreams that started like this," Ginny said, coming over to lean against the wall, watching Sirius with slightly fogged eyes. "If he starts to take his clothes off, all bets are off."

"You're all disgusting," Hermione scolded them without much effect. Luna was nodding along, her head tilted too as she examined the rear view.

"Lovely bottom," she said amiably. "Does he use it well?"

"Luna!"

"What?" Luna watched Hermione with fathomless eyes.

"What – Regulus!" Hermione replied in a strangled voice, desperately trying to ignore how Sirius had started to wriggle his bottom vigorously, putting on quite the show for his audience.

"I don't see your point," Luna said confusedly, not removing her eyes from Sirius's rear end.

"I don't get it," Lily said, the only person who seemed to have missed the point of the conversation. "What's a transvestite?"

Lavender, Ginny and Hermione shared an 'oh, that's adorable' look, but declined to answer. At that moment, Regulus and Remus entered the room, chatting amiably. Regulus looked more animated than he had since he'd arrived in their company, and as Hermione came closer she could tell why. It appeared both men shared a love of their Defence study, with a specialisation in magical creatures, and were in an animated discussion of non-corporeal spirit-based creatures.

"I still believe they're based in fae," Regulus was arguing, with a smile on his face that showed his enjoyment. "You can't argue differently – not when the stories describe them so accurately. And anyway, wasn't it your own father who once wrote that the 'ability of a Boggart to change its appearance is likely rooted in an inherent magical glamour', similar to the mythical Sidhe?"

Remus scoffed, automatically pulling Hermione under his arm as she came closer. "My father is Welsh, Regulus. You'll have to forgive him his Gaelic tendency towards the fantasy. There is no evidence at all to suggest that Boggarts come from these regions-"

"-Oh, apart from all of the wild ones you find walking around the country," Regulus parried quickly. "Your own mother."
"One Boggart does not a pattern make! There are just as many, if not more, wild Boggarts in England as there are in Wales and Scotland." He replied, completely at ease.

"If you don't believe in the fae, then how do you explain Goblins, and Red Caps, Hinky-Punks and Will-o’-the-Wisps? Eh, Lupin?"

There was a shattering which had all of their heads whipping around. Lavender, who had been fiddling with a vase as she examined a school photograph of Alphard and some woman, stared blankly at the wall, her face a mask of mute horror.

"Oh, goodie!" Hermione whispered excitedly, tugging on Remus's arm. She suspected that, as interested as she had been in their discussion, this had the potential to be far more entertaining. Which is not something she would ever say lightly, not when Remus was on the brink of a lecture (because Gods, was he sexy when he was lecturing). Lavender blinked rapidly and turned on her heel to face Hermione, her eyes appealing for help.

"It's S… It's Snape," she gasped, for once apparently speechless. Hermione affected a suitably solemn expression for the occasion, though inside a small, petty part of herself was laughing very loudly. "Severus Snape," she repeated, louder, as if Hermione might not have heard her the first time.

"Ugh, can we not talk about him in my house?" Sirius asked, sauntering over from the wherever he had been and frowning at Lavender. James had perked up from his perch by the door, Lily frowning in confusion. "What about him?"

She turned gigantic eyes on Sirius, not appearing to see him at all. "Oh, Gods…" she moaned, sounding genuinely distraught. Hermione hurried over to enfold her in a hug, which Lavender clung to desperately.

"It'll be okay," Hermione murmured, rubbing her back soothingly. "He's not that bad, and if he is, we'll fix it. I'll set Remus on him, you know I will."

Snorting wetly, Lavender shoved her back a few feet. "That's really sweet of you, but I can look after myself. That's not what I'm upset about."

"Then what?" Hermione said sceptically, eyeing her sodden face.

"What the fuck is happening?" Sirius asked, looking confused.

"Alright, Lavender?" James asked, appearing next to Sirius. Remus had a look of dawning realisation on his face mixed with genuine disgust, an expression so hilarious Hermione wished she could take a picture, but she was too tangled in her friend.

Lavender shot her a look that questioned her sanity. "It's Severus Snape. Come on, Hermione. You've seen him." Lavender shuddered violently. "I'd have to look at him. Talk to him. Have sex with him."

"What?!" James shouted in sheer shock, goggling at the blonde.

"Stop right there-" Sirius demanded, lunging to cover Lavender's mouth, looking a little green.

She paused then, ripping his hand away, blurted out, "what if he's into kinky sex stuff? I mean, I can get kinky, but he looks like he'd be super kinky, right? Right?!"

"No no no no no no stop talking-"
"What the fuck what is going on-"

"Oh, my Gods! Hermione! What if he expects me to suck his nose?!"

Sirius passed out, unable to compute, hitting the ground with a thud. Nobody moved to cushion his fall, all staring at Lavender in newly mute shock. She looked around at each of them, all waiting for her to announce it as a joke, with a panicked expression. "Don't just stare at me!" She snarled, whirling back to Hermione. "This is a real problem!" Quietly, she murmured to Hermione, "you know what they say about noses, right? D'you think that's true?"

James swayed dizzily, held up only by Remus's shoulder, who was watching Lavender with mingled pity and fascination. Lily was a pale statue in the corner, her quick mind already having put the pieces together. Ginny was red-faced, avoiding eye-contact with everybody lest she burst into hysterics. Regulus and Luna were the only solemn faces.

"Well? What do I do?" Lavender asked again, looking at them all. "Goddamnit, you lot! I might have to fuck. Severus. Snape!"

Gosh, she really shouldn't laugh, she really shouldn't, but she just couldn't hold back. She liked Lavender, and she felt for her, but it was just... Snape wasn't that bad looking, though she'd admit he wasn't a prince - in anything but the literal sense - and Lavender's overreaction... Soon she and Ginny, the worst friends ever, were in fits of hysterics against one another, with Lavender on the outside, arms folded, face impatient. At length, resigned to the fact that she would get no support there, and unable to find comfort from the pile of half-conscious Marauders, she turned to her last resorts. "Well?" she demanded, looking at Regulus. "What do I do?"

"Deal with it," he replied, unimpressed. "You could do a lot worse."

"I could do a lot better," she sniffed.

He shot her a heavily skeptical look. "I'm sure," he responded with a level of sarcasm Lavender opted to completely ignore in favour of wailing despondently.
Chapter Forty-Nine: Solus House Part II

Chapter Summary

Ginny and Hermione talk to their beaus. Lavender has an adverse reaction to Hermione's plan.

Chapter Notes

Hi!
~OH MY GOSH I completely forgot to update this on Monday night, I can't remember it at all and I've spent all week like "I'm sure there was something I was meant to do?"
So, here it is! Delayed but still here! Enjoy!
Love, Eli x

Lavender eventually calmed down enough to be taken to bed, even though she was still a little wild-eyed and kept coming out with questions like "does he even have a penis? Because I've never seen it. Have you? Can we rightly assume he's even a sexual animal if we've never seen his penis? Is it like – what's that thing you're always talking about, 'Mi, with the dead cat in the box'?". The task was delegated to Ginny, not because she was helpful but rather because she seemed to be deriving the most amusement from Lavender, laughing until she cried as the blonde ranted on.

Sirius refused to be 'revived' until Lavender had left the room, at which point he made a miraculous recovery and ushered them all into the dining room, where he entertained them over dinner with renewed aplomb. He pointedly did not ask for an explanation, and when Remus turned to bring the topic up quietly with Hermione, he found himself hexed to sing Wizarding Nursery Rhymes instead – the clear message being that Sirius's ears were too tender and innocent to be subjected to the likes of Severus Snape. Especially if it concerned sex.

The thing was – they didn't actually want to talk about Severus and Lavender's sex life. Or, perhaps 'want' was the wrong word, for Hermione doubted that any situation would occur in which she would want to hear about his sex life (though she didn't doubt the day would come that she would be forced to, anyway, with Lavender on his tail) but instead his role in the War, in their plan, which rolled on despite their sudden relocation and other obvious stumbling blocks. The picture Lavender had been perusing was the reminder – an image of Alphard Black in his Hogwarts robes sat on a bench in some nondescript courtyard, a raven-haired woman with a face more handsome than pretty and an abnormally prominent nose sat beside him. She was an afterthought in the picture, just happening to have been in the frame at the time, but she was identified on the frame as Eileen Prince. Severus's mother.

We need to get him involved. Soon.

She sent that, on a note, to Luna at the other end of the table. The blonde looked up when the paper unfurled in her hand, and shot Hermione an acknowledging look. Luna would be thinking on it now, too, as would Regulus, no doubt. What Hermione didn't expect was a return message.
Have you tried his house?

Gaping, she looked up at her friend, who watched her with a placid expression. She hadn't thought to try his house, which she now realised was idiotic of her. Of course, in her mind the Spinners End terrace was abandoned, having been cleaned out by first the Ministry, who removed all traces of magical activity, and later looters from the neighbourhood not long after the wards had fallen. When Hermione had visited, hoping to clear out his earthly possessions to hand over to his next-of-kin (Draco) and also, if she was honest, hoping for some of his ground-breaking research, she had found his next-door neighbour sitting on the porch in a wingback chair that looked suspiciously Snape-like, and a family from across the road using his distinctly sandalwood scented Potions bench as a picnic table.

That in this time he would be living there both amazed and depressed Hermione. Even what little was left of the place during her short visit had been miserable looking, his own bedroom not that much better than the closet in which he had put up Wormtail for that short stint before Sixth Year.

She glanced at Sirius and James, doing their double-act thing at the head of the table, all elbows and grins and saucy winks. As much as she'd like to get Severus out of that hellhole, it wasn't like she had anywhere to bring him. The Marauders might be okay with him being involved with the War because their arguments to the contrary fell on deaf ears, but to have him in their house?

Hermione would rent them their own place if only she could, but Lavender had to be near Remus otherwise one or both would get sick, and she couldn't deal with that all the time. At least, if Lavender bonded with Severus, then that would be one problem taken care of.

At the thought of bonding she glanced at Remus. Lovely, sweet Remus who had been nothing but good to her the whole time she had been in the past. Whose only real wish was to have the war over and done with so that he could live a normal life, like any other man would. There had been only the one moment last night when they'd come close to bonding – it seemed her resounding no on that occasion had allowed the wolf to step back, at least for the time being. She revelled in the warmth in her gut, the lightness of her spirit as he reached out absently to stroke her fingers.

They retired to the same room again that night, accompanied by Sirius's lewd suggestions and James's catcalling as a flushed Remus tugged her behind the protection of his door. There was something peacefully domestic about the whole routine – her trunk next to Remus's on the floor, him pulling the bedclothes back for her, her filling water glasses to place next to the bed. It was only after they'd done all of this that they realised they were still clothed.

"Err-" Remus bit his lip, avoiding her eyes as they stared across the bed at one another. "I could turn my back…?"

"No – I don't… no," Hermione babbled, feeling a flush warm her cheeks. "You don't have to do that, it's not like you haven't seen… what there is to see." Gods, her face was burning. His lips twitched up but he matched her blush for blush. Why it was so awkward, she didn't rightly know, not after how comfortable they'd been the previous night, but there was a new tingle in the air.

They were saved by a knock at the door, and Regulus poking his head in. "Oh, good, you're decent. Luna says we should go tomorrow – for Severus, that is. Me and you, and she thought maybe Lily? I'm not sure if that's such a good idea but at least you have less of a chance of getting hexed if Lily's there."

"Will she go?" Hermione asked, settling down on the foot of the bed, grateful for the break in the tension. Remus, seemingly at loose ends, busied himself in his trunk.
Regulus stared back at her, impressively impassive. "She might take some convincing. She and Severus aren't on the best of terms." He saw her mouth open and beat her to the punch, saying, "and no, I'll not do it. She doesn't trust me at all and likes me perhaps less."

"She doesn't like me, either," Hermione pointed out dully.

"That's not true," Remus piped up from the corner, drawn by his instinctual need to reassure his mate. Hermione shot him a disbelieving look, and Remus bit his lip. "She respects you," he corrected himself.

"At least that's something," Hermione muttered under her breath, then rolled her eyes. "Alright, fine, but I'll talk to her in the morning. It'll be easier to get her to come if she doesn't have time to think it through." She smiled at Regulus, who still only had his head on their side of the door, the rest of his body hidden outside. "Thanks, Regulus. And thank Luna, too, please."

He nodded stiffly at her, then at Remus, and departed again. Unwilling to go through the stressful charade of earlier, Hermione took advantage of Remus's position away from her to summon her pyjamas, whipping off her shirt and jeans quickly. Her movement to pull on her pyjamas was stalled, though, by Remus's hand. "Hi?" she said questioningly as he moved around her, tugging lightly on her clothes. She released them easily, and he smiled, looking directly into her eyes.

"Hi," he replied, a mischievous smirk on his lips as he tossed her pyjamas over his shoulder, using his freed hands on her hips to pull her closer.

She melted into him as he nuzzled at her neck, winding her arms across his shoulder and giggling as he ran his nose over her sensitive spots. "Got over that shyness quickly, didn't you?" she murmured into his shoulder, squeaking as he nipped her pulse-point in reprimand.

"I know, shocked me too. Must have had something to do with you taking your clothes off."

She snickered quietly as she was spun in his arms, settling against his chest and reaching up to kiss him. Like everything – almost everything – with Remus, it was gentle, and sweet, touching her emotionally as well as physically, stripping her bare of all the stresses of the day, which made it all the more surprising to her when she burst into tears.

"Hermione?" Remus pulled back, surveying her face with a panic-stricken expression on his face. "Are you alright?"

"Yes-" she tried to say, only it was lost in a hiccupping sob, and then her vision was blurred and everything was a slash of colour. She didn't know what was happening; something had cracked inside of her and a whole tidal wave of emotion burst free, crushing her under its weight. She wasn't a crier. She hadn't cried, as a general rule, since the end of the war. Of course, like everybody she had her moments, but they didn't last long and they certainly weren't this intense. Was she having a fit? Perhaps it wasn't a crying jag after all, but some sort of cleverly disguised physical breakdown. Perhaps what she needed wasn't a tissue but a paramedic or two.

She tried to convey this suddenly desperate need to Remus, but what with her vision being compromised she couldn't see him, and she couldn't get enough air into her chest to talk, the words coming out as agonised whimpers. She felt her legs wobble as a split-second warning before they collapsed, felt Remus catching her and pulling her into his lap, and the way he cradled her like she was made of the finest glass as he murmured nonsense into her hair.

It was a good thing he seemed to know what he was doing, because she couldn't make heads or tails of this suffocating melancholy. With every nuzzle and stroke the emotion seemed to bleed off a bit,
pushing it back, not so that it was gone but so that her thinking became more clear. It had been a long day, she rationalised. She'd thrown herself head-first into a relationship with a man who had once broken her heart more thoroughly than she had thought possible, Lavender had ran off and met her own wolf-mate, they'd had to perform a sneaky move in the early hours of the morning after obliterating all evidence of their existence from Potter Manor, including from –

Remus was touching her face now, his unintelligible jabber louder to break through some high-pitched keening she didn't realise until that second was coming from her. Oh. Now, she wasn't a psychologist, but she knew enough to identify that there was a possibility of this, this **breakdown**, stemming from a delayed emotional response to the events of the day. It made more sense than her suddenly contracting some disease, now that she thought about it. Not that she wouldn't prefer to blame this hysteria on a medical condition; as it was, she felt she was being less of an adult and more **Lavender-ish** about it all, which was terribly shameful. She'd been brought up better than this – intellectual women didn't allow their emotions to impair their thinking.

And she knew that because she'd been doing such a good job of sticking to that rule since the war. She was, in fact, notoriously clear-headed, which was what had brought such an unceremonious end to the one date she and Ronald had had (while Lavender was in her coma, long before she woke up, and in fact the thing that sent him back to her bedside – not that she knew. She must **never know**). Awkward in general, when the date had progressed to the point that he had her pushed against a wall, clammy hands in her bra, tweaking her breasts with, she had to admit, considerable skill, and she hadn't been able to summon more of a reaction than an 'oh. Well that's… interesting?' it had become clear that she wasn't quite the passionate creature he'd expected of her.

To be fair to her, though, she had been in mourning.

Thinking about Ron did the trick, it seemed, working as the cold shower she required to bring herself somewhat back into reality. Remus was sat on the edge of the bed, still watching her with distressed eyes, a shimmer of gold around the pupil betraying Moony's involvement in the moment as he ran his fingers through the birds nest she fondly referred to as hair and let out a low, comforting hum from his throat.

"Are you – are you purring?" she finally asked, her voice croaking and painful after the torture she'd put her throat through. Remus's eyes widened and then he smiled slightly, not diminishing the concern on his face.

"Wolves don't purr," he chastised her lightly, running his fingertips all over her absently as if there might be some physical reason for her upset, or he just needed to ensure she was all in one piece, still. She didn't feel like she was – she felt ripped raw, but at least she had a handle on it, and she knew what was wrong. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Automatically, she went to hide her face behind her hair as she demurred, but he still had it held back so that she couldn't hide. How uncomfortable to feel his gaze on her, not demanding so much as curious; he wanted to know what was wrong so that he could make it right. **Gods**, what did she ever do to deserve this man? "You don't have to do this…" she told him half-heartedly. She wanted to talk about it, damnit. She was a girl, with emotions and hormones and while she didn't want to scare him away with her baggage, she didn't want to hide it from him either. He'd always been a solid strength in the past and she was sure that, at least, wouldn't have changed.

He frowned, nose twitching agitatedly. "I know," he replied, "but I want to know what's wrong."

"I Obliviate-ed my parents," she said with a valiant effort at a matter-of-fact tone. "In the past. During the war. The Death Eaters were out to get me, you see, and the Order – I asked them for help but they said they couldn't protect everyone, they simply didn't have the resources. They 'highly
doubted' my parents were a priority, anyway, but they were wrong." She bit her lip, fighting the urge to flinch away from his unguarded green eyes, feeling all of twelve again, looking for reassurance. He cinched his arms tighter but didn't say anything else.

She wound her fingers in his shirt before continuing, drawing strength from the warmth of him beneath her. "I was Harry Potter's best friend, the Muggleborn Brightest Witch of Her Age. Many people credited me with keeping him alive most of his life, and the Death Eaters knew it. Add to that that I'd pissed off a few personally in my time..." she paused, her throat closing convulsively around the words. "My parents were dentists and that was all that kept them alive so long. Dr. and Dr. Granger, it said in the phonebook. Death Eaters don't know what that means, you see, so they discarded them. I know this because there was another Mr. and Mrs. Granger in the phone book, just above them – my father's cousin, Robert and his wife. They had three children, all of them muggles. The eldest lived in London and the second was at University, but the third..."

She coughed through the lump in her throat. "They died," she stuttered out, the words not fully capturing the horror of the scene, with her cousins torn up, body-parts strewn across the living room, then poor Katie, the youngest at fourteen, killed afterwards with an Avada; mercifully, not that they had shown much mercy to her in life. There had been so much anger in the scene even after they were dead and their attackers gone. A dark, oily cloud of hatred that had felt at once personal and impersonal, almost beating the horror of the scene itself in Hermione's mind, just one more thing for her to remember late at night when she was alone.

"After that, I knew I had to get my parents out of there, at any cost. I wouldn't let them suffer like that, not if I could help it." She averted her eyes to her own hands, tangled in his shirt, trying not to remember the hue of Robert's face, the cool stickiness of their blood as it permeated the canvas of her trainers. "So I Obliviate-d them, and sent them to Australia with no idea I even existed. They were safe, and when the war ended, I fixed them. I thought that would be it, everything would be fine, but..."

Here she burst into tears again, the truth of it all to much. They'd hated her, as much as parents can hate their own child. How could she have done it to them, they'd asked. What sort of sociopath can remove all traces of themselves from their family's life without even a trace of guilt? And why would she come back – was she sadistic? Did she like to see them suffer, as they stumbled through life trying to connect their two existences, lost in a horror she'd made for them, confused and disoriented, unable to trust their own minds.

Now, she recognised her spell had worked too well, and she had made allowances for it in future uses, not that she could ever say the word without flinching. But then...

She'd had to blank them again; the only way to fix them, to restore some semblance of sanity, even though it meant she would lose them twice over, only the second time instead of remembering a loving family she had only their slurred, bitter words ringing in her head. She remembered them at the most inopportune moments – like earlier that day, when Dorea had made her request, a request that should by rights have been easy to grant if only she were a little stronger.

Remus listened to all of this, and when she finished, she watched him, waiting for the flinch. He winced, true, but then his eyes filled with such compassion, pure sympathy, that she wanted to cry all over again. "Oh, Hermione..." he sighed, pulling her tighter into him, not objecting when she took the invitation to curl up into as small a ball as possible and burrow into his heat. "Oh..."

There were no words he could say to make it better, and he seemed to understand that, because after a long moment he stood, bearing her weight with no complaint, and climbed into the bed with her still laid on his chest, head tucked under his chin. He covered them with a blanket and they laid still,
relaxing by increments. She couldn't rightly say they slept, because she didn't remember sleeping, but they shared peace for a long time and that meant more.

Ginny slipped out of the bedroom, leaving Lavender asleep face-down on top of her ridiculously plush king-size bed after talking herself into some sort of emotional coma. It had taken four hours. Ginny had read of this phenomenon - where people could literally talk themselves to sleep – but had never experienced it in reality, though it should come as no surprise that it was Lavender who demonstrated the event. She had a whole new sympathy for Hermione's school years. Smiling a little sadly, she headed off towards her own bedroom, thus taking a few moments to realise she had company.

Ginny froze, taking in the five-foot-whatever of sculpted male leaning against the wall in a t-shirt, some sort of village-people inspired leather waistcoat, black jeans and bare feet, with his hair flopping insolently into his eyes. The typically arresting sight wasn't what had stopped her, though. No, it was what was in his hands.

"What is that?" she asked, raising one shaky hand to jab at the offending object.

"This?" he twirled it in his hands, smirking slightly. "It's a flower, Gin."

"Oh, no." She backed up a few steps, horrified gaze still on the slightly bent, slobbery – and he totally found it in dog form, didn't he? – thistle he held in his hand. Now, if she were thinking clearly, she'd be touched by the flower, and the choice – she didn't particularly appreciate colourful flowers, especially delicate ones she felt she could crush with a touch, but thistles were hardy and beautiful. But she wasn't thinking clearly, she was panicking, because this was Sirius Black and for Merlin's sake he was heartbreak with abs. "What did you go and do that for?" She demanded, her voice perhaps a little weaker than she'd like.

"I'm courting you," Sirius replied simply, holding out the flower.

"No, you're not," Ginny denied, backing up a few more steps, still unable to get over the damn thistle. "Courting is, like, a letter to my dad asking permission, then three years worth of dates where we don't even kiss, then a big white wedding where I'm sold off in exchange for a prosperous winter. Courting is not – not sex while drunk and a flower to follow!"

Rolling his eyes, Sirius pushed off of the wall and advanced on her. "Maybe I should have been more specific," he said slowly and clearly. "Padfoot is courting you. I wanted to bring the whole plant – you know what us dogs are like – but I managed to restrain myself to a simple flower. To be fair," he added with a devilish smile, "my instincts were telling me to bring you his favourite toy, but it's a bit tatty and about 75% dog saliva, so really, you got off lightly with this."

"No," she said, throwing her palms out as if the gesture would ward him off. Sirius, smirking, prowled closer.

"Careful, love, you'll hurt my feelings," he taunted, threading his fingers through her outstretched hands, trailing the tips across her palms as he did so, sandwiching the clipping between their hands. She fought not to shiver from so simple a touch.

"Sirius…" she scowled half-heartedly as he used his grip to tug her forward so that they were only inches apart. "What do you want?" she forced out, resolutely ignoring how her breath came shorter, her pulse speeding as he invaded her space. It was a good invasion – not unlike a predator cornering prey, but wilder and richer, because she was hardly prey, and both of them knew that if she wished, she could break his grip (and his wrists) and be gone before he had time to react. She
was allowing this, playing into the game, though she had no idea why she would do such a foolish thing except that it felt so good.

He cocked his head to one side, eyes wide and warm, and Ginny rolled her eyes with forced nonchalance as he employed 'puppy-dog eyes' on her for possibly the fiftieth time in their acquaintance. "I thought I was making that clear."

"I'm not fucking a dog," she said, and was gratified by the expression of utter revulsion that crossed his face.

"I should think not," he replied haughtily. "I'm not asking you to. But you're pretty, and funny, and so sexy it hurts sometimes, so I want to see if we can make something of this."

She frowned, focusing on the spikes of the thistle. "Of what, Sirius? Because there's not much here."

"I disagree." Nodding to the flower, he added, "and so does Padfoot, and he has good instincts."

"Dogs don't court people," she said exasperatedly. "They don't even court dogs."

Offended, he pulled back a little. "I beg your pardon, but what do you think all that butt-sniffing is about?"

"Sexual compatibility?" Then, a thought occurring to her, she smacked his chest. "I knew you'd sniffed my arse, you utter git!"

Grinning unrepentantly, he shrugged. "Okay, so that was a bit weird, I grant you. But don't think about my idiosyncrasies right now, think about us. How good we were together. How perfect last night felt. And not just the sex-" he shot her a knowing look as she opened her mouth then snapped it closed again, "-but all the rest of it, too."

Inexplicably irritated, she scowled at him. "You're ruining this," she growled, though something in her was resigned. Even excited. Because, well, it just seemed inevitable, after the life she'd led, that were she to get this close to someone – have any sort of adult relationship with someone on a level, constant, equal basis – it would be with the human representation of the Grim. Because what better fit for Ginny Weasley, closeted dark-witch and all around stain on her family, than a walking, talking, butt-sniffing Omen of Death?

"I think I'm making it better," Sirius said knowingly, smiling down at her and giving her hand another tug in the direction of his bedroom.

Sighing, she followed his lead, though with a put-upon expression and a snarl of "don't even think about it, Mister. I'll be the little spoon tonight, thanks."

He shot her a bright smile over his shoulder, so angelic she caught her breath. "I knew I'd wear you down," he winked.

"Lily," Hermione said, foreboding churning her gut. "Can we talk?"

The redhead turned to Hermione, a frown on her face. "Talk?" she repeated, looking distinctly uneasy. "About what?" James, beside her, squared off against her so promptly she was surprised he didn't break a bone.

"Snape," she replied promptly. After the night she'd had, she had no intention of dancing around the point – especially not given how much they had to do today. She didn't have the time nor the
inclination to dance around Lily Evans's feelings.

"What about him?" Lily asked warily, her eyes dancing across the table to Lavender, who was eating her bacon with forced nonchalance, pretending (badly) that she wasn't listening to every word they were saying.

Regulus, sat beside Hermione, shifted and glanced at her, a warning in his eyes. He was telling her to be careful, not that she needed it. She well understood the delicacy of the situation. "We need his help," Hermione said bluntly, fluttering a hand across the table. "All of us. I don't think we can win this thing without him, if I'm honest, and according to Regulus he might be open to helping us."

James scoffed, his expression incredulous. "Snivellus? Help us? I don't think so."

"Shut up, Potter, like you didn't cry like a baby when McGonagall said you couldn't go to the Yule Ball," Regulus snapped in his prim and proper way, his hand spasming around Luna's. Bit rich for someone who had just warned Hermione to be careful to go off like this, but Hermione was learning that when it came to James Potter, all bets were off. "I've really never understood that name – really, it's not even very clever wordplay. Though what else I could reasonably expect from a group of boys who nickname their pet werewolf 'Moony' and think they're being subtle, I do not know."

"Hey!" Remus said from Hermione's other side. "Is there any need?"

"Sorry, Remus," Regulus said blithely. "You have to admit, though – inventiveness is not your strong suit."

Remus scoffed. "I resent that. Who do you think came up with Padfoot?"

"When I first heard you call him Padfoot I thought he was a bear with athlete's foot," Regulus countered smoothly. "I suppose if your goal was misdirection, it works."

"It's a reference," Remus seethed, though he slumped back into his chair at Hermione's hand on his thigh. They were all a bit highly strung that morning after a horrible night's sleep; possibly not the best mood to take to confront a man Hermione was certain could win the award for World's Most Abrasive, but they took what they could get.

"I think you'll find Severus quite open to helping us," Hermione picked up where they'd left off, prodding at her porridge with her spoon. "Not you, personally, of course – the less interaction between you three and Severus the better, I think, but the rest of us will."

"Not Lily," James said. "Lily won't be going near him, either, will you, Lil?"

"Well..." Lily looked torn, chewing up her lip as she avoided James's astonished look. "I mean, if you think he'll help, and we need him..." her knee jiggled the table as she twitched her foot anxiously. "I was considering what you said, and yes, actually, I was thinking about trying to resolve this... thing... between Sev and I, anyway. So if you think I can help..."

"It needs to be today. Regulus and I will come with you; the less the better, I think, so I'll take the lead and you and Reg can be familiar faces. Ginny and Luna have agreed to secure the area, taking out any spies they might have hanging around." She pulled out her notebook, checking the list she'd scrawled that morning in bed. "Oh, yes – we'll be taking Remus's mum's van, because it's a muggle neighbourhood, so that seems safer than apparition. Regulus will be glamoured, but I understand that Severus's wards repel gl amplours, so that'll fix that..."

"What about me?" a voice said, and Hermione winced.
"What about you, Lav?"

Lavender's purple eyes sparked with something dangerous. "What will I be doing?"

"Err..." Hermione shot a pleading look at Regulus, who raised his eyebrows. Remus backed further into his chair, his expression clearly informing her that she was on her own. "Well, I thought it best if you... stayed here?"

There was a beat of silence, and then Lavender exploded, diving across the table to confiscate Hermione's notebook, tearing it into tiny little shreds with her exquisitely manicured nails while Hermione watched on in shock. Then, she leaned across the table to look directly into Hermione's eyes and snarled, "If you think I'm going to let you send this red-headed little bitch-siren in to seduce my mate then you have another think coming."

Lily rounded on Lavender, her face red with fury. "Oh, so he's 'your mate' now, is he? You didn't seem to feel that way yesterday, when you were screaming your head off!"

Lavender looked Lily up and down with slow deliberation, her face morphing into a sneer as she reached Lily's eyes. "Just because I was in shock doesn't mean I'm just going to hand him off to the next bitch who walks by. You're not even a werewolf; how are you supposed to protect him, eh?"

"Protect him?" Lily let out a bark of laughter. "Shows how much you know Severus. The only things he needs protecting from are his own bad decisions!"

"Really?" Lavender whirled on Hermione, her eyebrow cocked as she waved a hand at Lily. "Really? You were going to take her and not me? With how very well she obviously knows my Severus?"

"Your Severus?!"

"Yes, my Severus, you whiny cow. Gods, are you deaf or something? Why is this not getting through to you?"

"He doesn't even know you exist!"

"Yes, he does!"

"One drunken encounter in a pub does not a relationship make!"

"Do not cheapen my mating!" Lavender screamed back. "He saved my life, he touched my hair, and it. Was. ROMANTIC!"

There was a stunned silence where Lily looked at Lavender as though she was completely insane, while the two other canines in the room winced and rubbed their eardrums.

"Okay," Hermione said in a small voice, still staring despondently at the trampled-on remains of her notebook. Remus took his turn at rubbing her thigh soothingly. "Okay. You can come. Just – please, leave my research alone."
Chapter Fifty: Cokeworth Bound

Chapter Summary

The gang of people one might objectively assume Severus Snape hates the least out of the available options head off to make their pitch. Lavender is a very excited werewolf.

Chapter Notes

Hi!
I've never been to Manchester, or any of Lancashire, except that one trip to Blackpool when I was younger. So, I just sort of... made it up? I mean... I have some preconceived prejudices against Lancashire but I tried to keep them out of it. Tried. (One might ask what I could possibly have against a county that produced David Thewlis and I would answer - many things.)
Enjoy some optimistic Lavender!
Love always, Eli x

They were in the van, trundling along the roads of Cokeworth, Ginny in the passenger seat asking "what does 'SWEN' mean?", her words slow and deliberately obtuse as she tried to navigate them with an upside-down map. Remus tried his hardest not to laugh when both Lily and Hermione lunged forward from the middle row of seats, running out of patience simultaneously, demanding Ginny "give me that!" before stopping to glare at the other. Ginny obediently passed the map through the gap, smirking and winking at Remus as she did so.

"Where are we now?" Lily asked, her tone noticeably softer as she spoke to Remus, drawing a throaty growl from Hermione's direction. They had the map spread equally across both of their laps, with Hermione monopolising Eastern Greater Manchester while Lily scoured the West.

"Err..." He peered out the window and slowed to catch a glimpse of the closest street sign, jumping guiltily when his move caused a cacophony of horns to blare out from the traffic behind him. Lavender, in the back with Luna and Regulus, predictably leaned out and shot them all the finger, shouting 'shut it, you lazy buggers! It's ten in the morning! Don't you have anywhere better to be?!'. "Blenheim Road?" he said, reading the sign as quickly as he could so that he could press down on the accelerator and be moving again before the fight brewing on the road could begin in earnest and Lavender jumped out to join in (she'd been wound up all morning, the tension only increasing the closer they got to their location).

"Oh, I know it!" Lily said brightly, which, well, Remus should hope so, given she grew up two streets away. "Not far now," she continued, shoving the map into Hermione unceremoniously so she could lean forward to push her head into the space between Remus and Ginny's seats. "Third exit at the roundabout, and then it's all pretty simple back-streets from there."

"Pretty simple backstreets," Remus repeated incredulously five minutes later as he pulled into the
first of the warren of ill-paved roads that comprised the council estates of Cokeworth, and would lead him to the more decrepit Spinner's End. The houses on these streets seemed to tilt forwards, balancing precariously with their newly-built cheap grey faces leering aggressively at passers-by, and they all looked the same. Not in a pretty suburban way, but in a grey-scale lower-class Depression way. Even Remus's delicate lower-middle-class sensibilities were offended; he was poor, but he wasn't this poor, and it shocked him that there were so many people who were. Even when his father couldn't work and his mother was doing menial jobs for little pay and all of that was going towards their upkeep, there had been food on the table, and though they'd had to sell their houses and consistently downgrade their living situation, it had always been pretty, remote cottages and never cold, grey matchboxes.

Lily, her head still wedged firmly between the headrests, smiled wryly at him. "You don't spend much time in cities, do you?"

He shook his head mutely, then focused back on the driving, tuning out the low hum of Lavender and Hermione mumbling in the back seat, Ginny's persistent teeth-grinding as she tried to figure out how to work the radio before giving up to slump into her seat, only listening out for Lily's quick directions. Eventually, the area became even more run-down, newbuilds fading into the more handsome but less healthy townhouses. Here, he paused to let Ginny and Luna out. The two of them were dressed for the area in dark, undistinguished clothing, their wands strapped to their forearms beneath their sleeves.

"Be safe," Hermione warned, watching Ginny hop down from her seat, manfully holding back a squeak of pain as Luna's foot dug into her thigh climbing over to the exit.

Ginny shot her a mischievous smirk. "Don't worry about me, Hermione. Worry about the Death Eaters who are about to get a taste of my wand."

Hermione grimaced. "Yeah, alright, then. Don't get too carried away."

"'Carried away'? Me?" Ginny pulled the most false of innocent faces. "Hermione, darling, have a little faith."

Luna smiled absently. "She'll be fine, Hermione. She's been concocting a new hex for just this occasion."

Hermione's yelp was lost in the sound of the doors slamming shut, and Ginny blew them a kiss before disappearing into the underbrush surrounding the houses. Remus, sensing that Hermione was about to blow, kicked the accelerator and shot off down the street. "A new hex!" Hermione repeated behind him, her voice a mix of prim and shocked. "Bloody Ginny."

They crossed a river which seemed more mud and scum than water, the distinctive silver frame of a bicycle rising above the surface, and then they were cruising down a short street that ended in a grey wall topped with barbed wire, beyond which the chimneys of a factory could be seen. The street was near empty, though a few curtains twitched and a door slammed near the end.

"It's just there," Regulus said this time, for Lily had gone mute. Remus, himself, hoped the exterior was clever spellcasting and not, as he feared, Severus Snape's home. Something in his gut curdled – he thought it might be regret at how he had treated the man in the past when this was his reality.

"He wouldn't want to be pitied," Hermione's matter-of-fact voice said, next to his ear. He startled, turning to frown at her.

"I wasn't..."
"You were," she said, the ghost of a smile crossing her lips.

He studied her for a moment, reading the emotion on her face; sorrow, an old grief, regret, but no surprise. "You've been here before," he said, surprised once again. He wasn't sure why, but the knowledge that she had been to Severus Snape's house seemed to sit ill with him. More proof, he supposed, that she was foreign – from the future, a different future. When the majority of her words about the time were surrounding him he supposed it was easy to become self-absorbed, believing that he, perhaps, had been the centre of her world. A queer jealousy ran through him at the realisation that he was not, that she had visited other men in their houses, that she knew just as much about them as she did him.

"Not in much better circumstances," she murmured, then nodded to Lavender, Lily and Regulus. They were all dressed full-Muggle, with Lavender and Hermione having borrowed clothes from Lily for the occasion, looking mismatched but no worse, he supposed, than the women they had passed on the streets that did belong to this era. They prepared to jump out, but Remus reached out to stop Hermione, his hand locking around her wrist in sudden anxiety. She shot him a questioning glance, and he reached back over his seat. He wasn't entirely sure what he was doing, but he followed his instincts, thinking that with Hermione they would not lead him wrong.

He brushed a kiss against her lips then rubbed his nose down her jawline, pressing one kiss to her pulse and dragging the underside of his chin across her neck. Pulling back, he noted with satisfaction that her scent had mingled with his; her eyes dilated in the light. "What was that?" she asked with a tremulous note in her voice to which he answered with a short chuckle.

"Be safe," he mimicked her earlier words, releasing her wrist. The anxiety had been replaced with satisfaction, and he relaxed back into his chair, watching them leave through the rear-view mirror.

Regulus, the last out, smirked at him as he leaned back in to close the door. "Nice display," he teased. "Very threatening. Consider us put in our place."

He smiled faintly, loosening his grip on the steering wheel. Outside, Regulus guided them towards the rowhouses unerringly, gathering an air of authority he'd lacked the past few days. Remus had thought the anxiety would return once Hermione dropped out of sight, but it didn't, not even when he watched her melt into nothing through Severus's ward. Apparently, the wolf was satisfied that there was no danger Hermione could come across today that his scent-marking couldn't conquer.

Lavender shivered in the cold breeze, pulling her jacket closer around her. She wasn't sure what it was, but there was something about the West that made her uneasy. Ever since she was a child and her parents had taken her to Blackpool, she'd had an crippling fear of travelling any further across the country than Sheffield. Her parents called it 'irrational' but, seeing the sorts of people that skulked around these streets, she rather thought it wise. You didn't come across these sorts of thugs in her native Iken.

And such a house, too. She glowered up at the house Regulus was taking them to, all miserable and lonely. She could feel Snape's wards from the other side of the street, could sense them even in the damn car, they were so vicious, so distracting. Never one with any particular skill in spellcasting, she could nevertheless distinguish the layers from each other, and if asked would have been able to identify the purpose of each one.

Not that anybody asked, of course. It was the curse of her life that when she knew the answer, nobody bloody asked the question. To spite them, she started reciting them in her head; Notice-Me-Not, Blood Curdling, Protego Totalum, Animagus Revellio, Anti-Apparition... She should have been put off by the darkness of some of them but instead they satisfied a violent part of her,
which did scare her, actually. Reflexively she moved closer to Hermione, not that even Hermione could protect her from her own nature.

She could give her something else to think about, though, and because Hermione Granger is ever obliging, she did. "Mi," she whispered, because low voices seemed to be The Thing To Do. Slowly, she edged closer to make sure she wasn't mistaken. Nope, she was right. "Are you aware you stink like my Alpha's favourite soft toy?"

"What?" Hermione's eyes widened and automatically she raised her arm as if to sniff her armpits. Lavender stopped her just in time.

"Yeah, that's not – never mind." She took another deep breath through her nose. Yep, there is was, that musky, earthy scent with a sweet edge, unmistakably Alpha. She held back a snigger because she didn't want to put Hermione on edge, but it was absolutely hilarious to her that Remus had just done the werewolf equivalent of pissing up her leg, and she hadn't even noticed. Gods; the scent was so strong for such a small gesture. "Yeah, never mind."

They hit the wards then. Regulus glanced around and started subtly adjusting them, his magic mixing with Snape's familiarly. It was like cutting good vodka with tap water in Lavender's head, though – the sharp cut of Snape's magic was dulled and violated by Regulus's, and she had to hold back a growl at the desecration. Lily kept walking without noticing their stop, and paused a few feet beyond the ward to look back at them in confusion, her face slackening when she noticed they'd all been prevented from moving onwards. Regulus made a disgusted sound without even pausing his work, sending a dark look at Lily that, if she were in her right mind, Lavender would appreciate.

Unfortunately she wasn't because, recognising what that had meant, Lavender saw red.

"No!" Hermione yelped, diving at the girl as she tried to barge past, uncaring about the vicious wards, determined to get at the woman who thought she had a claim on her mate. She was no longer Lily Evans, slightly irritating but mainly sweet girl who'd nursed her through the bite that changed her. No. Instead, she was that bitch redhead. Soon to be that bitch redhead with the gaping hole in her throat.

Regulus stepped through a second before Lavender whipped passed him, lunging for Lily, who hopped aside a second before Lavender would have made contact. Snarling, she recovered and turned for a second try. "What the hell is wrong with you?!" Lily screeched, turning panicked eyes on the others two for help. "And why aren't you stopping her?"

Regulus shoved his hands in his pockets and glanced at the front door. They were masked from muggle eyes here, so he didn't particularly feel any need to get involved. Especially when it would be to get between a possessive werewolf and the challenge to her mating. "I told you to get over her," he told the house officiously. "Lily Evans will lead you straight into trouble!, I said, and you didn't listen. Well, she's about to get mauled on your front lawn. Happy now?"

Hermione was enjoying the show rather more than she should; Lavender missing Lily by inches once again. Though she did feel a little guilt over telling Lavender about the 'always' thing, being as it had led to this catastrophe. With a sigh, she shouted Lavender's name, and the werewolf stopped in her tracks. "Leave it out, Lav," she called, much like one might a naughty dog.

Lavender glared at Lily once more before straightening up, shaking her hair back into place. Then, determined to ignore the redhead, she looked up at the house. It wasn't a nice house, she could admit easily, but if it had been more looked after no doubt it would be charming. The bricks needed washing to relieve them of their sooty load, and the windows needed replacing, but otherwise, she didn't hate it. Wincing, she shoved her homemaking instincts to the backburner – he wasn't hers yet
and stood back as Regulus swept past, his imperious stance returning to him in the familiarity of these surroundings. Without hesitation, he pushed open the door.

"What, you're just going to walk straight in?" Hermione asked with a frown.

Shrugging, Regulus stepped across the threshold. "It's not like he doesn't know we're here. Severus?"

The other three crowded around the door, none of them eager to enter without an overt invitation, but they still had a good view when a scowling Severus Snape emerged from behind a door, wand extended. "What are you doing here?" he snarled at Regulus. "You're meant to be lying low!"

"If only that were possible," Regulus replied dryly, stepping aside to reveal the others in the doorway. "I'm afraid my new 'protectors' have expectations."

The colour – what little there was – drained out of Snape's face and he jerked backwards as if to run away, but had then thought better of it. "You've joined the Order," he said in a flat voice, his eyes flicking between Regulus and Lily as though they'd short-circuited. "And you brought them to my house." There was a flicker of betrayal in his eyes before they were shuttered and he stood tall again.

"We're not the Order," Hermione said brightly. She had a disturbing glow in her eyes as she looked at the younger Snape for the first time, like she'd just found a rare edition of a book she'd been hunting and she was determined to add it to her library.

Snape glowered at her, one finger pointing at Lily. "She is."

"Yes, but we're not," Hermione countered, waggling her finger between Regulus, Lavender and herself. "Majority rules, Snape."

"Let us in, will you?" Regulus said, sneering slightly. "It's cold as -" his eyes shot to the girls stood next to him and he grimaced, obviously editing. "Merlin out here, and while your house is hardly a step up, I'd rather not be overheard."

Suspicious still, he wavered, undecided whether to trust them. Lavender could understand that. Really, she preened at it – that ridiculous, irrational side of her she'd equated with her wolf was proud of him for being so careful, damn it all.

Finally, Snape waved a negligent hand and everybody trooped across the threshold, Regulus shutting the door behind them. They followed Snape's dark silhouette through the hallway into a study that had definitely seen better days, and Lavender would comment no further than that out of respect for her mate. If she whined pitifully at the state of her mate's house, that was just between her and the wolf.

And Hermione, apparently, because the other girl shot her a half-amused, half-exasperated look.

They crowded into the room; Lily, Lavender and Hermione standing awkwardly as Regulus fell onto a settee with absent grace, and Snape moved to the mantel, ignoring the others in favour of glowering at his friend. "Who are they?" he asked gruffly.

"My new friends," Regulus told him lightly, smiling faintly. "They'll be yours, too, if you'll let them. Severus, might I introduce you to Lavender Brown and Hermione Granger. Hermione, Lavender; the one and only Severus Snape. Of course, you know Lily." He added the last with a resentful lilt that informed Lavender that she wasn't the only person with a dislike of Snape's pining.

Snape turned on his heel to observe them properly for the first time, though the dim light must mask
their appearance somewhat. Still, Lavender noted his paling further when his eyes lit on her. "You," he said bluntly. His voice lowered to a hiss, "what is this?"

"Way to make a girl feel wanted," she teased, ignoring the painful clenching in her stomach at his dark look. "When I imagined our reunion…"

"Mr. Snape," Hermione butted in, drawing his gaze. "My name's Hermione, and I've come to ask for your help."

He peered at her, apparently deciding to ignore Lily and Lavender, discounting their presence. Lily didn't seem to notice, gawking at him. Only the Gods knew why, it's not like he looked much different to how he did in the future, mar the lack of wrinkles, so he couldn't look too different to how he had at school.

"If you're not with the Order, who are you?"

"We're…" Hermione seemed lost then, gazing off with a wrinkle in her brow. "We're…"

"We need a name," Lavender remarked, if only to draw his attention. He stubbornly refused to look at her. She tried not to mourn the loss of his dark regard.

"Yes, well, it's hardly a high priority," Hermione snapped, then straightened again. "We're a secret society within a secret society. A name would be detrimental – people only ever get caught when they have names, see," this last part seemed addressed to Snape, as though defending their lack of preparation.

"Sev…" Lily stuttered, finally gaining her voice.

Snape flinched, turning on his heel to face Regulus. "Do they speak English or am I expected to decipher this nonsense?"

"They're usually at least coherent," Regulus remarked dryly, frowning across at Hermione. "Are you alright?"

"Fine," Hermione squeaked. Looking at her, however, Lavender noticed that she was shaking slightly, and her hands were clenched into fists. By the Gods, Hermione was scared. "It's just…"

"Circe's tits, Snape, do you have to be so bloody intimidating?" Lavender burst out, protectiveness for Hermione clouding her thoughts. She wondered how that could be; with her Mate stood in front of her, surely her first loyalty was to him…? Then she took another steadying breath, and rolled her eyes. Right; that conniving little shit. Remus had gone and rubbed his scent all over her so that she'd read the Alpha in Hermione. Something she shouldn't have to do, according to Remus, until after they were officially Mated and Hermione bore his Mark, their scents intertwined for all eternity and beyond, with Hermione taking her rightful place as Alpha female. It seemed he'd found a get-around. Prick.

Aside from the blatant manipulation, Lavender found she was actually quite grateful for the help. Protecting her Alpha's 'property', for lack of a better term, gave her something else to focus on aside from mooning uselessly after the ugly git across the room. The second he'd become a threat to Hermione, her thought processes had become sharp as a tack, and she was all ready to tear him apart.

"Excuse me?" He looked taken aback, black eyes wide. Good. She pressed her advantage.

"Drop the scowl, offer around some tea, and for Merlin's sake, sit the fuck down." She sniffed,
looking around at the room, noting how it looked like a bomb had hit it. "I'll clear off a spot for us to sit on while you make drinks."

"Excuse me-"

"You are excused," she countered saucily, whipping out her wand and praying that her magic wouldn't fail her now. She couldn't bear the humiliation. Happily, when she set it to cleaning surfaces, stacking plates and glasses, and sorting books onto the shelves, it complied with a satisfying rush. Add that to the jig she was dancing on the inside at finally getting to use one of her grandmother's favourite comebacks, and she was practically walking on air.

She noticed, as she passed to walk through to the dinky kitchen, that Snape was still stood at the mantel. Pausing, she shot him as haughty a raised eyebrow as she could muster. "Is there a problem, Mr. Snape?" she purred, taking the opportunity to bask in his lovely scent. Ah, sandalwood. She'd always liked sandalwood.

He twitched, again, his face darkening, which only heightened her enjoyment of the situation. "This is my house," he told her, his jaw clenched.

"That's true, it is," she replied with equanimity. "And look at me, cleaning it for you. You don't know me yet, but when you do you'll realise what a miracle is occurring right before your very eyes. The least you can do is make me a drink."

"Make the girl a drink, Severus," Regulus goaded from the settee, his own eyes dancing as they watched Lavender whirl around. Hermione was pretty gobsmacked, so gobsmacked it had shocked her out of her well-conditioned fear response to Snape, which had been Lavender's intention. Lily, apropos of nothing, was picking her way through the debris of Snape's life as it was strewn across the floor. Nosy cow. "She's right, it really is the least you can do."

Breathing heavily through that impressive nose – and Lavender hadn't been joking when she'd idly wondered whether it was proportionate, because hoo, boy – he shot a black look at Regulus. "If I make you tea," he began slowly, pinching the bridge of his nose, "will you shut up."

Lavender considered that for a moment, weighing the pros and cons. Eventually, she gave a short, sharp nod. "Yes. But only on this occasion. You don't know this lot – a bunch of ruddy chancers, they are. If I set a precedent like this, they'll keep me in leaves just so I can never talk again."

"And what a shame that would be," Snape grunted, marching through to the kitchen.

Delighted, Lavender spun on her heel to beam at her friends. "See that?" she stage-whispered. "He knows me too well already! And you didn't think this would work." Scoffing, she sauntered on through, certain that not even his inconvenient little crush on that redhead bitch could derail her good mood. Her Mate was here, he was talking to her, he was providing her with sustenance and he was allowing her to improve his living situation. On top of that, they were having banter of the old-married-couple persuasion! When their base chemistry was this brilliant, everything else was surely incidental?

She wondered if he'd object to her calling him 'Sevvy'...

Chapter End Notes
Shameless self promotion: if you hunger, as I often do, for some more Lavender Brown goodness, I have updated Alihotsy, Aconite and Amortentia, which is a Lavender/Severus fic I am about half-way through! (I think)
go read that go read that go read that I whisper

Love, Eli x
Chapter Fifty-One: Failure to Launch

Chapter Summary

Hermione demonstrates the reason she never went into sales. Lavender is unimpressed. They're all unimpressed.

Chapter Notes

Hi!
Bah! Originally this chapter was going to have Severus joining the team but then I thought "it'll be much more fun and canonical if he doesn't" so he doesn't (sorry Lavender). I hope you enjoy this anyway!
Love, Eli x

"We're fighting the war and we want you to join us," Hermione said when Severus returned to the room. She'd planned this, decided not to appeal to his heroic side, but for some reason these words were tripping out of her mouth instead of her carefully cultured appeals, embarrassingly blunt and entirely wrong. "Fight He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named with us. Fight Dumbledore with us. Help us win a war."

"No," Severus snapped, dropping the tea-tray unceremoniously on the table and glaring over the top of it at each of them in turn.

Hermione reclined back onto the plumped up – and miraculously clean – cushions of the couch, taking a leisurely sip from her tea. She'd never have guessed it before, but Lavender had managed to set her at ease in Severus's presence. Seeing him bossed around by the blonde, then watching her strip the room of dirt with a near unholy glee while he watched helplessly, had melted some tension inside of her. Now she saw him as he was – a stressed but remarkably normal young man. And seeing him this way helped her not be cowed by his glower and bluster; she could react in the way she'd react to anybody else's refusal of her wishes.

That is to say, by pestering them until they broke.

There were many routes she could take toward convincing him. Asking straight-out was her typically Gryffindor approach, but it shouldn't be underestimated that she was still the same person who hexed the DA's sign-up sheet and gave Umbridge up to, first, Grawp, and then the tender mercies of the Centaur herd. Appealing to his other interests was next on her list, if he'd let her get there.

"Mister Snape," she began, leaning forward to place her cup delicately on its saucer. From the corner of her eye, she caught Lavender nodding approvingly at the gesture, and fought to keep from smirking. Snape had no idea what he'd started by letting her take the liberties she had with his living space. "I understand your concern -"

"You do not," he bit out, eyes blazing. Hermione closed her mouth with a click. "There is no way possible for you to comprehend the risks you are – and would be - asking me to take." He pinched
the bridge of his nose and sighed deeply. Hermione felt a twinge of guilt at the action, but pushed it away mercilessly. They needed Snape and he needed them, whether he knew it or not. "I am not a green lad. If all you needed was an expert in Dark Magic, you have one in Regulus. You want me to be your little spy, and I see no reason to oblige."

"Severus," Regulus said quietly. He opened one eye to fix on his friend, looking half-defeated. "You need to know – if anybody has a chance at defeating the Dark Lord, it's these girls."

"If they're that good, I fail to see why I need to be involved." He took a sip of tea, not relaxing in the least, not even sitting down. His nostrils were flaring in anger.

"Because you're good, too, Severus," Lily said quietly. Severus's lips twitched into a sneer. "We can help you…"

"I don't need your help," he hissed, wincing. Hermione twitched slightly.

Flinching at the edge to his voice, Lily turned her back and went on searching the room. Truly, she wasn't being as helpful as had been suggested. In fact, her mere presence seemed more off-putting than appealing, and Hermione was beginning to regret the suggestion that led her to bring the girl along in the first place. Had it worked, it would have been a masterful piece of manipulation, but after some thought she realised that she didn't want that, either. To use his love for Lily in order to force him onto their 'team' would make them no better than Dumbledore, and if there was one thing she wanted aside from a favourable outcome of the war, it was to bring Dumbledore down without stooping to his immoral tactics.

She could hardly send Lily away now, however; the damage was done. If he thought any less of them for the failed attempt, it wasn't possible to tell, for he eyed them with utter contempt constantly.

"Be nice," Lavender chastised, still making moon-calf eyes at the man. Snape sneered back at her, only to receive a blinding smile. Disconcerted, he went back to ignoring the infatuated werewolf, not that it stopped her. In fact, the only thing stopping her from reaching out and stroking him was that when she'd lifted her arm to try Regulus had braved her wrath to clamp a hand around her wrist, which he had yet to release.

"I don't see what you hoped to achieve by coming here," Severus scoffed, pulling himself back together. "It should have been obvious that I would not welcome your intrusion. Regulus, at least, should know that well."

"Indeed, I do," Regulus allowed with a nod. "But, things are no longer simple enough that they can be delayed by observing the niceties. I'm being hunted by both the Order and the Dark Lord. Hermione and Lavender aren't supposed to exist. Evans is a mu – Muggleborn, which you know is risk enough in itself."

Severus arched an eyebrow at his friend's stumble, which Regulus covered up by stiffening into a perfect pureblood statue. "I thought things were too complicated to observe the niceties," he asked lowly.

Regulus sniffed haughtily. "They took me in. It would be poor form to repay their kindness by addressing them with such slurs."

"Them?"

Regulus tilted his head towards Hermione, who smiled. "Evans is not the only Muggleborn on the team."
Severus turned to face Hermione fully, which unfortunately put him within grabbing distance of Lavender, who took full advantage of this and Regulus's distraction by running the edges of his robes through her fingers as though she was examining the finest of silks. Hermione filed this behaviour away in the back of her mind for later perusal – Remus had never been this thunderstruck by her very existence, and she wondered if it was another symptom of Lavender's werewolf's general weakness, or something more.

Twitching his robes out of reach of her marauding hands, Severus examined Hermione with his eyes. "You didn't go to Hogwarts," he observed in a faintly accusatory tone.

"Oh no, I did," she said sagely. "Gryffindor and proud. A Prefect, too, for two years. Highest marks since Professor McGonagall in my NEWTs once I got over my pesky DADA troubles." She gave a vague, smug wave. "They called me the Brightest Witch of my Age."

"And so modest, too," Lavender muttered from her chair. "I'm still not entirely sure that wasn't because you were sleeping with the teacher."

Severus's brows rose even higher at this. "I don't recall you." He deftly sidestepped Lavender's arm again, shooting her a mildly irritated look. "Either of you."

"You wouldn't," Hermione demurred. "We started in 1991."

As expected, Snape froze completely, the implications flashing through his mind. "That's not possible," he coughed out.

"Quite, and yet, here we are."

Severus was so lost in his own thoughts he didn't notice he'd stopped moving, allowing Lavender to gather the hem of his coat to her face and sniff deeply. She let out a satisfied little purr, glaring at Regulus when he laughed lightly. "But -" Severus stopped, then restarted, his gaze sharpening. "You are the weapon," he realised aloud. "That which the Dark Lord believes Dumbledore will use against him."

Lily, now behind the couch on which Hermione sat, let out a little harrumph. She was roundly ignored. "I dislike the word 'weapon'," Hermione said, going to take another drink of tea, disappointed when the cup was empty. She set it down with a clatter. "But yes, our sources tell us that's how he views us. And we'd rather like him to remain ignorant of our true nature, you understand. The risks are rather monumental."

"And yet you came here, to me."

"I trust you," Hermione admitted with a minute shrug that did not betray the depths of her own troubles on this subject. "Lavender does. Our other friends – you haven't met them and doubtless you'd dislike them greatly but I can assure you they're accomplished – trust you also. It's only the doubts of those resident in this time that might have delayed us, and, as you can see, such is not the case."

His eyes shot speculatively to Lily, who hid her face behind the cover of *A History of Chimera in Wizarding Wales*. It tarried there for a moment before returning to Hermione with some new knowledge in its depths. "I still refuse."

"Excuse me?" Hermione was shocked, shocked, to say the least, but Severus was stood tall and a little superior, seeming to have gained back his air of intimidation in the few seconds of deliberation he had granted himself.
"I believe you heard me correctly, Miss – Granger, was it? I'm afraid I shall have to decline your kind offer. Please," he gestured to the door, "see yourself out."

"Severus!" Regulus was aghast, and their host barely twitched at the tone of his voice.

"Surely you didn't expect me to agree to this ridiculousness, Regulus," Snape chided, crossing his arms over his chest. "Perhaps you enjoy being locked up somewhere with little Miss High-and-Mighty, Potter, his sycophantic cohort and this - this -" he glared fiercely at Lavender where she was still snuggling with his coat, watching him with bright purple eyes, "- whatever you are, but certainly I couldn't do it."

"I'm a werewolf," Lavender corrected him, brow puckered. "Surely you can identify a werewolf? Smart bloke like you, and all. In fact, I'm pretty sure there was this whole lesson on it in third year, right, 'Mione?"

Horror crossed Severus's face at that and he jerked his coat back roughly, snarling. "You brought a werewolf to my home?"

"In fairness," Hermione said, a bit blearily as she was still shaken by the abrupt turn of events, "it's not like we could leave her in the car."

"Get out!"

The wards bended around them with an almost audible screech, and Hermione jumped to her feet, the very real prospect of their eviction firing her through with adrenaline. "Regulus informed us that you, as he, were looking for a way out. If that's no longer something you're interested in, just let us know and we'll get out of your hair."

Severus, face still carved with rage – and, she thought, perhaps a little fear – turned on her, careful not to put his back to Lavender, who was uncurling herself from her chair quite languidly, as though absolutely nothing was wrong. There was a flash of her wrist as she did something, but then Severus was talking and Hermione was distracted. "I'm not interested," he said clearly. "I was never interested in – in this."

He turned on Regulus, then. "When I said 'an escape' I meant a well-warded cabin in the woods, not a parade of – of – creatures through my house, risking my life. What if the Dark Lord finds out about this? I'll be dead, Regulus!"

"We've taken care of the Death Eaters on watch," Regulus soothed, his hands up, palms-outwards to placate him. "Even if you refuse, they'll remember nothing. Your neighbours will remember nothing. Just an ordinary day in Spinner's End." Offended, suddenly, Regulus bristled. "Did you really think we'd risk your life like this? Me? I'm your best friend, Severus."

Severus turned his head away, facing the wall with a stony expression. "I am much obliged for your consideration," he said coldly. The wards flexed again, ominous in the sudden silence. Regulus, stricken, stumbled back a few steps.

"Really, Severus. -"

"Perhaps, next time you attempt to convince someone to join your team, you might ensure that they have no quarrel with your colleagues, Miss Granger." Snape sneered again, but it was a poor covering for the genuine hurt in his eyes, and the fear that almost eclipsed it. "Really, for someone who proports to be so clever, you failed utterly in your due diligence."

Offended, Hermione scowled. Regulus came to her rescue before she could say anything rash. "Severus, think on this offer. It will remain open – just call for Kreacher if you change your mind. I'll
have him listen out for your summons." He brushed off his cloak, swinging it around his shoulders. "Promise me you'll think about it, please."

His eyes barely grazing his friend, Snape stepped towards the door, pulling it open and holding it there, his face a pale mask. "Good-bye, Regulus."

Regulus tried to talk, to get through to his friend a few more times, but in the end Snape lost patience and retreated upstairs. Finally, Hermione sent her patronus to Remus and the four of them traipsed into the van, feeling defeated.

"How’d it go?" Ginny asked, leaning over the back of her seat, concerned when she caught the looks on their faces. Hermione dropped into her chair and faced the window, not even meeting Remus's eyes.

"All wrong," Lily informed them. "I told you; Severus is too stubborn. He doesn't need our help."

Lavender growled from the back seat. "If you think what we saw in there is a man who needs nobody's help, who is happy with their life choices, then there is no hope for you, Evans."

And with that surprisingly sober insight from a girl who'd spent the last hour-or-so gazing love-sick at a man she didn’t even like, they fell silent for a pensive drive back to Remus's parents'.

"Don't you dare," Ginny snarled the second they stepped over the threshold. The boys were waiting in the foyer, and upon seeing the downcast expressions of everybody who had participated in the trip, had opened their mouths near as one.

"You don't even know what I was going to say!" Sirius whined, pouting. Ginny patted him on the cheek with a sympathetic moue, though perhaps the pats were a bit hard, for he winced and the sound of flesh hitting flesh had echoed in the hall.

"You were going to say 'I told you so'," Ginny informed him in a sweet voice. "And unless you want to join Dolohov singing soprano, you'll refrain."

"Dolohov?" Hermione asked, peeking up from where she had her face pressed firmly against Remus's chest, the werewolf making the most of a rare opportunity to comfort his terrifyingly capable mate. "You did what to Dolohov?"

Affecting an innocent face, Ginny twirled her wand through her fingers. "Y'know how I said I was road-testing a new hex?" she split into a mischievous grin, eyes sparkling wildly. "Well, it works."

Most of the males assembled made little whining sounds at the back of their throats, James going so far as to cup himself protectively. Sirius, on the other hand, grinned widely. "I think I love you," he said matter-of-factly, to which Ginny smirked and patted him again.

"What do we do now?" James asked, breaking away from his reunion nuzzles with Lily. "You said we needed Snape, right? But we don't have him, so…"

"He'll come around," Lavender chirped from where she leaned against the wall, absently fondling something in her pocket. Hermione narrowed her eyes, but let it be. With two werewolves, a James Potter, a Sirius Black, and a Luna Lovegood in the group, what was a little petty thievery between friends? "It's meant to be."

"Erm, that's not how Fate works, Lav," Ginny said, a trace of amusement lining her voice.
Lavender pulled a face but shrugged, pushing off from the wall. "He'll come around," she repeated, ignoring their disbelief. "In the meantime, I think I'll shower. I love him and all, but really, his hygiene standards leave a lot to be desired." Plucking at her shirt and pulling a disgusted face, she bounced up the steps, her curled, braided, be-ribboned and possibly bejewelled hair flying in her wake.

"She's changed her tune," James observed mildly, leading the rest of the group through to the war room by silent agreement.

Scoffing derisively, Lily folded herself into a chair. "She's embarrassing," she muttered, her cheeks tinted pink at the memory. Ginny raised an eyebrow at Hermione across the room, but the other witch only smiled faintly. She was coming to understand Lily better now, and she knew that her aggression towards Lavender in fact stemmed from her own mortification at what they experienced that afternoon. No doubt, despite the years that had passed, Lily had expected to be welcomed by her old friend with all the adulation and gratitude that had defined their friendship in the first place. It was a fair deduction; Lily wasn't to know how the years had changed him, how bitterness had taken root in his heart and grown from there.

Even Hermione was kicking herself for not expecting and planning for this outcome, which now, looking back, appeared inevitable. Her view was shadowed too much by her image of the heroic Snape Harry had built in everyone's minds following the war, her opinion gilded by years of hero-worship for the dark spy. Given that he hadn't been alive to dispel these thoughts with his personal brand of snark and well-placed insults, it had gotten out of hand.

Now, she knew better, and while she didn't fully trust in Lavender's prediction she also wasn't going to give up just yet. He had a history of saying things in the heat of the moment he'd later regret. Already formulating her next plan of attack, she missed the other's words until Remus nudged her into awareness. "Huh?"

"We were wondering whether we should make a start on collecting the next horcrux," Remus repeated, smiling fondly at her. "Which one would be best, do you think?"

"Oh," Hermione blushed at the looks she was receiving from the others around the table and cleared her throat, getting back into business mode. With a flick of her wrist she summoned Luna's parchment, spreading it across the table and pulling up the Horcrux section. "I thought, maybe, the ring?" Nibbling on her bottom lip, she surveyed the information available on the other artifacts, giving a decisive nod once she had. "Yes – the ring. It'll be the easiest, I think. Fewer protections, once you discount the curse on the ring itself. That reminds me… do any of you happen to know a curse-breaker? One who can be trusted? I don't want to have to battle with unforeseen complications when it comes to destruction, so it would be wise to solve that problem now rather than later."

James grimaced, a look akin to awkwardness crossing his face. "I know one, but I don't think…" he trailed off, shooting a pleading look to Sirius, who shifted awkwardly.

"Er, yeah. There is…" He stopped too, gazing off into space. Hermione frowned, pulling back to look at Remus, who avoided her gaze.

"They don't want to say it," Regulus muttered. He was sat in a chair with Luna sat between his legs,
twining his fingers through his hair as he watched the other boys. "They're all hoping someone else will so they don't have to blame themselves for the aftermath." He dropped his hands to Luna's shoulders and squeezed gently, his eyes softening.

"Why?" Hermione asked quietly. "What can be so bad..?"

"It's not bad," James reassured her hastily. "It's just…"

"It's my mum," Luna piped up suddenly, her eyes fixed on James's guilt-stricken face. "That's why they don't want to say it. She's a freelance curse-breaker, but they don't think we can bring her into this."

Stunned, Hermione stuttered for a moment and then smiled sadly at her friend. "Well they're right, aren't they? We can't bring her into this."

Luna frowned, her brow crinkling. "Why not? She's brilliant, and she's not a Death Eater."

"Luna…" Hermione looked around desperately for assistance. Ginny rolled her eyes, though, and shrugged.

"I agree with Luna. We should bring her in." Seeing Hermione about to argue, she held up a hand. "I know – it would be tricky with anybody else, but Pandora and Xenophilius Lovegood are not 'anybody else', are they? They're special, like Lu."

Frustrated, Hermione waved her hands. "Is this where you tell me there's some obscure pureblood rule about who will or will not create a paradox?" she snapped.

Luna let out a little snort of laughter. "No," she soothed, "there's no such thing, don't be silly. We're just saying that if any of our parents can get involved without there being adverse effects, it would be mine." She paused, then met Ginny's eyes. "Sorry, Gin."

Ginny shrugged it off, not quickly enough to hide her pain. "It's fine. I mean, if ever we need a shepherd's pie or to dissect a plug, then we'll be in big trouble, but Mum was never a curse-breaker. Too dangerous."

"And Gods forbid we ever need a filling." Hermione murmured, to the amusement of Remus, the only person in the room who understood the reference. He squeezed her hand for a quick second, and then Hermione rolled her eyes. "Okay, so Mrs. Lovegood needs to be involved. How can we manage that? And when we do it, should it be before or after we fetch the ring? Because who knows how long that might take…"

Bolstered by having something other than her failure to focus on, Hermione threw herself into plans, eventually dragging Lavender down to put in her two-knuts. The blonde looked weary from the emotional turmoil of the day, and Hermione felt a punch of guilt. Here was she, pitying herself over Snape's rejection, when certainly it would affect Lavender more profoundly. As amusing as Hermione found their mate-situation in the abstract, she couldn't imagine the pain Lavender must feel at Snape's obvious disgust at her existence. At the end of the day, Hermione had what Lavender didn't – a warm bed and a devoted mate to curl up with.

She sighed quietly to herself. Despite the certainty that getting involved would be bad, the Gryffindor in Hermione couldn't stop itself from swearing to help the other girl however she could. Even if it meant playing matchmaker between the Greasy Dungeon Bat and the World's Most Inept Werewolf. Even though she knew if it worked she'd have to start wearing earplugs full-time as her level-headed but bitchy Lavender deteriorated into Lav-Lav the Crazy Love-Monster.
Remembering the famous necklace, she stifled a snort. If she could fix this... boy, would it be entertaining to watch.
Chapter Fifty-Two: Fate Part II

Chapter Summary

A friend visits Luna while the other girls go Horcrux hunting in typical seventies style - which Hermione thinks is still better than camping; Lavender disagrees.

Chapter Notes

Swears! I feel like I can be relied upon for a good swear every now and again. Also snakes. Gotta love those slippery buggers. Ginny certainly thinks so. Enjoy! Love always,
Eli x

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Luna appeared, alone, on the familiar pathway she'd trodden every day for seventeen years. The day was a bright one – unseasonably hot, the air muggy and thick, as though the world was on pause. Something was coming, she recognised. Something stronger than the storm that brewed off beyond the horizon.

In the distance stood her house, strong and proud against the sky. People had often described it as odd, deriding it for its eccentricity, but Luna couldn't see it as anything other than home. The seat of generations upon generations of Lovegoods, and at that very moment, the place that housed her mother and father in the first years of their marriage.

Hermione had objected to Luna taking this mission, of course. And then she'd objected to her doing it alone. But Luna, though dippy and sometimes detached, couldn't stand the thought of someone else bringing this request to her parents. Even she could identify all the myriad problems that could crop up here, but she couldn't help herself. The lure of seeing her mother on this side of the grave was too strong.

The sun was shining, not at all giving the appearance of a day in which she was likely to make a huge, world-ending mistake, and she trusted the weather's opinion on the matter. Around her, flowers bloomed, the path littered with cherry blossom that felt like cushions under her bare feet. She liked that; liked the sensations she could detect. Her dislike for shoes wasn't simply an eccentricity, it was a necessity – a girl such as herself who existed between worlds needed something to hold her down, to remind herself that she yet lived. The scratch, stroke, crunch of textures beneath her sole and between her toes brought her awareness back where it should be gently, without endangering her sanity.

It was the same with Regulus, now. Whenever she thought she was floating away, being absorbed into the greater world, he was there to hold her down. His fingers linked with hers, the soft brush of his lips against her skin, his voice as he spoke her name; all of these kept her in her body, and kept her wanting to be in her body, too. She couldn't be lured by the awesome alternate realities of existence if she loved him, wanted to return to him.
Behind her, she noticed smoke spiralling upwards over the hills. The Burrow. Something flickered in her mind, a dancing temptation, whispering coaxing words to her brain. Her feet moved before she could think to stop them, carrying her back down the hill towards Ottery St. Catchpole, and she went with it, not really understanding why she shouldn't.

"Greetings, Luna," softly chastising, the voice broke the siren's call, bringing her back to earth. She dug her toes into the petals beneath her until she could feel the sharp sting of the gravel beneath, so hard it broke her skin. Turning, she spotted a woman lurking beneath a tree.

"Hello," she said cautiously, tilting her head to better observe her. She was a pretty woman, with porcelain skin and ruby-red hair, and eyes so pale the iris was nearly indistinguishable from the whites. She was draped from head to foot in a translucent peach-coloured gauze, only her face and hands fully visible, though the sunlight was bright enough to take away any mystery. Something about her was familiar, scratching at Luna's brain, wanting to get out.

"Ah," the woman said, a faint smile crossing her lips. "I forget how malleable the mortal brain is. Perhaps this will help." She tipped her hand upwards, pursing her lips and blowing a short breath in Luna's direction. All at once, her memories returned.

"You're her – One," Luna muttered, eyes wide. Pressure pressed against her skin as she wandered forwards; the woman's power – Godly, devastating. It surged against her so hard as to make her pale skin paler, cutting off the flow of blood to her extremities, not unlike if she'd ran into a wall. It smothered her breath, cutting off air-flow, but she moved on. Survival instincts had been bred out of her bloodline generations back.

Struggling, she drew closer to the woman until the bubble seemed to burst, the power dissipating harmlessly into the air.

Another smile, warmer, lit One's visage. Up close, Luna could see how smudged her features were, as though she couldn't decide exactly how she wanted to look that day. Her nose appeared at once button and aquiline, her lips plush and flat, her eyes oval and slanted. Despite this, her emotions were still vibrant, written over her face. "One? That's new. But yes, indeed I am. And you are Luna, Pandora's daughter – one of the Gifted."

Nodding, Luna briefly considered curtsying then dismissed the possibility out of hand. "I am gifted." She said instead, brightly.

One chuckled warmly, and gestured towards the copse she stood sheltered in. "Come. Walk with me, my child."

Luna nodded and followed, the two of them keeping company in silence for minutes as One led her deep into the familiar woodland. Then, after a while, something occurred to Luna. "Your child?" Obviously, she knew that her mother was Pandora Lovegood, who dwelled in the house just beyond the trees, but this was bigger than that; Gods had been interfering with human existence for millennia, as her entire trip to the past proved.

One paused. "You are one of my children; Fate's children, which is why you are here," she said slowly. There was a fallen tree to one side, and she brushed blossom off of it and indicated that they should sit. "I don't think that's what you're asking, though, is it?"

Luna shook her head. "No, I didn't think so." Gazing up at sun-dappled leaves, One gave a wistful smile. "You have a gift and a curse – you knew that. It dates back... oh, so far. The women of your family have always been connected to the Other, whether through Prophecy or Necromancy or Spellcraft or..."
Shaking her head, she turned to peer at Luna out of the corner of her eyes. Luna gazed back guilelessly, just taking it all in. "Of course, your line dates back to Cassandra of Troy. It is... how do you say – mutated? Yes, the gift has mutated, with its curse. While Cassandra was cursed never to be believed, that price is paid elsewhere. No, your bloodline's cost is your... somewhat tenuous grasp on sanity."

"I'm perfectly sane," Luna retorted with a sigh. Truly, it got so tiring to constantly defend one's mental stability.

One waved her off easily. "Of course you are, dear. In fact, you are perfection – all of my children are. You, your friends, your young man. Tragic, but perfect. Well," she cocked her head to one side. "Except for the little werewolf girl. She wasn't one of mine. But she's doing so well, I might just have to adopt her.

"But, no. You are as natural as any magic child can be, if one disregards your roots. Which is rather the point of this activity, some might say."

There was a natural lull in the conversation as they both took in the environment, attuned themselves with nature. They could have been anywhere in the world except for where they were, on the brink of something that could not be undone.

"Are you certain of this?" One asked finally, not looking at Luna.

"No," she replied honestly, watching the hemlock glimmer as wrackspurts danced from flower to flower. She thought of Ginny, and her mother – warm, welcoming Molly Weasley. She thought of Hermione, and the lengths she'd gone to, the sacrifices she'd made for the war, including sending her own parents away. She thought of Lavender, who had left her father behind, a father she'd adored like the air she breathed. "It's not fair."

"You've never been one to care for fair," One hummed. "You care for the natural, for what is right. And Pandora is, as ever, required." She let out a tight laugh that seemed to coax wildlife closer, one sparrow alighting on her shoulder. "Truly, my sisters and I have never forgiven her for her past actions – they are impetuous, my sisters, but your mother is unpredictable. And she has the most wonderfully selective hearing – "don't open the box" becomes "please, open the box" and so on, so forth throughout her incarnations." One shrugged. "You are much more sensible."

Luna smiled. She loved her mother, but she'd never been someone you'd want to model yourself after – too flighty by half, easily distracted, unable to finish anything she started. And those qualities had gotten her killed, tragically, and deprived Luna of her mother, forcing the family gifts to be passed down to an unprepared, unanchored eight-year-old. Resentment wasn't an emotion she was capable of, but she understood the concept, and was glad she couldn't pull that veil over her memories of her mother. Instead, she felt a rarely used protective instinct stir. "Is this the right thing?" she said, because one didn't scold a goddess. Not even one who appeared as benign as One – Gods were never benign, and the Fates in particular were famed for their ability to detect offense in the mildest of actions.

"I cannot say," One replied mildly. "There appears to be no other course of action."

Luna squinted as the sun came out from behind a cloud, bathing their little clearing in thick, gold light, turning the air into syrup. "Hermione thinks we'll make a paradox."

"Nonsense," One scoffed. "One would have to exist in two places to create a paradox. You – or, their first child which, in the future, was you – have not yet been conceived. As well with the rest of you."
She frowned suddenly, and it was as though a storm cloud had gathered overhead, the birds falling silent, the gold-tint to the world seeping away. In the new grey dinginess, she sighed. "The problem with the Gifted is that they cannot be so easily overwritten. It is much simpler with the others – they will never be born, therefore they simply exist. They have no parents; we have gifted them with family. Their home is now here, and if their parents passed them in the street there would only be the faintest hint of recognition. The redhead – Ginevra – should she come across her mother, her mother would recognise her as a distant cousin of her husband, recently returned from the – is it the Colonies? I often forget, you humans rename things so frequently. She fits. Family is still family, just not in the same way. You understand this?"

Luna nodded. It made sense, in a way.

"You, however. There is no way in which we could manipulate the world, with what limited power as we have remaining, that would make your mother forget you. And how frustrating – to not be able to make a woman forget that which she has never known! She lives up to her reputation, Pandora." She sighed again, a hissing of air through her teeth. "I doubt much harm will be done by revealing you to your mother." One stood to her full height again, and glared through the trees in the direction of the Lovegood house. "If she must be continually reincarnated in this way, she might as well make herself useful. Especially," One gave a wry smile that blew the cloud away, "if the other option is waiting fifteen years for another reliable talent to mature."

It was clear then that One was preparing to leave, and Luna hopped up from her perch. "Will I remember this?" she asked with curiosity. She thought it only fair. If the Fates were going to keep popping into her life, at some point she’d have to be allowed her memories.

One shrugged eloquently. "That's hardly my decision to make," she said, a tiny string of bitterness in her tone.

Another nod. The hierarchy of the Gods was not something she was privy to, nor understood. She'd remember if it was necessary.

"Until next time, little one," One blew her a kiss before melting into dust. The day was back to normal again; sun shining, birds singing cheerily.

Luna turned back towards her house, and wandered through the trees, lost in her own head. It was such an odd sensation, to not exist. She had no hold on the earth aside from the bonds she'd made in her time here. She was real only to her friends and Regulus, and were she to die, she'd have left no indelible mark.

Even to Luna this was a horrifying concept. All the more reason to win the war, then.

"This is nice," Ginny hummed as they drove, her head back against the rest as she gazed drowsily out of the window. "We never get to do anything together anymore."

Lavender, behind them, scoffed. "Never? This morning you woke us up at five a.m. and dragged us out to 'survey the landscape'. At high speed. That was together."

"That was different," Ginny said firmly. "You complained the whole time. This is something we can do together without any of us being forced to do something we don't want to."

"Yes, it's wonderful, if you can get past the ever looming threat of sudden death," Hermione commented drily, checking the road in the rear-view mirror. Lavender caught her eye, her own dancing with suppressed laughter, and Hermione had to choke back a chuckle of her own. "But, aside
from that, I agree. Spending some time together in a situation that doesn't require me to inhumanely bind my chest is nice."

"I really don't understand your hatred for sports bras," Ginny muttered sulkily. "I think they're quite comfortable."

"You would," Lavender said darkly, shooting an unsubtle glare at the other girl's miniscule chest. "I bet you've got no problem with these clothes, either." She plucked at the white trousers she'd been shoved into by a nearly delirious Lily that morning ("Oh, but you've got boobs," she'd declared with glee. "I've always wanted to dress someone with boobs!"), which constricted quite painfully around her waist. Added to that, there were suspenders – suspenders – attached which pinched the flesh of her shoulders beneath some polyester monstrosity the redhead had had the audacity to call a blouse.

"You look nice," Hermione and Ginny insisted as one, sharing amused glances. Not to be pacified, Lavender plucked at her shirt again, scowling.

"No I don't – none of us do. Honestly, Hermione – you can't possibly think that colour suits you. What shade of vomit is that, again? Baby food?"

Feeling a little set-upon despite her determination not to let Lavender get to her, she checked her reflection in the rear-view mirror. Ginny tutted exasperatedly. "Honestly, you two! Hermione – leave it. You look gorgeous. And the colour, Lavender, is taupe, as well you know. Now, are we really going to be those girls, who the second we get together start talking about clothes and shoes and make-up? Next you'll be asking if our periods have synced."

"They haven't," Lavender replied irritably. "Otherwise your sweaty, dirty sex with the puppy would be even more gross than I imagine it already is."

Gin made a strangled noise in her throat before she turned in her seat to regard Lavender. "At the risk of betraying the sisterhood," she said slowly, "that explains so much."

Tightening her grip on the steering wheel so as not to smack them or, maybe, throw up, Hermione murmured, "I think I preferred the clothes conversation. Can we go back to that, or is it too late? Because I think that – whatever it is – is lovely, Gin."

Brightening, Ginny ran a self-conscious hand over the dark green jumpsuit Lily had provided for her to wear (somehow, despite her excitement at dressing "you curvy girls!", Ginny had still come out the best, what with having the same hair colour and figure as Lily). "Do you really?"

"No, it's ugly." Lavender drawled from the back. "Don't worry, though – I'll be happy to swap with you. No need to thank me, I'm just selfless like that."

Gin rolled her eyes, leaning back to snatch at a strand of Lavender's hair. "I don't think it'd suit these, Lav, or I'd love to," she smirked, shaking the handful so that the little blue-and-white beads she'd added to her braids clicked together. Scowling, Lavender snatched it away, a splash of pink highlighting her cheeks.

"I like beads, okay?" she snapped defensively. "Merlin forbid you do anything nice with your hair."

Hermione hid a laugh in a cough, nimbly switching gears as she moved onto a roundabout. "I think," she said loudly over whatever Ginny was about to say, "that when Lavender starts to sound like Mrs. Weasley, it becomes time to change the subject."

"Oh, gods, yes please," Lavender recoiled sharply.
"Alright, then. How far, Gin?"

Ginny pulled a sheet of parchment from Hermione's bag, which she kept safe in her lap. The writing on this one, however, was Ginny's. It contained a series of important addresses; those Harry had collected during the future war, which Ginny remembered. She didn't have the address for the Gaunt house, but she did have the one for Riddle's, which they followed now. "Maybe a half mile?" she thought aloud, consulting the map she'd spread across the dashboard. "Keep following this road."

Hermione nodded, lifting a hand to thank a driver when they gave way. "You remember the plan, don't you?"

"Find the ring. Don't touch it. Don't put it on." Lavender scoffed quietly. "It's not exactly rocket science, 'Miney."

"Don't call me that," Hermione snapped reflexively. "I remember plotting out something a bit more complex."

"Not overly." Lavender's mass of hair bobbed in the background. "Can we put the radio on, please?"

Rolling her eyes, Hermione flipped the switch and the car was filled with a familiar chirpy song. She stifled a groan, hearing Ginny do the same as the lorry – not heavy enough to balance itself – began to rock with Lavender bopping around in the backseat. "ABBA!" The blonde shrieked, raising her hands in the air and wiggling her whole body as much as she could within the constraints of the seatbelt. "Turn it up! Turn it up!"

"Don't you dare," Hermione growled when Ginny's hand crept forward. She could see the tune infecting her redhead friend as it played on, her fingers twitching with the urge to dance. "I'm warning you, Ginevra!"

Round brown eyes met hers helplessly before she spun the knob.

"WELL I CAN DANCE WITH YOU HONEY, IF YOU THINK IT'S FUNNY, DOES YOUR MOTHER KNOW THAT YOU'RE OUT!"

She only barely resisted the urge to smash her head against the window until it bled. Ginny was flicking her hair around madly in tune to the music, while Lavender sang – loudly, tunelessly, more in line with shouting – her little heart out. Maybe if she crashed the car, they would stop this nonsense?

Watching Lavender bounce nearly out of her seat like a small child, Hermione discarded that plan. Nothing, nothing on earth could keep Lavender from singing this god-awful song.

Ten minutes, three more songs – Siouxsie might think she knew Banshees, but she hadn't yet heard Lav's attempts at harmonising – and a splitting headache later, a hush crept over them. They had reached the boundary of Little Hangleton. It was a sleepy village, so much so that Hermione reached automatically to turn the radio off completely, feeling instinctually that playing it would disturb these people's lives in an unforgivable way. They drifted into the centre slowly, in first gear so that even in this old van their passage was muted. None of them said a word, instead slipping seamlessly into their persona's for when Hermione pulled up at the curb.

Somehow, Hermione had thought there would be something about Little Hangleton that betrayed the darkness that had grown here – a sinister vibe in whatever small way; glaring old crones, out-of-control children throwing rocks, bankrupted shops – and it was unpleasant to realise she was wrong. In her prejudice she'd been tense their whole ride in, a ridiculous waste of energy. The main street
was lined with pleasant community shops – a grocers, a confectioners, a butchers, even a florists that seemed to be doing a brisk trade, all pretty boxes in windows and pleasant brightly-striped canopies. The quiet atmosphere wasn't about a lack of people – indeed, there were a fair few out and about, some old, some young – but more a sort of respect for the environment in which they lived. People greeted one another as they passed with smiles and pleasant words, stopping for whole conversations, carried out at a low volume on the streets.

Hermione was pleased to note that the younger population were dressed similarly to the three of them, though the native's clothes were more worn, and some of them had a distinctly home-made air about them. A seamstress had a tiny shopfront at the edge of the street, and a homeless charity had set up one of their own a few doors down, but there was no place a person might buy clothes new.

She'd parked outside the sweet shop, and Ginny swanned inside, gaining appreciative looks from a pair of stocky men stood talking outside of the butcher's. Hermione took note of them as she scanned the street in preparation for her part. One of them, from his apron and youth, must have been the butcher's apprentice, and that was who she targeted, smiling benignly as she wandered closer.

"Hello," she said, affecting shyness to cover her nerves. She was always nervous around new people, and as that could manifest in either bossiness or stuttering, they'd all decided shy was the better way to go. 'These are small-town people,' Ginny had said, the voice of experience. 'It's 1979. You can't bring your big-city ideas and your feminist ideology there. Better to play it weak and feminine.' So she did, because she liked to think she'd learned when to defer to other's expertise. "Is this Little Hangleton?"

The butcher's apprentice raked a leer over her figure, and she bit her lip to keep from scolding him. Up close, he was probably a year or two younger than her, his friend a year older. Both of them were smoking foul-smelling roll-ups. "Aye, lass," the older one said, nudging his friend when his eyes appeared to stall on her cloth-covered breasts. Because the Gods forbid they lost that thin veneer of respectability. "What about it?"

She held onto her smile for dear life. "Ah, see – my friends and I drove out from York for a picnic, and someone said there was a lovely spot around here someplace." She waved gaily at the two hills that bracketed the village, visible rising high over the steeple of the church. "But it turned out it's all uphill!" Eyeing his expression, she decided to try a giggle on for size, see if that sold it. It came out sounding thin and odd, slightly strangled, and she could feel her braincells bailing out.

The young one still appeared mildly interested (in her tits) but the older one was eyeing her with suspicion. "Y'came all the way out 'ere for a picnic?" he asked dubiously. "Could'a gone t' seaside instead."

Blood heated the inside of her cheeks as she spread her hands helplessly. "I don't like sand?"

Thankfully, before she could humiliate herself any further, rescue arrived in the form of an arm linking through hers from behind.

"Hermione," Lavender said in the mildly husky voice she'd obtained from the damage to her vocal cords during the attack. Suddenly, in this scenario, Hermione could see its benefits. "Gin wondered if you want lemon or cherry." She tossed a smile at the two men, who looked as if Christmas had come early. Hermione noticed that her friend had opened three of the five buttons on her shirt, showing off an obscene amount of cleavage and scarlet bra, and she'd arranged her hair so that it covered the majority of her scars. Clever.

Suddenly Hermione felt exhausted and frumpy. Really, flirting wasn't for her. She should have left it to Lavender from the start, but they'd been concerned that her scars would detract from the image, so
they’d both argued her down. Really, she needed to stop underestimating that girl. "Lemon," she replied with a sweet smile, but Lavender wasn't listening.

"Who might you be?" she was purring, tapping the apprentice on the arm (playfully? Hermione honestly had no idea).

"Ben," the apprentice sighed. His mate identified himself as 'Dave'.

"Ah, Ben and Dave. And you're a butcher? Wow. Isn't that... icky?" Lavender gave a delicate shudder. "It's not for me, I think. I'd never be able to look my poor puppy in the eyes again." She shifted to meet Dave's eyes, and continued as if he'd asked, "his name's Moony, and he's the sweetest little thing. About – oh, say, this big?"

Hermione swallowed back a retch at the obvious gesture.

"I bet," Dave murmured, mesmerised by Lavender's swaying hips. She could probably make a fortune if she went on tour with that trick.

"It's so lucky she found you," Lavender breathed next, clutching Ben's arm excitedly. "We could do with more meat." She leaned in conspiratorially, and Ben leaned in too – Hermione had no idea what he was expecting, her to snog him on the street? He looked disappointed when she went for his ear, instead, and said "Ginny's a veggie, you know, and she makes the worst sandwiches. We always have to smuggle in some chicken, don't we, 'Mione!"

"Don't call me that," Hermione mumbled, though it went ignored.

"We do have chicken," Ben nodded, "and beef. Sausages, if you want them."

"A veritable feast!" Lavender cried. "You've saved us from a slow death of boring food!"

Really, it was horrible to watch Lavender flirt so outrageously, so Hermione stayed outside the shop as Lavender was taken in on Ben's arm. He fell over himself to please her, and she repaid him with endless touches – to his arm, his chest, a hip-bump once. Eventually, Ginny wandered over, sucking on a glass bottle of lemonade. "Where's Lav – oh."

"Yeah," Hermione agreed, taking the drink she was offered. "Does that really work?"

"I don't know," Ginny shrugged. "I don't bother with all that fluff. Generally, Harry was the flirter. I'm rubbish at it."

Hermione went to nod, then froze. "Ginny," she began, feeling like an awful person. "Why don't I miss him?"

"Who, Harry?" Her eyes widened as she thought it through. "Oh – fucking hell."

"You don't either, do you?"

She shook her head thoughtfully. "No. I don't think I've even thought about missing him for days. And I've – oh, I'm horrible, aren't I?"

"What?" Hermione turned to her in confusion, seeing the colour drain from her. "Why? Because of Sirius?"

"Yeah." Biting her lip, she went on, "it just doesn't seem right – I'm shagging his Godfather, surely I should be feeling guilty?"
"Well, if you think you should, maybe that's as good as feeling guilty?" Hermione suggested, her brow furrowed. "Like, you're feeling guilty about not feeling guilty, so in the absence of the first amount of guilt, the second – and worst – might make up for it?"

Ginny peered at her doubtfully. "I don't know… do you feel guilty?"

"I was raised a Protestant, Gin. I always feel guilty."

Lavender danced out of the shop, calling goodbyes to her new friends as she thrust two bags into Hermione's hands. "Mission accomplished!" she cheered.

"Is this necessary?" Ginny asked, peering into the bag. "Ooh – sausage rolls! I take that back, of course it was necessary."

Hermione snorted and yanked them back. "We're not going to eat them," she scolded, adding a "yet" when Lavender looked stricken. "We came here on a mission, remember?"

"I remember." Lavender hummed, though it didn't stop her from sneaking a finger into the bag closest her as they returned to the car. "You don't know how painful that was, though – I went for flirting level '70's porn star', and now I feel dirty. A bacon bap would really help with that."

"You'll have to make do with lemonade," Hermione handed her own bottle back over the seat as she strapped in. "Please tell me one of you got directions, at least?"

"Yep," Ginny nodded, tossing a mint from the glove compartment back to Lavender when the girl continued to attempt grand-theft-pastry. "Two options for 'scenic picnic spots'; just below the graveyard, or there's a snicket on the southern edge of the village that lets out in a patch of woodland."

"There, then," Hermione nodded, already heading out in that direction.

"Not the graveyard, definitely," Lavender said through a mouthful of mint. "Dave says it's haunted."

"Again, Lav – not here for a picnic."

"And here I thought you'd gotten fun," she pouted.

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "I fear you've been severely misled."

They parked on a street of smaller cottages and Ginny led them to the snicket, a tiny one-man-wide passageway between two sweet little ivy-covered homes. It was dark even in the sunlight, and stretched on much further than either house or garden, before ending abruptly where wilderness had taken over and the old passageway crumbled into dust. They were shaded by trees as they wandered out, the ground covered in snapped branches and bracken.

"He said kids often come this way to prat about after school," Ginny informed them as they stepped gingerly over the ground. "But they never go further than a mile's walk. He didn't say why, but his face got all funny, so I think we're on the right track."

They were indeed, for after about ten minutes the debris of human remains – bottle caps, broken toys and the like – tapered off into nothing, and a sense of foreboding stole over them. Hermione couldn't feel any magical influence in it, but it was creepy all the same, especially as a cloud drifted over the sun and they were plunged into a grey half-light. She batted away midgies that came to feast on the rotting plants and glanced around for the origin of the feeling.
"There," Lavender said, pointing off to the side. "I can see – is that a hut?"

It was a hut; once a house that had been assimilated into the surrounding bush, all that was visible at first sight were a few tiny, grimy windows and an ivy-eaten door. There was something hanging from it, something dried up and scaley. "Snake-skin," she said aloud, nauseous all over again. "I reckon this is the right place."

"But there aren't any wards," Ginny murmured. "Surely if he'd hidden a horcrux here, there would be wards?"

Hermione was certain though; the foreboding was getting stronger, and she realised with a jolt that it was familiar. It was the same anxious feeling she'd gotten with the locket around her neck during her time on the run, only weaker, but then she was much further away. "It's stronger than the others," she observed as she walked up to the front door and unsheathed her wand.

Diagnostic scans revealed a nasty curse on the door-handle, but it was old, weather-beaten and weak, and she cracked it easily. The second she did, it swung inwards as if she were expected. "Be careful," she warned the others, not that they needed it.

Inside hung the smell of dirt, dessication and despair. The room was pitiful – a curtain in the corner only half-hid a toilet, which didn't appear to have been cleaned since Merope Gaunt had abdicated her role as house-maid. The kitchen comprised of a few rotting cupboards and a pantry, and a sink stood alone on the back wall. The floor beneath their feet had been eaten by insects and rats, and what remained were strewn with droppings.

"Gin, you start with this room; Lavender, we'll go-

"What's that?" Lavender cut in abruptly. They all fell silent to listen, and Hermione frowned, about to continue when it came to her.

There was a scuttling in the walls that she attributed to rats and mice. The bushes on the outside of the hut brushed against the wall with a light hushing noise. And quietly, from a few yards away at the most, there came a dragging. A scraping, as though something was being pulled across the floor, came from upstairs too. A prickling shivered down Hermione's spine as the discordant noises triggered a memory, and at the same time, a light hissing travelled down the stairs –

"Fuck," Ginny swore, backing up and pulling out her wand. Lavender's lips were pulled back in a silent snarl as she prepared to fight, the pretty girl looking suddenly more bestial than ever before.

Hermione's memories froze her in fright, but Ginny looked entirely different – more irritated than anything.

She caught Hermione's eye and gave a sharp, bitter smile. "Fucking snakes," she spat, conjuring a ball of fire and shifting into a battle-stance. "Always with the motherfucking snakes."

Chapter End Notes

Headcanon: Lavender takes Ginny (and Sirius) to see Snakes on a Plane when it comes out, then proceeds to point at the screen every time Samuel L Jackson swears at snakes with a "that's you!". Ginny is unimpressed. Sirius finds it hilarious.
Chapter Fifty-Three: Snakes

Chapter Summary

Lavender, Ginny and Hermione tackle snakes while Luna meets her mother. Lily makes herself useful.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

They poured out in a rising tide of hissing and snarling, at least a hundred of the things shoving their way up through the floorboards and toppling down the stairs. Immediately, Ginny knew they weren't British – she associated British snakes with sweet little creatures, smooth and pretty with shy personalities and the panicked rustle of grass as they rushed away. These were massive; aggressive and fanged in a multitude of colours. Several were as thick as her forearm, more even thicker, and far from being retiring they instead rushed forward in a wave.

Lavender's vicious growl preceded her first *Incendio*, catching one of the fore-runners on the nose and whipping it backwards. Some of them flinched at the attack, but the majority carried on undaunted. Ginny tried not to recoil as she felt the floorboards beneath her feet buckle and quake with the onslaught.

She moved quickly, shooting strategic slicing hexes into the fray, taking the opposite side to Lavender and forcing the range wide so that she could catch as many as possible with just the one spell. Lavender threw out large swathes of fire, but they burned out quickly, forcibly reminding the three of them of her weakness.

"Lavender, get out," Ginny shouted over the sinister, whispering hisses. Automatically she flinched back as a viper swung upwards towards her face, snapping over where her nose had been. Snarling, she threw out her arm, the bright orange of her spell neatly decapitating her attacker.

"No!" Lavender shrieked back, her dying flames reflected in her eyes. "Hermione!"

Swinging around, a shield just barely protecting her, she finally saw Hermione. Their girl, their indomitable leader, was frozen solid, the blood drained from her face. Her eyes were glassy, wand held loosely at her side as the snakes undulated about her feet. She lunged forward to – she didn't know, shake her out of it? – at the same time as a sand-coloured reptile with brown knots on its scales appeared to notice Hermione's undefended state. It rippled backwards, dragging its body onto the top of the sea of snakes, and then surged, its whole body propelling itself through the air with speed. Ginny's scream tore through the constant susurrations, snapping Hermione into reality, but the other girl's wand barely made it half-way up before the creature's fangs were buried in her throat. Lavender's roar of fury followed their friend down as she was smothered by the tide, her wide, terrified eyes the last Ginny saw before she was swallowed by snakes.

Luna knocked on the door; her secret knock, the one her father had taught her when she had been only a baby. 'The Lovegood Family Knock', he'd called it with a grin. "You use that on any of your relatives, my love, and you'll always find a home."
She wanted a home. It made her feel selfish and ungrateful and dirty, but she wanted her home, and her mother, and her father, and – oh, Gods, she was drifting again. She should have brought Regulus. She missed him to the point that it ached.

Glancing around, she checked the windows beside and above her. There weren't many differences between this house and the one she'd grown up in; fewer signs by the gate, yes, but there were still Dirigible Plums growing wild by the fence, and the apple trees her father tended so carefully despite their low nutritional value bloomed with yellow-orange berries, several of which lay crushed and sticky beneath her feet.

The door thumped, or something on the other side thumped, and Luna turned back to it curiously. As she watched, a little door at the top flipped open and a little feathered head poked through, eyeing her warily. She met its queer grey eyes guilelessly with a smile. "Hello, Alf," she greeted it. "Can I come in?"

The owl cooed shortly, impatiently. He had never been a very good host, Luna had to admit. He hated guests, but always insisted on answering the door if he was inside. In her time, they'd generally left him perched on one of the trees, where he could snack and glare at his leisure, but he was only a fledgling now. They'd learn.

"Who's that?" A familiar voice asked from inside. Alf turned his head to face the newcomer and clacked his beak together three times. The voice hummed as though he quite understood, and the door was pulled open. "Hello," a young Xenophilius Lovegood said, his head tilted. "You used my knock!"

"The Lovegood Family Knock," she corrected him gravely.

"Of course, of course!" He gestured down the hall with a grin. "Come in, come in! Can't leave kin on the doorstep, can we, Alf?"

Alf hooted contemptuously at the idea that he was obliged to entertain anyone, never mind kin, and with one last derisive glare at Luna hopped down off of his perch to claw-walk off down the hall. Xenophilius turned back from watching him with an expression of faint apology, but mostly the big smile Luna so missed to see. "He's in a mood," her father explained, ushering her in and closing the door. "'Dora – that's my wife, see – used the last of the Gurdyroots this morning to make pie-crust, and that'll be the last we see of them 'til November comes 'round again. Dreadfully picky bloomers, those Gurdyroots…"

"You might try shade," Luna suggested softly as she looked around the house which had so recently been her own. Her handprints were missing from the wall, and there – in the corner, where they'd measured her height scrupulously from year to year, instead stood a table laden with Quibbler drafts. "They're more confident in the shade, and if you sing to them you might even convince them to bloom year-round."

Xeno stopped to gape at her, before letting out a booming laugh. "That's what my 'Dora says!" he cried happily. "'Dora, come hear this. Tell us again what to do with the Gurdyroots!" He disappeared around the corner to yank Pandora Lovegood's arm excitably, and she drifted in with indulgent obedience. Luna caught her breath at the first sight of her.

She was beautiful, of course, but also pale – shaded. There was a translucent quality about her that suggested she was neither present nor missing, only there and yet not. Luna had never met anybody who so embodied the disconnect she felt with the world, but looking at her mother now, she could understand how she had been produced. Xenophilius didn't seem to notice, but Luna could see. Pandora's hand flit up to rest on Xeno's shoulder, her muttering something lowly that had him belting...
out another laugh, but as she did the ray of sun that shone through the window behind her seemed to penetrate her skin, lighting it, and she cast no shadow.

"Hello," she said with a sweet smile, the sort of smile Luna had forgotten she had. It was an inherently maternal smile; warm and soft, giving the impression that she might smell of cookies or bread, something motherly. Her bright blue eyes were knowing as they travelled over Luna's body from head to toe, and Luna had the uncomfortable realisation that this must be how her friends felt when she spoke to them. "Luna Lovegood," Pandora tasted the words slowly, tipping her head. "Yes, just the name I'd choose."

"Oh, is that it?" Xenophilius asked with his natural exuberance. "Luna? Yes, yes, very nice. And you look just like her, petal!"

"Well she is our daughter," Pandora said serenely, still eyeing Luna. "Look, Xeno, she has your ears."

A self-conscious hand came up to touch her ears beneath her fall of hair, and Xeno, despite the fact he could certainly not see Luna's ears from there, nodded happily. "And my mother's nose," he cooed.

Alf hopped up on a chair behind Pandora and ruffled his feathers scornfully. Pandora tutted. "Hush, Alf. She does." To Luna, she explained, "he doesn't think you look at all like either of us, but he's just jealous. We'd promised him we wouldn't have children for at least a year after he came to live with us."

"I know," Luna said, feeling unaccountably irritated. "I heard him."

"She certainly did!" Xeno said happily. "My daughter!"

"Why don't you bring us some drinks, Xeno? I think she'd like to speak to me." Pandora smoothed a hand over Alf's head and then deposited him on an owl-stand in the corner. She gestured to the sofa. "Please, sit."

It was odd, Luna thought, though it took quite a lot to make her consider anything odd, to be here sitting opposite her mother, who was presently only a year or two older than she was, feeling like a guest in her own house. Pandora had been dead for ten years in Luna's time, and while she loved her mother, she'd filled the space she'd vacated with other things; her father being both mother and father, helping with the quibbler, running the garden and keeping the man from blowing the place up.

As a child she'd spent a considerable amount of time looking after her mother anyway. As she'd thought earlier, if Pandora had been around when Luna had been a teenager it was likely the majority of her time would have been spent stopping her from blowing herself up, rather than studying, which Luna rather preferred, all things being equal. Book-learning was an oddity in their house, Luna being the only person who'd kept a personal library that consisted of anything other than journals written by eccentrics in Eastern Europe who sold perhaps three copies a year, and so it hadn't been a great priority for either of her parents to give her time to read.

Still, she'd always adored her mother beyond measure, which is why it made no sense that she was feeling prickly and out-of-sorts.

_Gods_, she wished Regulus were here.

"So," Pandora said, settling herself on the opposite sofa. She was wearing a muumuu made of
Acromantula silk that slipped across her skin like water, and Luna found herself caught up in the image of Loony Lovegood's Loopy Mother picking her up from the Hogwart's Express in something so sheer, or, perhaps, nothing at all, because the Gods knew she'd spent most of Luna's childhood nude. Something that hadn't bothered her at the time, but she now realised would have perturbed her at least a little come school. "What's the future like?"

"Wonderful," Luna said, nodding. "I miss it."

"Of course, you would," Pandora said with a sympathetic smile. "We all miss what we know, but it's the unknown that is rather more fun, don't you think?"

Luna didn't reply because she wanted to agree, and that irritated her. Who was this stranger who was her mother? Pandora looked up as Xeno entered with the drinks, sharing an intimate look with him that made Luna's lips twitch in a reluctant smile. *He loved her.* Whatever reservations she had about her mother were nothing compared to the effect her father's happiness could have on her.

But then, Pandora had taken that away, too, hadn't she?

Conflicted, Luna shook her head and reached for a cup, looking up when she felt eyes on her. "I'm sorry, how uncomfortable for you. It must have been a long time, and neither of us look the way we will, do we?" she let out a laugh, ruffling Xenophilius's flyaway hair affectionately. "You'll have less hair, won't you, love?"

"You'll be as beautiful as always," Xeno reassured her, patting her hands absently, eyes still focused on Luna. "Did you need us?"

"Yes," Luna said. If she stuck to one syllable words her throat didn't stick as much, which was helpful. "I need you… mama."

"You need me?" Pandora asked, visibly shocked. She took a moment to scan Luna before giving a decisive nod. "Yes – I think you do."

Luna nodded, too, trying to relax even as she felt the other pull at her. It often did when she was stressed, coaxing her to return to another plane, to play in the unreality of reality. A quick escape from things she didn't want to deal with. "My friends have a cursed ring," she said, and at once Xeno and Pandora's eyes lit up.

"Friends!" Xeno squawked. "Did you hear that, my love? Our Luna has friends!"

"Wonderful," Pandora hummed. "Oh, I'm so glad – I always thought our daughter would be lonely."

"Brilliant minds often are," Xeno nodded solemnly.

"We thought you could help us?" Luna continued, channelling Hermione. Hermione would know what to do. Hermione wouldn't be upset, or emotional. Hermione was sensible and professional and could handle anything. Luna'd always watched her with interest when she worked so it wasn't hard to pull up that sort of mask, even if she had no idea how the other girl accomplished anything with so little emotion involved.

"Yes," Pandora brightened drastically, her ethereal vibe lessening until she looked almost like a real person. "I would love to help you, Luna. With anything. Just bring it here, and we'll fix it." Her eyes locked on Luna's, and she reached out to press a powdery, weightless hand against Luna's. "Together."
Lily was in the kitchen when it happened.

She'd not been doing anything special or particularly strenuous; just arguing with Fritz because the stubborn elf wouldn't let her make her own sandwiches (what part of 'lactose-intolerant' did they not understand? Was that not a thing elves had? Did wizards not have it? Great, because what she really needed was just another thing that set her apart from the rest of her bloody race-) while ignoring James's constant tugging at her hand (he was starting to get antsy because she hadn't mentioned the wedding in about a week. As if not talking about it meant she'd just gone and forgotten the biggest event of her life, the bloody idiot, couldn't he see she loved him? If she didn't, she certainly wouldn't put up with his weird separation anxiety, and definitely not his friends). Just your usual low-level stress in a Potter household; she'd not gotten worked up or upset.

And yet it happened. One second she was explaining what lactose was to a bewildered elf while holding her fiancé at arms-length, the next second she was lying on the floor, an electric-buzz running from her head through her body, nearly bending her in two. All of her synapses appeared to be firing at once, and the overwhelming message was something bad is happening something really bad something bad is happening.

She might not fully understand all of the rules of magic and all their weird pureblood laws (the whole 'trust in magick' thing sat so badly with her; no matter how you sliced it, it still sounded like semi-sentient fairy dust, and she didn't like to think it might be smarter than her) but she wasn't stupid, and she knew a cry for help when she heard one. Sort-of. It was really more of a feeling but semantics weren't a priority. Instead, she stretched a hand out to Fritz and grabbed the elf's leg, ignoring James's frantic questions and panic.

"Take me to them," she demanded, clutching its ankle (did House-Elves have ankles?) for dear life. The creature sent an apologetic look at James but grabbed onto Lily's ear all the same and popped the two of them out of the kitchen.

The buzzing let up the second they touched down, freeing her body for movement. It was helpfully replaced by an influx of adrenalin which propelled her to her feet in record time, her wand springing to hand with a thought. Fritz disappeared again, clever creature, and Lily turned to face the music.

It took a second to make sense of the scene, since so many things were happening and so very few of them made sense. Lily liked to think of herself as an open-minded kind of girl, but some things even her brain froze up about – not murder, not magic, not dragons or the like, but due to her frightfully weak constitution, she did have a paralysing fear of two things: spiders. And snakes.

So when she heard that jumbled mess of screaming, shouting and hissing, she didn't comprehend what was happening. Her brain didn't want to believe, so it provided an alternate explanation, like the gas was leaking and she was the only person who could save them from a nasty explosion, or maybe Hermione had pissed the wrong person off and it had caused a really quiet bar-fight. Stranger things had happened.

But it hadn't.

First, she saw Hermione. Paled out, on the ground, eyes closed as a mass of writhing bodies smothered her. There might have been one snake or a hundred, but either way they were thick, muscular, and definitely not of a breed native to the UK.

Then her eyes found Lavender, following her arms up from where she was tearing and shredding the snakes claiming Hermione as their own. She'd abandoned her wand at some point, and was now
down on her knees, snarling with wild eyes and blood spattered over her face and hair. Around her lay the remains of other snakes, ones she'd gotten through first before reaching her friend.

Ginny was giving off a constant low-level scream that Lily didn't think she knew she was doing, stood with her legs on either side of Hermione's prone form, up to her ankles in snakes as she sent haphazard slicing hexes through the teeming mass. Seriously – her face was a mask of infuriated terror, and she was no longer being clean about her kills, blood from both her hexes and Lavender's primal tearing spattering her face until she looked like a seventies, low-budget Boudicca.

Why am I here? Lily asked whoever was listening. She didn't like snakes, she wasn't any better at defensive spells than the three of them were, and she wasn't great at offensive magic either. All the same, Lavender looked up and spotted her, her eyes exhibiting some sort of feral relief. Those monstrous scars at the side of her face melded in with the rest of her flesh as a snarling sound ripped from her throat – words, they were words, only they came out mangled by the simple fact that Lavender had suddenly sprouted fangs.

"Oh, shit," she gasped, stumbling out of the door and into the woodland surrounding her. Her first instinct was to run, wait until she was far enough away to be safe, then send a Patronus for help. Her second was that that was a stupid plan, and by the looks of it Hermione would be dead by the time any of their men arrived.

Dead.

Lily shivered despite the heat. She didn't want that fate for herself, but she was a Gryffindor, and she couldn't leave someone – an ally, if not exactly a friend – to suffer if she had the ability to help them. And while she didn't really have the ability to do anything other than what Ginny was doing – that is, stand around and scream while throwing hexes haphazardly into the melee – it felt like logic wasn't supposed to be ruling her head.

Except – well, gut instinct appeared to be ruling those three in there, and it wasn't doing them any good, so maybe what Lily could bring to the table was that vital logic they all lacked? She didn't have much time to do so, but she was the original Brightest Witch of Her Age for a reason, and like Hell was that changing just because some bushy-haired brat appeared in her backyard.

She thought for a moment, built up a half-cocked plan in her mind, and then went for it without thinking it any further through. What did she have to lose, after all? Either it worked, or it didn't, and if it didn't the outcome could hardly be worse than what it was looking like, now.

Sparing herself a second to curse the Sorting Hat for putting her in Gryffindor - she was convinced that if she had been in Slytherin with Sev she wouldn't be doing anything so idiotic – she marched back towards the disgusting little hovel before she could change her mind.

Same scene as before – Hermione on the floor, Lavender with fangs (fangs!), Ginny being the badass Lily had always sensed she was. This time, however, the scene was sharpened, she could see the diamonds on the back of snake skin, every glint of the afternoon light off of their scales, hear the gasps of breath leaving Hermione's lips.

Her wand moved quickly, throwing snakes every which way as she blasted her way through to the woman who had been the bane of her life this past few months. Her hair had lost its curls in the wake of slime and dust, her braids crusted with grey-brown grime. Lily blasted herself an empty area around the woman's shoulders, revealing as she did so a nasty seeping wound on her throat.

Copperhead, Lily recognised clinically, glancing around and noting the prevailing breed as her Healer instincts called to mind fang-sizes, bite-radius, symptoms with ease. She'd never treated the
wounds before, their kind being native to North America, but she knew it was not fatal and they had universal antivenins that would clear it up easily. The problem here, then, was both the loss of blood from the raggedy gash and Hermione's obvious allergic reaction.

"Lavender!" She called, snapping her fingers to get the girl's attention. "Grab her feet, angle her upwards!"

She slotted her own hands beneath the woman's shoulders and lifted her clumsily into her arms, Lavender following her example by hefting Hermione's ankles onto her shoulders. Lily gained Ginny's attention with another shout. The redhead, far from stupid, got the message immediately and jumped into formation behind Lavender. Together, the three of them pulled Hermione out of the shack and into the cover of a close-by tree. Immediately, Ginny threw a beaded bag at Lily and got up again. "Anti-venom is in there," she gasped, her eyes fixed on the shack. "She has a bunch – I thought she was paranoid but..." she gestured towards the house, where the windows were covered by snakes crawling across them from the inside. "I'll be back with the ring."

"Oh, no you don't!" Lily shouted, jumping up to grab Ginny. "That place is a death trap!"

Ginny gave her a look that questioned her sanity, which Lily did not appreciate. "The Horcrux is in there," Ginny told her slowly. Lily grit her teeth and thanked the Gods that the 'duh' remained implied. She didn't fancy breaking a fist on a Weasley's abnormally hard face today.

"I know that," she said patiently. "But you can't go back in."

"Watch me!" Ginny snarled.

"Don't be an idiot!" Lily spat, tightening her grip on the other girl's bicep. Ginny looked from Lily's hand to her face slowly, her eyes glinting dangerously. Lily ignored this, which was likely another symptom of her ingrained Gryffindor stupidity. "Those snakes will kill you if you go in alone," Lily explained with strained patience. "You're lucky they didn't get you already!"

"They did," Ginny said, hiking up the shredded leg of her trousers and fixing Lily with an unimpressed look. "Turns out polyester is not an appropriate choice for Horcrux-hunting. Go figure."

"Yeah, well, it's going to be an even worse choice if you go back in there," Lily said calmly, "because polyester is extremely flammable."

"What?" Ginny tipped her head in confusion. "What do you –"

"Fiendfyre!"

"- oh, holy fuck."

She spared a smirk for Ginny even as she kept her wand pointed at the hut, directing the one demonic hell-spawn she'd managed to conjure to devour the creepy overgrown worms that lived inside of it. Thankfully the heat disguised the sweat that had broken out on her forehead with the strain of controlling the beast – Fiendfyre had been a spur-of-the-moment decision she was undoubtedly going to regret, but after what Hermione had said about Horcrux destruction, it seemed like the wisest course of action. None of them could get back in there with the killer snakes on the loose, and finding a ring in the mess even if they managed to kill the lot would be impossible without touching it, and none of them were sure whether a simple touch would activate the curse.

No, this was better. Much cleaner, at the very least.

"Are you insane?!" Ginny was shrieking, her disagreement with that decision plain.
Lily twisted her wrist as the dragon she'd conjured threatened to make a break for the trees. "I'd say no, but these days that's debateable," she muttered mostly to herself. "Or maybe the world has gone insane. That must be it."

"How do you even know that spell?!" Ginny yelled then, not listening. "I don't even know that spell, and I had the fucking Dark Lord in my head for a year!"

"Why is it," Lily hissed, getting genuinely worked up now, which only caused her flames to roar higher, "that everybody conveniently forgets how before I was James Potter's future wife I was Severus Snape's best friend?" She shot a good facsimile of Sev's favourite sneer at Ginny and drawled haughtily, "not all darkness is evil, Lily."

The other girl stumbled a few steps back, her mouth falling open. "That is disturbing," she shuddered. Lily turned back to her work with a smile. The roof of the hut was properly aflame now, embers flying up when the second floor collapsed and having caught on the improperly laid beams. The dying noises of the snakes burst upwards in one massive, haunting death rattle, which Lily stoically ignored – she hated to kill so many living creatures, but it seemed they were confined to the house, and none of the girls had the time or skill to break whatever hold You-Know-Who had over them. Even if they had, God knows what sort of trouble all those venomous snakes might cause in the village, never mind the havoc they'd wreak on the ecosystem.

There was a low groan behind her as she kept a close eye on her little dragon friend, and she glanced back to see Hermione was moving once more. A flush of guilt shot through her when she realised she hadn't bothered to help her – she, the Healer – but in her defense, she'd been busy and Lavender had the hang of it just fine. Plus, it seemed to have kept the woman occupied so she wasn't distracting Lily.

"Lily Evans!" Lavender suddenly shouted, seeming to notice the raging fire for the first time. The air stank of sulphur and brimstone, so how she'd not even looked up was beyond Lily's comprehension. At least the fangs were gone. "My God, you hid that dark side well!"

"You know, if you were a muggle, you could have said 'Jesus Christ!' then and it would have sounded much better," Lily said, wobbling a little. Ginny held her steady and she crinkled her nose, watching the dragon hunt for more food. There was a problem. "Erm - is this the best time to admit I have no idea how to get rid of him?"

"Let the bastard place burn," Lavender called, shaking her blood-soaked fist at the burnt-out husk. "Set him free! Let him plunder the village!" She shrugged when both Ginny and Lily turned to her in shock. "I've been used as a snake stress-doll, Ben pinched my arse and the sausage rolls are definitely cold by now – I'm not in the mood to be a hero. Besides, I'm only saying what we're all thinking."

"That will not be happening," Ginny said flatly. "We're the good guys, we don't …"

"Instigate a massive human barbeque? I don't see why not. You didn't have to talk to those people, Ginny, you don't get it."

"Shouldn't you be nursing or something?" She snapped, waving at Hermione. "Leave the big girls to solve this problem."

Lavender looked like she was about to start a fight, then suddenly flopped back, laughing. "Yeah, alright. I suppose Evans did put me to shame." She leaned over Hermione's face and tapped her cheeks. "Hermione, love…"
They turned their backs on their two friends, instead contemplating the *Fiendfyre* as Lily's dragon sniffed the air, observed the environment for a few seconds, then leaned down and swallowed a tree whole, leaving licking flames of hellfire in its place.

"I know this sounds stupid," Lily said with a small voice, "but maybe *aguamenti*?" There was a beat of silence before she looked over and saw Ginny gaping at her. "Yeah..." she grimaced. "I thought not. Worth a try, though."

"Bloody Hell," Ginny muttered darkly. "I can't believe you just saved our lives."

"Doesn't shock anybody more than me!" Lily replied brightly, though the problem of her new pet dragon was still pressing. "Shrinking charm? We could keep him in an unbreakable jar." She could tell without looking that Ginny was glaring again, and tried not to pout. "What? I'm becoming quite fond of him."

"Just call the damn thing back, Evans, before I do something I might regret."

Scowling, she tried to remember what Sev had said. He'd been a great fan of the Dark Arts, and this had been one of her attempts to understand what drew him to them so much. It turned out she was rubbish at most of it, but *fiendfyre*? Inexplicably, *that* she was great at. He'd not wanted her to even try it; he'd liked the idea of her dabbling with him but he, like James, preferred to keep her on a pedestal of sweetness and purity. Lily, however, had been drawn to the animals. She'd only been fifteen, and the idea of being able to conjure up a friendly little fire-pal, maybe a squirrel or a little kitten, was exciting. When she'd tried and only been able to conjure dragons and hellhounds, it had lost its appeal, so she'd done the Lily thing and locked away all of the information in case she needed it in future but never intended to bother with it again. The feel of it was awful, too; so dark and silky, like sex and chocolate had been melted on her skin and soul. Growing up in a conservative household, she knew to distrust that feeling and recognized the danger in it. *That* had been when she'd taken up against the dark arts, and she had also, unfortunately, from that day forward been unable to associate Severus with anything else.

But she remembered the theory and that one episode, so she pulled that information out and concentrated. Lily pulled back her wand as though it were a whip, closing her eyes; focusing on her centre. The pot of darkness she'd opened to conjure her dragon friend was spilling and spreading, but that was fine. She left it for now. While she had dabbled in the Dark Arts briefly, she was Light through-and-through, so she pulled easily on her store of bright, pure energy to absorb it until it was but a tiny pinprick. The dragon, with its access to her worries, fears, nightmares and darkest temptations cut off, sputtered out, taking its trail of fire with it. She pondered the scorch marks sadly. "That's another thing Sev said," she thought aloud, uncaring whether anybody was listening. "He said it takes the truly light to cut off the approach of darkness."

Ginny met her eyes, saw the sorrow there, and was blessedly silent.

Lavender, however... "That's bullshit!" she snorted. "That's how the big baddies get the good girls into bed. Though, actually... did it work? As a pick-up line, that is? Enquiring minds and all." Lily didn't speak but whatever Lavender saw in her face was enough because she whooped loudly. "Excellent! I'm using that! There's no way he can refuse me if I use one of his own trite phrases."

Lily rubbed her temples tiredly and swallowed back a growl. "Should have left her to burn."

Chapter End Notes
I don't know how Lily finagled her way into this chapter, I just don't know, but that being said I do think it's plausible - even logical - that Hermione and Lily, as curious muggleborns, would have dabbled in Dark Magic before joining the Light-brigade. It's practically canon - nobody can convince me that the binding hex Hermione put on the DA member list was not, at the very least, light grey.
Lily being the overachiever she is... ok so maybe fiendfyre is a stretch but it's my stretch and I'm quite nimble.
Love, Eli! x
Chapter Fifty-Four: Forward

Chapter Summary

The girls return to Solus House to face the consequences of their snake fight; Lavender cannot resist the pull of her mate any longer.

Chapter Notes

Hi!
This chapter was a bit rushed upon writing (the Windows 10 update corrupted my data and I had to buy a whole new laptop, bloody thing) and I haven't since had a chance to edit it properly, so apologies for that.
Still, enjoy!
Love, Eli x

"Please don't tell James," Lily begged as they approached the house. Hermione – and, she thought, pretty much everybody else – turned to her in shock.

"Great plan," Lavender said sagely. "Let's not tell him. Because he'll probably not notice all the slime and blood and bitemarks and soot – nah, that'll be magically invisible, and he'll totally buy that nothing happened. Great plan, Lils."

Lily turned on her defensively. "I just saved your life, shouldn't you be nicer to me?"

Lavender furrowed her brow with confusion. "Is this not nice?"

Ginny, with her uncanny understanding of human nature, butt in before it could become fisticuffs at dawn. "Well I, for one, have never before empathised with Snape so much."

"You?" Hermione laughed. "Excuse you, but who is the one with the snake bite in their neck?"

She nodded thoughtfully. "Good point, but I was referring to being in love with Evans. Seriously, that was heroic."

"If you truly love me, you won't tell James," Lily said tartly, pulling her soot-stained cardigan closer. "He'll be so mad if he finds out what happened."

"The fiendfyre or the snakes?" Lavender clarified.

"Either."

Hermione lolled her head on Lavender's shoulder and sighed. She was so tired. "You lot do what you want, but I'm telling Remus. We're trying to build trust – that means honesty. I'm not breaking that, not even for you and your mysterious Dark Arts skill."

"Oh, Merlin," Lavender groaned good-naturedly, hitching Hermione up higher on her side. "You're
one of those couples."

"Please?" Lily asked, pouting. The effect was ruined by the after-effects of Hermione's allergic reaction, though; the world was spinning, and that included Lily. The more Hermione tried to focus, the more the other girl became a red-and-pink blur. "He won't take it well."

"Sorry, Lily," Lavender shrugged. "As the lady says…"

"Damn you all. How can you be so selfish? Does my happiness mean nothing to you?" Lily cried, then, seeing the answer on their faces, stormed ahead of them in a huff.

Ginny tutted. "You couldn't just do what she asked this once?"

"She's an adult," Hermione slurred, her energy seeping out through her feet. "She made the decision to marry James – she can put up with the consequences."

"You can be so cruel, sometimes, Hermione," Ginny sighed. They finished their walk in silence.

James, Remus, Sirius and Regulus were sat together in the war room, deep in conversation about something or other when they entered. James immediately sprang to his feet and headed to Lily, saying "There you are! Where have you been, we were worried-"

"Hermione!" Remus leaped across to her, putting James's rush to shame as he pulled his mate from Lavender's arms and into his own. He sniffed her neck and growled, and she couldn't resist giving him a wan smile.

"I'm fine, now – Lavender found the anti-allergen in time, thank the Gods. It's just a little bite, love, stop fretting."

"Stop fretting? Stop fretting?!" Remus pulled her hand and the napkin from her neck, his eyes going round. "Hermione, you're bleeding!"

"Still?" she touched the ragged flesh tentatively. "We didn't have any dittany," she remembered. Remus scowled and pulled her hand away, tucking her into his side.

"There'll be some in the pantry," Sirius informed them from his place beside Regulus. He'd done a subtle scan of Ginny when she entered the room, and was satisfied with her overall health. There was no point in making a scene – she'd only get mad. "Alphard was clumsy."

"Thank-you, Padfoot," Remus replied without looking at him. "Come on, love…"

They disappeared off down the hallway, Remus still muttering under his breath, Hermione sporting an indulgent smile as he fussed over her. James and Lily followed, Lily mumbling something about a shower, leaving Lavender and Ginny alone with the Black brothers. "So how did it go?" Sirius asked, kicking a chair out for Ginny to take.

"Quite well, all things considered. No-one died." Ginny dropped a cloth-wrapped package onto the table with a thunk. "We got the ring out. The curse is still on it – it was woven into the stone's aura, annoyingly, so it wasn't destroyed – but the Horcrux is gone."

Regulus leaned forward and gingerly unfolded a section of the cloth until blackish-crystal shone dully in the light. The metal of the ring had twisted and warped, soot caked into the cracks and rivers, but the stone remained in perfect condition. "Ugly little thing," he said, tilting his head and using a quill to pull it further out until the stone was fully revealed. His mouth dropped open. "Is that..?"
"No." Ginny leaned forward and covered the rock up again, palming it quickly. "Where's the box?"

Sirius leaned back and pointed at one of the glass-fronted bookshelves, through which their box was visible. Ginny deposited the ring and locked it up again, adding an extra ward just in case anyone got curious. The ring in anyone's hands was dangerous; they couldn't take that risk.

Lavender watched her move with an inquisitive gleam in her eye, and Ginny thought that she might say something to give the game away, but when she finally opened her mouth all she said was "when's dinner? I'm starving, honestly – Lily wouldn't let me eat in the car and now that we're back the sausage rolls are all soggy." Ginny didn't know if she did that on purpose, or accidentally, but either way it helped and she was grateful.

If Hermione didn't want Lavender leaving the house, she'd put a lead on her. Or, so Lavender rationalised later that evening as she slipped out of the back door and across the garden toward the cliffs. Dinner had gone well, or at least well for Lavender, who thrived on chaos: Lily was mad at her and Hermione; James was 'disappointed' in Lily (and a little scared of his fiendfyre toting redhead); Remus was still in 'protective-wolf' mode, worsened by the coming full moon, unable to let Hermione leave his side for long (Lavender thought that was cute and apparently so did Hermione, who rewarded his effort with copious kisses on his cheeks, nose and mouth); and Regulus was shooting suspicious looks at Ginny every ten minutes. Luna returned half-way through in an uncharacteristically drab mood, and that was when Lavender had made her escape under the guise of an 'early night'. She'd been sleeping so much since her first transformation that nobody made much of it.

Their mistake.

She reached the cliffs by following their sound, a deep, earth-shattering crash as water broke on rock, the spray reaching up and over the edge to soak her when she found them. Lavender couldn't prevent a content smile; water had been her element since birth and even with her new werewolf status she didn't think anything could compare to that first feeling of connection with a body of water, the welcome a water-witch receives from their nymph cousins, the sight of fish and mammals cutting joyously through the tide. Drops coated her bare arms and face, like calling to like...

In a previous life, she'd have climbed all the way down to the sea and used that as her escape. But then, in a previous life she hadn't had a mate to woo, so the point was rather moot.

She scrambled over the edge and down, using jutting stone as foot holds until she felt the wards shimmer over her. Climbing down until she reached a larger outreach, just big enough for her to turn on, she apparated away.

Spinner's End at twilight was no more welcoming than in the daylight, but at least the darkness hid imperfections. Televisions blared behind cheap curtains and cats scurried through gardens. In one front-yard a dog barked madly at some unknown irritant. Lavender ignored it and ploughed on.

He'd not adjusted his wards, and since he wasn't an idiot Lavender thought he mustn't be as angry as he'd professed to be. Regulus would still be able to make it through should he so wish. That wouldn't help Lavender – they were otherwise impenetrable – but it gave some insight into his mindset, at least. Crossing her arms, she contemplated the house front and then the floor around her, eventually deciding on a course of action.

*Smack!*

Humming under her breath, Lavender hunted around for another stone. Nobody in this
neighbourhood had gravelled drives, but the pavement was buckled in some places leaving loose lumps of tarmac littering the street; no end of ammunition for the determined werewolf. Smack! Crack! Smack!

She was just choosing her fifth piece when the door flew open, an enraged Severus Snape filling the frame. She straightened up to admire him – still ugly, yes, but intimidating too. Tall and lithe, his clothes suited him perfectly well, and if he washed his hair and cut it a bit that wouldn't be objectionable either. He was glaring at her, and the fury in his eyes was just a hot enough emotion to appeal to the wolf within, a beast which was only further enticed by the undertone of fear that wafted to her across the garden.

"Evening!" She greeted him brightly with a jaunty wave. When he only glared harder she realised she still held a clump of tarmac, which she let fall to the ground with a sheepish grin. "Nice night for it?"

She heard him let out a hiss of air through his teeth – crooked and yellow for gods-know what reason, but that was an easy fix, too (maybe this was what Lavender had learned all of those beauty charms for?) – before he stormed down the path to her, stopping just behind the threshold of his wards. "What do you want?" he snarled. "I told you before – I don't want anything to do with your scheme."

Lavender shrugged, leaning against the brick of another house's fence, the image of nonchalance. "This isn't about that," she waved the idea off. "This is about us."

Severus blinked at her blankly for a moment before he found his voice, and even then it came out a bit choked. "Us?" His eyes went wild for a split-second, like a cornered rabbit. The wolf liked that, too. "Are you mentally imbalanced?"

Hurt despite herself, she scowled. "Do I look mentally imbalanced?" Seeing his lips twitch up into the beginnings of a sneer, she caught herself. "Don't answer that. I wanted to ask you to dinner."

Instead of being reassured he flinched even further back, which irritated her – she was pretty certain she didn't say 'for' dinner, so the fear was really quite undeserved. "Is this a joke?" he hissed, even angrier now, his voice deadly quiet. "Did Potter put you up to this?"

"That seems like an unwarranted accusation," she pouted. "As if I'd ever do what Potter asked me to do. He asked for the butter at breakfast yesterday and I passed him the honey instead." When this statement didn't appear to reassure him, she rolled his eyes. "Well I couldn't just ignore him, could I? I was raised right."

Doubt. There was definitely doubt on his face, and in his voice when he said 'you're a werewolf', as if that would be any excuse for bad manners? Lavender was a lot of things but you couldn't fault her manners – she remembered her 'please' and 'thank-yous' (when people deserved them), always ate with her mouth closed and never ever ignored someone if they asked her an outright question. "I'm starting to think you might be a bit fixated on the werewolf thing," she said instead, because it didn't matter what Hermione said – there was, in fact, a cure for ignorance and given time she would dispense it to Snape.

"Werewolves are dangerous Dark Beasts," Snape told her, as if she didn't know that. He seemed to have calmed down, or maybe had just crossed the threshold of visible rage and was about to rip her throat out. She didn't know – it didn't really matter. He'd never be able to touch her before she could stop him and while they were talking she was content either way. "I would know."

"No, Snape, you wouldn't know," Lavender corrected him, still perfectly calm. "I would know. You
were almost – almost – attacked by a werewolf once, and while that's awful and I think Sirius should be, at the very least, temporarily castrated for what he did, you really have no first hand experience of werewolf behaviour." Smiling flirtatiously, she batted her eyelashes in a move that had snatched her many a man in the past. "I'd be happy to educate you?"

He appeared dazed by the look for a few seconds, long enough for victory to begin to bubble up in her stomach, before he snapped back to himself and scowled even more fiercely than before. "No thank you. I'd rather have as little to do with you creatures as possible."

"And yet you're on the same side as Fenrir Greyback and his happy little pack of murderous sociopaths," she drawled, narrowing her eyes. "Hardly the actions of a man prejudiced against a whole race. If you were, then you'd naturally choose the side with the least amount of us on it, wouldn't you?"

"At least the Death Eaters -" a pause while he obviously edited 'don't try to kill me' out of the sentence to be replaced with something marginally truthful. Lavender smirked. "-like me," he finished with a triumphant twitch of an eyebrow.

"I like you," Lavender returned. "Only the Gods know why, but I do."

He didn't reply, observing her with unnervingly sharp eyes. She was abruptly slung back in time to his classroom, when Seamus had melted her cauldron through improper use of a Lionfish Spine and he'd had to decide whether she deserved to be punished too for something that wasn't her fault. It was the same feeling now – a spiteful man deciding whether she should be tarred by the same stick he'd used on Remus and the rest of his friends. Now, as then, she stayed silent and allowed him to make his judgement as he would.

"Is this a joke?" he asked finally.

"No," she replied huffily, her eyes burning from the effort it took not to roll them. "It is not."

He narrowed his eyes. "You're still a werewolf. Inherently untrustworthy."

"I've been a werewolf all of one month," Lavender gritted out, trying not to scream in frustration. Didn't he realise she wouldn't even be here if it wasn't for her wolf? He was hardly a model – considering her idea of the perfect man ran from Hugh Grant to Bruce Willis and no farther on either side, he was lucky she noticed him at all. And that wasn't even considering their past relationship. She didn't have enough fingers to count the ways he'd called her stupid. "I must have missed that part of the training."

He snorted unattractively, a victorious light in his eyes. "See – I know you're lying. That was a mistake on your part, Miss Brown. Just looking at your face I can tell you've been a werewolf for much longer than that." He sniffed in a superior way and turned back to his house. "It was a nice try. For what it matters."

A growl ripped from her throat of her own accord. "Oh, because these scars couldn't possibly be from anything else?" she shouted at his back. He didn't stop, not even when she said, "don't you walk away from me, Snape!", which – rude. She watched impotently as the door slammed behind him, blocking his figure from her view. She knew he still observed her, though. She could feel it. Pissed and feeling juvenile, she blessed his house with an obscene hand gesture before storming away.

Hermione was waiting for her back at the house, wrapped in a dressing-gown circa. 1794 and fuzzy slippers. She held a cup of something brown at her collarbone and wore her most unimpressed face,
last seen two weeks before NEWTs when she'd heard Parvati say she needed to start revising. Start revising. Lavender had feared Hermione's head might explode, she was scolding the other girl so hard, but they'd both survived the encounter intact.

A fact which Lavender was liable to regret if Hermione went all 'disappointed Head Girl' on her.

They stopped, facing each other from about ten feet apart. Hermione was neutral, sipping on her beverage, while Lavender thought hard about what she could say to get herself off the hook. "I went for a walk?"

Hermione's lips twitched wryly. "To Manchester? That was quick."

Lavender winced. "How do you know these things?" she cried plaintively. "What are you, some sort of Oracle?!"

"No," Hermione replied patiently, "but I'm not dim. Our newest werewolf goes for a midnight wander in a world where she knows nothing and nobody. Where else would you go but Snape's house?"

Squinting in the dark, Lavender tried to reassess Hermione's expression. She didn't sound mad… but sounds could be deceiving. "Aren't you going to shout at me?"

"Would it help?" Hermione asked with a sigh. "You're a grown woman, Lavender, and you can look after yourself. I was worried, though. This is a dangerous world and none of us know it. You can't go running off without a word."

"Sorry?" Lavender tried, and Hermione smiled. "If it helps, it didn't go well."

For a moment Hermione looked like a deer in headlights – you could almost hear her thinking "oh, shit, what have I done? She wants to talk about it?! I didn't take a NEWT in girl talk!" but she manfully shoved that back and conjured another mug, beckoning Lavender forward to take it. "Come sit down, we'll chat," she said warmly, doing a wonderful job of sounding like she actually wanted to be there. That was enough for Lavender. She skipped up the steps and plonked down on the top one beside Hermione, gathering the mug in her hand and taking a deep pull of the liquid inside. It was cocoa, and well-made; rich and silky, spreading heat through her bones before she even realised she was cold.

"He doesn't like me," she moaned after a long minute, dropping her chin onto her knees.

"He doesn't like me either," Hermione reminded her in an approximation of a soothing voice. "Snape isn't exactly known for liking people."

Lavender pouted. "No offense, Hermione, but lots of people don't like you. And anyway – I'm his mate. I thought it would be different."

"Nobody said it would be easy."

"You and Remus are easy," Lavender accused, then wrinkled her nose. "That sounded worse than I meant it to."

Hermione spared her a smile. "We're not easy. We have our problems – and our relationship in the future was problematic, too. But we'll work it out if we're committed to each other, and so will you."

She ran a finger around the rim of her mug. "I hope so." She took a deep breathe and let it out slowly, watching the cloud curl in the cool night air. "He thinks I'm a liar." Hermione barked a
startled laugh and Lavender glared at her. "Oi! I now know why nobody talks to you about their problems!"

"Sorry!" Hermione squeaked, clamping a hand over her mouth. "I know I shouldn't laugh, but that's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. You? A liar? Lavender, dear, you're the most honest person I've ever met. To a fault. You can't even lie to yourself!"

It was true, but Lavender still felt like there was an insult in there somewhere. Oh, well. Plenty of time to get worked up about it later. "He doesn't know that," she pointed out sulkily. "He couldn't possibly know that because he refuses to get to know me."

"You've met him three times."

"And all three times he came away thinking I'm a psycho." She threw her hands up in defeat. "How can I possibly change that impression?"

Hermione's mouth pressed in a thin line, a sure-fire sign she was holding something back. Lavender narrowed her eyes on her and hissed "don't you dare!"

"But you are a psycho," Hermione whined, snuggling closer to her mug. "It's precisely what makes you so loveable. And he's not really what you could call well-adjusted, is he? He's living in the decrepit remains of his family home, refusing to clean or leave. He's a corpse and a wig away from actual 'Psycho' territory." She stopped when she saw Lavender's eyes flash gold in the darkness. "Right, maybe I shouldn't talk about your mate's… less desirable traits right in front of you, then?"

"Maybe not in that way," Lavender agreed through her teeth as she fought to stop her she-wolf from trying to bite Hermione's ear off. She smelt enough like Remus that the pack instinct to protect her was there, but even in Packs they could scrap. The wolf seemed to think that an ear was a small price to pay for insulting their mate. Lavender was inclined to disagree. "You're exaggerating." She pointed out, slowly shaping the words to ensure the wolf couldn't wrestle control away. "He's not insane."

"Well, no – a man that clever would never do anything so demeaning as lose control over his sanity. He's much too tightly laced. What I do mean is that perhaps his dubious mental state is part of what draws you to him?" Hermione smiled, a quick flash of pearly white against the shadows. "The two of you can understand each other better for it?"

"I thought it was because of his brains and his nose," Lavender replied, thinking it through. "You know – signs of virility and intelligence, making him the perfect mate, decent reproductive material?"

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "Really?" Of course, because this was Hermione Granger, she didn't sound offended but rather intrigued by the idea.

"Really," Lavender said, happy to oblige. She'd done a bit of thinking about it – she wasn't so stupid she couldn't make leaps of logic owing to basic biological fact, thank you very much - as a way of trying to understand why her wolf, who seemed pretty cool in every other way, would pick a Mate for her that was so obviously deficient in temperament, humour and looks. "For example, you're intelligent and you have birthing hips. Plus, you're attracted to Remus – the potential of which would have been there from your first meeting, despite you being a kid – and you're appallingly fertile. Honestly, you smell like some Goddess of the Harvest, all spring blooms and fresh litters. If Remus hadn't been the first werewolf you ever met, some other wolf would have snapped you up pretty quickly. It's sickening."

"Birthing hips..?" She glanced down at her curves, hidden for the moment behind the voluminous
monstrosity she'd worn to come outside. "Thank you…? No, actually, not thank you. That's disturbing." Shaking her head vigorously, she let out a small chuckle. "Do you know, just this once I think I'll stick with the mystical explanation. Remus and I are soul-mates, and that's that. You and Severus must therefore also be soulmates."

Lavender hid her wrinkled nose in her cocoa. "I think I'll stick to the big cock explanation, it's much less terrifying." Deciding that a change of subject was in order, Lavender turned to look at the house. "Where is Remus, anyway? I wouldn't think he'd let you out of his sight for at least another day."

Hermione turned with Lavender and pointed to one of the windows on the second floor. "He's there, in the library. I bargained for an hour of privacy when you got back, but he'll be watching. My, err, 'incapacity' earlier had him worried."

"'Incapacity'," snorting, Lavender shot the window a wave, noting the shadows within move with some amusement. "I don't even want to know what you bargained for your freedom, dirty girl."

She received a knowing look from Hermione in return. "Yes, you do, but I'll not tell you anyway." She got to her feet, wrapping her gown more tightly around her, and lent Lavender a hand upwards. "If I leave you without walking you directly to your bedroom door, will you run off again?"

"No," Lavender gave a mocking smile, spreading her arms out. "Where exactly would I go?"

"Like that'll stop you," Hermione murmured. They entered the house and she locked the door behind them. "Next time you bugger off to see Snape, let me know, okay?"

"Yes, mother," she droned in reply, ignoring the warm glow in her belly at Hermione's concern. The she-wolf purred with satisfaction at her Alpha-female's affection. Really, there were all sorts of mummy issues happening in Lavender at that moment.

Feeling rather like a child again, a not entirely unpleasant feeling, Lavender bid Hermione goodnight and watched her head off looking pleased with the concession. Remus met her at the top of the stairs, scooping her back into his arms with the enthusiasm of a newlywed and toted her off to bed. Lavender took her time, not wanting to bask in their enthusiastic couple-ness when her trip had ended so badly.

Not that she'd give up, oh no. Lavender Brown was not a quitter. She'd pursued Ron for a year before he noticed her, or any girl other than his sister-in-law, and if she could wait for a Weasley she could wait for her mate. Well, maybe not wait. She wasn't known for her patience. She'd give it another few days and try again.

Pleased with this plan, she made it to her room and lay in bed, plotting her next move in the wooing of Snape until sleep overcame her.
Chapter Fifty-Five: Even Further

Chapter Summary

The girls get through another full moon. Severus learns some things about himself he'd rather never have known.

The next two weeks passed in a bland, grey blur while the residents of Solus House waited for one of their many adversaries to make their next move. Snape hadn't contacted them, Dumbledore had sent a brief memo claiming to be out of the country, Voldemort burned down a Muggle village, and Pettigrew begged off of the full moon again.

"He says he's in Aberystwyth for the Order," Remus had frowned, reading the note aloud in the library one night.

"He was in Carlisle last month," Sirius scowled, snatching up the letter and shoving it in a drawer. "What do we care, so long as we don't have to see his weaselly little face again?"

The full moon came and went in the same manner as every other day, except Remus moaned more (Lavender's assessment – she'd been top of her game and spent most of the day prior dramatically re-enacting Remus's many tired groans as she pretended to swoon on the sofa/table/stairs/whatever was closest at that moment in time). Hermione, of course, stayed close to her beau the forty-eight hours preceding and following the moon, and had to be babysat by Ginny the whole night in case she got any funny ideas about joining her mate on the grounds.

For his part, Moony spent the night howling at whichever window Hermione was closest to and generally causing such a ruckus that it took Padfoot twenty minutes to realise Lavender had gone missing, and another ten to find her whining her and pawing at the wards in a roughly south-westerly direction. He'd carried her back to the house by the scruff of her neck, an action she begrudgingly allowed for as long as it took him to put her down, at which time she scampered back off to scratch at the wards a bit more. Walking into the house at dawn, Sirius had scowled at Hermione and demanded she let Remus bite her. "Unmated werewolves are more trouble than they're worth," he'd declared, shoving Hermione in Remus's direction and sloping off to bed.

Come morning all four participants were exhausted, even James spending the day in bed while Lily ignored his many complaints, spending her day of freedom in Lavender's room, where all of the girls had gathered for an impromptu day off. Lily, having been assimilated more completely into the group following 'Motherfucking Snake-Gate' (no prizes for guessing who named that), had loved the opportunity to bond more completely with her new friends without the danger of impending anaphylactic shock, blood loss, paralysis and/or murder.

Otherwise, it had been dull. They waited, they researched, they exhausted the library and went stir-crazy. Hermione studied her timeline and sent the boys to protect families in danger of death - the McKinnons were rousted from their Glasgow home and sent packing to the Highlands, the Prewitts received anonymous threats that sent them on high alert. Benjy Fenwick conveniently contracted Mumps through the post (Hermione was particularly proud of that one) and therefore didn't end up eviscerated. Ginny invented a new hex. Luna owled her parents and snuggled with Regulus. Remus visited his mother in her safe house and worked, bringing home new books he conveniently left in Hermione's path. Lily visited her parents, but only once, and James and Sirius took her home to the
Potters several times. The girls didn't go; after Hermione's memory charm, there was no need, and besides; it would be too dangerous for the Potters to remember anything of them while Dumbledore was still on their trail.

Instead, they went to Diagon Alley and bought books and supplies. Lavender bought a new wand more in tune with her werewolf-adapted magic, and Luna bought seeds to start a potion's garden outside of the kitchen. Hermione deposited some of their money into Gringotts to start a paper trail of their existence, identifying them as Canadian immigrants and stating their address as a small house in Aberdeen Luna's family donated to them that they would probably never use.

Lavender disappeared for hours on end, leaving scribbled notes for Hermione to decipher.

And they waited some more.

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Severus was sat in Lucius's library again, researching. Lucius hadn't asked questions, and Severus was glad of that discretion – it would only have caused trouble had he tried to lie to his friend, and he didn't want to burn those bridges. Not just yet.

To himself, Snape could admit he was somewhat intrigued by the information Regulus and his cohort had given him on their ill-fated trip to his house, offended or not. It had been two weeks since their visit and he'd managed to calm down since then; enough to consider the proposition properly, without the haze of rage affecting his judgement.

Regulus had been his best friend for seven years, and he'd never steered Severus wrong, which was not something Severus could say for himself. Despite their ill-advised actions, the nature of their trip seemed reputable. And he did want a way out, if not quite in the way they were offering one – he had no wish to spy, but if that was what it took to end this forsaken war perhaps he should consider it. It would be dangerous, yes, but wasn't that what he deserved? Thinking back over all he had done in his life – the people he'd tortured, killed, how he'd assisted by brewing the potions, inventing the spells, the actions he'd taken to survive – and considering the core of himself, the darkness that was a fundamental part of his being, it seemed only logical that there would come a time that he'd face redemption, and no redemption was easy.

Still, to be offered an out; even by a group obviously calculated to get his attention, using Lily and Regulus as bait; had not seemed possible. Certainly not that they would approach him, specifically, as though he had something to offer that they could not get elsewhere. The Granger girl had been respectful, if brusque, and made no motions to investigate his life any further than he allowed. Of course her friend had – that irritating chit that continued to appear in his life, lingering like a bad smell, had cleaned his parlour and reorganized his belongings as though she had a right, and now he had to spend hours searching for a book because it no longer dwelled on the floor but on the shelves, and he was constantly disoriented by the stacks of clean plates in his cupboards. He couldn't be certain but he thought that she'd stolen something, too – with everything out of its place he had no idea how to find what was taken, but he knew something had been – and that was insulting.

However, she wasn't hostile either. More playful, if he knew what that meant. It appeared out of character from what he knew of werewolves but he was the first to admit he did not know much more than what they taught in Defence, and, ignoring his own prejudice in order to assess it as a scholar, he had to admit that the information was biased. Biological fact interspersed with speculation.

He'd not been considering their proposal to begin with. Instead, he'd been enjoying the image of them all in his living room, amidst the accumulated filth of his life as an outlier, imagining the dirt infecting them and bringing them as low as he was. Lily had caused a flicker of excitement, but it
had been so many years now since they'd last spoken civilly that he'd begun to prefer the Lily of his
daydreams – sweet, pliant, pure Lily who loved him unconditionally, rather than the inconveniently
loud one of reality, who told him off when he was being mean and had abandoned him to the
shadows.

Though he'd deserved that, too, hadn't he?

If he were a Gryffindor perhaps he'd appreciate their approach – the way they'd brought everything
he might find objectionable about them and thrown it in his face: Lily, Lily's awful fiancé, two
Muggleborns doubtless as pure as the day was long, and a werewolf. They'd made sure there would
be no surprises if he did join them, possibly hoping to gain his trust through the transparency of their
actions. But it hadn't worked – transparency was just another form of manipulation, wasn't it?
Severus had had enough of that in his life, and he now operated with different values – self-indulgent
ones, like any good Slytherin. He wanted to learn Dark magic, so he did. He wanted to create a spell,
so he did.

But you want out of the Death Eaters too…

Severus snarled under his breath, shaking his head. He did, but not enough to put himself under
some tyrannical witch's thumb. They'd have to offer him much more than the vaguest possibility of
peace to get him interested, and there was nothing they had that he wanted.

The werewolf appeared in his head again and he stifled the urge to stab himself with his quill. He
despised werewolves, and no matter what she said, he had a right to. She'd as good as called him
ignorant, doubted his intelligence – not that someone like
her
blonde
could measure up. She was blonde, for
goodness sake. Just because she knew more about werewolves – a topic he wasn't interested in – did
not make her better than him. It did not.

Severus's eyes wandered over to the shelves at the back of the library, in shadow and neglected. The
Malfoys had no care to learn about Magical Creatures, but their library had the obligatory section
regardless. It was, for them, more status symbol than function – a way for Lucius to one-up his
poncy pure-blood friends ("oh, you have the first edition of Demonica: Sacred Monsters? I have
the signed first printing of Medusa Macabre; it's over a thousand years old, you know"). He did
harbour an impressive selection, though – and were Severus to find an accurate portrayal of
lycanthropy anywhere, the laws of probability suggested it would be here…

No. He shook his head, clenching his jaw and dragging his eyes away. He didn't need to look – he
didn't care. His belief that werewolves were monsters had served him well all his life, there was no
need to challenge his assumptions now. Especially not over a woman – and the Gods knew Severus
had terrible taste in women, so that should tell him something about her he needed no research to
define.

No. He wasn't interested in her. Yes, she was quite pretty, if one ignored her disfigurement, and with
the disfigurement she looked fierce, but he didn't like fierce in a woman. He liked demure and sweet.
A certain purity. Certainly not the werewolf's crassness, even if he did find it amusing at times: he'd
never before met someone so prone to speaking their mind and damning the consequences.

Hardly an admirable trait, he sneered to himself when he felt his brain go a bit dreamy, snapping
himself back to reality and firmly denying any foray into the romantic. In his life discretion was key;
he could ill-afford to become involved with a woman who wouldn't know 'subtle' if it kicked her in
the head. Not that he was considering involvement, of course – this was pure conjecture, based on an
entirely hypothetical situation in which he'd said yes to her request for dinner instead of sending her
away.
He was in dangerous territory now, much too close to considering her offer. She'd said she'd make it again, but he'd yet to see her. Occasionally he'd feel eyes upon him as he went about his business – the other day in the apothecary, for example, and the night before as he walked home from the pub – but he didn't see anyone, which meant the invisible eyes likely belonged to one of the Dark Lord's lesser lackeys. He doubted the werewolf girl was clever enough to hide herself from him.

His wayward eyes were back at the Magical Creatures section again and he cursed under his breath. Fine. He'd look. If he were to teach at Hogwarts it stood to reason he'd need a thorough background in Magical Creatures… especially if he hoped to be promoted to Defence one day. Really, he should read up some more on Grindylows, they'd always confused him, and Kelpies too – in a castle with that many children around, in Scotland of all places, on the shores of a lake, Kelpies were a real danger and someone would need to know how to recover their victims…

Forcing himself to cross to the shelves, he gazed upwards, wondering where to begin. Ostensibly, the Malfoy library had a system, maintained by a House-Elf with a book who sat at a toy-sized desk in the centre of the stacks from dawn to dinner-time each day. The problem with this being that the elf – Tot – took it upon himself to fill the spare time between visits with reorganizing the place, meaning that nothing was ever where you last found it. Being an elf, Tot also wrote the book, directions and shelf labels in Elvish, a script Severus had never learned. Since it was coming up to eight in the evening, Tot had other duties to attend to, and Severus was on his own.

Which was how he liked it, because if he didn't have the option to go directly to the books he wanted then it was easy to fool himself into thinking that when he pulled out a book on lycanthropy, well, it was just an accident, and if it fell into his pile, well then, that was accidental too.

Severus was an academic – there was no fudging, ignoring, or escaping that fact. He was curious, he enjoyed learning, and reading was his favourite hobby. The Magical Creatures section was nearly undisturbed which left the smell of dust and leather hanging in slightly stale air; the smell every academic revelled in. He was more relaxed here in seconds than he had been at his desk, so he took his time, brushing his fingers down spines, pulling out tomes to flip through the pages at his leisure, replacing them slowly and moving on to the next. There was no sound but his breathing and the soft swish of pages as they moved, the light scrape of a book as he dragged it into his arms. Each one was beautifully kept, the spines displaying names pressed deep and covered with gold ink, their covers intact and smooth.

Except one. Severus ignored it at first, thinking perhaps it was a gap or a notebook someone had hidden away, but the longer he was around it the more it seemed to sing to him, calling him closer. He brushed the pad of his index finger down the battered spine that showed no name, and the seduction came stronger, swirling through his head in a fog, brushing along his nerves like the softest of fur coats. He recognised that feeling – he was a damn connoisseur of that feeling, the beautiful temptation of Dark magic. Yet, something …

He pulled it free and palmed it, and the moment it made full contact his arm burned. Burned more than a call, more than when it had been given, as though something within it recognised kin and would kill Severus to get to it, to reunite. The black deepened, seeming to spread until his whole fore-arm was dark with ink, and the book in his hand rattled, shaking and leaping in his grip.

"Shit," Severus spat, dropping it in horror. Even on the floor it moved, a sinuous wave towards Severus's feet, as though a magnetic field drew it closer. Fear crawled up his throat as he stumbled back, clogging his lungs, cutting off his breath.

"Severus?" Lucius's voice called through the ringing in his ears. "Are you around?"

Deep breaths punched their way out of his lungs as he panicked, instinctively knowing that
Lucius must not see him here – whatever this book was, and he had a good idea, was valuable enough to kill for, and Severus – well, Severus always knew his curiosity would hurt him one day, but he wasn't stupid enough to succumb yet, not tonight.

Conjuring a thick cloth, he wrapped the book and shoved it deep into his robes, slipping around to the other side of the library as quickly as he could. "I'm here," he called once he knew his voice had levelled again, and swept out into the light. Lucius was leaning against his cane, riffling through his work with an expression of distaste.

"Cissy wanted me to invite you to supper," he said, glancing up and raising a sculpted brow. "You'll need to clean yourself first."

Looking down revealed that he'd managed to cover himself in dust. He battled to keep the embarrassment from showing in his cheeks. "I think I'll pass," he murmured, "I should be off, anyway. Do you mind if I take these?"

Lucius flicked his fingers indifferently. "I'll certainly not read them. I'm a newly married man, we've other interests." Severus suppressed his groans and collected his things swiftly, knowing exactly what was coming next – "Narcissa has some… not terrible acquaintances, if you'd like me to make a match, Severus. Merlin knows you're old enough, and Cissy fears if we leave it too long you'll remain on the shelf forever. And that's not to mention the other benefits of taking a wife…"

The predatory gleam in the older man's eyes had Severus redoubling his efforts to pack. "No, thank-you," he snapped, considering hexing the book that wouldn't fit in his satchel. It was as though the world was colluding against him.

"No?" Lucius pouted. "Not even the one? That Shafiq girl is reputed to be quite the talent, if you understand my meaning, and quite open to anything…"

"Again, Lucius, with all due respect to your wife, I have no wish to be married." He nodded curtly. "And no amount of 'talent' will change my mind."

"Spoken like a virgin," Lucius purred, prowling closer. "Oh, the things you're missing, pet…"

A quick flicker of his eyes showed Severus that the Floo was open, and he lunged for it, abandoning all dignity to the wind. Lucius's low, melodic laugh followed him out, his "Goodnight, Severus!" still ringing in his ears when he finally reached the safety of his own house.

Lavender wasn't stalking him. No. She was… protecting him? Yeah, that sounded plausible. Protecting him. He'd disagree that he needed protecting, as would pretty much anybody else who'd ever met him, but Lavender knew better. He'd just spent the evening at Malfoy Manor before wandering down to the Horse and Frog to drink among a crowd of disgustingly sloshed brutes twice his size and three times as aggressive. Which, considering this was Severus Snape, really meant something. Talk about out of the frying pan, into the fire! The man had no idea how to look after himself!

And, yes, she understood that stalking was wrong – morally and legally and all that. And, yes, it probably wasn't a pit-stop on the direct route to his pants. And, yes, okay, she knew that there was a high probability of her getting hexed, cursed or worse on these nightly excursions.

But…

He smelled so good!
Now, as a human Lavender might not have believed in the power of scent – the idea that there was a scent so good you'd willingly walk off a cliff for it seemed ludicrous – but now she understood. It was like Pimms on a hot summers day, when you've just watched the bartender smash the ice and slice the fruit fresh – irresistible.

Or, at least to her it was. In a non-edible (but also pretty edible) way. Weird to be haunted by sandalwood of all things, but she was considering taking up incense burning just to feel closer to him.

She wanted to think it was bizarre, the amount she was attracted to him, how mental she was about the man, but it just wasn't. Not for her. She'd always been the sort of girl who could be entirely distracted by a boy; could fail tests because she was so mesmerised by his arse, or the way his biceps bulged beneath his shirt (Transfiguration OWL, Blaise Zabini, no regrets). It wasn't something she was proud of, and it made her feel like a failure to the sisterhood, but… she liked men. She just did. Shame wasn't within her purview so she just didn't bother with it.

Comfortingly, she knew she had control of her own mind. Her reactions to Snape were just too textbook Lavender for her to blame it on the wolf – the wolf who got all growly whenever she called him ugly, even though it was true. He might have knock-you-on-your-arse, beg-him-for-attention sexy pheromones, but that didn't change his face.

The nose was growing on her, though.

It was almost one in the morning when he emerged from the pub, swaying slightly but otherwise keeping his composure. He tottered off down the road, weaving off towards his house, crossing the wards and plodding up to his door. Then he stopped, and Lavender froze.

Twisting on his heel, he turned and marched up the path again, out of the wards, across the street, down an alley – and at this point Lavender started to get concerned, because this estate was really shifty and he was about half her size, never mind that of anybody else he might come across. The sound of rushing water caught her attention and then they were at a stream, and she was lurking in the shadows of the latest alleyway as he paced up and down.

Finally, after about ten minutes of this (and Lavender beginning to doubt his mental stability) his face underwent a change, his features hardening. This was her only notice before he whipped out his wand and jabbed it in her direction, shouting "finite incantatum!" for the whole North-West to hear. "Bugger," he snapped, a bit blurrily, when her disillusionment charm wore off. "It's you."

"Hello to you too," she said, glancing around. She felt exposed all of a sudden, and she didn't think it was unreasonable to be concerned about her health. It rather felt like just standing on this street might have her contracting some grotty Muggle disease, if Snape did decide to let her live.

"Why are you following me?" Snape asked, crossing his arms. A closer look at his face showed he was frowning petulantly at her; stifling a laugh was the hardest thing she'd done that night, and only possible because he also looked adorable. "There are laws against stalking, you realize."

"I didn't realise 70's society was that evolved," Lavender shivered. "I don't mean to be funny, but it's quite chilly out here and you knocked off my warming charm..?"

"Right, sorry." A wave of heat crested over her and she smiled, revelling in the warmth and comfort of his magic. Until it fell away abruptly and he was scowling at her again. "No, actually, I'm not sorry. What do you want?"
"That was rude."

"Stalking is rude!"

"One would think you'd be flattered. I don't stalk just anyone, you know."

He looked apoplectic. "How gratifying to be the subject of your fixation!"

"I'm not fixated," she hissed. He raised an eyebrow – somewhat sloppily, due to the drink. He must have had quite a bit more than she'd thought he'd because it only made it about half-way up his forehead before he'd apparently exhausted his sarcasm reserves and the thing started twitching madly, like a seizing caterpillar. It took a few seconds to pull her attention away; it was strangely mesmerising...

"I'm not fixated," Lavender repeated when she realised he was attempting to look dubious. "Really. I just want to make sure you're safe." She sighed when his expression of disbelief deepened further. "Yes, alright, and I'm bored. There's really not much to do at home. In a war there's so much fear that you sort of think You-Know-Who and his minions are lurking around every corner but they're not, and I don't think I ever expected that to be disappointing but it is. Ginny and Luna have managed toemasculate at least three Death Eaters between them and all I got was snake sushi."

"That was you lot?" Snape paled dramatically – or as dramatically as he could, being so sallow as he was. Lavender was caught between wanting to wrap him in blankets and keep him safe and wanting to ship him off to the Caribbean so that he'd get a nice tan for once. One was wolf instinct, the other personal preference – people with olive skin and dark hair weren't meant to be that pale. They just weren't. About fifty of her problems with his appearance could be solved if he spent some time in the sun, and yes, while that would hardly scratch the surface at least it would help a little. "Bellatrix has spent the last month trying to recreate that curse," he hissed angrily. "She lopped off Mulciber's bollocks!"

Unexpected as that statement was, she couldn't hold back a laugh. If anything, he seemed to get even angrier. "It's not funny! I have no immediate wish to be a eunuch!"

That sobered her up, fury from her wolf bolting through her at the speed of light. "If she touches you," Lavender growled, her voice deep and scary even to herself, "I will rip out her organs one by one and feed them to her."

Snape staggered back, stark shock blanching his face. "What?" Then he shook himself. "I don't... no." Taking a deep breath, he patted his pockets. "I have something for you."

Lavender brightened. "For me? You shouldn't have! Is it chocolate? I love chocolate."

He shot her a queer look. "No. It's not chocolate. Here." He held out a cloth-wrapped bundle. "I think you've been looking for this."

Disposing of her disappointment, she reached out and took it, then immediately shoved it back into his hands. "Ew, no! I don't want that. You need to step up your gift game, Sevvy. No wonder you're single."

"Sevvy?!" His eyes bulged. "SEVVY?!"

"What is it, anyway?" Ignoring his shaking – he really did seem quite furious, Lavender would suggest anger management if she had less of a self-preservationist streak – she flicked open a corner of the cloth. This also, helpfully, had the side effect of bringing her within feet of the man so she could bask in his warmth, his lovely smell. He was a few inches taller than her, just tall enough that
his chin was directly in her sightline, tempting the she-beast to reach up and lick it like a good little mate. She didn't, though. They weren't at that point yet.

A girl could fantasise, though…

"Oh," she wrinkled her nose, managing to bring her gaze away from the curve where his shoulder met his neck (a lovely place to bite, she thought, then pushed that away because the reaction it triggered was not appropriate for trash-strewn riverbanks in the middle of the night) to examine the battered little journal underneath. It emanated dark magic like it was going out of fashion; if it hadn't been wrapped up and buried so deep in his pocket, she could have smelled it miles away. "It's one of those."

Recognising it as a Horcrux was easy now she knew what she was looking for. Voldemort's soul had a tangy, sulphuric tinge to it, like it was already half-submerged in Hell. Her wolf was growing a constant stream of abuse at it and she would have liked nothing more than to throw it into the river and leave it there forever. Not that she'd do that, of course – Hermione would skin her, and she didn't fancy being a rug in one of Alphard's gaudy reception rooms.

She looked up at Snape, who seemed a bit bemused by her closeness. His eyes examined her as though he'd never seen a woman before, running over her hair and face curiously. As ever, they were dark, unfathomable, but she thought she saw something she recognised…?

"I found it at Malfoy Manor," he said brusquely, some of his drunkenness falling away as he took a few more steps back. Automatically she reached out to steady him, he'd gone too close to the edge for her comfort, but he jumped as though she'd just sprouted horns and skittered even further away. "I assume this is what you wanted me for?"

"Well, part of it, yes," she replied, considering the package again. "We also wanted you, just… well, because it's you, and you're not a nice person but you're pretty clever and in our house clever beats nice any day of the week, just ask … well, anybody. Also, there are at least two more of those knocking about the place, and we'd quite like to destroy those too."

"In Lucius's library?" Snape asked, doing a brilliant job of cutting through her blather to reach the point. That's why he's our mate, the she-wolf purred proudly, and Lavender couldn't disagree.

"No. Just… around. I can't say more, mostly because I don't know the details." He looked at her sharply and she shrugged with a wry smile. "I don't know if you've noticed but I'm not good at, well, not talking. So it's safer all around if I don't know where they're kept. Otherwise I'd totally tell you. You just need to bat those pretty eyelashes and I'll tell you anything you want to know."

"Why are you following me?"

"Oh, good one." He rolled his eyes and Lavender giggled idiotically because, well, it was what she did. And because he became more attractive the longer she looked at him. Damn pheromones. "I fancy you and I think we'd have cute babies. You know, despite all of that." Here she waved a hand at his face and he went back to glaring at her. "Sorry, that was rude, wasn't it?"

"Quite," he replied, his voice tight. After a second, he thrust the book at her. "You should take this before I change my mind."

"Right!" she shoved it in her own pocket and smiled at him again. "Does this mean you're on our side?"

"No." He pushed back a hunk of lank hair. "It means you caught me at a weak moment. You might
want to take it away before I change my mind."

Nodding ferociously, she couldn't resist darting forward and catching him in a hug. He stiffened immediately, but she was already there and he was softer than he looked and his hair tickled her cheek… she allowed herself one deep whiff of his throat before she backed off again, getting out of easy reach in case he took it into his head to hex her. "Will you be okay?"

He sniffed in a superior way, looking down his nose at her, the epitome of gentle condescension. Just how much time was he spending with Lucius Malfoy..? "Indeed." Narrowing his eyes, he added, "will you stop following me now?"

"Not on your life, Mister." She grinned, waggling her hand in her pocket. "But thanks for the book! Hermione will be so pleased. You're a literal lifesaver, Severus Snape!"

Twin flags of pink appeared on his cheekbones, masked only slightly by his glower. "Sod off."
Chapter Fifty-Six: Remembering

Chapter Summary

Hermione deals with some guilt. James has a lot to say about Severus (and some of it even justified).

Chapter Notes

Hi!
See, I do think James can be a sweet and rational human being (sort-of). I'm just not good at remembering that!
No Lev (thank-you, SilentWords, for my preferred ship name!) today, sorry!
Love, Eli x

Hermione couldn't believe it. Tom Riddle's Diary. In her hands.

"Bloody Hell," Remus said for the fourth time that morning. And it was morning – four o'clock, to be exact. They were curled up on the end of their bed, where they'd moved when Lavender had woken them - which was becoming a habit, it seemed. He reached out a finger to brush it against the frayed leather binding then winced back almost immediately. Hermione couldn't restrain a snort at this apt demonstration of the lure of Dark Magic.

"This is brilliant, Lav," she said warmly, looking up at her friend. "Just… brilliant."

Lavender beamed, tossing her curls – right now decorated with black ribbons and silver beads, because the girl knew how to dress for her audience – down her back. "As much as I'd like to take all of the credit, I really can't," she demurred, her eyes sparkling with pride. Hermione could understand why – this was a massive step for Severus, to so overtly disobey his master. And in no little way, either; this wasn't the passing on of an inconsequential piece of intelligence, he'd literally handed over a portion of Voldemort's soul.

"I just find it so hard to believe…" Remus said in awe. "Snape. Doing... well, this!"

"Don't you start, Lupin." Lavender gave him a stern look she'd obviously nicked from Hermione's repertoire, and it chimed oddly well with her funereal decoration. "It's bad enough with Black and Potter doing their thing. I thought you were meant to be the nice one!"

Hermione snorted as Remus blinked blankly. She looked between them and let out a gusty sigh, throwing her hands – one of which remained firmly clamped around the diary, which she treasured as evidence that there was yet hope for her and her mate to be together – into the air. "If you're not the nice one, who is?"

"Peter, actually," Remus responded immediately, then paled, as though he'd said something unforgivably foul. They'd been doing that a lot, the Marauders; acting as though Peter had died, or
just never existed in the first place. When they met his name during a story they were telling it was skipped over, or they tapered off into silence. It always had Hermione's heart clenching – after all, it had been her to cause this pain, unthinkingly and unremorsefully, in one of their very first meetings. No wonder Sirius hadn't taken to her – she wouldn't have taken to someone who'd accused her friends of such despicable things, either.

It seemed disrespectful, though, the way they were forced to be about it. Perhaps pretending he was dead was easier than confronting the fact that their friend could turn on them so thoroughly. At least then it wouldn't cheapen their previous relationship.

"Oh," Lavender said, her eyebrows raised, seeming to share Hermione's thoughts. In her eyes was a mingling of pity and empathy, and she reached down and patted his hand with one of hers, her sharp, patently false nails clicking against the table. She'd charmed those green for her visit with Snape. Hermione briefly wondered if he'd noticed.

Probably not.

"I didn't know," she continued breezily, though there was a soft edge to her voice. "In the future you don't really hear of the nice side of him. Only what he became, and I think that's what everybody would rather forget. He was never evil, not really, and it's easier when someone's evil, don't you think?"

"Lavender," Hermione hissed, because Remus's face had twisted in a most peculiar fashion. She wasn't sure if talking about it helped or hurt him, but she'd put money on hurt.

Lavender was right, though. Nobody had really talked about Peter, not as the person he had been. In Hermione's head he was firmly entrenched as the pathetic, moulting man she'd encountered in the Shack, who'd grabbed her and made her skin crawl, whose moans of 'sweet girl … clever girl' had haunted her nightmares. Now, she tried to think back to how he'd been described before then, when he'd still been an innocent victim. She knew there must have been something good in him, something she'd overlooked, because it was not for nothing that the world had so easily accepted Sirius as the monster of the group.

He'd been pitied. She remembered that much of what Harry had learned from Madam Rosmerta. Even Professor McGonagall, who'd always been sweet about her students, if not to them, had called him a 'foolish boy', albeit with vague affection. And Rosmerta hadn't had much more to add, simply calling him a 'fat little boy', which even with the best of intentions couldn't be construed as flattering. He'd been a 'hanger-on', a follower, lurking behind the big, bright personalities of Sirius and James.

This should have piqued Hermione's interest, she scolded herself. Because what was she if not the bushy-haired brat that had followed Harry's shining star? What was Remus, if not the shy beanpole who never dared say a cross-word to his exuberant friends? Neither of them would have had particularly flattering obituaries at that age, either. There were always different sides to a person, and she'd not bothered to check for his – and if that wasn't enough to shame her, then the fact that Lavender, who'd only been two hairs short of a bully to her the first few years of school, had been the one to recognise that first was truly galling.

It was too late to consider such things, she knew. The time to consider Pettigrew had been before she'd accused him of being a Death Eater to his closest friends. But she was firmly fastened into the self-loathing rollercoaster and now she was doomed to ride it.

"He was quiet," Remus said, his voice hardly above a whisper and his eyes far away. Hermione stifled a helpless moan. She didn't want to hear this, not really. She didn't want to face up to the grief she'd caused him with her little, uncaring revelation. Lavender met her eyes across the table and there
was something hard in her, something frosty that Hermione took as accusation, even though she knew, logically, it was the girl attempting to hold back her own guilt. "Shy, at first. He didn't make friends easily and he always seemed overwhelmed, when James and Sirius started doing their thing. Of course, I was, too, but while I was inclined to just let it roll over me, Peter felt it like pain, all of the things he wasn't, for those first two years..."

He spoke onwards, in a slow, reverent voice as though he were speaking of a relative, stammering over the words at points and at others talking too quickly. Hermione held his hand, because she had to – his emotional upheaval chirped away at her, and she felt sympathy for him even while she loathed herself, then loathed herself more for taking time to loathe herself while she should be focusing on him. There must be some sort of inherent selfishness in her, that she couldn't just give herself up to supporting Remus without thinking constantly about her own fault in this.

Her fault it was, though. All of them had made the decision to level accusations at Peter, but they'd been so underhand about it, with him not there to defend himself, and they'd not considered the Marauder's feelings. They'd not wanted to. It added a human element, and humanity made things difficult.

Was he even guilty? She couldn't help but consider that they might have made a mistake as she sat here, listening to Remus eulogise his friend, seemingly unable to stop now that he'd started. He painted the picture of a boy, inept but sweet, stumbling through life in a state of permanent confusion. The Peter Pettigrew Remus knew had depth, and dimension, and actually sounded quite likeable; quite a bit like Neville, only worse. "He was great at Transfiguration, alright at Potions, but Defense..." Remus laughed, "oh, they'd had to give him remedial lessons with Flitwick, and both of them hated it. Flitwick used to come to meals bruised all over, not from Peter landing a hex but from where he'd tried to correct Pete's stance and been elbowed in the face!"

Realistically, they had no evidence on which to convict him. Yes, he betrayed the Potters, but that was two years from now, and they had no idea of when he'd first gone dark. Sirius had said the boy had been feeding information to Voldemort for years prior, but they had no evidence of that, and it wasn't like the Order was watertight. There were no oaths involved, very few safeguards on their meetings, none of the members knew more than rudimentary Occlumency and then there was the matter of that picture! That ridiculous picture, of which they all had copies (Remus's was displayed proudly on his bookshelf), which wasn't much better than when Hermione had left the DA membership list pinned to the Come-and-Go Room wall, except that these were adults and the fate of Wizarding Britain was in their hands and they should just bloody well know better!

There was a sudden splitting pain in her lip and her mouth flooded with tangy, metallic liquid. Great. She'd bit through her lip without noticing.

"Hermione?" Lavender asked, as Remus shut off the flow of speech to look at her oddly. Regret dropped like a stone in her stomach – when would he get the opportunity to be so open again? And she'd ruined it. "Are you alright?"

She glanced down at where her blood was pouring down her chin to pool in her cleavage, bypassing Remus's battered old sweatshirt entirely. Dazed, she pulled her hand up to cup the liquid. "No," she said thickly, the word coming out slightly nasal as she tried not to spill more blood. It was a lot of blood, more than she'd have expected for a lip wound. "Excuse me," she begged off, spluttering. She dashed from the room for the closest bathroom, where she fixed the cut with a quick healing charm and sponged off as much of the blood as she could. The taste in her mouth remained, coating her tongue in bitterness; when she couldn't dislodge it after three glasses of water she realised it was probably psychosomatic.
Again, great.

*Don't borrow trouble, Hermione,* her mother's voice commanded her in her head. She stared at her reflection and tried to shake off the pall her thoughts had cast.

"Bugger," she swore, when it didn't work. Well, she could hardly go back to Remus like this, could she? He'd have questions, and she'd have to answer because she couldn't not, not when her doubts were so loud and alarming and concerned him. It wouldn't be fair if she did offload this on him, though. After what he'd just been through, he needed time to calm down, not get more stressed immediately. What sort of mate was she if she couldn't provide him with what he needed?

Lavender would, she told herself firmly. Lavender was much better with people than Hermione, not that it was saying much, and she was Remus's packmate. They had a relaxed, stress-less relationship; when they spent time together, even if it was just them in the same room and not speaking, they both came out the better and their bond grew stronger. Lavender didn't ask anything of Remus except the occasional werewolf tip, and Remus treated Lavender like she was an actual person (as opposed to the way that Sirius, Regulus and James tended to treat her like she was a fascinating new sea creature with claws and suckers – something you'd like to observe from a distance but never, ever get involved with).

"They'll be fine," she told herself firmly, aloud, then turned around and headed back anyway.

Only, as she reached the entrance hall, the front door swung open to admit – of all people – James and Luna, apparently in deep conversation. Her feet stalled with shock, leaving her in the shadows as James took Luna's coat and folded it into a nearby cupboard. Luna stamped her feet and clapped her hands to stimulate circulation, her cheeks pink from the early morning gale.

"You're probably right," James was saying with some reluctance, "but…" and then he was back at Luna's side and their heads were bent together, and all Hermione could catch were indistinct mutterings. She thought she might have heard Lily's name, but that could have just been a fancy of her own mind – what could they have to talk about except Lily, after all?

There were reasons she'd not become an Auror.

When they turned in her direction, she abandoned her ham-fisted attempt at spying and stepped into the light. Luna gave her a vague smile and a nod; James stopped dead. "Hermione!" He flushed with what looked unpleasantly like guilt, then forced a smile. Hermione narrowed her eyes. She trusted Luna – as much as anyone could trust Luna, that is, and about half of that trust was based more on blind faith than any evidence of her actual trustworthiness, so perhaps it would be more accurate to say she thought Luna was, at base, a good person – but that reaction didn't inspire confidence. "I didn't see you there. What are you doing up?"

She remembered reading once that people who are in the wrong go on the defensive with very little urging. Was that what was happening here? She rather hoped not. "Lavender found a horcrux," she replied, her voice colder than she'd intended it to be. James gave her a quizzical look and Luna ignored it completely, humming under her breath as she chased some bearded Black ancestor around their portrait with her fingertips. "Or, rather, Severus did," she added, just as Eridanus Pollux Black II bellowed out for help. A quick look showed that Luna had succeeded in herding the poor man into Lyra I's portrait. Next to her, Phineas Nigellus sat, eyeing Luna warily. She took a step closer to his ornate frame and he sneered impressively.

"Not… another… step," he drawled, eyes flashing dangerously. Their eyes clashed in challenge, and after a long moment Luna backed off. Phineas nodded once in satisfaction, and went back to staring superiorly into the middle distance.
"Snivellus?" James was gasping. "What do you mean, Snape did?"

"Exactly what I said," Hermione told him snippily, then chastised herself for it immediately. She really should be nicer to James, it was just so hard. "Snape found a horcrux, and, rather than leaving it where it was or using it to curry favour from his 'Master', he risked his life to bring it to us." She pinned him with a significant look. "Despite his severe misgivings about most of our group."

Sniffling, she added, "In his position, I very much doubt that I'd do the same."

James waved off this impatiently – it seemed he had about as little time for her singing Snape's praises as she did for his dislike. "Yes, okay, I get it." He narrowed his eyes. "But, why?"

"Why, what?"

"Well, why did he bring it to us?" James asked with no small amount of condescension in his tone. Hermione noticed, in the back of her mind, that Luna had gone missing. "You're right, we've never liked each other and he knows that's not likely to change. In his place – not that I'd ever be in his place, because I've got more sense than to join a Dark Arts club whose membership boasts more bigots than the royal family – but if I was, I'd hand it off to the highest bidder."

Hermione snorted derisively, but James pressed on. "No, really. I understand that you don't think much of me," he held up a hand to stave off her automatic objection, which, in honesty, was more out of politeness than anything else, "but I went to school with Snape for seven years. We saw a lot of one another. Classes, meals, duels – you can't spend that much time with a person without getting to know them pretty well, and I know Snape. I know how he thinks, how he fights, exactly how to trigger his ego and even how he takes his morning tea. I probably know him better than Lily does, because she was just his friend – friends don't study one another, enemies do. Between Padfoot, Moony and I, we've seen more of Severus Snape than his own mother and I'm telling you now – that man does not do anything for free."

As much as she might like to, she couldn't argue with that logic. Not with her own experiences of the matter (Pansy Parkinson, no sugar, black like her soul). And then there was Harry, who, an hour after Voldemort's death, had taken pity on a distraught Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy and directed them to their son, whose location he'd apparently 'guessed' with uncanny accuracy (he'd been on the Astronomy Tower, contemplating his many and varied mistakes. His mother had talked him down in the end).

She felt the urge to argue anyway, but she squelched that as part of her resolve to be a better mate to Remus. Getting along with his friends would be a good start, so she nodded thoughtfully, giving no sign of how difficult the motion had been what with her pride standing in the way. "You're right," she admitted, sounding only mildly resentful. "So what do you think he wants?"

He eyed her suspiciously as he examined her words for a trap, then said slowly, "who could tell? If you'd asked me a month ago, I'd have said, unequivocally, Lily – after your little trip to Spinners End, though? No. Don't get me wrong, I'm still sure that given half a chance, he'd snatch her up and run for the hills, but… frankly, she doesn't seem to mean as much to him as she did a year ago." He wrinkled his nose in distaste. "Even then there was the touch of the 'dragon with his hoard' about it all, but at least he always treated her well."

"That's good to hear," she said, thinking of Lavender, who was a whole lot more damageable than she looked. "So you don't know what he'll want."

James shrugged. "Probably to hold it over our heads for the rest of our natural lives. It's the power he gets off on, not the actual favour." He glanced at his watch. "I'd better get back, Lily will be waking up. Great news about the horcrux!"
He bounded off up the stairs, leaving Hermione to her thoughts. He had a lot of insight about present-Snape, which couldn't be discounted; for all that Hermione had known him in the future, his motivations remained murky. Guilt that no longer existed wasn't exactly effective. Still, she couldn't say she looked forward to him coming to collect. She'd have rather he turned entirely to their side, but on balance, an ambivalent Snape was better than no Snape at all.

Chapter End Notes

*whispers* if you fancy some faintly sardonic werewolf shenanigans, mild bloodshed and general all-round mysteriousness go check out Apples and Oranges, the first two chapters of which are up now!
Chapter Fifty-Seven: Suspicions and Meetings

Chapter Summary

The boys and Lily attend an Order meeting. Regulus and Luna meet with Pandora. It's difficult to tell which meeting is more disturbing.

Chapter Notes

Hi!
This chapter is inspired by (and partially written for) the lovely SiriusBlackHeir who, as well as being a regular and much adored reader, reminded me last week that I'd been neglecting Regulus, which was shameful of me. This comment spurred a whole week of Regulus!writing over here and in Ghost, so thank you for that and I hope you (specifically, you, SiriusBlackHeir, but also the rest of you, my loyal readership, too!) enjoy!

I don't know how it grew into such a monster of a chapter. Honestly, there is no clue. (Editing is your friend, Eliza, damnit!)

Love, Eli x

The Order of the Phoenix, despite what Hermione had to say about it, remained an institution of hope for the Light Wizarding World, and as such the Marauders continued to attend and carry out their assignments as faithfully as they had before the girls' crash landing. Hermione was under the impression that they attended so as not to rouse suspicions; she was wrong – no matter their qualms about Dumbledore, his morality and his leadership, it couldn't be denied that the members of the Order were good, kind people, and they helped the general population in ways no other organization even tried. When they weren't on secret spying missions with vague objectives, they were making a tangible difference to people's lives; evacuating people from homes that were likely to be attacked, protecting the vulnerable, and providing Aurors with as much evidence as they needed to bang Death Eaters up for good.

And that was a lot of evidence – Remus wasn't sure if it was Voldemort's influence or simply the Ministry's own crippling weakness, but arrests for the past few months had not led to imprisonment and even the Dark Mark wasn't seen as strong enough evidence. The Ministry claimed that the saw no reason to connect a magical tattoo, crude though it was, to a string of unspeakable atrocities which might well be committed by the one man, working alone.

Cowards, the lot of them. They didn't want to risk their necks by becoming involved – the most they'd do is give Dumbledore free reign to fight their battle for them. The Minister himself had given Headmaster Dumbledore permission, back in '76, to set up what amounted to a Neighbourhood Watch group, registered with the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and supervised by whichever Junior Auror they could spare at the time. This Junior Auror ended up being one Kingsley Shacklebolt, who had swapped shifts with Fabian Prewett so that the man could, coincidentally,
attend the Order meeting himself.

Far from being the hodge-podge collection of wannabe vigilantes, housewives and children the Order had been in the future (or, so it had been described derisively by Ginny, while Hermione nodded along and Lavender accused them of being bitter that they'd never been invited) the 1970's Order got things done, and got things done on a regular basis. Partly because, Remus had to admit, Dumbledore only dropped in infrequently to boss them about in the manner of a negligent general, and partly because they had rights. As long as they were registered with the Ministry – and they were, much to Hermione's grumbling ("and you all told me leaving the DA member list pinned to the Room of Requirement's wall was an idiotic thing to do – your membership is available to anybody who cares to look! At least the Room was secret!") – they were afforded the legal rights to use force to subdue attackers, and perform a citizen's arrest on them, too. All they had to do was ensure an Auror came to pick them up later – and nobody cared to check just how much 'later' it was.

Remus, Sirius, James and Lily had little laminated cards identifying them as Order members, just in case an Auror came upon them while they carried on their business. "We'd don't carry them always," Remus had replied defensively while Hermione had stared at him as if he'd suddenly sprouted an extra head. "Only on official business – fighting baddies and the like." He'd given up on explaining when Hermione had only continued to gawk at what she called the 'sheer, confounding idiocy of the whole scheme', finally squeezing out a "thank heavens for small mercies" laden with so much sarcasm that even James, generally oblivious though he was, had stifled a snort.

Still. Flaws aside, Remus was proud of belonging to an organisation with such transparently pure aims. He might not like all of the members, but he trusted them, and that was worth more.

It was their seventh Order meeting since the Marauders had begun harbouring their time-travellers, and it started out as though nothing momentous would be happening. They had arrived at the location – an cottage somewhere near Thetford ("did you know Thomas Paine was born around here? He was quite influential – he encouraged American Independence, despite being British…" Hermione had babbled enthusiastically – and quite adorably, if you asked Remus, but nobody did – while they did reconnaissance the previous day. Sirius, from two trees away, nodded thoughtfully. "Fascinating stuff," he drawled, "but more importantly, it's where they filmed Dad's Army.") – and immediately fell into conversation with Marlene, Alice and Frank, who'd been waiting to ambush them. Order meetings were slowly becoming the only time they could see their friends, what with Diagon Alley being overrun by Death Eaters and Hogsmeade too obvious a destination. Remus found he missed them; more and more the longer he went without being able to have a proper conversation with them. He and Frank had always been close, even before he'd become friends with Sirius, James and Peter, and he felt guilty to realise that he'd not owled the man in weeks.

"You know Mum," Frank was saying, with a good-natured roll of his eyes. "She's demanding we have the wedding at Longbottom Castle, but Alice hates it. She says it's spooky. Of course, with Algie lurking around every corner I'd have to agree." He gave a pained grimaced. "Can't wait to move out. Have our own place for a few years, you know? At least until Mum bullies us into moving back."

Remus, who had no experience of owning a castle and then not wishing to live there, nodded wisely as if he did. He couldn't really empathise over Augusta Longbottom, either; the woman was investing heavily in Damocles Belby's quest for a werewolf cure out of the goodness of her own heart.

Also because a pack of werewolves had recently moved into a Priory just west of her house, and she couldn't abide their endless howling.
But mostly out of the goodness of her heart. Remus was, therefore, biased. He might have access to the Wolfsbane Potion (another reason among many why he thanked the Gods each day for bringing him Hermione), but other wolves didn't, not yet, and he wouldn't deprive them of its relief.

"I simply don't understand why she won't let us get married on the seaside," Alice grumbled, taking Remus's other arm and tugging lightly. "I love the sea. And it's so close-by, hardly even twenty minutes walk…"

"If we get married by the sea, Mum can't wear her favourite hat," Frank explained patiently. "The last time she wore it to the beach she was attacked by gulls, and it took a week to get rid of the smell. She won't do that again."

Alice, heaving a long-suffering sigh, gritted out, "That bloody hat! Nobody is wearing a taxidermy animal to my wedding!"

"Well there goes my plan," Remus murmured, snorting when Alice punched him in the arm.

"It's not funny!" she cried, though she did look dreadfully amused. "That woman is going to drive me nuts, I swear it! I'll be lucky if I make it to the wedding; at this rate she'll have me in a permanent bed at Mungo's."

He couldn't hold back his wince at that. Neither of them noticed, still happily bickering. Remus slipped his arm out of Alice's grip and went to grab himself a butterbeer from a table set up in the corner. Then, leaning against the wall in a corner, he scanned the room.

With the exception of the few out on missions – Peter, Dorcas, Mary McDonald and a few blokes he didn't know very well – the rest of the Order was present, the magically expanded room filling fast. Sirius had found his way to Gideon and Kingsley, watching them with wide-eyed awe (they were his idols, and they knew it); James and Lily had been intercepted by Alice and Frank, no doubt listening to the same woeful tirade as Remus had just been subject to; Marlene and Dorcas were huddled in a corner away from everyone else, Dorcas curled up in Marlene's lap; Fabian Prewett was juggling apples for his three young nephews, frequent attendees of Order meetings when the twins couldn't skirt babysitting duties; and a collection of more adult persons were gathered around Professor McGonagall, who finally took her position at the front of the room and cleared her throat loudly. Immediately, everyone jumped to attention.

"Welcome, everyone, and might I say thank-you to Mr. Diggle for lending us the use of his home for this meeting." Dedalus nodded forcefully, his hat toppling from his head to the floor. "In the light of recent attacks on the McKinnon home and…"

Professor McGonagall went on to outline the repercussions of these actions, then to congratulate Fabian and Gideon on their recent capture of Mulciber, whom they'd mysteriously found bleeding quite heavily from his groin somewhere in Sussex. He'd been unconscious, but a capture was still a capture, and after stemming the bleeding and before they took him to the Ministry, they'd found out the location of two Death Eater bases; both of which McGonagall now created teams to raid. She then went on to organise patrols in likely areas of attack, including the Evans household and the McDonald home. As a group, they shared intelligence gathered over the past week or so, and McGonagall dismissed them, taking Fenwick, Dearborn and Moody to one side.

The Marauders gathered to leave, waiting to say farewell to their friends, when the doorway was blocked. "Mr. Potter," Albus Dumbledore said in rather a cold voice, devoid of twinkle. "I think we had better talk, don't you?"

James blanched. Sirius, across the room, seemed to realize something was happening and turned only
to have his eyes widen too. Remus himself had to stifle the urge to run and hide behind something, an action he regretted not taking when the Headmaster turned on him. "Ah, Mr. Lupin," he said, something far from benign lurking behind his eyes. "We ought to chat, too. Mr. Black!"

Sirius, who had been sneaking out of the back door, froze. "Come along, gentlemen," Dumbledore wheedled. "Surely you have nothing to fear from me." He smiled, then, a terrifying thing. "After all," he continued, his voice taking on a dark undertone; "we are all on the same side."

Regulus twirled his wand in his hand, then swapped it to his left. Twirled it again. Swapped it to his right. Twirled it again.

The soles of his boots made satisfying clicks as he scuffed them against the floor, one-two-three times, then stopped, then repeated the motion in time with his twirling.

In front of him lay a letter from his lawyer, delivered by Kreacher that morning. It informed him that while Grimmauld Place and most of their properties were entailed to the youngest son, Regulus had been deeded his mother's dower house, Crane Tower, along with the full amount of her original dowry, as well as all of her worldly possessions – those which couldn't be claimed as a part of the Black estate, of course.

Regulus restrained the need to nibble on his nails, not least because Lily had painted them in some disgusting concoction to keep him from doing that very thing and now every time he brought his fingers within an inch of his mouth he retched.

His mother had signed the bottom of the letter, to be sent in the event of her death. There was a short note – for my devoted son – written in her elegant hand. Regulus had always thought that her writing was an interesting counterpoint to the rest of her person; it being delicate and feminine where the rest of her had been strong, unyielding, as masculine as her husband. Now, he traced the letters with his busy fingers, wondering. Wondering whether her death had been his fault – yes. Wondering whether he could have stopped it – no. Wondering where she was now, whether there was an afterlife and if in it she was happy. He didn't think she'd have been satisfied with a paradise; an Elysian Fields in which everything was perfect, she was provided for and had nothing else to do but be content. He couldn't quite see her in Hell, either.

The Underworld, perhaps. Somewhere there were people to bully, staff to order about. She'd have swam the Styx herself, then marched up to Hades and thrown him from his throne. And Persephone – when reading him the story of Persephone as a child she'd littered the prose with her own snorts of disbelief, her derogatory judgement of the woman: "So weak! Who wants a woman that weak? She does nothing but frolic about in the flowers, then cry when they're gone. Really, Regulus, I expect you to exercise much better judgement when finding your future wife." Persephone would not know what was coming, not when Walburga tossed her bodily from her home and took her crown for herself.

He chuckled at the vision. She'd like that, wherever she was. Walburga Black had always been a formidable woman, it was unlikely to change in death.

Regulus paused, confused. He wasn't sure what he felt, not really. He missed her, of course. She was his mother, and he'd loved her. He was furious at the manner of her death, at the torture she'd endured beforehand and during. But he didn't wish she hadn't died, and that was probably worse than any grief he could have felt. How ungrateful of him, to be glad she was gone, to be thankful for the freedom her suffering had brought him. To think that it was better for her, to have been put out of her misery.
His tapping escalated fiercely, his foot twitching at a manic pace. He winced when he noticed it, pushing back his chair to stare at it as though it was separate from his body, not a part of him at all. It felt like that, sometimes, when he went through periods of intense emotion. His fingers would twitch, his foot would tap; he'd feel, instead of emotion, the intense urge to sort or scrub or count. So he'd count measure, and beat, and string the tapping into a song in his head until he'd calmed and it stopped.

After nearly eighteen years, he still wasn't sure whether he was the one that made it stop.

It calmed with his heartbeat, and he let out a faint smile of relief, forcing it back into time so that he could think properly. One-two-three.

Luna was having a problem with her mother, he knew. Reuniting with her after so many years was difficult for her; the fact that the woman had never been the best mother only made it worse. Regulus, while he had difficulty with overwhelming emotion, could at least identify what he felt on a daily basis – Luna had no such joy. She worked differently to other people, felt both more and less than her friends. She loved easily – too easily, he knew, considering the situation with himself – but she'd never experienced negative emotion alongside it. Disappointment, she felt keenly from years of practise. But the resentment of an abandoned child and how it taints and evolves with the love one bears for their parents? That had her lost, adrift, and that experience alone had her panicking.

If Regulus had the choice, he'd ban Pandora Lovegood from Luna's life. It seemed unfair, yes, but Pandora was the only person who knew how Luna was. She was the only person in the world that could have brought Luna up properly, taught her to live with her unique condition, helped her grow into her heritage while staying attached to reality. Rather, she'd gone and killed herself experimenting; experimenting with dangerous, unstable spells while her daughter stood by watching. Knowing that were something to happen, Luna would bear the marks of it for the rest of her life – would consider it her fault.

At least Regulus's mother had been marginally sane, and occasionally had his best interests at heart.

His foot had gone off on one again. He scowled down at it, but it wouldn't stop.

Scrubbing his hands across his face, he gave up his introspection as a bad job and pulled himself from the room. Luna was about somewhere, he could feel her. He wasn't sure how or why, but he just knew that the lightness of his soul, the sudden hope in his heart came from her. He trotted down the stairs, enjoying how the noise echoed, then crossed through the house into the kitchen, where he ignored the elves in favour of striding to the window.

And there she was. Covered in dirt up to her bare knees, with a bee-keeper's hat on her head and dragon-hide gloves. As he watched she heaved, pulling her shoulders back, a frown of determination crinkling her face beneath all of the netting, and then she fell, stumbling a few feet back when the plant flew free. Her laughter, so pure without even a hint of embarrassment, drifted through the door she'd left ajar as she passed, and Regulus felt himself smile too.

By the Gods, despite everything else, he did adore Luna. She was a surprising addition to his life, as everything seemed to be lately, but… he attributed his newly mended relationship with Sirius to her. He attributed his comfort and happiness to her. He might spend night after night writhing in pain as the Dark Lord tormented him with his call, but Luna was there, soothing him with soft strokes of her fingers, brushing his hair and damping his forehead through the worst of it. Then, in the early hours, when the pain finally let up and his old Master got bored, Regulus could crawl beneath the sheets of his bed and Luna would wrap herself around him and not let go.

He had no idea what he brought that could make her as contented as she was. As long as she was
happy, though, he wouldn't question it.

"Master?" Regulus appeared and stooped into a low bow. "Mrs. Nutty has called."

Another snort. Kreacher was a most impertinent elf. Regulus would want him no other way. "Take her…" he paused as Luna did an impromptu dance, lifting her arms to the sky and spinning in dizzy circles, the skirts of her summer-dress billowing, more laughter pouring from her lips. It took a few blinks to find the strength to dislodge his gaze from her figure. "Take her to the second study, we'll be up soon."

Kreacher disappeared to pick up Luna's mother. They'd decided she couldn't be trusted enough to make her own way here, and so Kreacher had been volunteered to escort her. She'd be apparated into the study and then apparated straight back out after their business was complete. It was the best way to do this sort of business, Regulus felt.

Loathe to interrupt Luna's happiness but aware that Hermione had been reluctant to leave this task to the two of them alone, Regulus endeavoured to prove his usefulness by stepping into the garden and bringing in his… well. Luna called him her soul's mate and he rather liked that, though it was quite wordy. Girlfriend didn't fit, he hadn't asked her to marry him and 'lover' was quite simply inaccurate. His Luna, then.

He squinted in the sun as he trod carefully around the barriers of her garden. "Luna?"

"Regulus!" Blinded, he wasn't quite sure of where she was until the second she grabbed hold of his hands and pulled him into her dance, spinning him 'round and 'round in spirals and circles and a whole host of other patterns that were quite unseemly for a man of his position and nausea-inducing for a man of his disposition. She laughed brightly, loud and long, her feet hardly touching the ground while his betrayed his years of dance training by following her. "It's a lovely day!" she sang, but something was off. He got it when she added, "we don't even need to go inside! Not today!"

"Luna…" he repressed a rueful smile as he stepped out of time, causing himself to trip and her to stumble with him. He held her up, having braced himself for it – Luna was so very fey in many ways, but perhaps the most fae thing about her was how if you started to dance with her, it was nearly impossible to stop. A twisted ankle was one of the lesser injuries ending her dance could result in. "You know we have to."

Her nose wrinkled, the light in her eyes dimming. "'Have to' is a silly phrase," she said airily, glancing off into the air and following the path of whichever creature she was going to try and convince him was there. "Oh, look, a-!"

"Luna, we are not chasing some wild creature just so that you don't have to face your mother." She frowned at him, almost a pout on her pretty face, and he couldn't stop himself from smiling as he stroked a finger over the wrinkles it made in her cheek.

"I don't think I like that," she said sullenly. He raised an eyebrow, and she shrugged delicately. "You know me."

"You don't have to like it; I like it enough for the both of us." He glanced down his body. He was wearing nice, perfectly starched robes for the occasion (he was meeting his Luna's parents, after all) while she was barefooted, soil streaking up towards the hem of her skirt. "Damn," he muttered to himself. Either he tried to convince her with words – which wouldn't work, because Luna wasn't a 'word' person, or he could pick her up and carry her in, which would require him dirtying his robes and needing to change them. Changing them would give her another window for escape, with or
without him, but he couldn't exactly meet her parents dirty, could he? He wanted to make a good impression.

An idea lit him up from the inside, and he beamed, leaning down to press a kiss to her cheek. "You can come in with me," he offered, holding out his arm for her to take, "or I could call Ginny."

"You wouldn't," Luna gasped, her already rather large eyes widening further, giving the impression of a startled doe. It hit Regulus right in the heart, she looked so sweet and innocent, but knowing better gave him an edge.

"I'd rather not," Regulus admitted. As openminded as he was, the idea of asking a Weasley for help still smarted. "But I will if I have to."

Luna frowned petulantly, and backed up a few paces. Regulus, recognising her intention, tightened his grip on her hand even as she swung back into a perfect pirouette. "I don't want to!" she sang, yanking on her hand. "Don't make me, please."

The very real, desperate pleading in her voice made his stomach wrench. "Luna, don't ask me to do that," he begged. "I gave my word that we would help. Would you really have me go back on my word?"

She stopped, raising her face to the sky and scowling ferociously at the clouds. "What is this?" she asked ill-temperedly, clutching at her stomach with her free hand. Regulus advanced slowly now that she had stopped dancing, pulling her back into his arms. "It feels like – like wrackspurts, but in my tummy."

Regulus rested his chin on the top of her silky hair, idly picking a knot of it apart. He smiled faintly at her question. "It's nerves," he replied quietly, dipping to press his lips to the crown of her head.

"Nerves?" She shook her head, her nose grazing across his collarbone where she'd pressed her face into his chest. "I'm nervous," she murmured with awe. Pushing back, she grinned up at him, the joy of discovery sweeping her along so that she'd forgotten about her other concerns. "I've never been nervous before! Is this what you feel all the time?"

Regulus blinked stupidly. "Yes?" he answered, drawing the word out in question.

"Bless you," she smiled, bringing up a dainty hand to tap on his cheek. "How do you get things done? It's very distracting."

"I suppose I've learned to ignore it." Realising how far off track they'd gotten, he rolled his eyes at himself. "Luna, we really do have to go inside."

Immediately, her hands flew to her abdomen again, and she tilted her head curiously. "How funny – whenever you mention my mother it starts up again." Her brow wrinkled and she shook her head. "There – I think I should be able to get past it now." She didn't look certain, though, so Regulus made sure to walk close to her as they re-entered the house, silently ensuring she knew that his strength was hers to borrow as she needed. After all, it is what she had done for him after his mother had died.

The second study was conveniently located on the first floor, just off the landing of the main stairs. This meant that it was easy for Luna and Regulus to drop into the War Room on their way past to pick up the ring (carefully packaged in a shield charm) without having to keep it in their possession for too long. Regulus was glad it was no longer a Horcrux – just sitting near them had done odd things to him, as though the soul fragments were attempting to access his Mark for themselves. On
the nights after he'd spent time in the War Room, the calls always seemed stronger, more painful.

He twirled the ring in the air before him as he walked. There was a mark on the stone, something familiar – it was dirt-encrusted after years of being stored unprotected beneath floorboards, but he could just make out what appeared to be a right triangle with a flat back, the shape marred by a continuing line on the bottom and the faded remains of a quarter-circle. Past that, he couldn't tell properly, though the bell in his mind kept ringing.

Pandora Lovegood looked like an apparition made of sunlight given form. Her hair, so similar to Luna's, had been braided in rings over her ears and fastened tight with a bunch of mistletoe, her face powdered white. Disconcertingly on a woman who looked like she might have stepped out of a renaissance portrait, she wore violent red dungarees over an ancient looking chemise, the type his mother had sewn for the poor when he was a toddler. Tiny pink toes peeked out from beneath their voluminous trousers, partially-hidden by thin rope where she'd tied wide rattan disks to her feet in place of shoes. Upon their entry, she rose gracefully to her feet.

"My Luna!" she greeted them, not sparing a glance for Regulus as she swooped down on her child, enveloping her in patchouli-scented arms (Regulus knew it was patchouli because he could smell it; she appeared to have been smoking some sort of incense in their absence). "You kept us waiting," she scolded good-naturedly, not noticing how Luna seemed to have flopped in her hands. "Mama," Luna sounded strangled as she disentangled herself. "You came." She reached back and tugged on Regulus's sleeve. "This is Regulus, mama."

Pandora rounded on him exuberantly, as though he'd simply appeared out of thin air. "Ah, my daughter's mate!" She trilled, reaching out to prod his cheek. "Sirius's brother. Yes." Nodding, she shot him a sly look. "I know Sirius."

"That is to be expected, madam," he told her shortly, giving a bow. "He's a well-known man."

"A flirt!" she proclaimed, laughing brightly, Regulus had a moment of confusion where he wasn't certain whether she was referring to him or his brother, before deciding it didn't much matter. "He's better," she then said to Luna, nodding wisely.

Luna was drifting, Regulus suddenly noticed. She had that far-away look on her face that said she was becoming too overwhelmed by the urge to escape, and he knew that if he let her she'd simply drift away to somewhere nobody else could find her, far away from the stressors of reality. Feeling a pinch of guilt, he nonetheless reached out and ran his hand beneath her hair, pulling it lightly. She dropped back into herself with a jerk, blinking rapidly, before sending him a serene smile.

"Mrs. Lovegood," he began, guiding Luna gently to the chair behind the desk, then taking up residence beside her. He placed the enchanted ring on the surface carefully, then withdrew the charm. "We were hoping you might consent to examine this ring for curses."

Pandora reached out, dragging her fingers in a circle around the artefact. "Of course," she said dreamily, closing her eyes. "Anything for Luna..."

He opened his mouth to go on, but a hand on his leg stopped him. Luna nodded at her mother, who was now poised over the ring, one hand flat on the desk as the other ran around and around. She cocked her head to one side, her face perfectly clear. A sub-par portrait; beauty with no life. Beside him, Luna rested her forehead on his hip, making him work hard to suppress a smile. She was like air, Luna; impossible to catch and hold; that she had chosen him, drew such support from his presence, seemed miraculous.
"Nasty!" Pandora suddenly yelped, leaping back and scowling at the ring. "Half-baked!" she pulled her wand from the back-pocket of her dungarees and jabbed at it, a complex web of orange and yellow emerging from the end to cover the artefact and half of the surrounding table space. She jerked her wand backwards as though she was drawing a whip, then brought it around in a sinuous circular movement. Beneath the cage of magic, a dark purple cloud began to seem from the stone. It sparkled with glittering flecks of silver, dancing in the poisonous looking air, and Pandora grit her teeth when she saw them. "Idiot man," she muttered, snarling silently as she used one hand to wiggle her fingers as though she was playing a concerto, stabbing and tearing at the delicate threads of her cage with the tip of her wand.

A few more such actions later, and the purple had woven itself in with the orange and yellow, the silver settling over the rock like dust. Pandora murmured to herself as she scratched runes into the table (Regulus's Great-Great-Great-Great-Etc-Uncle Tarandus Urna's desk, salvaged from the remains of the Library of Alexandria, said to contain the secrets of the God Babi, not that Pandora would care about that). Finally, she retreated to contemplate the mess of wood-shavings, scraped polish and magic she'd made with a tilted head.

"Well," she said, brushing her hands off on her shirt, "he really wants someone dead."

Regulus was too well-bred to say something uncouth like "no shit" but he really, really wanted to.

"It's a messy curse," she continued, her voice oddly stern in a way that chimed oddly with her demeanour. "It wouldn't work on just anyone, only the powerful and only if you were to put the ring on, or attempt to use the Stone." She said it like that, 'Stone', capitalised. Luna nodded as if she knew exactly what she meant, but then she generally did. "It's a mass of degenerative Dark Magic, with an in-built trigger and no cure that I can see. It would work only the one time, given that rather than being a curse it's more parasitic in nature, and the only way to get rid of it would be to pass it on to someone else." Having finished her lecture, Pandora's face returned to its usual absent state and she flopped back into her chair.

"So," she said, looking at Luna, "how have you been, my dove?"

"Mama," Luna chastised, sounding years younger. Pandora grimaced.

"Oh, alright then." She reached out and placed her hands palm-up on either side of the cage. At the last minute, she looked up at Luna. "Can I take this back to your father? He'd love it. It might even top his wedding gift…"

"No, mama," Luna sighed.

Pandora leaned over and with one swift movement scooped the cage up into her hand. The orange and yellow curled protectively around into a sphere, separating from the ring to enclose the writhing purple mass, and Pandora brought it up to her chest. Balancing it on one hand, she pulled from her pocket a small trinket box, which she flipped open and deposited the magic inside. "For later," she murmured quietly, making Luna flinch involuntarily.

Regulus looked back at the ring. It seemed perfectly ordinary, now – just a somewhat gaudy stone laid in twisted metal, impossible to wear but somehow intriguing all the same. The silver flecks had been absorbed, the dirt evaporating harmlessly, and now he could see the engraving clearly. His eyes widened and he had to clench his fists to keep himself from reaching out to snatch it.

Luna patted his arm gently, giving him a soothing smile. "Thank-you, mama," she said to her mum, who grinned widely, looking like a child who'd been given a whole sack of sweets.
"No, no, love, thank you."

"Now, boys, why don't you tell me what's going on?"

Dumbledore had seated himself comfortably on the sofa in the centre of the room, removing from his cloak a silver tin of mint humbugs, which he popped in his mouth and chewed loudly. James, Lily, Sirius and Remus sat opposite, posture perfectly straight and brittle, feeling like naughty children. Dumbledore smiled benevolently at them, offering around the sweets.

"Come, come, lads; surely there's something you'd like to get off of your minds?"

Remus felt his mouth move to open, his mind suddenly full of the urge to spill all – surely it wouldn't hurt, this was Albus Dumbledore, after all; he was the most powerful wizard in Britain, if not the world. They didn't need to rely on the weapon – indeed, they probably didn't even know how to use the weapon! It would fare much better in the Headmaster's hands, and then he could get back to doing what was important, his missions-

A sharp stabbing pain in his thigh dragged a hiss from his lips, dragging his gaze away from Dumbledore's to Lily, who sat next to him. She smiled demurely at the Headmaster, but her hands were hidden down by her side, and he knew that it was her nails that had scored his leg. He wanted to ask how she knew – really, the fact that his thoughts had referred to Hermione, his mate, as a weapon should have brought him out of it – but a significant look from Sirius had him keeping quiet.

Dumbledore made a disappointed noise at the back of his throat, his blue eyes sad when he scanned the row of young adults. "None of you?" he asked, his voice coaxing. "Not a single one of you is hiding a secret from me?"

His brain began to fog over again, but Lily's nail twisting in his thigh kept his wits in place. James whimpered slightly, his jaw set.

"I'll begin, shall I?" Dumbledore said lightly, his long, wizened fingers tapping on the arm of his seat. "I happen to know that you've moved out of your parents house, James. I also know that they've been obliviate-d. Can you tell me how that came about?"

James stiffened, and Lily placed a restraining hand on his thigh. After a beat of silence, James gritted out, "I wouldn't know, sir. As you say, I've moved out."

"Ah, Mr. Potter, I'd feared as much..." Dumbledore looked faintly satisfied as he leaned forward conspiratorially. "You are aware of the rules of the Order, correct?"

"Sir?" James looked as close to placid as he could.

Sucking another humbug and then storing it in his cheek, the old man nodded. "We must be informed of any and all changes of address as soon as they happen, young man." He waved a hand. "No matter – that can surely be sorted. You'll take me there now?"

"Sir?"

"Well, James, we cannot be expected to protect you if none of us know where you live." He laid a scolding look on him. "Everybody else has done so – you cannot be the exception to the rule all the time. It's for your own safety."

James gaped for a moment, Sirius growing red by his side. Lily was still the perfect picture of decorum.
When he realised he wasn't going to get a response he scanned the line again, searching for a weak link. His eyes settled on Remus and Lily, his mind surely rejoicing at the multitude of exploitation opportunities between them. Really, if you wanted to emotionally blackmail a group of people, you couldn't get more prime than the Marauders. "Miss Evans," he said finally, apparently saving Remus and his box of issues for later exploration. "I assume you're staying with Mr. Potter?"

"Yes, sir," Lily replied sweetly. It was the same voice she'd used all through school to convince teachers that no, of course it hadn't been Lily who'd hexed James in the corridor! She'd never do that! And, oh no, that jug of fresh leeches just fell into James's shirt, it couldn't have been her, she'd never do something like that! It was wondrous in that no teenager bought it, but all adults ate it up.

Maybe it had something to do with the fact that the students had seen Lily drunk on too many beers, dancing half-naked on the common room couch, grinding on Marlene and singing along to Wild Cherry on the record player, but it was more than likely the big green eyes.

"Is it not an odd time to move – right before the wedding? Forgive me if I'm wrong, only I was given to understand that they are rather expensive affairs…"

Lily, still sickeningly saccharine, took James's hand in hers and clasped it lovingly to her chest. James stared at her as if she'd suddenly shapeshifted into a goat. "We've decided to forgo the big wedding," she confided in the Headmaster, eyes aglow, forcing him to nod his understanding. "It would have been nice, certainly, but… with the war…" she rested her cheek against her fiancé's shoulder and gazed up at Dumbledore beseechingly. "We don't want our special day tainted by fear."

"Oh, I disagree," Dumbledore shook his head solemnly. "A wedding is surely what everybody needs in such dark times! That is the only way we will get through this war; by finding things to celebrate, and what's better than young love?"

"Living past the honeymoon?" James snarked, then squeaked (luckily, in a pitch Dumbledore probably couldn't hear due to his advanced age) as Lily tightened her grip on his arm.

"I'm sorry, Professor," Lily said, doing an excellent impression of genuine disappointment. "But with the war, and of course my parents' passing last year… I'd love to have a big white wedding, I really would! Just… not right now. We're decided – James and I will do a simple handfasting at home and celebrate with only close friends and family. Then, later, once the war is done, we'll have the official ceremony." She turned to beam up into James's eyes. "Because who needs a certificate to tell us we're meant to be when we've always known that?"

Sirius retched dramatically, earning himself a good kicking from James, who seemed to be basking in the attention – even if it was faked. Dumbledore smiled, his eyes twinkling madly as he reached forward to take one of Lily's hands in both of his. "I understand completely," he told her, patting the top of her hands gently. "After the trials you have gone through to be together, you deserve the wedding of your dreams."

He paused for a breath, then lifted his head as though he'd just had a wonderful idea. The performance was so masterful that Remus almost expected to see the lightbulb blinking on atop his head.

"I have always admired the two of you," he confessed quietly, staring at his hands. "The strength of your love and devotion – especially you, James. In the light of that, I would like to offer my services as Officiant for your handfasting." He gave a mischievous wink. "Add some gravity to the situation?"

James looked about to leap at the opportunity simply for the prestige, and Lily closed her eyes in
apparent awe (except that Remus could hear her chanting a prayer for patience under her breath).

At this point, Remus started counting the whole planks of wood he could find in the wall. Lily was declining firmly, with James supporting that decision by deferring to her judgement. On the other end of the couch, Sirius was following the progress of a woodlouse across the floor, then counting the floorboards, then watching the drizzle outside, then going back to the woodlouse (he was easily distracted). At one point, while James said something no doubt witty and sly to the Headmaster, Sirius let out a howl of laughter. Everybody had turned to him in surprise, only to find that the woodlouse had fallen onto its back (he was also easily entertained).

Darkness fell with haste, as though a blanket had been dropped abruptly over the entire woodland. One moment a dusky orange light shone through the windows, the next nothing. Dumbledore might not have noticed except Diggle came tripping back in, his hat perched on his shoulder at a jaunty angle. "Oh, hello!" he cried, clearly three sheets to the wind as he tottered across the floor. "Wot'chu still doing 'ere?"

Dumbledore lurched to his feet, noting the time with some surprise. "My apologies, Dedalus," he said pleasantly. "I must have lost track of the time. No matter – we'll leave you to it, I think. Come along. Farewell, Dedalus."

"See you, Headmaster!" Diggle cried, waving his hat happily.

The four younger members had only a moment to formulate a plan, which consisted of 'get out of there as quickly as possible by any means necessary' before he was back dogging their footsteps as they made their way a suitable distance from the house. "A perfect opportunity to show me your new place, James!" he said happily as he strode through the trees. "And then, perhaps, we can have a little talk, Remus. We never finished our discussion on-"

"Actually, Headmaster," Remus cut in, cringing as he did so. It was rude, and he despised having to interrupt an authority figure, but if Dumbledore had made a direct request he wouldn't have been able to say no. "Sirius and I promised my mum we'd pop in for tea tonight, and we're already late…"

"Did we?" Sirius asked. A significant look later, he nodded wisely. "Oh, yes, I remember. Hope's cooking, yum, and the eye candy… can't say no to that, Albus!"

"Yes, so if you'll excuse us…" Ignoring James's pleading look – all's fair in love and war, and Lily would save him anyway – Remus grabbed Sirius's arm and executed the best apparition he could under the circumstances. They landed at the border of his property with an obnoxious crack, and Remus felt like he could finally breathe again.

"Do you think they'll be alright?" he asked as they traipsed up the path to the house.

"Oh, yeah." Sirius shrugged. "He's got Lily. He'll be fine."
Chapter Fifty-Eight: Cleverness and Claiming

Chapter Summary

Lily proves herself useful in order to spite This Author, who still doesn't like her. Regulus remembers that he used to be a Death Eater, and why, and Remus receives a gift.

Chapter Notes

Hi!!!
I was originally going to do LOTS AND LOTS OF SMUT but then I didn't think it would fit with the story so instead you get -abridged- smut, where there originally was smut but I edited most of the dirty bits down (b/c Author is a sexual deviant. Probably.) It's my fault for going sixty chapters without smut. Remind me not to do that again, so I have the ability to get down and dirty.
Enjoy!
Love, Eli x

James and Lily popped into existence on the path of a suburban house in a perfectly average suburban street. Streetlights lit the area, shoving away the pervasive gloom of the night, and across the street a curtain twitched. Lily noticed, but didn't bother to comment – she'd lived in enough neighbourhoods to know that there would always be one incorrigible nosy neighbour clamouring to catch you doing inadvisable things, no matter the time or date. Instead, she smiled and waved until the eavesdropper had dropped the curtain in a snit and presumably returned to bed.

"What are you doing?" James asked as he was dragged towards the door. "We need to get home!"

"Shush!" Lily fumbled with a key she'd pulled out of thin air, clattering it around the lock. Her hands were shaking, vibrating enough to disturb her delicate operation. James, well acquainted with his fiancée's formidable and volatile pride, simply pressed his hand over her wrist to steady her. She shot him a smile in thanks, unlocked the door and pulled him inside.

Indoors, it was the archetypal family house of the era; a thin corridor led down the centre of the house to connect the front and back doors. To the right an open door led into a kitchen that nauseous mustard colour that was so recurrent in Muggle interior design, with shiny green vinyl cupboards rammed onto every available square inch of wall space. At the back of the kitchen another outside door led onto a small concrete patch tacked onto the side of a garden, on the opposite end of which stood a shed.

Lily ducked into this, leaving James standing, still bewildered, at the kitchen door, staring around at the familiar well-kept crab-grass garden. A swing-set stood guard over a well-trodden ditch, evidence of years of children digging their heels into the mud to slow their descent, and a token attempt at a flowerbed had been made before the occupants of the house had realised that the ground had ideas all of its own – and none of them involved any plant less hardy than a dandelion. A clattering came
from the shed and Lily reappeared, her face pinched and solemn, cradling a mess of wires. She marched him back through the house, past the stairs and into an equally rancid looking living room.

"Sit," she commanded as she flitted about, pulling a big box out from the wall and the lampshade from the lights. James surveyed the options with distaste – either a mouldy-looking green couch or a brown faux-leather armchair. He must have dithered too long, because Lily made a disgruntled noise and shoved him down, hard. "Must you make everything so bloody difficult?" she snapped.

"Where am I?" he asked, unphased by her unusually aggressive tone. If she wanted to talk about what was upsetting her, he'd be available, but he wasn't going to indulge her tantrums. Instead, he amused himself by admiring the tchotchkes gathered on the corner table; picking up a creepy figurine painted like a chubby young girl. He noticed, with some surprise, that he recognised the figure. "Is this… Petunia?" Her name was punctuated by a disgusting snort as he laughed. "Oh, Merlin, it is, isn't it?"

"You put that down!" Lily snatched it from his hands with a scowl and repositioned it on the corner table. After a second of staring, she grimaced and twisted it to face the wall. "It is horrid, though, isn't it?"

"Understatement," James chuckled. Then they trailed off and he looked around again, his eyes taking in the photos on the mantel and behind the glass of the hideous antiques cabinet. He remembered the mug on the counter in the kitchen, discarded absentmindedly as though they thought they'd be back to sort it out later. "Oh, Lils – this is your parent's place, isn't it?"

Lily shrugged, making a satisfied grunt when the box's screen flickered on to show wriggling black-and-white lines. "We didn't check if we were being followed," she muttered, fiddling with a knob on the side before settling next to him on the couch. "We can't go back to Solus, just in case."

"Why would he do that?" James frowned, finding himself distracted by the fact that the box was now showing two men sat at a desk. His eyes widened when their voices spilled into the room, clear as if they were sat right there with them.

Lily ignored his fascination, making herself comfortable by twisting around to lay her head in his lap, slinging her calves over the arm of the chair. "He's convinced we have something he wants. He'll do whatever he can to get it." She waited for a reply, and when one wasn't forthcoming switched her gaze to his face. She scoffed when she realised he was completely hypnotised by the telly. "James!"

"What?" he asked, not even looking away.

"It's just the news," she said, rolling her eyes.

"It's brilliant!" James murmured, clutching her hands excitedly as the camera panned out and switched over to photos of whatever was the latest disaster. "How do they do that?"

Shaking her head, Lily resigned herself to the fact that she'd be unlikely to get any sense out of him for the next hour, until the television channels closed for the night. Swinging her legs back down, she headed to the kitchen to make some tea, before remembering that they wouldn't have any milk. Letting out a mild curse, she leaned on her elbows over the sink, putting her head in her hands.

She hadn't been back here since the funeral. Her parents had deeded their house over to her, having paid the mortgage for Petunia's new marital abode; they'd thought it was fair – Petunia disagreed. In true Petunia fashion, she'd launched a screaming match over the matter at the wake, bringing every damn guest into it, deriding their parents and their blatant favouritism over 'Perfect Lily'. God, but she hated when Petunia said that.
From Lily's perspective, she'd always thought her sister was the coddled one, always being showered with gifts and laxer rules and unconditional acceptance of her life choices, just because she wasn't magic. Because she couldn't ever get over the fact that Lily had something she didn't, even though she did have something much more important – time with their parents. Not that Lily had thought so at the time, she'd been so busy prancing around Hogwarts learning all there was to know about magic, but now…

Lily bit her lip. She loved her parents, missed them with a wrenching pain. She visited their graves whenever possible, grooming the grass and laying flowers. Daisies, because they had always been her mother's favourite, and her father had loved anything that made his wife happy. Especially if he had been the one to do it – hence why they'd been in the car the night the drunk driver had crushed it, and them with it. A French restaurant had opened at a lay-by a few miles down the M6 from Manchester; her mother had loved French food. In fact, she'd loved it so much that she'd squealed when she'd read about it in the paper, and Lily's father had laughed, put down his tea, pulled her into his arms and headed straight for the car.

Lily winced to think about it, so she stopped, instead picking up the mug and a scourer and setting to work. She should have done this earlier, really. She'd promised Petunia that she'd sort through the house and their possessions, then offer her around to take some for herself. It had been months since then, and she'd not yet even looked.

When the mug was clean, she reached for another, and another, the repetitive motion washing away her thoughts until she was in a blissful haze of nothing. She pulled the china down from the cupboards and cleaned that too, and then the pans, just to be safe. Consequently, when the lights closest to her house went out and a quiet crack cut the air, she was alert enough to notice.

"What was that?" James's voice asked quietly as he came up behind her, sliding his hands around her waist and pressing his whole length against her back. From the living room the national anthem could be heard, twisting through the night air. She melted into him, her eyes still fixed on the path outside.

"Dumbledore," she muttered quietly. She could feel eyes on her even if she couldn't see them. It struck her that she'd accidentally set the most convincing scene she could have – her, elbow deep in soap suds, with a whole set of patterned china drying on the rack, startled by the noise as if it was unexpected. The unsuspicious wife. James coming up behind her, pressing kisses to her crown now that the telly had finished for the night. The clear-conscience husband. It was domestic bliss; exactly what you'd expect to see when you drop in on a couple unannounced in the middle of the night. If they'd been sat, tense, in the living room, it wouldn't have been nearly as believable.

The lights flit back into their translucent glass cases and Lily caught just a flash of star-scattered cloak before the sensation of being watched dissipated, and they were alone again.

The two of them stood in silence for a long moment, considering the repercussions of what had just happened, before James chuckled warmly. "Have I told you today how very clever you are?" he muttered against her hair, making her smile.

"Yes, actually," Lily smirked, turning in his arms to plant a kiss on his nose, "but please, do feel free to tell me again."

Hermione stared at Regulus, and he stared back obstinately. Lavender stared at Luna, who span in aimless circles around the middle of the office. Ginny sat in a chair to one side, looking bored.

"That's the resurrection stone," Regulus said again, pointing at the mangled ring.
"Excellent powers of deduction," Hermione snarked. "Ten points to Slytherin."

Regulus's eyes darkened. "You're not even going to deny it?"

"Why should I?" Hermione picked up the now harmless ring and tossed it from one palm to the other. "You're too clever to be distracted by my obfuscation."

"Sometimes I swear you use big words that mean nothing just to confuse the situation," Lavender muttered, reaching out a hand to gather a fistful of Luna's skirt, jerking her to a halt. "Stop that," she told her sternly. "You're making me dizzy."

"Well what are we going to do about it?" Regulus demanded. "You can't just pretend it doesn't exist."

"On the contrary," Hermione replied patiently, "I can."

"That's a powerful magical artefact!" he argued in a strangled voice. "A bloody heirloom – some would say the heirloom!"

"All the more reason to get rid of it. Toss it off a cliff. Hide it in a cave." She shrugged. "I'm not choosy about how we lose it, just that we do."

He released a whimper at the very idea, his eyes panicked. "You can't do that!"

Hermione shot him a chiding look. "Now you're beginning to repeat yourself."

"Luna! Help me!" He turned pleading eyes on the other girl, who just shrugged. Hermione gave him a faintly pitying look, if only so that she didn't give him the frustrated smile she really wanted to.

"It's more trouble than it's worth, trust me. Besides; as long as someone's in possession of the Stone, there's a chance that Voldemort – or some other manipulative psychopath - can get a hold of it. That's not a risk I'm willing to take." Hermione tossed it in the air again and caught it with the deftness of a seeker. "So, as I said – ocean or cave?"

"I cannot be a party to this," Regulus snapped, stabbing at the table with his index finger. "That's wilful destruction of a magical artefact, magical culture, our history."

"A small price to pay to stop a madman!"

"You're insane if you think destroying that thing will do anything to stop the Dark Lord." He gave a haughty sneer. "Muggleborns – you always think you know better than the rest of us, but you know nothing. Why do you think all of those people flocked to join Him? It was to prevent situations like this, where you just wander in and take over, sacrificing everything that's wonderful, special and pure about magic in the process!"

Hermione gasped in shock, but Regulus's expression was implacable. "I'm not destroying it!" she replied, a distinctly strained edge to her voice. "I'm just losing it! The same thing you lot have been doing with the damn thing for years."

"Oh, and that makes it better, does it?" He demanded, clenching his fists.

"Yes, actually. That way it still exists! It's still a piece of history, with the possibility of a return one day – just not now. Not today or next month or even anytime soon. We just can't trust that it would be safe."
"Magical history isn't about safe," he growled, and Hermione scoffed.

"What is it about, then, if you're such an expert?"

Raking a disgusted look over her body, his disregarded her easily and stormed out. It might have been more painful if she didn't think he'd retreated because he couldn't answer her questions – a satisfying feeling, to be sure. Still, it didn't stop her from feeling like she'd just lost a friend; bereft in some odd, unfathomable way. They could hear his footsteps echoing as he climbed the stairs to his room, and then the slam of the door. Hermione stood, realised that she was trembling, barely holding back tears.

"Oh, Hermione…” Ginny came to her, wrapping her in her arms. The contact helped just as much as the fact that it was Ginny, but when Lavender joined, that was when she really started to feel better. Scientifically, she knew it was the Pack bond, but emotionally she couldn't handle all of the sympathy at once. It raked at her uncertainty, and after their troubles over the matter of Magic and magic a few months ago, Hermione just couldn't trust that they weren't thinking the same thing as Regulus.

Gods, but she wanted Remus. She couldn't help but replay in her mind the look on Regulus's face as he sneered the word 'Muggleborn'. His past as a Death Eater, and his very real reasons for joining, had seemed amorphous ancient history until just then.

"Is he right?" she asked, looking from face to face. Luna hadn't joined in the hug, but she hadn't left either, and Hermione was unsure what to make of that. "Am I… am I…"

She couldn't even articulate what she wanted to ask, instead hiccupping a sob. Ginny's face gentled as she held Hermione at arm's length. "No, no, Hermione. He's just mad. You know how this works – the Horcruxes," she fluttered a hand at the ornate box on the shelf, "have an odd effect on you, and Regulus too. Plus, he's bitter that he doesn't get the Stone himself. It's not about you – or muggleborns as a whole." Her lips pinched in disapproval. "At least, I hope not, or I'll have to show him what I do to bigoted cock-faces like himself, whether or not he's Luna's boyfriend."

Hermione let out a watery giggle that was overshadowed by Lavender's more full-bodied expression of mirth. "Cock-face," she snickered.

Over by the wall, Luna twitched, her eyes swinging to the door. "The boys are back," she muttered, sounding more subdued than usual. Hermione frowned, about to ask, but then Sirius and Remus clattered into the hall and they were all distracted. As always, the sight of Remus was immediately reassuring; calming her down and levelling her out so that she had control of her own mind again. Often she was so busy that her emotions were compacted deep inside, barely felt; then he'd return and it was only by the absence of the gaping, empty feeling in her gut that she'd realise how glad she was to see him. It had always surprised her how emotion happened without her permission, without even consulting her at all – they were just there, waiting for her to recognise them. And she just about recognised the mixture of contented warmth, tingling excitement and complete faith that she felt when she looked at him.

Remus crossed the threshold straight to her, following the immensely comforting and wildly romantic routine of gathering her to him and burying his nose in her hair. He'd do that no matter how long the separation was – two minutes or two days, he would be the same level of pleased to be back with her, and that level was off the charts. At the door, Sirius paused, making meaningful eye-contact with Ginny. Hermione cringed at simply having caught it – she felt like she needed to shower from the heat.

"How'd it go?" she asked Remus, blinking away the last of her tears and brushing her hand across
his dear face. "Was Dumbledore there?"

"He was," Remus murmured, his words vibrating on her throat and setting her to squirming. "We have a problem," he added, though his voice had already gone husky from his pleasure at her response.

"A 'right now' problem, or a 'later' problem?" Hermione asked, pressing herself forward with a wicked smirk. All she wanted was to get out of this room, and maybe not think for a while. Remus was excellent with that – stopping her from thinking. In fact, when he replied she was so distracted by the scrape of his teeth against her pulse that she stopped thinking altogether, preventing her from hearing the words. "What?" she breathed.

He pulled back and looked into her eyes, a feral grin flashing across his face at whatever he saw there. "Later," he decided, chivvying her towards the door. "Definitely later."

"So Dumbledore's on the hunt?" Hermione asked, squirming beneath his hands as he traced a line from the underside of her breast to the soft thatch of hair at the apex of her thighs. "Stop that," she moaned in a tone that said anything but.

"Yes," Remus agreed, nuzzling against her shoulder. They'd found themselves wide-awake at the end of their… intimacies, and now laid in bed mulling over the problem. Or, rather, Hermione was mulling. Remus was providing information and enjoying the sensation of her skin against his, seeing how long he could drag his refractory period out for before he simply had to have her, wondering if it would last long enough for Hermione to get the answers she wanted. He'd learned from experience that she didn't like being disturbed while she was thinking, and he'd also learned that he found her thinking almost unbearably arousing. Since she appeared to think best after midnight while laid in bed with him, he'd learned to get the sex part over with first simply to avoid temptation.

It had worked pretty well so far, but then the full moon came and went, and with it more of Remus's self-restraint. Moony wanted her, Remus needed her, and together they'd managed to plot out the perfect place on her body for his mark. He'd not noticed himself doing it, not at first, but when he found himself grazing the spot with his teeth over and over he couldn't really ignore it any longer, either.

It didn't help that their relationship was the best thing that had ever happened to him. They could talk for hours on end and not get bored, nor tired, and if they did then they could curl up next to one another and sleep without any qualms. He trusted her, and she accepted him – accepted him, that gift so rarely given, and so incredibly valuable.

Consequently, each time he failed to mark her during sex, Moony seemed to say "better luck next time" and then work to ensure next time came pretty quickly.

"I suppose we should have known it would happen at some point. Do you think he followed you?" she said, her voice surprisingly academic considering where his hands were wandering. He tweaked at a nipple just to watch her mouth go slack, savouring the victory when it did.

"No," he murmured. "I think I apparated out of there too abruptly for him to manage the spell." Catching her sceptical expression, he strove to wipe it away by swiping his thumb through her folds, delicately teasing. Over the top of her gasp, he added in a business-like tone, "you know how they deteriorate over time – he'd have waited until the last minute. We were quick about it, and we left Lily and James there."

Her hands flew up to clench on his shoulders. "Oh – please don't talk about them while you're doing
that."

Bending over to draw her earlobe between his teeth, he cooed, "what would you like me to talk about?"

"Sirius-" she let out a yelp of frustration when he jerked away. Scowling up at him in shocked frustration, she continued through gritted teeth, "he said I should let you mark me."

"Erm," Remus blinked, fighting the vicious stab of desire he felt at just hearing her say the words 'mark me' in that breathy tone. He was instantly hard – rock solid, actually – and he pressed himself into the mattress to relieve some of the pressure. "Don't tease, Hermione," he begged.

"I'm not teasing," she purred, sprawling out on her back. The blankets had been kicked down to the bottom of the bed and she was bared to him in her entirety; every soft, luscious curve, every inviting shadow, every inch of skin. His fingers dug into the sheets beneath them to stop himself from reaching for her, suspicious of her intentions. "He made a good point."

He dragged his eyes up from somewhere far south of where, as a gentleman, he should have been looking, and met hers. They were heated, slightly unfocused from their earlier activities but still penetrating. Nearly irresistible, she was. "What point was that?" he choked out.

"That unmated werewolves are nearly useless," she smiled, a sweet one that took his breath away just as surely as if she'd gone sultry. "Impossible to control, obsessive…"

Remus smiled wryly. "If we're so bad, why are you even considering it?"

"Because I want to," she told him quietly. Her hand came up hesitantly, hovering over his heart for a moment before making contact, a warm and steady weight on his chest. "And I want to do this, too. It's not healthy, for you, to wait forever. And we've courted for a while, now. We have our problems, both individually and together. It's not going to be easy." Her fingers mimicked the beat of his heart in a quick tattoo. "But it's us. I mean, Christ, Remus – I travelled through time and I'm half convinced it was just for you. Not any honourable reason, because to be honest I could have cared less about changing history, but if someone had come to me one day and offered me this, this… chance. To be with you, to be your Mate and stand by your side for the next… forever, I'd have said yes. Even if I couldn't change anything else, if it was just you. If I had to… just, damn the consequences – I'd have taken their time-turner and done it myself. It's…" she let out a self-deprecating laugh, and he gathered her closer to him as though he could squeeze away the world of pain and bitterness that came with it. "I just didn't think it was possible," she muttered against his chest. "But it was."

For a few minutes, they lay there, listening to one another breathe. Then, softly, Hermione pushed away from his chest and sat up, her mane of hair forming a curtain around them. Remus stared up at her, feeling torn in half – there was the half below his belt, which screamed for her, for release and freedom, and the other half.

The other half had his heart, and a warm feeling of supreme happiness, an easy joy, as he regarded her. Knowledge bloomed in him, a knowledge entirely human, separate from what he considered to be 'Moony'; entirely Remus. It billowed outwards, spreading through his limbs like a warm cloud, suffusing him with a giddiness that made him feel as though he were ten feet tall, stronger than anyone.

He lifted his hand to trace her cheekbone, then along her jaw to her lips, where he pressed the pad of his thumb into their pillowed softness. She puckered them to lay a gentle kiss on his skin, eyes watching him worriedly – the action was subconscious, by now. He smiled.
"I love you," he said. Hermione's eyes flickered wide, and the shock there, mingling with a whole host of other, softer emotions, prompted him to say it again. "I love you."

"Remus," she said, her voice catching. Her mouth shaped words, as if she was trying to force herself to say something witty and clever, but lost them in translation. "Remus," she gasped, finally, lowering her body to meld with his. He repeated his name over and over, crawling up his chest to assault his lips with deep, drugging kisses interspersed with quick, kittenish licks and bites. He reared up to meet her, winding his fingers through the back of her mad hair to pull her closer, taking charge with the ease of experience. The other hand flexed on her hips, pulling her fully onto him until all he could feel was her.

"Do you mean it," he pulled back to gasp, all of his willpower channelled into asking those words.

"Did you?" Hermione countered, her fingers frantic as they applied themselves to mapping his skin, his scars, routes she'd travelled dozens of times and yet he responded to as if they were the first. He nodded for lack of an ability to do anything else, and she broke into a grin. "Yes," she said, pulling her palms back up to cradle his face. She pressed a soft kiss to his jaw, then his lips, and pulled back only a tiny amount to look directly into his eyes. "Mark me, Remus," she murmured, her lips brushing his with every word.

His control snapped.

All flew in a blur of lips, flesh, the grazing of his teeth against her breast, the bone-deep satisfaction when he sank deep into her, her moans and whimpers, his strangled groans. He whispered affirmations of his words as he licked at her skin, mouthing her collarbone as long, steady strokes guided them both toward climax. She mewled and cried, an endless litany of "please, please, please," as he played with her, driving her upwards with increasingly rough jerks of her hips, moving her body with his as though they were one and the same, until they were both close, his thumb firm on her little nub to keep her from coming without him, feeling himself swelling within her.

He couldn't stop now; didn't want to stop, just wanted to keep driving himself into her until they could never part, but also, he wanted....

He said her name, loudly, piercing the fog of desire. Her eyes flew open and met his with a question. He realised that that was what he'd wanted. Her. Her eyes. The emotion that burst through them when they fell apart; the sight of her loving him, even if she couldn't say the words, yet. Sweat-slicked, he flashed her a wolfish grin, pushing them both further until, with a quick flick of his thumb and a stuttered jerk of his hips -

*That* was the moment he would remember – would always remember. Hermione panted for air, their eye-contact not breaking. Recognition flashed between them, and then acceptance, and just as they crested, she gave a sharp nod.

His teeth penetrated her skin just as she flew apart; her body undulating around and underneath him. Her blood flowed bitter and salty on his tongue, mingling with a release that started at the base of his spine but finished somewhere behind his eyes, blinding him.

He came-to with Hermione sprawled across his chest, yawning sleepily, her eyes drowsy and satisfied. Before he could fret, she pulled her hair to one side to reveal a perfect imprint of his teeth – scarred already, leaving the surrounding skin unblemished. He revelled in the rush of possessiveness that shot through him. Hermione gave a throaty laugh.

"You look like you're thinking 'mine!'," she giggled, cuddling against him, peering up with a mischievous smirk.
"I am," he admitted shamelessly, brushing his fingers across his mark. Even Moony was dementedly gleeful, chasing his tail and howling somewhere in the back of Remus's mind.

"Well, buddy, so am I." Hermione beamed, pressed one last kiss against his throat, and nestled into his arms with a sigh of contentedness. "Mine."
Ginny winced at the pre-dawn brightening of the sky. Her ponytail pounded a beat on her back as she ran, feet slapping the wooded ground. She was far from noiseless – grace and stealth had never been her strong point – but she was certainly fast and agile, whipping through the tiniest gaps in the trees without a stutter in her step, skipping lithely over stray branches and rocks. She'd liked running at Potter Manor, where the terrain was pretty and even, if a bit predictable; Solus House's grounds, however, were a haven. Challenging, with sharp stone jutting from the ground, hidden in crunching grass, and dips in the earth camouflaged by the landscape and often full of drained rainwater. Ice was nearly invisible, but it was there – even in Spring. Dew sprayed her ankles and calves as she sprinted through a clearing, the cool welcome on her overheated skin.

The locket, she thought, in time with her footsteps. The cup. Gringotts. The cave. The locket. The cup.

She mulled the puzzles over in her head. How to get into Gringotts, one of the most well-guarded banks in the world? Even assuming Voldemort had hidden it there already; if not, it might be on the Lestrange estate, if possible the only place more dangerous to infiltrate than the Bank. Sure, Hermione had already done it once, but that had been more luck than anything else and said luck had come from Harry.

The locket, however – they knew the cave, the defence mechanisms Voldemort would institute, but they weren't sure of the location nor when, exactly, Voldemort would deposit the locket. Ginny was glad they'd saved Regulus, but it was a tad galling that by doing so they'd chatted themselves out of a handy warning.

Ginny tilted her face up to the sky, closing her eyes as she came to a stop to think. It was somehow easier to think, this morning. Where the night before her thoughts had been chaotic and confused, today they seemed perfectly ordered, as though during her sleep they'd chivvied themselves into categories, columns and piles for her perusal. There was a peace resting in her chest such as she'd not known since her fifth year at Hogwarts, when things had been simple and understandable and the War had not yet started in earnest. Even her magic, which yesterday night had been pent-up and stir-crazy, reminding her of something wild, a fox or a deer, perhaps, penned into a cage and hoping for escape, was more level.

Opening her eyes, she watched clouds drift over the endless horizon. She thought it would storm today; they had been painted an ominous red and pink, dark as blood offset against the calm blue flashes she caught of the sky beyond. A shiver trickled down her back as she stared. Impressive, but terrifying; the sun in the east reached feelers of calm yellow and warm orange out, but they were beaten back by the scarlet. An odd phenomenon – Ginny was sure Hermione had an explanation for it, something scientific and logical, nothing at all to do with omens or death and destruction, no matter how much staring up at it scared her.

Catching her breath, Ginny shoved back her unease and glanced at the house. It was a speck in the distance, just as in the opposite direction Ginny could see out over the sea to a fleck of black, an
island.

A gust of wind suddenly blasted into the cliff with a magnificent slamming noise, throwing Ginny back a few feet. Over its wail she heard a cracking and skittering as rocks blew loose of the cliff, tumbling and splashing into the sea below. Above, the deeper reds were turning almost black, and the air grew thick with the promise of rain. At that, Ginny wheeled around and sprinted back to the house, just managing to slam the kitchen door before the clouds released their heavy loads, raindrops as fat as her fist pelting the window.

"Merlin," Ginny swore, leaning closer for a better look. The drops hit the ground with such force that they bounced back up into the air, sending pebbles and chipped stone up with them, two-, three-, and four-feet high. A monstrous growl cut through the air, echoing off the cliff, so loud her ears rang, and it took a moment for her to realise it was thunder – its noise rebounding off the water and reflected back threefold until it shook the very foundations of the house. She'd never heard anything like it in her life.

Finally she turned away from the window, freezing when she met three pairs of elf-eyes, all watching her quizzically. "Morning..?" she said hesitantly.

"Miss Wheeze-y will catch her death," Tinker chastised, jewellery jingling merrily as he propped his hands on his hips and scowled at her sternly. "What is Missy thinking, to go out in a storm?"

"It wasn't raining when I started!" she protested defensively, but didn't bother fighting as Fritz clicked his fingers and her legs were knocked out from underneath her, depositing her in an over-stuffed armchair by the fire. A thick ceramic mug of tea was hovering beside her, and the elves set themselves industriously to making breakfast as she sipped it. Soon she was surrounded by the sounds and smells of meat fizzling in the pan, the repetitive scrape of the butter knife lulling her into a haze of security, reminding her of home.

Somehow, she'd reached the point in her life here that she'd accepted her fate. Her family was lost to her; Molly and Arthur Weasley would never recognise her as their daughter, her brothers wouldn't see her as their sister. But did that matter, really? Fred was alive. A child, happy and well and united with the other half of his soul in George. George, if she had her way, would never become the half-dead wraith she'd known in the future. They would never fight a war, never even realise one was occurring. Molly Weasley wasn't a member of the Order, and neither was Arthur; her uncles were, but she'd never met them anyway. The important thing was that her family was out of the line of fire. They could be happy. Whole.

Admittedly, the idea that they'd never know her, that she would never again experience the comfort and safety that came with having a large family who accepted you, flaws and all, depressed her if she thought on it too hard, but it wasn't like she was alone, not physically nor in her emotional turmoil. She had Hermione, who was a mother to them all, and Luna, who was her best friend and sister, and Lavender, who was what Ginny imagined a saucy aunt would be; irrepressible and sassy, determined not to allow anyone in her life mope about for too long when they could be amusing her instead. Not to mention the Marauders and Lily.

In particular her relationship with Sirius, which remained simultaneously the simplest and most complicated relationship she'd ever experienced in her life. On the one hand, they had really great sex, like, transcendent sex; on the other, he tended to kick her a lot in his sleep. On the first hand, again, she'd lusted after him since she was thirteen; on the other, well, she did lots of inadvisable things in her early teens, didn't she?

She liked him a lot, but she wasn't the commitment type, especially not now, not in the situation they were in. It was all well and good for Hermione to find her mate, but she'd been in love with Lupin
since the man had stood up for Neville against Snape - she'd spouted off about his bravery to everyone who would listen, and sadly, for Ginny, after a while the redhead had become the only one who would listen. And for Luna; well, Regulus was just perfect for her, wasn't he? You don't push away that sort of match because you have squicky moral problems. You just get over them and then get under him (though, in Luna's case, not literally - he was saving himself for marriage, the adorable child).

Lavender might have understood if she hadn't found Snape. As it was, she spent most of her spare time trying to outscheme the Slytherin into falling in love with her, and didn't have time to debate Ginny's relationship with her. The one time Ginny had tried, the blonde had cut her off half-way through by saying "wait, wait, wait! Are you really coming to complain about how the super hot, super rich, super eligible wizard is courting you? No pressure, hands-off, with explosive sex? For fuck's sake, Ginevra - my Mate wouldn't shit on me if I was on fire, and you're complaining that yours actually likes you?" and then stared at her in disbelief for a long minute until Ginny had backed off in shame.

In the present, the kitchen door swung open and Lily came skipping in, an excited grin on her face. "Ginny!" she squealed, hopping about on her feet. Ginny raised an eyebrow in question, still huddled over her tea. "We've chosen a date," Lily babbled, thanking Fritz as he handed her a mug of tea. "Midsummer's eve. An auspicious date for our wedding, don't you think? I just woke up this morning and it was there, in my mind. I thought, we simply must get married on Midsummer Eve, and I told James, and he agreed!"


Lily gave a somewhat star-struck smile. "James says he's waited so long to have me that he's not waiting for a wedding, too. That would just be cruel. And he has a point - I mean, he's been trying to get me to go out with him since he learned I existed. The least I can do is let him marry me, don't you think?" Giving a wink, Lily turned and flounced out of the kitchen, no doubt off to spread more cheer with the news of her impending nuptials, too excited even to notice the storm.

Tinker approached with a plate piled high with breakfast delicacies, and hesitated by her chair. "Does Missy want to eat in the kitchen?" the elf asked, looking supremely uncomfortable with the idea. Taking pity on him, Ginny shook her head and stood.

"No, thank you, Tink. I'll take it in the dining room."

Tinker grinned happily and poofed off to lay the table. Somewhat envious of the ease of their travel, Ginny unfolded herself and wandered through the long way.

Soon after she was sat at the table, the sounds of laughter echoed down the hall towards her and she had to fight to prevent herself taking her head in her hands. More couples.

Remus led Hermione through - though led was the polite way to describe it, considering she was wrapped in his arms, laughing as she attempted to walk with him attached to her like a limpet. He mumbled something indiscernable into her ear and she blushed furiously, coming to a stop when she saw Ginny.

"Hello!" she chirped, her cheeks bright red. "You're back in early."

"Am I the only one who noticed the big, angry storm outside?" Ginny asked, somewhat rhetorically. Hermione was being deposited in her chair with all the care one night afford a Princess, Remus grinning like the cat who'd got the cream. Ginny narrowed her eyes, looking between the two of them. "Hermi..." and stopped when her friend turned towards her.
"What - oh!" Hermione's hand flew up to her neck, where a newly healed scar taught Ginny more about Remus's dental health than she'd ever wanted to know. A shy, surprisingly sexual smirk crossed Hermione's lips, and she winked.

Well. There was that question answered. Suddenly queasy, Ginny pushed her plate away and forced herself to think of something else; anything else.

"The cup!" she squawked, startling both of the others. Remus blinked quizzically, while Hermione frowned. "It's not at Gringotts," she explained, still feeling out the memory her mind had provided. "Remember how we didn't know when it was placed there?"

Hermione bit her lip, Remus still looking somewhat bewildered. "We couldn't be certain," she said slowly. "When the sword was hidden sounds right, but then where would it be before that?"

Ginny deflated. "You're right. There's no way to know - I just know that it's not in Gringotts. I remembered that He didn't trust the Lestranges as much during the first war. He was all about the Malfoys, the Notts: the Old Families and their older generations. It was their stay in Azkaban that made him bring them closer, as much as he could. But."

"But?"

Ginny chewed over her idea again, just to make sure it made sense. "Well… we know a lot about him, don't we? And he's always put them in important places before, like the cave and the Gaunt house, so it's logical he'd put this one somewhere important, too."

Remus gained a look of enlightenment, finally showing the intellect he was so lauded for. "If we go through your notes again, we should be able to figure it out pretty quickly with elimination."

So that was where Sirius found them an hour later, as Hermione and Ginny argued over their preferred locations. He leaned against the door and watched with a smirk as it grew more heated, the two precariously close as they shouted, Hermione's face as red as Ginny's hair. Remus crossed the road to join him, rolling his eyes when he spotted the look on Sirius's face.

"You're such a pervert," he said fondly, lounging against the wall next to his friend.

"Tell me you're not thinking the same," Sirius protested, gesturing towards the pair. "Girl fight!"

Remus snorted, shaking his head. "Honestly, Padfoot. One sight of a heaving bosom and suddenly you're every male stereotype. How we put up with you, I don't know."

"'Heaving bosom', Moony? Really? Having a poetic day, are we?"

Remus donned a wolfish grin, his eyes wandering back to where his mate stood. "I'm not sure 'poetic' is the word…"

At that, Sirius spun to face him, taking one look at Remus's satisfied expression and practically howling with glee. "Oh, Moony! You did it, didn't you? You got laid, then you got all wolfy, didn't you?"

"I don't see how it's any of your business," he sniffed, then a sly smile quirked his mouth. "But yes, yes I did. Twice."

Sirius's resulting cheer dragged the girls from their argument to glare at him as if he were interrupting terribly important business. Sirius favoured them with an unrepentant wink. "Don't mind me, ladies. Just getting all the dirty details from Remus. Tell me, Hermione - was it as good for you as
"it obviously was for him?" he leered playfully, ignoring Remus's murderous look.

Hermione seemed to consider whether to gut him or not, then finally relaxed and grinned. "Oh, better - he's immensely skilled with his hands." She accompanied this statement with a suggestive wriggle of her fingers that sent Sirius into fits of laughter and had Ginny retching dramatically.

"Really? Really?" she scowled. "Who are you and what have you done with my Hermione? I was happier when I thought you were a virgin!"

"Who's a virgin?" Lavender burbled as she wandered through the door, scrubbing her hands through the knotted mass that was her hair. A comb had gotten stuck somewhere in the back, and she searched for it with one hand as she used the other to scrub at bleary eyes.

"Not Hermione, as they're so excited to inform us!" Ginny said, throwing her hands in the air.

Lavender paused, peering at the brunette through a fringe of messy curls, lacking the ribbon that customarily held them out of her eyes. "I wondered why I slept so well," she said, shrugging. "Can I see it?"

Hermione proudly bared her neck, chin held high with such confidence as to stop the move from being submissive. From the wall, Remus let out an approving rumble.

Lavender squinted at it and snorted. "Figures. You even wear scars well." Sniffing the air, she shook her head. "You didn't even save me breakfast? C'mon, Hermione. Less than twelve hours and you're already slacking on your Alpha female duties."

"Get your own damn breakfast, Lav," Hermione rolled her eyes, arranging her hair across her shoulders again. "Now that you're here, perhaps you could help us out by solving an argument."

Lavender slumped into a chair and shot wide-eyed, appealing looks at Remus as her stomach rumbled. Scoffing, the man nonetheless slipped out of the door to call an elf. "What argument?" she asked, satisfied that she would soon be fed.

Ginny flopped down in a chair, leaning her elbows on the table. "Hermione seems to think Riddle would leave his Horcrux in the orphanage, but I disagree. I think he'd hide it in that barn; you know, the one he hung that kid's rabbit in? His first display of magic."

"I'm telling you," Hermione said, forcing patience into her tone, "that is not a significant enough occurrence. He already used the cave - he's not going to go back through all of the horrible things he ever did and leave a Horcrux everywhere he did them! It's not logical."

"Oh, but leaving it in the orphanage is? He hated that orphanage - loathed it! He leaves his Horcruxes places where he feels good about himself, where he feels powerful. The orphanage where he was subjugated and humiliated his whole life? That's not a place he'd go! It's just not possible."

"Has anybody else noticed the penchant Dumbledore has for leaving vulnerable orphans in places they'll be abused?" Lavender said suddenly. When everybody turned to look at her, she shrugged sleepily. "For such a great Headmaster, he's astonishingly careless with children."

"Isn't there anywhere else he'd put it?" Remus asked, drawing their attention away from the blonde. "I mean, there must have been somewhere? Even if it's only a tenuous connection - he put the diary in Malfoy Manor, for Merlin's sake. That can't have had any great significance for him."

Ginny blinked as if he'd said something supremely unintelligent. "Actually, Abraxas Malfoy was one of his closest friends at school. He trained him up, got rid of his lower class accent, taught him how
to dress and carry himself to attract admiration. The two of them, Dolohov Snr. and Nott Snr. were the original Death Eaters, back when they were called the Knights. It makes perfect sense that he'd keep a horcrux in his best friend's house. I mean, if you're as twisted as he is," she added hastily, when Hermione looked at her in concern. "I wouldn't put a Horcrux in your house. Stop looking at me like that."

Lavender yawned, stretching languidly. "Well, I, for one, am glad my best friend isn't a Dark Lord. Even in the '70's, Horcruxes aren't the height of interior fashion."

"My money's on Dolohov's house," Sirius proclaimed. "That would explain how he grew up so fucked-up."

"Sadly, I think that's just natural talent." Ginny looked uncomfortable, shifting in her chair. "Look, you don't get it. To Riddle, people are puppets. Useful puppets, in which case he keeps them around for a while, or gormless puppets, in which case they're entirely disposable. Intelligent people, like Malfoy senior - people he considers to be on a level with him - are rare to non-existent. He liked Malfoy; genuinely liked and respected him as an equal. Dolohov and Nott? Puppets. Stage dressing. Pretty followers with money and familial connections. To him they might as well be pets, but not a dog or a cat or something that could amuse him enough to gain his affection, but more… pet rocks. Only useful if you want them to smash something. Brainless."

"How…?" Sirius began, then stopped when he saw the bleak look in Ginny's eyes. He sloped over to her, careful to heed any signal she might throw him, and sat down, draping his arm casually over the back of her chair. There were inches of space between them so it couldn't be properly classified as a cuddle, but when he felt her move and lean ever-so-slightly back against his arm, the victory felt like more than if any other woman had thrown herself into his lap.

"So, not anyone's house."

"No. And I'm sure that the only way Riddle would use the orphanage would be if he'd committed some horrific crime there and nobody has heard of it, which I doubt very much."

"Can't we at least try?" Hermione pressed, still stood up and determined. "What's the harm if we're wrong? At least we'd know."

Ginny clenched her jaw, some unknown reluctance holding her back, then finally gave a nod. "Fine. When will we go?"

"Today," Hermione said, and her words were followed by a cracking of thunder that appeared to rattle the whole house.

After a few more minutes of argument, they split up to gather their things. Ginny left a note on the table to tell the others where they were going before heading up to her room to dress. Hermione and Remus shut themselves in theirs, pulling on jeans in silence.

Finally, as they were gathering their outdoorswear, Remus turned to Hermione, a question on his lips.

"If you have such faith in Ginny, then why are you so determined to prove her wrong?" he asked, frowning as she pulled on her coat.

"It's not about proving her wrong, it's about worrying that she's right." Hermione fumbled with her buttons, cursing as her fingers seemed to slip across the buttons. "This is Tom Riddle, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. He spent his formative years in that place, with bullies and liars and sneak
thieves, trying to outsmart them, proper survival-of-the-fittest stuff. And it was the forties, which means that around every corner there was a teacher with a cane waiting for an excuse to strike, too."

Finally, she gave up and spelled the coat closed.

"I'm just concerned that after school, when he gained all this power and was confronting the ghosts of his past, he went back. Wouldn't you, after all? I certainly would, to lord myself and my success over them. To prove I'd risen above my beginnings and what they'd tried to make me. To get closure."

Remus caught his breath. "And you think…"

"Well," she said, a crack in her voice betraying her anxiety, "Riddle's closure does tend to be much more violent than most, doesn't it?"
Chapter Sixty: Varying Woes

Chapter Summary

Severus spends some time with an old friend, while the girls (and their loyal compatriots) check out Mrs. Cole's orphanage.

Chapter Notes

Lucius Malfoy is my favourite. Writing him was almost as fun as writing Lavender. He's such a treasure, the puffed-up old dandy.
Enjoy!
Love, Eli x

Lucius Malfoy IV (yes, the fourth. Nobody seemed to remember that he was continuing the grand tradition of three Lucius Malfoys before him, aside from himself and Narcissa, and, he was convinced that the only reason Cissy knew was because he kept telling her. It was important information, after all. The Malfoys were just as old and powerful and pure as the Blacks!) sighed into his whiskey and wrinkled his nose as the sound of his wife's anguished shouting reached him. The Manor was built sturdily, but not terribly soundproofed - despite the fact that he was on the second floor and his wife was on the third, he could hear her as clearly as he had when he'd been stood next to her.

At least he couldn't see her anymore, he comforted himself. She was a beautiful woman, Narcissa Malfoy, but when she cried - urgh. He shuddered. Really, she should pull herself together. Straighten her hair. Put on some make-up. Checking his watch, Lucius realised that if she hurried, they might even make it to the club. It was only just-past midday. Either he'd been here all night, or her company had been much more draining than he'd realised. Still - she had nearly ten hours to clean herself up. Plenty of time!

Hope bloomed only to shrivel immediately afterwards. They hadn't been to the club in days.

It was truly quite unseemly; Nott had even owled him to ask what was going on, and Lucius had been forced to lie! Not, of course, that he had any moral difficulty over telling a lie, but usually he told lies for fun, and it seemed declasse to be forced to tell one to protect his family's image. And all of this hoo-ha about a missing house-elf! As if they weren't ten-a-sickle.

He'd even tried that, too - bringing her another one, or three, to replace the daft old thing she'd loved so much. No dice. She'd just glared at him through those evil Black eyes and snarled, all feral. Lucius had once admired the animalistic traits of the Blacks - thought they'd do well in a wife. Protective, loyal, a bloody whirlwind in bed. That, until he'd come across his wife after she'd not slept or bathed for three days, her hair a wild, living thing that seemed intent on throttling him if he took his eyes away for only a second, and her teeth - teeth he'd always admired, as long as they were only used on his shoulder and not his cock - sharp, glinting threateningly in the candlelight.

He was grateful he'd thought to present the gift in her bedchamber rather than the kitchen or some
other, more brightly-lit area. It had originally been a ploy to get her into bed, but in hindsight he thought it had been quite clever; preventing him from having to see the harpy that had once been his wife in full sunlight - the curtains had been closed in her suite for so long they'd probably fused in place..

She screamed again, the sound coming to him on the heels of high-pitched elf chittering. All eight of their elves were up there, sharing in her mourning or some such nonsense. Lucius hadn't been able to escape their accusatory glares since he'd chosen to send Dobby away.

But, really, it wasn't like he had a choice. The Dark Lord had needed an elf, and Dobby had been at hand. It wasn't like he was a useful elf, always nattering on about idiotic, dangerous things, like freeing the elves. He'd hated Lucius - as if Lucius would allow his wife to keep an elf who hated him in her bedchamber! She might have laughed at its antics up until now, but who knows what would happen if he'd allowed the creature to go on? Years from now, he'd be left with a bitter husk of a wife, whose continuous listening to that elf had warped her mind against him!

No. It would not do. He'd done the right thing, and she would get over it.

He winced as her screech, angry this time, filled with curses and threats about what she'd like to do to Lucius's prized genitalia, reached his ears. Eventually. She'd get over it, eventually.

Sighing, he wished he had somewhere else to go. In years past he'd had mistresses, but they'd all been dismissed after the wedding. That day, his strong, ferocious bride had glared up into his eyes and inserted her own little ditty into their vows - "and I swear to all the Gods, Lucius Abraxas Malfoy the fourth, that if you ever take another woman to your bed without my express permission, I will geld you like a prized Abraxan. Slowly."

He still had nightmares about that.

His glass was empty, and none of the elves could be summoned to fill it, as they were all huddled around his wife. Lucius glared balefully at the glass of Ogdens, perched so far away, on a corner table two feet from where he sat. He considered getting up to fetch it, then snorted. He was a Malfoy. Like Hades was he fetching his own drink. Too drunk to accio the thing, he instead looked around for other options.

Ah! He was sat beside the fireplace. His foot was nudging the urn of Floo powder. Excellent.

With a kick and a holler, the flames turned green and soon, the smooth baritone of Lucius's closest friend (outside of the more suitable, aristocratic circles, you understand) could be heard.

"Lucius," Severus drawled, his head appearing in the logs. "What can I do for you?"

"Oh, nothing, old pal," Lucius said jovially, sending a quick, lustful look towards his prize, glowing a warm red in the firelight. "I only wished to invite you for a drink."

Severus eyed him doubtfully and Lucius made an effort to present his most pleasant expression. It seemed to work, because Severus rolled his eyes and backed away. A second later, his svelte form stepped through onto his hearth-rug, and he was brushing ashes off of his trousers. Lucius made no effort to hide his ogling of the man's pert bottom - Narcissa only specified women, after all - and smirked when the younger man jerked, striding towards the bottle. Victory!

"Don't tell me you wasted an entire urn of Floo powder, took me away from my brewing, and dragged me to Wiltshire, just so that you wouldn't have to lean too far out of your chair," Severus sneered, his quick mind putting the pieces together when he caught Lucius's expression. Hastily,
Lucius tried to rearrange it back to normal, but it was too late. "You are incorrigible," Severus sighed, bringing the bottle and a crystal tumbler for himself back over to the fire.

"That is the general consensus, yes," Lucius smirked, gazing up at Severus through ash-blonde eyelashes. The other man snorted indelicately. "Come, let me tell you of my woes."

"Did you run out of the good cognac again?" Severus asked lightly, but followed Lucius's instructions anyway, settling himself in a plush leather armchair opposite his host.

"Worse," he replied, watching the amber liquid slosh into his glass. He raised it in a silent toast, Severus clinking his own glass against Lucius's obediently. "Cissy is angry with me."

One perfectly formed black eyebrow raised upwards towards Severus's hairline. Lucius watched it rise, a tad enviously. The Gods knew that Severus was an ugly bugger, but he did have some interestingly handsome features. That nose, for example, was a twin of some of the better Roman statuary he'd seen in his years - Mercury, to be exact. In the bowels of the Ministry there was a full-sized statue of the God, wearing that exact nose. Not generally a fan of Romans, coming as he did from a French line, the statue had caught Lucius's eye mostly because of the corresponding… package. It was such a shame that the Muggles had gone around cutting the things off, because it had been really, very...

"Lucius," Severus snapped, rolling his eyes. "Stop that."

"Stop what?" he batted his eyelashes flirtatiously. Severus only scowled more. He'd never once fallen for Lucius's seductions, but that didn't mean he never would. Lucius had hope.

"Tell me more of your wife," he sighed, letting whatever he had a problem with go. Lucius supposed his friend disapproved of him thinking about him naked. A perfectly natural response from someone as bashful as he. It wouldn't stop him, but he could understand why the other man felt that way.

Lucius threw himself back in his chair, slinging his legs negligently over the arm. "You recall Dobby, yes?"

"The elf you gave the Dark Lord." Severus shrugged. "What about him?"

"He did not return from his trip." Lucius waved a hand. "Oh, the Dark Lord did, but not Dobby. When I asked, He only smiled and told me that Dobby was a 'good elf'. Which is a blatant lie, you know, because he was absolutely useless."

"Another sacrifice for the cause," Severus intoned. Lucius frowned. Not because of the sentiment - it was the correct sentiment - but because Severus was always so solemn. It was really quite dull. The man needed to lighten up - they were on the winning side of history, after all. Soon, their Master would be King of the World and they the Earls and Dukes to rule in his stead. Every day would be a party, and Lucius loved a good party.

"Yes, yes, quite," he muttered, twirling his hand to dismiss the words. "You won't catch me mourning the thing. It's Narcissa who is cut-up about it. She's become quite unhinged."

As if on cue, Severus startled as another torrent of rage rang through the corridors. Lucius shot him a look to say 'you see what I have to deal with?'. He didn't look sympathetic, but then Severus never looked very much like anything at all. "She says she loved the thing," Lucius sneered. "Ridiculous. She loves me. That should be all that matters." He swept his long, blonde hair over his shoulder and stroked a hand down it to draw attention to the shining locks. Severus didn't fall for the bait.

"I know it will shock you to learn this, Lucius, but it turns out that you are not, in fact, the centre of
the universe. I know," Severus continued, a faint smirk on his lips when Lucius's eyes widened in outrage. "I was stunned, too."

"Why did I call you over, again? I must have gone mad," Lucius sniped, taking a long sip of his drink.

Severus crossed his legs elegantly and refilled Lucius's glass. "I have no idea. Why did He even want an elf?"

"Do you know, I wasn't really listening. He's brilliant, but most of what He says is blather." He felt the dangerous words as they left his mouth into the universe, felt the clench of his chest in regret when he said them, and still didn't particularly care. This was Severus he was talking to. He might be loyal to the Dark Lord, but his first loyalty was always to himself. He'd not betray Lucius as long as Lucius kept giving him more than he cost the man. Which was also why he felt comfortable sharing the situation with him, despite the Dark Lord specifically telling him not to share the information with anyone. Surely, when he said 'nobody must know, Luciussssss-' he, in fact, meant 'nobody but Severusssss-'? That seemed entirely plausible to Lucius; the Dark Lord did so like being cryptic in that way. "Went straight over my head. Something to do with a dangerous Dark artifact. It was important, I know that much." Pride swallowed the rest of his emotions as Lucius preened. "Hence why he came to me, his most trusted ally."

Lucius was so busy admiring himself that he completely missed Severus's eyes widen and narrow, calculation crossing his face. "In the new world," Lucius declared, so self-congratulatory that he missed Severus stand and cross to the other side of the room, where the door was, "I'll be his right-hand man, you know! And my son, and my son's son, and all the Malfoys after that will be shining and pure, an example to the rest of the Wizarding world - where are you going?"

Severus paused in the doorway. "I thought I'd give my condolences to your wife," he answered blandly. Always so bland, that man. What he really needed was a cane. Like Lucius's, only not as grand - Lucius's cane must be much nicer. But perhaps just an ebony one, with a pewter handle?

Lucius shook his head, dragging himself back to the present after adding that to his list of things to furnish the other man with, right next to 'wife' and 'real job'. "You don't want to do that, Severus, my boy. She's horrid to look at right now."

"I can handle it," Severus responded dryly, gesturing towards his face. "I do own a mirror."

Lucius laughed, and in the process Severus left, leaving the older man to his fantasies.

From the outside, the orphanage looked comfortably untouched. All gothic spires and dirty rock, it wasn't a place Hermione would ever choose to house children, but she supposed in bygone eras one wasn't too bothered about the emotional health of orphans - or, even today, Hermione reminded herself, thinking of Harry and the childhood nobody had cared enough to save him from.

Next to her, Remus shifted uneasily. She could sense that he was highly uncomfortable - their bond seemed to have widened to something intense and tangible, as though there was now a whole section of her mind set apart for her to sense his emotions with. Hermione, ever the academic, wondered how it would do if they were apart. Was proximity a factor? Or, strength of their bond? How did it work? She'd love to experiment with it, some time - perhaps not right now, though.

*Back to the matter at hand,* she told herself firmly as she felt her mind drift off into more scholarly pursuits. She couldn't help it. She was, at heart, a researcher. If it hadn't been for Harry, she would have never been in the field, and quite happily have committed her life to study. Fate, it seemed, had
other plans, but she couldn't deny that if they survived and won this war, she was probably just going to shut herself up in a library for the next several years, if only to answer the myriad questions this little trip kept raising.

She turned to look at Ginny, whose face had taken on a tight quality as she looked at the facade of the building. Hermione felt a pang of sympathy - what Hermione would have given to be wrong, but… it was too late now. She could practically smell the darkness radiating out from the building, and while some of it could be attributed to its past and the stories of the children and staff who passed through, there was something magical about it; purposeful. Mature.

"I don't like this," Lavender said, her face scrunched up and faintly green. "Not at all. Do we have to go in?"

"Can you feel the Horcrux?" Hermione asked Ginny, who shook her head. "Well, then - looks like we do have to go in."

Sirius poked Ginny in the shoulder, and when the girl looked back at him, he widened his eyes in question. Ginny appeared to dither for a moment, then sighed, and nodded. Sirius frowned, then took up a place by her side. Remus stepped closer to Hermione protectively. Lavender, on his other side, was pulled behind him, under the wing of his concern, too. Lavender and Hermione shared amused looks at his actions, then, as one, stepped out from behind him and headed straight for the door.

Remus scowled, but followed on.

The door was unlocked, its handle having been blasted off at least months before. It was a miracle it hadn't been looted; not that there would have been much to loot. The first room was neglected, dusty, and damp crawled up the walls and through the ceiling until everywhere one looked there was sagging plaster, grey-black puddles, and disintegrating wallpaper. They were silent as they walked, as if the slightest noise could bring the building down around their ears.

The foyer opened into a hallway, with an office on the right and a flight of stairs on the left. This room, too, was deserted; the office filled with dust, cobwebs and dessicated spiders, abandoned for so long that even the insects living there had left or died. Dust was a thick grey mist, but a quick peek informed Hermione that there was no corpse hiding beneath the desk waiting to be discovered, and the closest thing to gold was a pair of broken glasses, sitting discarded on a shelf.

"Nothing," she whispered, backing out. Ginny nodded, as if that was what she'd expected. Lavender, Remus and Sirius were all staring up the stairs, identical looks of concentration on their faces. "What's wrong?" she asked, a shiver running down her spine.

"There's something…" Remus began, then paused, as if he couldn't find the word.

"Off?" Lavender supplied, creeping up a few steps then sniffing at the air. "Like off meat, I think?"

"Yeah," Sirius confirmed, leaping lithely above her. "Definitely some sort of meat."

A heavy weight in her stomach, Hermione nodded. "Right. So… we'd better go and check it out."

"You don't have to, love," Remus said gently, reaching out to touch her shoulder, his face sweetly concerned. "Stay here, and let us look."

"No - thank-you, but no. This is what we came for, isn't it? I brought you here. I'm not going to let you do my dirty work for me." She smiled, leaning in to kiss his cheek. "You're very sweet to offer."

When Ginny stepped forward, however, Sirius stepped firmly in front of her. "No."
"Ex-cuse me?"

"You're not going up there," Sirius said, crossing his arms.

Ginny's eyes lit with unholy fire as she squared up to the man. "And you have the right to order me about, why? Because we slept together? You think because I let you inside me that gives you power over me?"

Sirius's eyes narrowed. "No. Of course not. How could - nope, not right now." He took a long, cleansing breath and let his face relax. "First off, we need someone to stand look-out. You're the best qualified for that position - your offensive magic is better than mine and Lavender's. Second, you're the quickest with a spell and the loudest shouter, aside from me. If someone comes, you can get a patronus off much faster than the rest of us, and we'll be sure to hear your warning if that's not an option. And, third..." He stepped closer, crowding her into the wall as he bent his mouth to her ear. He muttered something softly, too softly for Hermione to hear, but Remus must have caught something of it because his eyes went soft and sad for a moment. Ginny tensed, her jaw ticcing, then relaxed suddenly, melting into the wall.

"Fine," she said in a defeated voice. "You're right. I am better than you lot." Her chin jerked upwards, she gave a sly grin. "I mean, come on - imagine Lavender up against a bunch of Death Eaters! She'd probably Mate with the lot." Winking to take away the sting, she turned and sauntered back towards the door, throwing a quick "listen for my shout!" over her shoulder as she left.

Lavender scowled at her retreating back. "That's rude," she sniffed. "As if I'd betray my Sevvy like that."

Remus and Sirius retched in tandem and Hermione giggled. "Okay, Juliet, let's go," she snickered, pushing Lavender up the stairs ahead of her. "I don't want to be here any longer than I have to be."

Their laughter tapered off as they climbed the stairs, Hermione following the canine's noses past the first floor up to the second. The flashes she caught of that floor showed a long hall of doors crammed together, which she assumed was the classrooms and dining hall. Altogether, there was something more *Oliver Twist* than *Annie* about the whole building, raising her hackles.

Lavender hacked suddenly, coming to a stop as she coughed and spluttered. Hermione didn't need to have canine senses to know why - an overpowering wave of the stench of rotting flesh washed over her as though it was a physical wall, and behind her Sirius let out a disgusted whimper. "Oh, Merlin," Hermione gasped, grateful for her less-sensitive senses, as they allowed her to shove past her werewolf companion and emerge on the third floor.

It looked the same as the others - abandoned - except for the smears of red on the wall. In front of her a mass of white-and-red lay on the floor, a heap she refused to look too closely at for fear she might vomit or cry. It had left the smears on the walls as it tried to run, she thought, before dying where it fell. The rest of the area was empty, aside from a trail of insects feasting on the flesh of the whatever-it-was. Tacky, red footprints marked the floor for a few feet, before vanishing completely - *magic*, Hermione noted.

Stepping over it, she noticed that all of the doors on this floor were wide open. The insides showed rooms as sparse and small as prison cells, with bare walls and minimum decoration, bunk-beds nailed to the walls. All were empty until she came upon the one closed door, half-way down the hall. Wards hummed from it - not malicious ones, but sentries. If it had been Riddle - and she rather thought it had - he'd *wanted* someone to find this place. *Wanted* someone to see what he'd left.

That meant the Horcrux wasn't here. She sighed, relieved, but the breath only clogged her throat with
the stench and she was gagging, trying not to throw up all over the scene. Remus was beside her, suddenly, with Lavender wrapping her arm around her waist, and then she was being guided outside to where Ginny paled at the sight of her face.

"Is she-?"

"Fine," Lavender said, lowering Hermione to sit on the top step of the stairs. "Perfectly fine, aren't you, Alpha?"

"I'm - not - Alpha," Hermione managed to choke out between gasping breaths of mercifully clean air, her head slowly ending its spin.

"Just slipped off the tongue," Lavender shrugged. She propped Hermione up by sitting next to her and pulling her limp body into the cradle of her arms.

"What happened?" Ginny asked, kneeling in front of them.

"Nothing," Hermione insisted, ignoring the flashing images of the man - she was quite sure it had been a man - curled up on the floor, face half-eaten by insects to show the shiny white of his skull beneath. "The smell got the better of me, that's all."

"No horcrux!" Sirius declared, sprinting out of the house and taking great gulps of air. Remus, on his heels, was a delicate shade of green. "Plenty of dead people, no Horcruxes."

"I didn't think so," Hermione muttered, turning her face into Remus's t-shirt when he took her away from Lavender. Mercifully, he smelled just as he always did - parchment, grass, and something undefinable that was simply Remus. "Were they…"

"Adults, all adults," Remus reassured her. "Probably the teachers, though a few of them…"

"No offense, Remus, but I really don't want to know," Lavender cut him off. "Where next, then?"

"The barn!" Ginny snapped.

"That's still faulty logic," Hermione snapped back.

"I don't care where's next as long as we get out of here," Sirius said loudly, draping his arm about Ginny's shoulders. For a second it looked as though she'd push him off, but she relaxed into it instead. "We couldn't pull down the Sentry wards, so He'll probably be here any minute."

"Back to the drawing board," Hermione grumbled, lurching to her feet. "Come on, then. Home."
Chapter Sixty-One: Confrontation

Chapter Summary

In which Lavender shows depth. For about ten minutes. It was painful.

Chapter Notes

Lavender, as much as I (and hopefully, you all) love her, has, admittedly, gone off the rails a bit. This would be the one situation in which we can cry "hormones!" and it would be valid, rather than disgustingly sexist, probably.
Enjoy!
Love always,
Eli x

The next night, Lavender stood outside Severus's house, twiddling her thumbs. She didn't want to make him mad, but at the same time…

What they'd seen that day had been horrific, and she'd not even looked at the worst of it. Not in person. However, she held in her hands evidence of the scene that Sirius had pilfered from the Aurors who'd raided the place overnight. In pictures, the horror seemed depleted; the blood less vibrant, the smell absent. Still, it was a striking scene. Horrifying. She flipped through the set of two Sirius had entrusted her with, nibbling on her lip anxiously. They weren't the worst, she knew, but the most shocking. When she'd asked for them, Sirius had demanded to know why, and when she'd told him he'd looked at her as if she'd gone insane.

"Why bother?" he'd asked, not dismissively but rather as if he was curious. "I know you like him and all, Lav, but... it's Snape. He's not going to care about a few Muggles."

"You underestimate him," Lavender had replied stubbornly, but now she had doubts.

Not about his goodness, because she could sense that in him. She'd never be matched with someone truly evil; not even the fickle Fates would do that to her. Morally ambivalent, sure, that was Severus all over, but not evil. And you'd have to be evil to look at these pictures and feel nothing. Feeling something, however, did not directly translate into taking action. She wasn't fooling herself into thinking that a single glance at these would have Severus wielding the sword of the righteous and storming into battle at her side, though she'd quite like that. Perhaps some humanity. That's what she wanted. Him to show her his humanity.

She took a deep breath, her hands shaking, and steeled herself. The lights of the house weren't on, but he'd be home soon. He never stayed out too long and it was nearly four in the morning; even if he didn't return, she'd have to be back at Solus House by seven, so that Hermione didn't panic everybody into thinking she'd been kidnapped by Dark Wizards with nefarious intentions.

Gods, how she wished Severus had nefarious intentions. Sadly, she rather thought that the level of dirt in his thoughts about her referred more to where he'd hide her body than what she could do with
In the distance, colour was blooming, the night slowly drawing back as the sun began its slow ascent, and she began to feel antsy. Had something happened to him? Had the Dark Lord found out about his stealing the diary? Oh, Merlin, what if he was, even now, being tortured to death and here she was, sitting about like a ninny-

The pop of apparition came from down the street and, instead of leaping down and stalking to meet him, as she usually did, her anxiety restrained her to simply turning her head in his direction. He appeared, skulking with his head bent over a sheet of parchment. In the low light, she caught the flash of his teeth as he worked through some idea in his mind. Relief washed through her, followed quickly by affection - from the time they'd spent together, acrimonious though it might be, she'd learned a lot; the most endearing of which she found to be his habit of mouthing words when he thought particularly hard. She hopped down as he passed her, though it took a moment for him to notice. Using this to her advantage, she steeled herself for the confrontation.

Severus stopped in the street, holding back a snarl. Again. He wasn't surprised, and, to his horror, even his irritation was starting to feel hopelessly contrived. This made him all the more annoyed, the emotion showing in his voice when he spoke.

"Will you just sod off?!" he demanded, spinning on the spot to face his stalker.

"You're not very nice," she said, strolling out of the shadows with a cocky smile. Today she wore a dark purple that would make her look distressingly attractive, were it not for the bright gold ribbons she'd threaded through her hair, which looked immature.

Or so he told himself.

"I'm not supposed to be nice," he snapped, folding his arms. "I'm a greasy git. Note the 'git' part. It's three letters, I'm sure even you can understand it."

She allowed this with an annoyingly knowing smirk. "I'm beginning to think you get meaner the more you like a person." She grinned, flashing all of her teeth. "That's fine with me – as long as you remember that I bite."

He blinked. "That's a very poor joke."

"Well, I couldn't afford the expensive ones." He stared at her, his face completely blank even as she scrutinised him, hoping to spot - there, was that it?! - just a hint of reluctant amusement in his eyes. "Oh, come on," she groaned after a long minute, stamping her foot. "I'm funny, goddamnit!"

"Are you?" he drawled, raising an eyebrow. He'd affected that expression from a professor he'd had in his first two years at Hogwarts who'd been able to make students cry with just a twitch. While not entirely up to scratch - yet - he knew it triggered a fear response, a fact proved by the amount of firsties he'd been able to make whimper in his own seventh year.

Lavender, of course, was not normal enough to react in the conventional manner, instead eyeing him petulantly. "Yes! Ask anyone."

He thought for a moment about pointing out their utter lack of acquaintances, her being a time-travelling werewolf who appears to have kidnapped his best friend, but decided against giving her such an opening. "Did you just come here to crack jokes?" Severus asked, though Merlin only knew why he bothered. It did seem to be her modus operandi - pop into his life willy-nilly and provide snarky commentary. If she wasn't his stalker and, quite possibly, mentally ill, and, also, if he
happened to be suffering some medical condition himself, he might be pushed into finding it charming.

Salazar, he even had to stifle a smile or two now.

It wasn't his fault she was good company, though. So he couldn't possibly be blamed for that. In fact, the face of nearly intolerable perkiness and unrivalled eagerness, he was holding up quite well. It didn't hurt that he was, somewhat guiltily, enjoying the experience of being pursued for once in his life.

He did keep a firm line, just in case he was tempted to get carried away. And that line was a word, written in bold black ink - WEREWOLF. No matter how superficially charming, attractive, and yes, okay, mildly humorous the girl might be, she'd never be charming enough to make him forget that once a month she became a salivating, murderous monster.

He squinted at her, trying to align the two pictures in his brain. Vivacious Lavender and the furry beast. She looked at him oddly as he did so, her eyes sparkling with wit and life, making it much too difficult to think of them furious, feral and empty of intelligence. Her lips, plump and painted pink, with a sheen from her tongue - pretty, but he'd spotted the canines behind them, sharp even in human form. Now, if he could only see them flecked with saliva and foam, the signs of an insane wolf…

"No," she replied, and it took a moment for him to remember what he'd asked, distracted as he was by the way her lips curved around the word, looking soft as petals (or some other insipid, romantic twaddle that he couldn't believe he'd had enough of a lapse in judgement to even think). He dragged his eyes up to meet hers, which had flattened, seriousness infecting them. Severus realised that he'd never seen her serious before - not really. She was always, always faintly mocking, her mouth curled into a smile. Somehow, solemnity transformed her face - she looked older, wiser. Her eyes, which he'd always considered frivolous (who has purple eyes?), were more solid, a darker tone, and he noticed for the first time that instead of a black ring around her pupils, her eyes were flecked with gold. *Entrancing* was the word he'd use, if he was feeling poetic.

"I'm here about these," she said, and handed him two sheets of paper. Obligingly, Severus took a quick look - and then a longer one, and even longer, until he finally made heads and tails from what he was seeing and bile raced its way up his throat.

"There were six of them," Lavender continued, tripping over the words as she fought her instinct to comfort him, to take away his pain and terror. Her nails were embedded in her palm to keep herself from snatching the image back, and the only way she managed to placate her wolf was to ensure her that this course of action would be better for him in the long run. "Seven, including the escapee. The man - boy, really; no older than you - who had been hit with an Entrail-Expelling Curse, and was desperately running for help. He died where he fell; slowly. Painfully. The others - they were trapped in a room together. Tortured. Terrified. *Muggles*, Severus, with no defense, no idea what was going on..."

"Stop," Severus demanded sharply, holding up a hand for silence in a gesture so familiar Lavender found herself responding as if she'd been in his classroom just yesterday. Back straight, hair tucked behind her ears, eyes bright and alert (even if *she* wasn't). "Why do you think I need to know this?"

"Because you need to know what sort of man you're following," Lavender told him, not without sympathy. *The sort of man you're choosing over me*, she didn't add, because it seemed an unfair comparison. Still, it was true. "I'm not naive enough to think you haven't seen some horrible things by his side, but this..."
She trailed off, watching him. He was staring blankly at the images, no longer projecting any emotion, just. Nothing. "All muggles?"

"All of them. They think they were the staff. The orphanage was closed in the late fifties, and they had been killed in the early sixties. The Aurors think they were lured back somehow." Listen to her, rattling off facts dispassionately as if she were a regular Hermione Granger.

Severus appeared to force a breath, his face paler than usual. "They were there over ten years? Nobody found them?"

"Nobody bothered to look," Lavender said sadly. It was harrowing. She couldn't imagine a world like that, where there was nobody who cared to search for her if she went missing. The oldest, the Matron, had been in her eighties - imagine living to your eighties without forming meaningful enough relationships that they would care when you died. The staff appeared to have been as alone in the world as the orphans they cared for.

"What makes you think this has anything to do with the Dark Lord?" Severus asked, though she knew him well enough to know that he was going through the motions. As such, she would try to be delicate and empathetic in her reply, and even took an extra minute to form a perfectly diplomatic response that would get her point across and, at the same time, take no risk of offending him.

Proud of herself, she opened her mouth and -

"Well, Gosh. I don't know. Maybe it's because it was his orphanage? Where he grew up? They were locked in his old room, warded with his magic. But, you know, in the face of this evidence your scepticism now has me doubting. Perhaps there is another explanation, after all. I mean, the odds of two unrelated people sharing a magical signature are only a billion to one, and sure, there are only a few million magical people in the world, but let's ignore the statistics; what was I thinking, to blame it all on your sweet, innocent Dark Lord?"

It seemed she wasn't fit for diplomacy, after all. Severus gaped at her - actually gaped, which she appreciated, after spending all of this time trying to shake his composure - eyes all wide and mouth slack. He recovered quickly but she'd have the image in her mind forever and that was priceless.

He chose his words carefully. "I see your point," he began, gazing at her nose with extraordinary focus. Despite knowing he wasn't actually looking at her nose, she started to feel self conscious, though that was easily cured with one long gander at his. He clenched his jaw, something flickering across his face, and Lavender got a peculiar flash of intuition that informed her he was about to say something outrageous.

"If I kissed you, would you leave this alone?"

Lavender stuttered to a stop, her eyes widening. Severus looked bland - bored, even - staring at her with faintly hooded eyes. Not hooded from attraction, but calculation. He was thinking of kissing her as a sacrifice, to get her to stop talking. Well, that just wouldn't do. She bristled. "No," she sniffed. "You'd be surprised how many people have tried that over the years and it never works. What is it with men and trying? I'd just talk directly into your mouth, which would be awkward and embarrassing for the both of us, what with the vibrations, the excess saliva and - oh, merlin - the echo."

He huffed, and there was a definite glimmer in his eyes despite his apparent irritation. His lip twitched and a rusty sort of cough erupted from his throat, shocking even him.

*He was laughing!*
Lavender giggled at the sound, which had him scowling, which only made her giggle more. Lavender had once been informed by a society Matron that she had a "particularly contagious laugh", and that worked to her advantage now - even as she snickered, his face was loosening up, his eyes beginning to shine, his coughing taking on more of a definite form. And his laughter was lovely; once he got into it it was a rolling, musical thing that washed across her in waves of melodic beauty, spurring a shiver to run down her spine, causing her laughter to take on a huskier pitch. It was, without a doubt, the most attractive thing about him, and if only he'd done it as a teacher he'd have had scores more students crushing on him than even Lockhart (now that she thought about it, however, she distinctly remembered a month or two in second year after Lockhart was defeated in duelling club when she'd swoon whenever Snape looked at her, previously locked away in the deepest darkest depths of her mind, likely due to the sheer trauma of the experience. She hadn't been the only one, though - she remembered black hearts being doodled in Parvati's notebook, and Susan Bones had gone through a goth stage).

The downshot of this was that now she truly regretted telling him not to kiss her. The growing need to feel his lips moving against hers was stirred further by his sex appeal rising three-thousand notches, and the she-wolf, over her stunned reaction to his voice's beauty, was raking at her self-control and demanding she take him for herself. It was proving difficult to remove her gaze from his lips, which were a pale purple sort of colour, in keeping with the rest of his vampiric visage. They glistened in the moonlight, which somehow managed to make everything look more romantic, even Severus's permanent scowl.

It was lucky that their entire courtship was conducted by moonlight, then, because none of it had been very romantic. Naturally, this thought led to another, and another, and then, in true Lavender fashion, she forgot that she was here to bully Severus into joining their team and was getting quite het-up over her new realisation.

Filled with indignation, she frowned at him and said, "you know, Sevvy, we've been dating-"

"We are not dating-"

"-for nearly a month now and you've not yet bought me dinner." Lavender shot him a chastening look from beneath her brows that somehow managed to make him feel guilty. "I'm hard done by. Really. I spend my every night with you -"

"I didn't ask you to!"

"-and still no dinner! What does a girl have to do to get some loving?" She leaned back against the fence, manfully not wincing when a splinter jabbed her in the kidneys. It was as if the man had never heard the phrase 'home improvement'. "I have cleaned your home, brought you tea, taken a dangerous magical artefact off your hands, brought you food, and even laundered your weird Death robe-thingies, and what do I get in return?"

She stopped to await his reply, and he rolled his eyes. "You brought me raw cookie dough you'd robbed from your elves. Once. And - wait - exactly when did you launder my robes?"

Lavender scoffed. "You always get caught up on the most irrelevant of details!" Okay, she'd cleaned his robes that one time, when he'd passed out in the garden and she'd had to help him inside. She hadn't done anything weird, just tucked him into bed and cleaned the robes. That was it. She didn't sniff his underwear, lick all of his food or nick any of his personal effects, so she didn't understand why he was looking at her like she was a strange human being. Or, strange werewolf. She doubted he considered her a human being, to be honest, and that about broke her heart. "Everybody loves raw cookie dough. Anyway, you're missing the point. I do all of this, and you still treat me like a leper!"
"You're my stalker," Severus said. Lavender rolled her eyes. She'd not been simply 'his stalker' for at least a week, not since he started calling her by name. Sometimes, when he was in a good mood, they'd actually have conversations - interesting ones, about charms (he invented them, she tweaked them) and politics (Lavender had never been so interested in the inner workings of the Ministry) and the tacky romance novels she loved and he still denied he'd ever touched even though she'd seen the worn stack beside his bed (not werewolf erotica, sadly, but there were plenty of dragons, vampires and fainting virgins). They were great, could last for hours upon hours, but then at a certain point Severus would suddenly remember who and what she was and close up, like a clam.

Again; if only she could get him to see Lavender the human more than Lavender the werewolf, she thought she might actually have a fighting chance.

"Not a stalker," she said, grinning. "More a nighttime companion."

He snorted and rolled his eyes again. "Fine." Passing back the pictures she'd all but forgotten about, he shook his head and pushed a strand of hair behind his ears (which were not as large as his nose, more average-sized, and quite cute). "This has nothing to do with those, nor your persistence in pursuing me," he said warningly, frowning severely. "I want to be sure you're quite clear on that point. I would have come to this conclusion on my own, without your continued pestering."

Bemused, Lavender shrugged. "I have no idea what you're saying, but you can be sure that when I ask Hermione to translate I will put extra emphasis on that particular string of nonsense."

"Indeed." Severus took a moment to close his eyes and bring several deep breaths in through his nose, pinching its bridge as he did so. His mouth worked, counting to ten? Only the Gods knew why. "Hermione is your leader?" he finally asked, his voice strained. Oddly, he looked down at the sheets of paper he'd been reading as he arrived. "The one with the abominable hair?"

"Indeed," Lavender mimicked him, growing bored enough to risk his ire by doing so. "What about her?"

He paused, then, with his whole body tensed as if he were about to do something he might later regret, he said, "I'd like to meet her. Again. About the possibility of-"

Whatever he would have said was lost to the air as Lavender finally grasped his meaning and squealed, long and excitedly, flapping her arms because stillness couldn't contain her sheer joy. "Yes, yes, yes!" she shrieked, dancing a jig on the spot and only just restraining herself from kissing him. "I knew you'd come through, I knew it, I just knew it!"

Unable to stop it, she smacked a loud kiss on his cheek and danced again. "You can't take it back now!" she giggled when he looked as if he would backtrack. "We'll be here within the day!" And then, not giving him a chance to do anything foolish like attempt to take it back anyway, she apparated away.
Chapter Sixty-Two: Interruptions

Chapter Summary

Hermione despairs over Lavender ever learning the meaning of the word 'private'.

"My parents would kill me for this," Hermione observed suddenly, pressing up into Remus as he mouthed a trail along her collarbone. "Literally kill me. When I first asked to stay at the Burrow my dad about had a heart attack, realising it was a house full of boys. So many opportunities for me to be despoiled!"

"Oh?" he asked, not really listening but still encouraging her to talk, if she needed to. Which she rather did. It was the early hours of the morning, and at that time she was somewhat prone to introspection.

"But then, they'd not understand it, would they?" She followed that thought. Her parents were scientists of the Christian variety, followers and believers in the Teleological argument, which stated that the intricacies of nature - and therefore, whatever science discovered - was merely more evidence of God's glory, for such brilliance could only occur by design, and not coincidence. Her magic, however, not being explainable and categorizable, had always left them faintly bewildered, and loath to believe anything about it without three unimpeachable sources to support. To her, the mating bond was a lifelong commitment; as good as, and in fact, better than, marriage. To them, however, it would be nothing but an unsightly scar.

In fact, she could almost imagine her mother's horrified expression should she know exactly how Hermione spent her evenings, especially if they found out that she had no intention of marrying - not that it was possible, the law being what it was.

Her father would probably faint. That image brought a nostalgic giggle to her throat, and when Remus looked at her questioningly, she repeated her thoughts aloud.

He looked at her face for a moment, trying to gauge her mood, then, seeing that she didn't consider the conversation of overly much importance, reapplied himself to his kisses after a noncommittal murmur.

"It's funny that I can think about them without getting upset -" Hermione began again, cut off as Remus let out a sigh and flopped onto his back.

"Hermione," he said solemnly, moss-green eyes peering over at her through the semi-darkness. "Must you bring your parents into the bed when I'm trying to 'despoil' you? It's really, very distracting."

She laughed breathily, especially hard as he traced the ticklish spot beneath her arm with his finger. "And doing such a thorough job of it," she muttered, smiling when he looked up at her with wickedly gleaming eyes. She loved this. She felt so safe, so comfortable, and she knew that while some of it could be attributed to the mark on her neck, most of it was simply them, the way they were together. Everything felt settled, the world not as encroaching: here, in their bed, in his arms, she could even talk about her parents without so much as a flinch, never mind the uncontrollable bawling which had characterised her emotions toward their loss up to this point. She still loved her parents,
missed them, but the guilt and loss had alleviated as she assimilated into this time and came to terms
with her new reality.

Much of which she had to thank Remus for, so, not being terribly good with the spoken word, she
abandoned her musing about her parents and set about thanking him in other, more creative ways…

Only to be interrupted by a banging at the door.

"Tuck away all your wobbly bits, I'm coming in!" Lavender's voice cried, almost covered by
Remus's indignant curse.

"I was enjoying that," he pouted as Hermione came back out of the duvet to join him, pressing a kiss
to her hair. Hermione scowled, slamming the door open in a show of wandless, silent magic she'd be
completely flummoxed by if only she wasn't so terribly frustrated.

"Is nothing sacred?" She demanded as Lavender was revealed, looking at where the door hinges had
been yanked out of the wall with widened eyes. "This is our bedroom, you know, not Kings
Cross! Our, in this case, referring to myself and Remus, and not you, despite how much bloody time
you spend in here with us!"

Lavender dragged her eyes away and glanced to them, apparently ignoring Hermione's tantrum
because she simply smiled triumphantly. Hermione was beginning to wonder if perhaps Luna's
personality was catching, because Lavender seemed completely out of it. "I did it!" she proclaimed,
grinning maniacally.

"I swear to all the gods, Lavender Brown, if you came in here to boast about finally getting into
Snape's outdated breeches I am going to
murder
you." Lavender blew a raspberry, because ten years of etiquette lessons appeared to have just bounced
right off her. "If I'd managed that, I certainly wouldn't be here. I'd be with Severus, luxuriating in the
aftermath of what would surely be spectacular love-making. Don't you gag, Remus Lupin!"

"I don't see how I could possibly not," Remus grimaced, Hermione giggled, while Lavender looked
spectacularly unimpressed. Oh. Hermione winced at even saying that word in her head, now. She'd
have to scrub it from her vocabulary. Lavender continued after an appropriately chastening pause.
"As it is, I've not managed that, though I'm pretty sure I'm close."

"Not close enough to visit him in daylight," Hermione pointed out. So she was vindictive, and what?
Everyone loved that about her.

Lavender rolled her eyes, turning to Remus (and pointedly turning away from Hermione). "You
must be really good to get her this pissy."

Raising his hands in supplication, Remus gave an amused smile. "It wasn't me."

"I'm a giver," Hermione snapped at her perplexed expression.

"I could have guessed," Lavender snarked back. "Anyway, Severus wants to meet with you."

"Tell him to sod off," Hermione growled, rolling over to bury her head in the pillow. She might be a
morning person, but she was not a stopped-in-the-middle-of-sex person, and really, it had happened
one too many times.

"I think he knows something," Lavender blathered on, once more oblivious to Hermione's mood.
"I think he knows rather a lot, actually," she hit right back in her dryest voice. Actually, the more she sassed Lavender, the better she was beginning to feel. A miracle cure, indeed.

"It's important, I know it. I could just see it in his face."

"Do you know it, Lav, or is it the wolf making you think you do because you want to?" That was Remus, wading into the discussion and talking like a reasonable human being, despite him definitely having lost the most through Lavender's interruption, considering where Hermione's tongue had been. He held up his hands defensively when Lavender looked fit to snarl. "Don't take it the wrong way, Lavender. I've been there too. Still am there, sometimes," he muttered the last with a heart-melting smile in Hermione's direction, which did a lot to soften her mood.

"No, I'm pretty sure he actually does," Lav nodded. "Otherwise, why would he have changed his mind?"

"Because he likes to mess with people?" Remus offered. Hermione, unable to let that stand, turned her head and reluctantly rejoined the conversation.

"No, he's pragmatic, is Snape. He wouldn't risk losing potential allies when everything goes…" she tried to think of a proper term that didn't involve swearing, but Lavender promptly jumped in with "tits up!". "Yes, that," Hermione rolled her eyes. "If he's really approaching us, then he definitely knows something. Still, I don't think we should go to him immediately."

Lavender frowned, propping her hands on her hips and giving them disappointment alá Mrs Weasley. "And why not?"

"Because, just because he says 'jump' doesn't mean we should jump."

"Don't you mean ask 'how high'?" Remus asked bemusedly, and was treated to matching sardonic looks from the women.

"'To ask 'how high' is to question me, Mr. Weasley, and that would be most impudent. Do you know what I do to impudent students? I should give you detention, but that would force me to suffer your presence longer than strictly necessary and I have no sins to atone for today.'" Lavender repeated the entire monologue, complete with eerily accurate inflection, before Hermione could get a word in. Then she blinked, startled at her own memory.

"O… K…" Remus shuddered. "For a moment I almost thought he was in the room."

"Now that would be the final straw," Hermione snarled. "That man, no matter how much I respect him, will never set foot in my bedroom."

"Is it wrong that I'm relieved?" Lavender asked; Remus shared a wry look with her and shook his head. "You have a point, I suppose. Best to let him know we're not pushovers!"

"Because where, oh where, could he possibly have gotten that impression?" She sighed, draping her arms over her face. "We'll discuss it with the rest of the group in the morning. Or, maybe, the afternoon. After we've all had some sleep."

"And other things," Remus murmured too low for Lavender to hear, provoking a rush of heat to flush through Hermione's body. Not a blush, because she hadn't blushed since he'd marked her, as if there was some enzyme in his saliva that made her impervious to embarrassment (at least as pertained to their sex life - she thought it might have something to do with how wolves were exhibitionist by nature, but didn't want to explore that thought any further), but a more welcome heat at the reminder that he was Remus; sweet, gentle and kind, but also Remus; earthy and enthusiastic when it came to
their couplings. She realised that a part of her indignation could be attributed to a confused sort of jealousy over how easily he'd brushed off her earlier ministrations, and his enthusiasm for their continuance brought it to her attention even as it was washed away.

It was good to know that some things essential to her character (even if it was self-esteem issues, which, all things considered, she'd rather were not) didn't change with his bite. And even though the whole experience was alien, she looked forward to finding more.

"James will have some good advice, I think," Hermione said, shaking those thoughts away. "I know he hates Snape, but as he pointed out not long ago, he also knows him very well. If we can persuade him to use that knowledge for good, then he'll have the perfect solution to our problem."

Lavender looked unconvinced but agreed anyway, and finally began to back towards the door, with a chirpy "I'll leave you to... whatever it was you were doing. Be safe, kids, and, Hermione? I expect details later!"

She was out of the door, with the wooden slab propped up against the frame, so quickly that Hermione's pillow (the projectile closest to hand) only bounced harmlessly back into the room. There was a beat of silence, after which Remus's hand slid slowly around her waist. "Now," he said, his voice gravelly in that way that made her knees weak, "I do believe you were thanking me for something?"

"You're joking," James said, gawping across the table at a jubilant Lavender, who had burst through the door with glorious news. It seemed she was constitutionally incapable of making a normal entrance into a room, always coming in a storm of adverbs and glitter. In fact, Ginny was quite sure that if it were at all appropriate (and Hermione wasn't here) Lavender's first order of business would have been to enlist a House-Elf to throw confetti immediately preceding her arrival.

"Do I look like I'm joking?" She asked, gesturing towards the grin she'd been unable to lose. "No. Severus wants to meet with Hermione. He did, specifically, say Hermione, by the way. Well, not Hermione, but 'the one with the abominable hair' can hardly apply to anyone else."

Lily rose her eyebrows, plucking affectionately at James's ebony bird's nest. Hermione smiled behind her hand. "I think if he were referring to James, Lavender would have returned with more vehement words than 'abominable'. Besides, it has always been his descriptor for me, next to 'insufferable' and 'know-it-all', though I suppose the last is a noun."

Ginny snickered. It was true that Professor Snape had always been the most inventive with his insults, and generally focused on one favourite over the others. Gin, for example, had been "less of a disappointment than her brother, but only marginally", affectionately shortened to "insolent girl-child" purely because, or so she supposed, he'd already run out of clever ways to refer to soulless, impoverished girings by the time Ron had been sorted. After the war, some people had looked at her (nearly impeccable; she knew how to follow instructions, she just chose not to) potion grades and suggested lewdly that perhaps Professor Snape had transferred his obsession with Lily Evans onto the other pretty redhead in his classroom. It had taken everything she had not to laugh them right off the astronomy tower, instead simply pointing out exactly how many ginger, auburn, and strawberry blonde women had passed through the halls during his tenure and smiling blankly.

(RED hair was a common commodity in pure- and half-bloods, what with all the Weasley, Bones and Prewett blood going around. Hermione had once calculated that over twenty-two percent of Hogwarts students in the last twenty years were redheads, some even with green eyes; most of whom still failed potions.)
"He must have liked you," Lily said with an impish grin. "He could have said much worse."

"Less liking and more tolerating, I think. I was the lesser of three evils, even if I did keep robbing him blind." Hermione smiled angelically.

"The Gillyweed?" Ginny asked, cocking her head. She'd never quite believed their 'the house-elf did it' story; it was the pure-blood equivalent of 'the dog ate my homework'.

Hermione shook her head, "Polyjuice."

Ginny quirked an eyebrow. "Really…"

"As charming as I find memory lane," Sirius said from beside Ginny (a position he'd taken up the second he'd left the orphanage, to the point that he'd even crawled into her bed after threatening to sleep over her feet in dog form, only leaving to go to work and use the toilet, though he was loath to separate even for the latter). She was mildly irritated by his constant proximity, a feeling compounded by his comment the other day, but also flattered, which only irritated her more.

Apparently she had nightmares. She'd not noticed it, but he had. And, in his typically delicate way, had told her that he wasn't letting her see the dead people because "you're violent enough in your sleep without adding this to the equation".

Despite knowing he'd said it to give her an honourable out, and it said so much about how well he knew her that he'd do it that way, she'd still taken great pleasure in waiting for him to fall nearly unconscious that night before 'accidentally' kicking him in the kidneys.

Not hard. Just… hard enough to make a point.

He had his revenge, anyway; even now, her breasts still stung from his attentions, in an entirely pleasurable way. When she'd woken up that morning she'd been surprised to find them bruised, but he'd been only too happy to help rub in the ointment.

Their relationship was truly disturbingly satisfying on a level Ginny didn't want to contemplate.

(Though she could be grateful they weren't Hermione and Remus, who had slept in until eleven that morning after suffering coitus interruptus one time too many. That Ginny wasn't the leader had never been such good news until right then, because if she was violent in her sleep, that would be nothing compared to how she'd react if someone deprived her of an orgasm.)

She was so lost in her convoluted web of thought that she didn't even realise she'd stopped listening until Sirius nearly perforated her eardrum with his shout. "NO!" He yelled vehemently, ignorant of Ginny's wince. Subtly, she widened the distance between their chairs and glanced about for any clues as to how she should take this new development.

Hermione was cringing, but resignedly, so Ginny thought it was probably her that had gotten him so het-up. Luna, of course, looked only faintly surprised, while Lavender looked a mix of furious and delighted. From this, Ginny could easily discern that she hadn't missed the whole conversation about Snape; not if Lavender had edged her delight for being in the presence of chaos with the sort of righteous anger only insulting Snape could bring out in her.

To support this conclusion, James also looked faintly outraged, and Remus uncomfortable, as if caught between his loyalty to his marauding pals and his life-long mate.

"He is not setting foot in this house," Sirius said, stabbing at the table with his forefinger.
"Sirius…"

"No!" He slumped back in his chair, relaxing back with the authority of a man who was sat in his own house, with the rest of them at his mercy. "Do whatever you like with Snape, just don't bring him here. I can't be nice to the bloke, but I can't be cruel either if he's just not here."

"If you-" Lavender began, only to go mute when Hermione flapped her hand in her direction. "I suppose you have a point," Hermione sighed, propping her chin on her fist. "But where else can we see him? I'm not going back to his - he's much too comfortable in his own territory, we'll not get anywhere. He's just arrogant enough to meet us on our turf, though - and thank the gods age hasn't burned it out of him yet, either, or we'd be truly stuck."

"He'd take one look at this place and refuse to come in," Sirius pointed out. "It has 'Black' written all over it. Literally - the word is carved into the foundations in about a hundred languages, most of them dead. He's a prick, not an idiot."

Hermione stared at him for a moment before dropping her head and swearing. "Then where can we go?"

There was a beat, and then: "Our house?" Luna suggested. Ginny floundered in confusion for a moment, Hermione doing the same, before at once they both blurted out an "oh!".

"I keep forgetting we have one of those," Hermione said, shaking her head incredulously. "Not surprising, given we've never been," Lavender pointed out. "We keep mysteriously forgetting we ever planned to." At this, she glared pointedly at Luna, who looked as innocent as a newborn lamb when she shrugged. Even Regulus didn't seem to believe her, raising a single eyebrow as the only evidence he'd ever been listening in the first place, considering how he had his nose buried in a NEWT Transfiguration textbook. Sometimes he was so mature it was difficult to remember he was supposed to be in school right then.

"It's time," Luna said unapologetically. "I think you'll like it."

"I think it'll be godawful, personally, it being a Lovegood house and all," Lavender said with the exact same tone to her voice. "But I suppose we have no choice."

"Okay, so we'll bring Severus to that house. How?"

"Lavender, obviously," Ginny said, nodding to the blonde.

"And when?" Hermione tilted her head, eyes squinted in thought. "Not today, nor, I think, tomorrow…"

"Tomorrow evening." James nodded as he counted backwards in his head. "Yeah. That'll be forty-eight hours, a respectable length of time without allowing him to change his mind, and not too desperate, so he won't be able to take advantage of you."

"Actually, I think that's perfect," Hermione muttered, staring at James as though he was a fascinating new species of animal, the way she tended to do when someone else was unexpectedly clever.

Their talk was interrupted by a rapping at the window, and Sirius frowned when he saw the figure beyond. "James, isn't that your mum's owl?"

James leaped to his feet immediately, lunging for the message. The owl, disturbed by his vehemence, flared its wings in irritation. Luna threw a strip of bacon from across the room; the owl caught it in a
quick hop and gobbled it down, cooing its thanks.

"Shit," James swore suddenly, paling out. The letter slipped from his fingers to land on the table, and immediately they all leaned forward to read.

*Dearest James,*

*I believe I have recovered something that belongs to you. The elves are currently looking after it, but I'd be much obliged should you remove it from the premises. One cannot imagine the diseases one might contract from continued exposure.*

*In any case, I do believe that you and your delightful fiancee are overdue for a visit! Your father and I would be so pleased to see you again.*

*Love, Mum.*

"Oh shit," Sirius spat, eyes widening. Hermione gave a surprised whimper, and Remus choked. James had frozen, and Ginny found her breath caught in her throat. That letter could only mean one thing. She was pretty sure it wasn't good news.
Hermione buttoned up her coat and rifled through her bag while Lavender checked her curls in the mirror. Behind them, Luna, Regulus and Ginny lounged on a bench, watching them work. "Are you sure about this?" Ginny asked, her voice a tad anxious.

"Me? Of course." Hermione rearranged a few books, more to keep her eyes down than anything else. She didn't want Ginny to read her nerves. It was hard not to be nervous, after how the last visit went. "How about you?"

Ginny flashed a wan smile. "I'll be fine. I've got Regulus with me." She punched the Slytherin in the shoulder affectionately, ignoring how he turned doleful eyes in her direction. "And Luna. Don't worry about us - you do your job, we'll do ours."

Hermione fought not to grind her teeth in frustration. She knew Ginny's flippancy was nought but a facade, but the facade still grated on her. They had an equally important job as her this evening - they were to break into Gaunt House and steal back Hufflepuff's cup, if it was there. Ginny seemed to catch her moment of doubt, because she smiled reassuringly.

"He didn't think much of Hufflepuff, nor his father, so it makes a twisted sort of sense, plus he'll have moved it out when he moved in in our time, so that would explain it being put in The Lestrange Vault."

Hermione grimaced. It was sound logic, she had to admit, but there was something bothering her. A niggle at the back of her mind. Foreboding keeping her on her toes.

"Alright. I'll leave that to you, then." She pushed away her concern and turned to Lavender. "Ready?"

"Of course!" Lavender grinned her demented, excited grin, and Hermione couldn't help but smile too.

"Peter," James said, his voice level, if a bit cold. Sirius chose not to talk, for fear he might shout, or, even more embarrassingly, cry.

Their friend, the final quarter of their whole, their faithful, ever present companion, sat on the bench in the kitchen digging into a roast with gusto. He had a splodge of gravy on his collar and he paused
with his fork, loaded with soggy Yorkshire pudding and mashed potato, halfway to his mouth.

He didn't look at all different, Sirius observed. Usually when one of their number came back from an elongated mission (infrequent though they were, with Remus disqualified due to his lycanthropy, Sirius needed with the Aurors and James banned from leaving Lily for any time longer than a week) they were generally disheveled and worse for wear. Peter remained plump and perfectly groomed, with the obvious exception of the gravy stain.

However, when he turned to look at James, there was a disturbing light in his eyes. "Prongs!" he yelped, dropping his fork and springing to his feet. "Padfoot, you're alright!"

"What?" Sirius asked, bemused.

"When you weren't here I was concerned. Have you really moved out?" Peter looked between them with a frown. "Without telling me?"

"We didn't know where you were," James defended himself.

"Right," Peter grimaced. "Bloody Dumbledore, sent me off to the wilds of Wales for a few weeks, then…" The light suddenly left his eyes, leaving him looking pale, shriveled and somewhat haunted. "My mum… She…" he stopped there, pressing his lips together until they were white with pressure.

Seeing him sat there, so small and pitiful, cracked something in Sirius's chest and he felt ridiculous. This was Peter, for Merlin's sake. He'd been their friend for years. Sure, he was a bit odd, but who of their number wasn't? It didn't make him a Death Eater.

They'd only known the girls for a few months, and while he trusted them completely, they didn't know much about this world. And how far in the future were they from? Twenty years. A lot could change in twenty years. A lot had changed, in their time, from the world he knew. It didn't mean that all of the information applied; take their horcrux hunt, for example! Take James and Lily, who'd binned their plans for an extravagant wedding. Marlene, who they'd saved.

That Peter had been a Death Eater then he wasn't disputing, but none of them knew why he'd crossed over. Nor when. Perhaps it would have happened next year, or the year after. In which case, Peter was just their friend; lonely and grieving.

"Oh, Pete," he found himself saying, hitching himself up on the bench beside him and giving him a sympathetic pat on the back. "I'm sorry mate. What happened?"

Pete gave a watery snort, shooting Sirius a grateful look when he handed over a napkin. "Dad says she just went. In her sleep, so it wasn't painful. We had the funeral and everyone in the village came." He sobbed again, and wailed out, "she was so loved!"

"Mate!" James cried, taking the seat beside Peter while Remus sat somewhat gingerly opposite. "Why didn't you write us?"

"I didn't know what to say, and besides, you were so busy, with the war, and what happened before I left…" he wiped his eyes on the back of his hands, seemingly forgetting about the napkin in his grief.

"We'd never be too busy for you, Peter, you know that," Remus chastised softly from across the table, his green eyes as earnest as they'd ever been. Apparently, he'd come to the same conclusion as Sirius - or, rather, he'd simply forgotten about their suspicion in his haste to comfort a friend. That was a very Remus thing to do.
"I know. I just wasn't thinking straight... it was mum, you know?"

Sirius did not know. Apart from a vague horror, he'd not felt anything when his mum had died. Not even relief, as he'd always expected. It was just... Odd that his childhood nightmare was no longer in the world. That he was free. But he knew it was different for Peter. They'd only met his mum a few times, but Sirius remembered her as a warm, plump woman who didn't stint on the physical affection. "I'm so sorry, Wormtail; we're so sorry."

Pete sniffled a few more times then blew his nose loudly into the napkin. One of the elves squirrelled it away immediately, and Pete wiped his eyes on the back of his hand. "That's enough of that, I reckon. What's been going on with you lot?"

James, Sirius and Remus exchanged uncertain looks over Pete's head as he took another hulking mouthful of potatoes. "Nothing much," James replied, slowly. "Lily and I have put off the wedding. You know how it is, the war and all... didn't want to make us more of a target."

"I'm almost finished my Auror training," Sirius said, puffing up his chest in pride. "Just a few more months left! I'll be a real Auror by September."

"Yeah," James snorted, "Fast-Tracking, because of the war and all."

"Oi, at least I'm getting there. And you all thought I couldn't."

"It's true that you're not good with rules," Remus smirked.

"Whereas you're all about them, Moony. I hate to think what your sex life is like - actually, I might do... does Hermione smack your arse when you're bad?" Sirius grinned wickedly.

"Who's Hermione?" Peter asked suddenly, and Sirius paled at his slip. Remus stiffened.

"Nobody," he replied, his voice icy. "Not to you."

Sirius blanched when, instead of looking offended like he would have a few months before, Peter got a calculating glint in his eye. But that wasn't so odd, was it? His mum had just died - that gave him license to be a bit strange. It didn't mean he was a Death Eater, for goodness sake.

"Moony has a girlfriend? Wait - I've never heard of a Hermione? Did she go to Hogwarts?"

"No," Remus replied reluctantly. "Ilvermorny. She moved back to England recently."

"And you got in there already? Good on you, Moony." Peter smiled widely, that disconcerting gleam in his eyes, still. "I feel like I'm missing out, never having met her. How did you meet?"

"At the shop," Remus said, following the script they'd set up. "She likes to read."

Peter didn't seem to be catching Remus's chilly demeanor because he just continued, but the more questions he asked, the more irony he pushed into his tone, and the more uncomfortable James and Sirius came. Until the moment he turned to James, looked him in the eye and asked, "speaking of mysterious visitors from far-away lands, what happened to that fated weapon you landed yourselves?"

Severus found himself in front of a cottage, all white brick and thatched roof. When he'd received the address, he'd done a bit of thinking about what he expected - and it hadn't been this. With two floors
it had the sort of width that spoke of it once being a farmhouse, an image further encouraged by the acres of fields that cocooned it. Sunflowers blossomed in the garden despite it being Spring, alongside tulips of every colour, and odd looking sprouts that he could only assume were root vegetables. A shed was just visible at the back of a lengthy garden with an odd shaped swing, red and white as though it had been pulled from the pages of a story book.

He paused at the vibrant, fuschia fence, looking up at windows shielded by frothy white net curtains and a solid wooden door. Were they here? All of them? Would he be ambushed by Black and his cohort?

Severus was as committed to this move as he was ever going to be but it would still feel like a slap in the face and a punch to his kidneys if he had to watch Potter and Lily canoodle while he negotiated terms. Not because he was jealous - if he were ever going to get over Lily, this would probably be as far as it went - but because of the pain of his lost friendship, which still grated viciously.

*Don't be a coward.*

Sneer fixed firmly on his face, he slipped through the gate, and immediately the wards rippled over his skin. He was greeted by a highly feminine shriek, and for a moment froze, terrified he was about to be accosted.

"Have you seen this *room*?!" Lavender's distinctive voice called from somewhere within the house. "It's pink! And orange! Now you tell me again how this house wasn't *made* for us, Miss Granger, because I'm not buying it! There's even a dressing table - with *naiads* carved into it! And - oh, yes! There are nymphs in the bath, too, and in the sink!"

As Severus recovered himself, the door swung open to show a long-suffering 'Miss Granger', who stared at him dolefully through a fringe of curls. "*Yes, Lav, I know.* Hello, Severus. Do forgive the noise, she's a bit excitable this morning." She paused, twitched. "Okay, every morning. Every afternoon. Every evening. Just - all the time."

Severus stepped delicately over the threshold at her invitation and winced as another delighted shriek echoed through the house. "May I take it that she likes nymphs?"

Hermione smiled softly and directed him through a narrow hall into a sunken living room, where a fire blazed in the hearth. The furniture was cozy and homely in the best of ways, showing none of the gaudy fashion of the decade and all of the taste of times gone by. He sank into an armchair that smelled faintly of the comforting aroma of coal-smoke, and accepted tea as she passed it. He didn't know why, but he felt distinctly more at ease now, and he blamed the house. It simply *emenated* a homely feel, inviting one inside to prop up one's feet and take a nap.

"Her magic had an affinity for water, as an element," Hermione said, taking her place on the opposite armchair. "Apparently, anyway. I'd never heard of such a thing, but then she always has been able to swim faster than the Squid himself."

"It is a rare, generally pureblood phenomenon," Severus found himself replying, as if it were an academic discussion. "I, myself, have no such connection to the elements, though I know that each pureblood family has one they source their magic through. The Longbottoms and their green fingers say it all, I think."

"Remus thinks that is why she has such trouble with her *condition.* Because of the change at a genetic level." Hermione peered at him as if she expected an answer, so Severus simply shrugged.

"I shouldn't think they've studied that particular matter very much, given the statistics on purebloods
contracting lycanthropy - next to nil. It seems a logical explanation, however."

Hermione paused, her face scrunched up in thought. "Do you know, I've never noticed that before."

Severus took a sip of tea and waited for her to explain, and when she didn't, rolled his eyes. "Do you wish to expand?"

She smiled wryly. 'I'm sorry, it's really not relevant, I was simply getting distracted by a new research opportunity. Purebloods and lycanthropy. We know they can contact lycanthropy; Lavender is our evidence; but why don't they?"

He considered this for a moment. He had to admit, as a half-blood he'd always had more to fear from werewolves than others seemed to. Even when they'd studied Boggarts, it only seemed to be half-bloods that had a problem…

He shook his head, scowling. "They're better protected, I assume. The poorer Purebloods still have an issue. There isn't any conspiracy here."

"I know," Hermione admitted, looking sly. "But wouldn't it be fun if there were?"

Just as Severus was starting to believe that perhaps all of Lavender's friends were equally as potty as she, the woman in question burst through the door with a grin. "Sevvy!" she cried, ignoring how he winced. He loathed that nickname, he really did. "I didn't realise you were here already! Hermione, you bad girl, you were supposed to let me know!"

"I got caught up relishing the peace," Hermione smiled, laughing when Lavender punched her arm. "Now that we're all here, rather than off examining the particularly beautiful dryad carved into the door of my room - what? I know my folklore as well as the next person." Severus savoured the pitying, droll sort of look Lavender gave Hermione and fought to suppress a laugh. Their friendship seemed easy, their banter free and unrestrained, but good natured. Was this what friendship looked like, then? Because if it was, he didn't think he could quite count Lily, though he desperately wanted to. It was closer to what he had with Regulus, or, even, Lucius, who he'd always thought had looked down on him too much to consider him a true companion.

The other miracle was that neither of them appeared even the slightest bit awkward in his presence. Usually conversations like this would be cut off just by the sight of him, earning him a reputation as a bit of a wet blanket, even (and especially) among the Death Eater set. But no, not these girls, which was odd since he hardly thought that even in the future he was the life of the party.

He couldn't suppress a snort at that thought, and that attracted their attention. Lavender grinned at him and Hermione smiled too, her expression no less inviting. "Penny for your thoughts?" she asked, and he opened his mouth to reply before he even realised what she'd said. And the emphasis with which she'd said it. 'Penny' had been no slip of the tongue, it had been specifically chosen, the sentence orchestrated to remind him of who and what she was.

It didn't bother him, but he welcomed the reminder. It kept him on his toes, keeping him aware of the situation - this was him betraying his master, betraying the Dark Arts he'd dedicated his life up to this point to learning. Dragging himself from a place he'd been relatively comfortable and liked (rather, tolerated, if he was being honest) to a world of light where he'd only known misery and Lily. He needed to be alert. Needed to stay cognizant of his mission here.

"Simply… A thought." He didn't smile, but he wasn't openly hostile as he brought the conversation back where he wanted it. "I have information."
"So I heard," Hermione lapsed back into a solemn visage and even Lavender backed up to sit on the sofa, for which Severus was grateful for he'd been truly concerned that she'd sit at his feet like a loyal hound. Sometimes she blurred that line, between pet and woman, which he had to admit was part of the reason he was so conflicted about her. If she'd just let him forget she was a werewolf for once, he might have been persuaded to fall into bed with her.

It wouldn't have taken that much persuading, if he could continue to be honest.

"Can we assume you wish to negotiate a deal on this?"

Severus opened his mouth to say yes, then paused. What, exactly, did he want from them, anyway?

"I just want out," he said, letting some of his exhaustion show. "However you've made Regulus disappear; I want that."

Hermione's face twisted in tortured sympathy. "I understand. We need the Horcruxes, though. That's our first priority, and you're the only one in a position to find a particularly difficult one. One he would have used Regulus to hide, but couldn't because we have him."

"Yes, that's why I'm here." He clasped his hands in his lap, feeling oddly vulnerable. Which made sense, seeing as his life was in their hands. "I heard something which may be of use to you. I assume it is about a Horcrux - it appears to be something the Dark Lord will go to great lengths to protect."

Hermione stared him for a moment, a sort of jumbled picture in her mind. She realised the irony - in the other war, it had been Severus running to Voldemort with news to impress him, rather than the light. How much they'd changed hadn't truly hit her until then. She basked in the irony for a moment before she said, "Great lengths?"

"He approached Lucius," Severus said dryly. "If you knew the man, you'd know that was great lengths indeed. He's not terribly good with secrets, nor pressure."

"He told me about it - quite without realising - while whining on about his wife's house-elf being killed on a mission with the Dark Lord."

"Wait - Dobby's dead?" Hermione yelped, shocked at the grief that arrowed through her.

Severus gave her a queer look. "Dobby, yes. So we might assume, considering he never returned."

Hermione considered that a moment, and shook her head. "No, I don't buy it. You don't know Dobby, but I did. He's constitutionally incapable of following orders. He'd rather punish himself than do something that goes against his own moral code, and he hated the Dark Lord."

"Then how do you explain him not returning?"

"Well, have they called for him?"

Severus blinked, his mouth falling open. So simple. Narcissa hadn't bothered, not since she got the news from Lucius that he'd died, and Lucius had wanted rid of the elf in the first place. "Merlin," he swore. "He's still alive, isn't he?"

Hermione's eyes - he swore - were twinkling with excitement. "And if he's alive, then…"

"Then he'll know how to get the Horcrux. But how do we get to him?"

"Fritz can do it," the little elf piped up, to the astonishment of all gathered. They turned to see him
twirling the ends of his feather boa through his fingertips. "Dobby is Fritz's nephew. Elves can always find family."

"Did you follow us?" Hermione demanded, flustered at his sudden appearance.

Fritz looked at Severus apologetically and nodded. "Master Remus was worry for Miss Hermy's safety."

Lavender snorted a laugh, flicking her hair behind her ear. "There's that famed werewolf protectiveness." Hermione blushed, and Severus widened his eyes in realization as he looked back at the woman. He'd thought something was different about her, but he'd not placed what until then. She was bonded. The werewolf's magic swirled about her, subtle but there. Severus specialised in the subtleties of magic, though, and had he not been distracted he'd have seen it earlier. She was well and truly claimed.

It, to his horror, did not appear as awful and archaic as he had expected.

At least she seemed happy, but that might just speak to her poor judgement.

"Okay, so we find Dobby, and we find the locket. Fritz, if you could find him - and please get him out of whatever mess he's in - I'd be much obliged. Severus, your information has been more helpful than -"

A searing pain cutting up his arm and into his chest drowned out her words and he doubled over in pain, hissing through his teeth. The Dark Lord was calling - and he was angry.
Ginny was glad they'd chosen to infiltrate the Riddle place in the daytime, because it was a simple matter of waking up the caretaker and confounding him into giving them the key. Breaking and entering was all very well and good, but pretending you were a camera crew come to film one of the most haunted houses in Britain was more fun. Even Regulus was getting into the spirit of things, lugging about the camera and bag Ginny had transfigured from a picture while asking excited questions of Frank, the caretaker, who was only too happy to answer them.

"The outer architecture is early Gothic Revival," Frank was saying in a proud voice as he led them through the downstairs rooms. "Inspired by Strawberry Hill, only the Master had wished to go much darker, to encourage his own haunting - most of London was obsessed with such sensationalist ideals at the time, and he was no exception. It's said that his mistress gave him the idea to have it painted red and black, and his wife rebelled, hence why the south face is entirely brick."

"It's quite beautiful," Ginny lied. It was clean, rather, but gloomy and dark. Cigar smoke had clung to many a Riddle family portrait, giving them a yellowish hue, as if they were permanently bathed in flickering candlelight. Frank appeared a spritely late-fifties and it was obvious he took great pride in his work, but no amount of dusting could disguise the lack of light and hideous, ancient furniture that loomed out of every corner. Truly, the haunting idea was a stroke of luck, for if there had ever been a house more likely to be haunted than this one, Ginny had not seen it. Even the moonlight on beautifully waxed floorboards seemed to hover in a cloud above it, creating the illusion of a mist that blurred their ankles as they walked. "How long have you worked here?"

Frank squinted, running the calculations in his head as he moved through to the parlor - another grey room, this one with heavy velvet curtains behind which could lurk any number of malevolent spirits. "Thirty-some years? Since the family was killed. It all runs together after a while."

Ginny glanced at Luna, who was poking about the room industriously. She'd been cast as the medium in their little farce, the better to explain he myriad quirks. To emphasise that, suddenly she grasped a statue of some monstrous olde English villain and gasped, her eyes rolling back in her head as she sang "the horror, the horror!" in a childish, sing-songy voice.

To his credit, Frank went along with her oddness without so much as a blink. Ignoring her friend, Ginny asked, "And in that time, have you noticed any… odd happenings? Cold spots, feelings of malice, anything of the like?"

Frank grinned good-naturedly. "Who hasn't? It's all the folks in the village talk about some days, especially coming up to Halloween. Kids are always breaking in, I've had to replace the kitchen window three times this year; the estate manager is right tired of my face. They reckon the souls of the family remain to drive off interlopers, and that's as how it hasn't been sold yet. He's wanting it gutted to remove any… lingering spirits."

Regulus shot Ginny a wry look that had her stifling a laugh.
"Load of guff, I thought, but then I started to work in the kitchen…” Frank's voice lowered, the rumble turning almost reverent. She only realised it was put on when his eyes flickered between them expectantly, so she pasted on her most interested face and said, "the kitchen…?"

Frank nodded in satisfaction and led them through a low doorway into a sunken kitchen, as ancient as the rest of the house with a wood-fired range taking over the back wall, leaving space for a barren, dark wood door, the wood itself peeling from rot. "There," he murmured, his low thrum echoing. "Can't you sense it?"

Ginny could sense something, alright. A big ol' ball of darkness, it's tendrils reaching into the cool, musty air from beyond the wall. It stirred anxiety in her, as well as other, darker emotions, touching the bloodlust it's owner had left.

"Restless spirits of the dead," Luna said, her voice high and trembling, inspired by Trelawney. She really liked playing the kooky medium. "They cry and cry and cry and-"

Regulus pinched her on the hip to shut her up. "Is there any chance we can go down there for a look?" he asked.

Frank seemed to dither about it, then bit his lip as if he was going to say no. Quickly, Ginny jumped in and smiled brightly. "Just a quick peek. We won't even bring the camera, will we, John?"

Regulus glowered at the use of the pseudonym she'd forced on him ("but it's so… Muggle," he'd shivered) but dropped the camera obediently. Frank grimaced but let up, bringing the keys from his belt. "I've never been in there," he grumbled, picking out a shiny silver one. "Gives me the shivers good an' right."

Ginny, imagining spiders and cobwebs and layers of dust, felt her face twist in distaste. The things she did for this war were ridiculous - for once, couldn't the dangerous dark artefact be surrounded by cuddly toys and cake? She could do cuddly toys and cake happily.

The lock on the door had stuck, a suitably ominous sign. Frank wrenched and jiggled while Ginny fervently wished she could use a bombarda, until Regulus surreptitiously slipped his wand from his sleeve. With a tight twist of his wrist the door flung itself open with such force that poor Frank, attached to it via the stubborn key, was flung abruptly inwards and disappeared into the dark with a belated yelp of surprise. Even Luna turned to look, having previously been fascinated by a string of rabbit paws hanging from the pantry ceiling.

"Damnit, Regulus!" Ginny inched over to the door, peering into the inky blackness, something in her brain holding her back as of the primitive half of her was terrified that some flailing beast may emerge from the depths to eat her alive. "Mr. Bryce?"

A half-formed burble rose, echoing eerily. It was followed by a shrill shriek.

"Brilliant," Ginny sighed. "Lumos."

The light from her wand didn't seem to show very much of anything, instead being absorbed by the rough hewn walls. Through the kitchen windows, she could see the sky over the hills bleeding into the muted reds and golds of sunset in the country; stars being picked out on the spreading blanket of night. In the basement however there were no gentle shades of comforting blue, no sense of night beginning, rather night eternal, inky blackness stretching from corner to corner so absolutely that Ginny suspected magical influence.

Luna hummed in the back of her throat upon seeing it, tilting her head from side to side and back.
"Lumos Maxima," she muttered, her own wand lighting so bright it became, all of a sudden, midday.

"Show off," Ginny murmured with a smile, and Luna grinned in reply. They bumped shoulders and hips affectionately, a throwback to fourth year when they'd first become friends and Ginny had promised to show her everything she'd been missing, from the most ridiculous of secret handshakes to the most delicious of dirty secrets. Since Luna had found Regulus and Ginny had started whatever it was with Sirius, they hadn't had much time to themselves, but they remained one mind despite that and it was wonderful to feel.

"On three?" Luna chirped, the excitement of discovery in her eyes as she parroted yet another of their friendship traditions. Ginny grinned widely.

"Of course. One-"

"Two-"

Together they launched themselves into the hole, giggling as they raced down the stairs, Regulus following at a more sedate pace, a glowing bulb of witchlight hovering above his head.

Stopping in an unbecoming heap at the bottom of the stairs, Ginny untangled her elbows and knees to stand straight, shining her wand around her. The basement was cool and dark, filled with crates and cluttered with treasures, from Ruby-eyed statuary to rows upon rows of shiny silverware, each laid out on a cushioned base. Paintings were piled in a corner and covered with a dust sheet, while all along one wall stood wooden furniture like grim sentinels, watching over their space.

Frank was sprawled a few feet from them, face whited out with pain, his ankle twisted in the entirely wrong direction. Ginny pressed her hand to his forehead with a frown. "I think he's in shock," she told Luna, who'd always been better than her at Healing, and frankly, she only knew to say that because it was what Lily had said about Hermione when she'd been in a similar state.

"Just pain," Luna corrected her mildly, skipping over and waving her wand across his ankle. It corrected itself with a deafening snap of bone, Frank crying out in pain. Luna patted him on the nose with a sweet smile. "You'll be fine. Go to sleep."

The muggle looked up at her in mild confusion but obeyed the command, his eyelids drooping. Luna pushed to her feet and glanced about. "It's not here."

"It has to be," Ginny said. "There's nowhere else. Besides, I can feel it."

"You can feel his evil. So can I. That doesn't equal Horcrux, though."

Ginny stopped herself from shaking her best friend only by a hair, turning instead to Regulus. "Can you feel it?"

He scratched the back of his head, looking uncomfortable. "I can feel something. I don't know if it's a Horcrux, though. It doesn't feel strong enough." He hitched up his sleeve, shining his wand over his arm and nodding. "See? If it was a Horcrux, it would be deformed."

Indeed, the Mark was as neat as ever, but that didn't put her off. Instead, she focused on what he'd said. Not strong enough. She felt that too, as if whatever it was was weaker than most, or separated from them by virtue of time or…

Space.

"Didn't he say this was a Gothic inspired house?" she asked, excitement thrumming through her.
"... Yes? What does that have to do with anything?"

"Well," Ginny shone her wand across the dusty floor, starting at one corner and working her way across. "Haven't you ever read an old Victorian Gothic? The houses in them always have… there." She shoved her index finger into a crack in the floor, finding a tiny, dislodged stone and pressing it hard. A clicking sound emerged from somewhere, followed by a grate of stone on stone, and Ginny looked up to watch a section of the brick wall fold in on itself, opening a hole the size of a large dog or a small horse, whichever fit your fancy. "Prepare to find out what being wrong feels like," she told Luna, who laughed.

Lucius was not a religious person, but even he said a prayer that night. Not for world peace, or an end to starvation, or even a fancier cane. No, for one brief moment, he prayed to whatever God might be listening - a god of vengeance, if there was one, but he'd settle for a god of scholarly pursuits if only so they'd share his outrage - that someone would kill the Dark Lord.

It wasn't a long prayer, simply a momentary blip as he watched the man he'd pledged himself to tear apart his library as though the priceless volumes were only so much ink, and hadn't taken several centuries to collect. The Dark Lord tore through them, ripping out huge sections of paper and trampling over them in his shiny, leather dress shoes, first, second and third editions alike all surrendering to his vicious hands.

He did it all with a cold, empty expression on his face, the only mask he'd worn since the momentary rage that had taken over him upon discovery that the tatty little diary he'd given Lucius for safekeeping had vanished.

As the Dark Lord lifted Lucius's prized first edition *Abraxans and How to Breed Them* in his spindly hands, an air of malicious joy about him, Lucius searched in vain for a distraction. Only Tiffy was available; Tiffy being the ancient house-elf bound to the library for over a century, responsible for its impeccable upkeep. She'd guarded the place with a ferocity even Lucius could respect, even going so far as to strike him when he was young and would reach for a much-loved book with dirty hands. His father, and he, had adored her and her commitment, though it had come to nothing in the end. For her troubles she now lay prone, glassy-eyed, her face shrivelling more by the minute.

The Dark Lord was hard on the House-Elves.

"Who, Luciusss? Tell me who hasss betrayed usss!"

That was also the broken record that kept playing, one to which Lucius had no good answer. Nobody entered his library. It was a sacred place, a place he learned in, a place his father had refused to entertain visitors in, a tradition Lucius upheld. Malfoys were reverent of very little outside of themselves, but books were in that lucky minority. Only his most trusted friends were admitted.

*Like Severus*, his traitorous, inconveniently clever and outspoken mind reminded him. He hustled to cover the thought, almost certain it couldn't have been Severus and unwilling to think on the matter more, but it was too late.

The Dark Lord turned to him, eyes flashing bright. "Sssoeverusss?" he asked, the sibilant syllables troublesome for him, as always. Lucius couldn't pinpoint exactly *when* the Dark Lord had procured his queer lisp, but he thought it might have been during his latest travels, during which he'd lived in the Amazon Rainforest for a week. In a tent.

Lucius would like to have the utmost faith in his Lord but whenever he thought he might, the man did things like *that* and Lucius was back to contemplating how useful, exactly, the Dark Lord's cause
actually was. Surely a true, pure leader would appreciate the need for a properly turned down bed and a clean, claw-foot tub, even when one was communing with nature in the colonies?

He blocked those thoughts out quick, but it didn't seem to matter, anyway. The Dark Lord was a master of Legilimency to the point that Lucius hardly ever felt his invasions, not unless he made a point of it, in which case it became nearly unbearable torture. He'd have heard all manner of frivolous thought over the years, lurking as he had over Lucius' somewhat stunted childhood, and likely knew when to tune it out.

"Severusss..." he said now, stroking a long finger down the spine of Rituals of Bretonic Origin. Lucius didn't much care about that one, having an ancestral distaste towards Brittany, but it was one of his few remaining first editions and included a foreword dedicated to his great-grandfather, so, all things considered, he'd rather it not meet its demise. "But why..."

The Dark Lord lapsed into a thoughtfulness so intense Lucius fancied he could probably take the book back and spirit it away without the man noticing. "Will you spare me the incesssant whining about your booksss?" the Dark Lord snapped, flipping open the cover and purposefully tearing the first chapter from its cover, ignoring how Lucius whimpered as the vellum drifted to the ground. "Quiet!"

He clamped his mouth shut, keeping his eyes on those elegant, destructive fingers as the Dark Lord thought. Finally, the man nodded to himself.

"The problem with the needy," he complained smoothly, "is that they are ever searching for something more." With a delicate flick of his ivory wrist, he motioned Lucius forward, snatching his wrist into his hand. Without further ado, he tore the silk! Acromantula silk woven by orphans in the wilds of Africa, to be sold for thirty galleons a yard! sleeve from Lucius's arm and bared the unsightly tattoo to the air.

"I know," the Dark Lord crooned. "It is ugly, iss-n't it? I rather liked at the time but it'ss clear now that was simply folly of the young. Tradition, however, must ss-tand."

Lucius spotted the smooth, pale wood of the Dark Lord's wand out of the corner of his eye, and braced himself against a pain that he knew would buckle his knees, burning inside his head and setting his nerves aflame.

A half hour later, somewhat dishevelled, Lucius seethed as he awaited his friend's arrival in the foyer of the Manor. It seemed ungrateful, as Lucius ran his mind over his relationship with Severus, for the other man to have turned on him so. To throw away everything they'd worked for together. Lucius wouldn't claim to want a better world, he just wanted a better place in it; and Severus - well he was as close to the bottom of the heap in the Wizarding World as one could be without dying their hair orange and calling themselves 'Weasley'.

He'd patronised the man. Given him a place in his home. Sponsored him through a mastery and listened to his every miserable brood. And how did he repay him?

Lucius wouldn't mind, but he'd told Severus not to join this little social club. Lucius had been tapped for it since birth and well prepared, but not Severus. For all of his snide remarks and body armour, the man was soft inside, and he liked that about him. Liked the spark of vulnerability in Severus that made him human. He hadn't wanted the Death Eaters to stamp all over him, but due to sheer bloody mindedness his friend had stormed in anyway, and now look where they were!

Well. Lucius had never been built to be a protector, anyway. He much preferred to be a flamboyant
toff, it suited his inner goddess perfectly. Leave the rescues to the Gryffindors, the Weasleys, Longbottoms and Potters of the world, that's what he'd always said; Malfoys may not be brave, but at least they kept their heads.

*Mostly*, he added, a silent nod to great grandfather Jacques.

What on earth could have possessed Severus to play the hero? There couldn't be some wondrous reward waiting for him, because Severus would share it with him. Unless his betrayal had gone that far…

No. He'd likely had a fatal attack of conscience, which didn't exactly *help* Lucius's mood but made the issue less about himself, which for once he appreciated.

His temper mostly stamped down, he was feeling almost calm by the time Severus made his way through the door. Forty-five minutes might seem late to anyone else, but considering that to get to his front door you had to navigate a maze, penetrate his wards and, depending what mood he was in, also fight a peacock, in Lucius' eyes Severus had made good time.

"Theodosius is in a good mood," Severus remarked blandly as he crossed the marble floor, tossing his cloak over the bannister. "Only two pecks, though they both aimed for the eyes."

"That's because it was Diocles, rather than Theodosius. Poor Theo met with an accident when Bella came to visit." Lucius felt his face twist in grief and Severus gave him a solemn nod of solidarity. His friend might never understand his attachment to his peacocks, but he rarely mocked it. At least, not in earshot. "Cissy buried him by the peahen enclosure. He so loved it there…"

There was a glimmer in Severus' eyes that told Lucius this was a step too far for his solemnity, and Lucius, any other time, would have pushed the envelope just a little further in the hopes of making him laugh. Not today. Sobering, he frowned, and Severus straightened too in preparation for his meeting.

"Why did you do it?" Lucius heard himself ask in a weary tone. Severus' lips tightened, and for as moment Lucius thought he'd lie - not unheard of, but certainly not what he wanted. Then, with an abrupt sigh, his friend turned on him eyes of deepest resignation. He paused for a brief moment, seeming to become enlightened by something, which only served to make him appear more miserable. Lucius just *knew* that whatever he was about to say would be sanctimonious and positively Gryffindor - nothing else could make Severus scowl so hard.

"Because I had to," he said, raking a hand through tresses which were devoid of oil but thin and limp. "Because it's right."

Did he not call it? Lucius felt a rising anger inside of him, and he grit his teeth. All humour left him in a rush as his fist tightened and he reminded himself that he was a *Malfoy*, and Malfoys did not punch people. "Who cares about right?" he asked, hopefully reasonably, as he shoved his face close to Severus's. "What about power? What about purity? What about our freedom?"

Severus gave him a pitying look. Lucius had never been on the receiving end of such condescension before, and it made him feel displeasingly small, an ant among wiser creatures. "What about life, Lucius? What about your family? Do you truly want your heir growing up in a world with *Him* at the helm?" He gave a wave of his hand. "Where is your wife while your house is being defiled? While every material possession you hold dear is torn from you like so much rubbish? Certainly not here - you sent them away, didn't you?"

"My wife is none of your business," Lucius snapped.
"You did. Because she's in danger, and you love her."

"Love has no place in a Pureblood marriage," he scoffed by rote, a defense mechanism. Because he did love his wife. She was his beloved counterpoint - the calm to his storm, the logic to his whims, a safe place where he could ever be entirely himself and still find her waiting, loving him, no matter what mistakes he made or how he erred. She was the only woman to tie him in knots, to keep him guessing. And she was his greatest weakness, one he protected with his very life. Right now she was in Greece, on a remote island with no ties to the Malfoy family, enjoying sun and sea and probably at least one lifeguard with glistening pecs.

(He took a moment to imagine the scene in the hopes that it would take the edge off his crushing despair, but no amount of his wife panting "oh, yes, Alexandros, there!" could make him forget that there was a murderous lunatic in his house hell bent on torturing his best friend.)

"Perhaps I simply wish for a world in which our loved ones can be safe," Severus said, his voice a sardonic drawl.

Lucius grabbed a hold of Severus's wrist, suddenly desperate. "He'll kill you," Lucius pleaded. He wasn't entirely certain what he expected Severus to do about this, but he needed to do something. He couldn't imagine a world without Severus; the dour young bloke was a fixture in his life, always game for a bitch or debate, with exquisite taste in whisky and a witty comment for every occasion. Plus, to be indelicate, he still needed to get the man laid. Preferably with him (and Narcissa...?) but also just, generally. The man was as tightly wound as Lucius' old man had been, and that couldn't be healthy.

Not that healthy would matter if the man got himself murdered, but Lucius refused to let the man die a virgin. There was something infinitely depressing about the very thought.

His friend appeared to dither a moment, then his mouth clamped shut in a way Lucius recognised as defeat. "Send an elf to a Hermione Granger, and also Remus Lupin, telling them of what is happening. They'll do the rest."

Stunned, Lucius took a moment to gather himself before asking, in as urgent a tone as possible in a whisper, "Remus Lupin? Why - no, you're not calling in Dumbledore?!

Severus silenced him with a glare. "Who do you think I am? Of course not. The werewolf is no longer affiliated with - I do not have time to explain this to you, Lucius! Despite appearances, I'm aware that you are not entirely unintelligent. Send the elf. They'll do the rest."

With a final glare, Severus swept up the marble staircase, his cloak billowing with extra aplomb for all that he was presumably walking to his death. Lucius was left with a choice to make.

He was shaking inside. Shivering, terrified. For all his dabbling in the Dark Arts, for all his pandering to the Dark Lord's every whim, he'd never faced death head on.

It terrified him. Chilled him to the bone. There was no question that he would die tonight and the second Lucius was out of sight this knowledge collapsed onto him, buckling his shoulders, crushing all hope from him.

Death. He'd not much considered it, if he were honest. His father had died and Severus had simply been glad; his mother had died and he'd felt empty. But never had he contemplated the process, the finality of it all, not before now.

He would be wiped from the planet. Regardless of whether there existed an afterlife of any sort, he
would no longer exist in the realm of the living. His friends would be lost to him until their own time, all earthly experience ended.

Would he be remembered? Would he be know for who he was, or simply the two-dimensional figure of evil so many had seen in him? He thought that Lucius would mourn, as would Regulus, he hoped. Not Lily, though. Hermione and her lot would be disappointed at his loss but if they fail to kill the Dark Lord they'll surely convert another Death Eater in no time, perhaps even Lucius, if the man contacts them. That was his gift to his friend; Lucius was misguided, an idiot for all his vaunted intellect, but he was not evil. Not even truly Dark. He hated torture, despaired murder, if only for the opportunity it made to stain his favoured rugs. Around children he was basically an oversized Golden Retriever, for all that he was apathetic towards adults, and for the man to go to Azkaban would simply be a waste. Not to mention how he certainly wouldn't survive it; not Lucius, who was certainly not made of stronger stuff than he appeared and used three different types of skin cream before bed.

Hermione would give him a debate, keep him occupied with them, and even if he didn't agree with their motives he'd certainly enjoy the prospect of intelligent conversation, not something oft encountered with the Death Eater lot. That, and the protection they could offer Narcissa, might be enough to sway him to their side.

Severus' eyes slammed shut, as if blocking out the light would somehow save him from his fate. He didn't want to die. By the gods, he did not. He wanted to live, wanted to feel the earth beneath his feet, luxuriate in the softness of his bed, wanted to laugh and cry and brew and invent; surely the purpose for which he'd been dumped on the earth. There was nobody better than he when it came to the art of Potion making, nobody who lived up to his instinctive connection with a cauldron, the ingredients. To him it seemed as though plants and hairs, dessicated insects and the shrivelling remnants of animal organs spoke to him, telling him where they wish to go and how they should get there, whether sliced or diced or squeezed or whole. He could smell in them their ripeness, how to manipulate them for greater efficacy, what to substitute for what.

And he'd wasted that talent brewing poisons of all things. Not that now, in what could be his final moments, the review of his life that would surely carry him to eternal dissatisfaction in the Underworld, should such a place exist, he had suddenly been hit with the urge to don a habit and cure the world's every ill. Certainly not, that wasn't him at all. What did grip him, though, was the utter idiocy of his recent actions.

He'd joined the Dark Lord because he saw no other recourse to finding the respect and adulation he, in his naivety, thought he deserved, despite having been a seventeen year old with not much of anything to his name, and none of that good. A poor choice, he realised now. He'd been so wrapped up in the seductive lure of his own magic that he'd completely lost his mind.

In seventh year, Lucius had approached him to offer him a sponsored Potions Mastery with a view to taking over the Malfoy-owned Apothecary in Diagon Alley. With his typical blather, Lucius had gone on and on about it suiting a man with his "rather stolid disposition", how the customers were mainly "other hermits, so you'll have something in common" only he'd "have to promise not to look at them like that, Severus, because a lesser man than I might run away - yes, Severus, exactly like that, you don't need to demonstrate, I'm really very aware of your more fearsome attributes". If only he had taken that job, where would he be now?

He laughed humorlessly to himself. Likely right here, ready to be dispatched with no more thought put to the matter than would be given an elf's burnt souffle.

"Ah, Severus. You've arrived." The serpentine announcement came from the handsome man
leaning against the library doorway. His blue eyes were shadowed by malice, a negligent smirk on his face as he pinned Severus with his stare. "Come, come, my friend. We have much to discuss." With a negligent toss of his head, the Dark Lord backed out of the doorway and disappeared into the depths of the room, leaving Severus to follow obediently, ever the docile servant.

As he prepared himself to enter, Lucius appeared at the top of the stairs, his pale eyes cool and glassy. With a long look at his friend, he turned purposefully aside and marched away.
Chapter Sixty-Five: Of Dreams and Delusions

Chapter Summary

Peter fucks up his opportunity to get the readers on-side, while Ginny faces fear. Again.

Sometimes, being underestimated was helpful, Peter acknowledged to himself as he watched his old friends squirm. Despite how it hurt him to be treated like the bumbling idiot of the group, there was no denying its benefits. For one, nobody watched what they said around him; harmless Pete, always there, never to betray them.

*If only you knew*, he thought viciously, then fought off the reflexive stab of guilt in his stomach.

He was here for information, and he was getting it *- piles* of it. At first he'd thought his link with the Order would be more useful to the cause than his old pals, had even begged to be released from his obligation to them, but sitting here now, watching his old friends banter, he was realising something different. Not that they'd come out and said anything about anything important, they were too careful for that, but they'd dropped enough hints without even realising it.

*Look at them*, Peter sneered to himself. *So self-important.* They were continually exchanging significant looks, lording their secrets over him, as if he was too stupid to know what was going on.

None of them seemed to remember that he had been in the orchard that night. That he had been there along with the rest of them when they'd realised they had 'visitors'. He'd been the one to send Dorea back, to sit vigil over Remus's bedside as the sun rose, watching the orchard carefully.

If only he hadn't been called away, he might have known even more. Details, like what the nature of the power they'd been presented with was, and how they were using it. He could have assessed the situation and reassured the Dark Lord, or, even, delivered the weapon to his door *himself*.

Hence why he was back.

It had been a good few months in the country with his family, and, intermittently, with his new friends. Dumbledore had chosen an inconvenient time to send him off, of course, but as the letters had come swooping in from James, Sirius and Remus he'd realised it might be useful to have disappeared. After all, they weren't as guarded in writing as they would have been in person - it would have been nearly impossible for him to sneak off as frequently as required had he been at the Manor with them, whereas in the country, far away, it was simply a matter of forwarding on their letters. As such, he'd been kept up to date, his Master had been kept up to date, and so had his new friends.

Not that the letters had given much in the way of details, but one couldn't reasonably expect them to. He'd been useful out there, though. And now that he was back, he'd be more useful still.

Stifling a smirk, he watched Remus stumble to cover up their slip - about the Hermione girl. Like he actually believed she was from America. No witch in her right mind would move to England when the country was in such a state of unrest, especially not an American ("She's Canadian," Sirius corrected him when he expressed his doubts, as if there were a difference). And anyway, Remus would *never* have the balls to make a move on a girl he'd met in a bookstore. He wasn't that sort of
bloke - he was a piner, the sort to watch from afar and mope when she got off with someone else. The most pitiful werewolf Peter had ever met, he was, and Peter had met a great deal of werewolves over the past few months.

Peter suppressed a shiver at the thought. That was one social circle he'd have happily forgone. At least he was being elevated, moving up and beyond what he'd been when he'd simply been James and Sirius's goofy mate.

He pitied Remus now that he, himself, was out from under the thumb of the magnificent duo. Didn't his friend know that Sirius and James only cared about themselves? Sure, Pete and Remus had been their mates for years, but they weren't their best friends. That spot was reserved only for the other, and Remus and Pete remained on the outside, looking in. Their eternal cheerleaders. Didn't Remus notice? Mind you, it had taken Peter a long time.

Peter remembered the time he'd first been approached by the Dark Lord. It had been shortly after James had been contacted and offered a place by his side, when the Dark Lord had still been dead-set on recruiting him and whoever came with him, but James had told him to piss off. Peter had been in awe of this response, how his friend - his friend! he couldn't believe that he, Peter Pettigrew, had such a cool friend! - told the most powerful Dark wizard of their time where to shove his offer. Peter had listened to the story again and again, humbled. He'd wished he could be that brave.

Then, with this in mind, his opportunity came. The Dark Lord had found him as he'd visited his parents, offering him power and prestige if he spied for him, if he swore to deliver James Potter to them, and Sirius, too. Then loyal, Peter had summoned all of his Gryffindor courage and told the man to sod off. True, it had been nearly whispered, and he'd stuttered a bit, and the Dark Lord had laughed, but that had only given him time to transform into his rat and escape. However, when he'd told his friends, proud of himself for once in his life? With this one, single thing to call his own?

They simply hadn't believed him. "Great story, Pete," James had grinned, thumping him on the back. "I reckon you'd do just that if it ever happened."

But it had happened! Peter had screamed in his head as they laughed. Perhaps not exactly how he'd described it, but it had. Of course he'd left out the bit where he'd nearly pissed himself, and definitely the part about running away. Maybe if he hadn't added that bit about single-handedly duelling Rodolphus Lestrange…

No. He was blaming himself again, when he should be blaming them. That was what the Dark Lord said, and he was so clever. Pete was clever; not as clever as James and Sirius, but he'd always equalled Remus, at least. The Dark Lord, though? He took clever to a whole other level, and he was teaching Peter to reach those heights, too. Peter knew he was favoured - his meetings were always with the Dark Lord alone, whereas the others had to see him in groups. They were friends. The Dark Lord listened to him, shared his opinions, thought he was worth something.

Because he was, and he knew that now. He was better than simply James Potter's little friend. He was his own person, making his own decisions, and he knew, just knew that this one was the right one.

Eagerly, he filed away all of the information he was gathering for later examination. The Dark Lord would take it straight from his thoughts, as he ever did. He'd know how to piece the information together, which parts were important and which were not. Pete couldn't do that yet, but he would. In the future. When the world was new and Pete had his place amongst the leaders...

He was getting carried away again. He did that sometimes, get caught up in the fantasy. The Dark Lord didn't mind, he'd just smile and assure Peter that the reality was going to be even better, as long
as he did his part, as long as he helped, as long as he went to his friends and brought back the information they needed, which he was doing. Successfully! Because he wasn't a failure.

Still, simply the mention of Remus's girlfriend wasn't enough. He needed more. The Dark Lord wouldn't be pleased, but... he had to take this chance. Ask the question that needed answering. Quickly, bluntly, keeping an eye on each of them: their reactions would be telling.

"Speaking of mysterious visitors from far-away lands, what happened to that fated weapon you landed yourselves?"

Silence settled like a blanket and Peter hid a smirk. They were thinking, panicking. What could they possibly say that wouldn't betray them? Besides, they'd probably decide to tell him anyway - Sweet Peter. Harmless Peter. Sure, Remus seemed loathe to tell him about Hermione, but that wasn't because of suspicion, it couldn't be. Remus was known to be cagey about his conquests, but this? This was simply friends business.

James opened his mouth to speak, only to be cut off when Dorea bustled in, whistling loudly. It wasn't a good whistle, shrill in a way that burned Peter's ears, and he winced, rubbing at them. His head down, he didn't see the significant look Dorea gave her son, nor the way she discretely rubbed at her inner forearm. By the time he lifted his head, the whistling cut off, and all was back to normal.

"Oh, James, dear!" she sang, coming over and enfolding him in a hug. "Didn't you bring your fiancee to say hello to your old mum?"

"You're not old," James scolded her, clutching her back with a warm smile. Peter relished the envy that rose up in him, coddled it close to him. Just one more injustice in his life; that James got to keep his blood-traitor mother, while Pete's languished in her grave. "I was going to bring her, but just as we were leaving she got an owl from Dumbledore asking for her help. You know what she's like."

Dorea's face darkened slightly. "That man!" she sniped, releasing her son to lean and press a kiss to Sirius's head. Remus gained a bright smile and a blown kiss, whereas Peter only received a look of deepest suspicion. That was fine, he was used to it. "He came here the other day, you know. Demanded to know where you were, not that it's any business of his. It was lovely to see Minerva again, however. She spends much too much time locked in that Castle, under his thumb." She turned to an elf to order tea and Peter's heart sank, knowing that she didn't plan on leaving anytime soon. He couldn't exactly talk to them with her here, could he? She'd kick him out the second he said anything imprudent.

"James," he said regretfully. And he did regret it, for given a few minutes more, he might have been able to dig up a bit more dirt. "I didn't realise how late it was getting. I agreed to meet Auror Moody and give him a report on my trip. Do you mind if I..?"

James blinked in surprise but nodded carelessly. "Yes, sure, you go. Owl us tomorrow?"

"Yeah, yeah," Peter thumped Remus on the shoulder as he climber out of his seat and grabbed his bag. "Good to see you again, though. And you, Mrs. Potter. Gonna walk me out?"

Dorea gave him a sour look. "You know where the door is, Mr. Pettigrew," she said coolly.

He did, and sauntered towards it, checking his watch. Maybe he was overplaying his hand a little, but who cared? Things were coming to a head, he could just feel it, and when they did, he wouldn't need this lot anymore. He wouldn't need anyone.

If he hurried, he might be able to get to the Dark Lord before he left Malfoy Manor. It wasn't like
him to call unannounced, but surely he'd be forgiven once he handed over the memories. They had a name, after all. One could do much with a name.

"He's a Death Eater," Dorea declared, staring after him. "No doubt about it. The stink of dark magic clings to him."

"That could be wishful thinking," James reminded her. "You've never liked Pete."

His mother crossed her arms defiantly. "Young man, you look me in the eyes and tell me he isn't the smarmiest, creepiest boy of your acquaintance. You can't, can you?"

"Snape," James pointed out quickly, earning a droll look from Dorea.

"Mr. Snape seemed perfectly nice to me," she said primly, sipping at her tea. "Really, James, it was so rude of you to drag me away that time in Diagon Alley, we were having a lovely discussion."

James huffed. "Only because you've always had a thing for the pathetic, Mum. I was scared if you spoke to him any longer we'd end up in bunk beds."

His mother sniffed in defensively. "Maybe you should have, then you'd know the difference between easily influenced and truly Dark. Peter is truly Dark, now."

Sirius sighed, unwilling to face the facts and yet seeing no other way. "He was a bit... off."

"I agree with Mrs. Potter," Remus said. James and Sirius swung their gazes his way in surprise; it was a rare occasion indeed when Remus would outright disagree with them. But there he was, his eyes narrow in the direction of the door, his frame stiff. "He was pumping us for information. I don't like it anymore than you do, but..."

"But it's Pete," Sirius exclaimed, throwing his hands into the air. "I can't think of anyone less likely to be a Death Eater. Can you imagine him trying to throw the killing curse? He's stutter his way through it and end up turning them into a plant."

"I don't think you can argue that he's 'too incompetent' to be a Death Eater, Pads," Remus pointed out. "From what we've seen, there's literally no such thing."

"Why would they even want him?" James asked, slumping into his chair. "I mean, he's a great guy and all, but hardly... special."

Dorea cleared her throat gently and raised an eyebrow at her son. "Darling boy, I think what you mean is, he's not you. She waved towards the door. "Peter Pettigrew is not very good at many things, but he did become an animagus at fifteen, which is impressive regardless of whether or not you two did it faster. He helped you create that map - don't act so surprised, do you really think I haven't seen the map? And I know for certain he wasn't simply the look-out on some of those ingenious pranks. By anyone else's standards, Peter is quite brilliant. He just doesn't measure up to the likes of you."

"...oh." James looked abruptly guilt-stricken. "I never thought of it like that."

"I bet he didn't, either," Dorea said, lightly scolding. "Not that this makes it your fault. His choices are his own to make, and he was unwise to choose the path he has. You are not culpable for his decisions, but you must acknowledge your role in his making them."

There was quiet as everybody let that settle in their heads, and then James straightened up. "Right-o,"
he said cheerfully, as if that last exchange had never happened. "What's the betting that he's running straight to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named about Hermione, then?"

"Bugger, bugger, bugger!" Ginny pulled her lit wand out of the hole, watching as the darkness stripped away from her light and things became visible again. "The bastard cursed it!"

"What a surprise," Regulus drawled. "A Dark wizard, cursing things. Call the Prophet, we've got a scandal on our hands."

Ginny spun on her heel to glare at him where he lounged against the opposite wall. At first, when she'd discovered the secret passageway, he'd been as excited as she had, as Luna had. After twenty-minutes of trying and failing to penetrate the darkness, however, the novelty was wearing off. "Instead of sassing me, can you please help?"

Luna snuggled comfortably under his shoulder, Reg moved closer a few steps, discomfort creasing his face as the outline of his Dark Mark blurred. There was definitely a Horcrux in the hole, but the real question was, what else?

"How big is it?" he asked wearily.

Ginny thrust a hand an inch into the darkness, patting around the edges of the opening. "Couple of feet across, maybe a foot more tall? I can't feel the end of the room, but there's no breeze, and the air is as cool and still as this one. I think it's just another basement, like this one, only… booby-trapped."

She'd tried lumos, incendio, all of the light-giving spells in her repertoire, and each time she pushed the spell into the inky blackness it was swallowed whole. She tried to walk into it with them, and only confronted blackness. But was there any other way to reach what was inside? What she knew was inside, felt in her subconscious?

"We should hold hands," Luna chirped cheerily, clasping Regulus's in her tiny, pale fingers. The other, she reached out to Ginny. "Regulus can stay on the outside and pull us out if we get in trouble." She looked up at her boyfriend with absolute trust. "Can't you, Regulus?"

He smiled down at her, nuzzling her hair briefly. "I can try."

Ginny grimaced and turned back to the darkness. There was no other choice, she knew that, but…

"I'm scared," she said abruptly, as if saying it quickly and dispassionately might make it easier. "I hate the dark. Since…. Remember the DoM battle, and all of the lights went out, and someone grabbed me? I couldn't see anything, and they were holding me so tight I could barely breathe, and all I could feel was their hands touching me and their breath against my face…"

"It is a good protection," Luna allowed, her voice floaty and light. "Most everyone is scared of the unknown, and that's what the darkness represents. It would take a true warrior to walk directly in there, not knowing what they were facing, or whether they would return." Ginny's best friend cocked her head and smiled kindly, releasing Regulus to come and wind an arm around Ginny's waist. "You've always been a warrior, Ginny Weasley," Luna whispered, squeezing her hard. "Always confronted the things that scared other people. Always fought for truth and love. Remember when they came for me, in sixth year, and you stood against four Snatchers for me, ending up in bed for a week? You took so many Cruciatus curses that year, all to protect those weaker than you. Remember using your Bat-Bogey hex on Alecto Carrow, so those third-year Slytherins could escape? Slytherins, Ginny, the ones nobody else would stick up for."

Ginny gave a weak laugh. "I don't see what that has to do with my fear of the dark."
She could tell that if Luna were any other person, she'd be rolling her eyes. "Everything. Absolutely everything."

It was difficult not to shake those words off. She knew Luna was trying to build her up; if it were anyone else, it would be to get her to do her job. But not with Luna. Luna tried to build her up because she loved her, but also because, to her, it was true. She was dotty and weird and had brought them all into this terrible situation, but she wasn't malicious, and she wouldn't have done it if she hadn't thought it would help them, nor if they couldn't have dealt with it.

The thing was… Ginny was more than Luna's best friend. She was Luna's hero, and despite how she didn't believe she deserved that title, she still had it. Luna trusted her, believed in her, some days thought the sun rose and set with her. Inside her soul, there was a rock, an unbreakable, unshakeable belief in Ginny that would never leave, no matter what Ginny did to undermine it.

And she didn't want to undermine it, either. She wanted to live up to this image her friend had, to be the best person she could be, because that was the effect Luna had on people. She was doing it even now - working her magic, for just a few minutes ago Ginny had been wavering in her determination to retrieve the Horcrux, but now? She still wasn't sure that she could, but knowing Luna was watching, hoping, believing in her? She had to try.

"Damn you," she groaned, and Luna beamed. Her hand released Ginny's elbow to curl around her wrist, interlocking with her fingers, while the other reached back to grab a hold of Regulus. Ginny wrinkled her nose, took a deep breath, and pushed forward before she could change her mind.

Blind. She was blind. Three steps in and the lack of light was a crushing weight, cushioning her ears until all she could hear was the pounding of her own heart; a pressure on her eyes so that bright flickers spun and whirled across them, disorienting her. Luna's hand in her own was a welcome connection to the world, the only thing that felt real in this endless, yet claustrophobic darkness.

Taking breaths was difficult, the fear constricting her chest a bind she couldn't brush off. She held it, instead, waiting for the pain that signified how close she was to bursting before she let it out in a soundless rush, her body taking over the motions with alacrity, forcing her lungs to work, even if that meant hyperventilation.

That done, she used her free hand to wander up and down the wall beside her, pausing with each step forward to ensure she wasn't walking into a trap. Nothing. Nothing but cool rock and the dark.

The Horcrux began whispering to her about four steps in, quietly, so that she could ignore it, but it wound into her mind like an enchantment. Behind her, Luna, who so rarely had contact with such darkness, began to tremble. Ginny opened her mouth to tell her to go back, but the words had no sound when they were released. She ignored the panic this triggered, brushing it aside impatiently. She was fine.

It was easy to locate the cup once one got used to walking blind through treacle. Its metal touched Ginny's forehead, caressing, the gems scratching her skin. Confused, Ginny reached up to touch it, finding it hung askew from a nail in the back wall.

"Luna?" she tried to say, only to remember that she was soundless. Instead, she curled her fingers tighter around the other girls, and they started back.

The Horcrux was disturbing to feel, cradled against her chest. It felt as though it was fused with her skin, playing tricks in her mind, showing her images of herself trying to remove it and ripping away flesh, of trying to hand it to another and instead their own skin melting from their bones. The darkness only helped, immersing her completely in its horrific visions; of the metal melting and
coating her arms, fusing them together, locking them forever in position.

Suddenly, it stopped. Her staggering steps suddenly were all she felt. It was a lull, she realised, as she felt the cup rooting through her brain. It had a delighted feel to it, as if it had just uncovered a treasure. Ginny braced herself in preparation, and then-

She was in Hogwarts, students filing by. None of them looked at her, didn't even glance in her direction. She tensed immediately, feeling the gnawing dread that signified her worst nightmare coming. Only this time it was sped up, it was more intense, each of the emotions her dark side played on plucked out and amplified. Her brothers began to appear, each one of them laughing, sparing her no attention - no. That wasn't true. As Fred and George passed, plotting something as they so often were, Fred's head turned as if he caught sight of her, and his face twisted, sneering at her, his eyes filled with condemnation.

Ginny's throat closed on a sob, ice running through her veins, that simple dismissal so much worse than any words, and for it to be Fred…

She closed her eyes, clamping them tight, but it didn't dissolve the vision, only made it more vibrant. Now Ron was there, hot-headed Ron, his face red as he went into full bluster, turning on her while Harry watched with disappointed eyes. Ron's words were mostly loud nonsense, and Harry cut through, sensible. "My godfather, Gin?" he said, looking nauseous.

And then Luna was there, her presence a balm as she inserted herself into the vision, her arm wrapping around Ginny's waist as she pried the cup from her friend's hands. "So nice to see you again," she said brightly to Ginny's brothers, then she yanked Ginny to the side.

She was back in the basement, looking up at Regulus as he slapped her lightly on the cheek. "Put that down, Lu," he said wryly, without looking away. Out of the corner of her eye, Ginny saw Luna examining some stone statuette, turning it in her fingers while the other arm cupped the goblet they'd just retrieved.

"It has diamond eyes, like you," Luna hummed, making Regulus colour slightly, but dropped it obediently back where it had been.

"What happened?" Ginny heard herself ask woozily. She felt completely drained, and her head flopped on her neck. Just to her left she could see Frank, sleeping soundly, suckling his thumb.

"What happened is, we're never letting you near a horcrux again," Regulus informed her coolly. "Talk about 'adverse effects'. You were out for a good half hour before Luna got through to you."

"Oh." Ginny considered that for a moment. Yeah. That sounded like a plan. Fuck being a hero, in the future she'll stick to castrating Death Eaters and leave the dangerous magical objects to Hermione. At least that way she'll be less likely to run into snakes.

"Four down, one to go," Luna said, dropping the cup into their box.
Chapter Sixty-Six: Unravelling

Chapter Summary

In which Severus is in trouble, and Lavender finds out.

"Fritz!" Hermione shouted, panic stretching her voice until it broke. "Fritz!"

No answer. Hermione had only half-expected one, for it had barely been two hours since the elf had gone looking for his cousin, and Dobby, she knew, could evade even the most purposeful of searches if he so wished. But Lavender had been twitchy since Severus had been called, and the lack of communication was not helping.

"I'm hungry," Lavender announced, nibbling her lip. "Are you hungry. We should eat. Where's food?"

"We don't have any," Hermione sighed, dropping her head into her hands. "Maybe we should just go back to Solus and wait there?"

"Where Severus can't contact us? No. No way." Lavender jut her jaw out in defiance. "What if he needs us?"

"Lavender…"

"No, Hermione." Lavender's tone brooked no arguments so Hermione left it be. For the moment.

They settled back into position again, Lavender staring sightless out of the window while Hermione totted up in her head what needed doing. They were close to the end now, she could feel it. So close, so bloody close and yet so far.

With the retrieval of the cup that would leave them with the locket alone to recover, and destroy. Then, they'd need to make a plan.

Obviously, they couldn't go into battle with only eight of them, but surely there was another way? Some way to do what needed to be done without all-guns-blazing it. They'd need an insider, though, someone to tell them the Dark Lord's movements, someone high enough up to know…

But Hermione couldn't think of one. Severus was useful up to a point but he wasn't overly close to Voldemort, nor was he popular enough among the others to get information that way. She was at a loss, but she comforted herself with the reminder that she likely wouldn't be for long. With eight heads to the task, including her own (which excelled at finding inventive solutions to otherwise insurmountable obstacles, if she did say so herself) they would i figure something out.

The quiet was broken by a *pop*, an innocuous start. Though, most things of import start out innocuous, don't they? If only beginnings were louder, one might be able to prepare oneself better. Still, this one was the quiet, experienced entrance of a well trained house-elf, who appeared in the centre of the room. Before she even saw him fully, the lack of fluffy accoutrements informed her he was not who she was waiting for.

"Missy Granger?"
Lavender sat up abruptly, her face pale as she looked at the elf. Or, rather, the stylised Malfoy crest that embroidered his chest. Hermione fought back a surge of panic, knowing that whatever was coming next, she'd need to be the rational one.

"That's me," she said calmly. "And, you are?"

"Blippy, miss," the elf said, giving a short curtsey. A female elf, Hermione wondered idly, if only to put off the concern about where it had appeared from. That Malfoy crest was like a flashing, neon sign screaming 'Bad News'. "Master has a message for missy, so he does."

Lavender was making little whimpering noises in her throat, eyes wide with encroaching despair. Hermione crossed over to her, not bothering to make the move subtle, and took her hand, managing somehow not to wince when her impressively long nails bit into her flesh. "Your master?"

"Mr. Malfoy, miss. He says to tell you that Mr. Snape has been unavoidably detained." The emphasis on the word 'detained' had apparently been a part of the original message, for Blippy leaned forward, throwing her ears out straight and widening her eyes until they were bulging. Lavender stiffened. "Master says that it's no surprise Mr. Snape would turn to thievery given his unfortunate upbringing, but perhaps Missy could consider his safety in future. If there is a future."

Again, with the wide-eye routine.

"Let me get this straight…" Lavender growled, a rumbling undertone to her voice. "Severus is in trouble? Because of us?"

Blippy blinked in confusion. "Blippy is not knowing. Master's Master is with Mr. Snape. Blippy only knows the message."

"Master's Master…" Lavender snarled. "So Voldemort has Severus." Colour rushed up her cheeks and into her ears, her eyes dilating in rage until her eyes were swirling vortexes of violet and black. Blood pooled in the crescents left by Lavender's nails as she wrenched away, standing in a fluid movement eerily reminiscent of the wolf she had inside. "At Malfoy Manor, yes?"

The little elf gave a nod, and Lavender gave a feral smile, her teeth bare and sharp as she turned her attention towards Hermione. There was nothing soft in her expression, only a vaguely hysterical fear, drowned in protective anger. "Get up, we're leaving."

"Lavender," Hermione said, getting to her feet. "We can't just… storm the place. There's no way to get him away from Voldemort without killing the man, and he's still immortal."

"Immortal, but not invulnerable," Lavender said, voice eerily level. "Let's see what good his Horcruxes do him when he's only so much flesh." She marched to the door, only once pausing to turn to Blippy. "Tell your Master that I'm coming for my man, and if he's not grown some bollocks by the time I get there, he'd better stay out of my way."

"Oh, no." Hermione ran to position herself between Lavender and the door, earning herself flashing eyes and a warning snarl. "Let's stand back for a moment and try to be rational about this," she pleaded in a soothing voice, not taking her eyes away from her friend's for even a second. It seemed ridiculous, but the dog training her mother had put her through when she was eight and they'd considered adopting an ex-fight dog was now coming in handy.

"Excuse me, rational?" Lavender gave a bitter laugh, shaking her head, but still not moving. She was a woman on a mission, and already half of her brain was on track to the Manor. "You say that to a girl who can't even be rational about a scrunchie, when her Mate is in danger? Tell me, Hermione, if it were Remus, would you still be urging caution?"
Hermione felt a burning rage light in her belly at the very prospect of Remus ever facing Lord Voldemort. "You might be right," she allowed, shoving it down fiercely. "But it's not Remus, it's Severus, if you were in my position you'd be saying the same thing."

"If I were in your position, we'd already be halfway to Wiltshire!"

"And then we'd die," Hermione said the words in a calmly damning tone. "What use will you be to Severus if you're dead, Lavender? Who else will be his champion? Perhaps Lily. Actually, he'd probably like that…"

"Are you really trying to use my jealousy against me?" Lavender snorted derisively. "If anything, I only feel more inclined to go and save his life, if only so that I can stake a claim he won't deny and wipe that frivolous little bitch from his memory banks forever!"

"'Frivolous'?" Hermione repeated sceptically.

"You heard!" Lav spat. Then, abruptly, she lunged for the door, shoving Hermione out of her way and into the doorjamb. The impact jarred her for a split second, long enough for Blippy to squeak and apparate away.

Hermione sighed, of the long 'woe-is-me' sort, and climbed to her feet, swirling her wand lazily in the air to alter the wards as she followed the sound of Lavender's feet pounding through the house. Graceful, she was not. "Lavender!" she shouted, as if she thought it would be of any use. Instead, she got a response of an entirely different kind.

Fritz and Dobby chose that moment to appear, holding hands in the centre of the room like some sort of elven gay wedding centrepiece, both grinning happily. "Missy-" Fritz began, gleefully, only to be stopped when Hermione held up a hand.

"Wait there," she commanded, forgetting all of her moral opposition to creature-slavery in the face of escaping unmated werewolves on missions to rip Dark Lords to shreds. Sirius was right - they are more trouble than they're worth. "Lavender's making a run for it."

Dobby turned toward the window and beamed, telling Hermione that Lavender had made it outside. "Dobby will fetch Missy Wolf-lady for Fritz friend," he said, before disappearing. Hermione made the window just as he reappeared directly in Lavenders path.

Lavender screeched in horror as she barreled over him on the way to the wards, sending them both reeling before they vanished again, popping up in the living room, sprawled in a heap.

Well, you had to give it to the little elf; he had near-suicidal levels of efficiency.

"Thank you, Dobby," she said, then bit her lip in consideration. Things needed to be done, and done quickly. It wasn't like she could hold Lavender for long, not if the girl calmed down enough to use her head. "Fritz? Could you please tell Ginny and her lot to come here once they're back? And the boys, too, I suppose. Some food wouldn't go amiss, either."

"Yes, miss," Fritz smiled proudly at her as if she was a child who'd particularly impressed him by giving him orders, then poofed off in a blur of boa. Propping her hands on her hips, she turned to Lavender with her most stern expression, only to find her glaring at Dobby.

"Figures that Potter would have the psycho elf," she snarled, watching the little creature with a wary eye. "You know, given how everything else he surrounded himself with is defective."

Hermione pretended to ignore the vicious look she was sent at that. "Severus isn't dead," she said
primly. "No need to channel his spirit." Hearing Lavender's furious gasp, she decided it would be better for everyone if the blonde wasn't given any more of a reason to speak. Instead, she kneeled down before Dobby and smiled comfortingly. Or, at least, tried. She could project a cool, calm demeanor, but inside her soul was screaming, demanding two things - one, that she help Lavender, her friend, to save the man she loved; two, that she help Lavender, her packmate and omega, to save her mate.

At least both sides of herself agreed on something.

"Dobby, you don't know me, but I'm Hermione Granger," she began, mentally cutting swathes from the speech she'd prepared during their wait. They didn't have time - Gods, who'd have thought the time-travellers would be the ones running out of time? "I need your help to defeat Lord Voldemort."

Dobby's eyes flew wide, his lower lip wobbling. "But Missy - Dobby is under orders - Master says Dobby must be good to Dark Lord."

"I'm not asking you to hurt him, Dobby," Hermione said, her soothing tone appearing to work on Dobby much better than it had on Lavender. Which was lucky. If she said the wrong word, the elf would throw himself into self-flagellation mode and then what would she do? Behind her, Lavender was eyeing up the distance between herself and the door, so Hermione made a point of slamming it with her wand. "I only need information. Did your master tell you not to give out information, hmm?"

He worried his lip and wrinkled his nose, eyes rolling back as he considered the question. "Master says as I must do as Lordy says," Dobby told her thoughtfully. "But Lordy never says not to tell. He says is a secret, but that's not saying not to tell!" He stopped abruptly, eyeing Hermione warily. "But Dobby shouldn't tell missy - Dobby doesn't know missy, and Missy might be a bad lady."

Hermione nodded sagely, taking Dobby's hand in her own. The elf looked at it in shock, his ears quivering madly, eyes glossing over. "That's true, I might be. I'm not, though. Just look at me, Dobby - you can see what sort of witch I am, can't you?" Dobby observed her for a moment and nodded, slowly. Hermione took a deep breath and directed his attention to Lavender, who was now clawing anxiously at the floor, her eyes narrowed but attention far away. "Lav is my best friend, and my family," Hermione confided in the elf, her heart aching at Lavender's pain. The faster she did this, however, the sooner they could find Severus, bringing him back to them whole and hearty. That is what she promised them both, deep within her heart.

"Her mate is being tortured by Lord Voldemort as we speak." Dobby's ears curled in distress at the blunt language, and Hermione even winced at her own words, but soldiered on regardless. "An unpleasant bloke, but she loves him. Loves him. If you knew the man, you'd understand what a miracle that is - for the both of them. Still, if anybody deserves love, it's the two of them."

"Everyone deserves love," Dobby said, a little misty-eyed as he looked at Lavender. "Dobby loves his Mistress," he chirped, his words a bit wilted under the strain of the moment. "Mistress loves Master, too, even if Master is…" he cut himself off, eyes going wide with alarm. "Dobby shouldn't talk about Master like that," he said hurriedly. "Master is not a good man but Dobby is a loyal elf, and - oh!" he span around and dove for the corner of the coffee table, Hermione catching him around the waist just as he landed and began to smack his head violently. Gritting her teeth, Hermione marshalled her patience and yanked him back.

"Dobby - Dobby! Stop!"

"Dobby must be punishing himself, miss, for speaking bad about his Master!" He curled his body
around so that he was upside down and beat his head against the floor while Hermione tried to hold his squirming body higher.

"That's all well and good, but Hermione must be saving Severus, so can it just wait?!"

Dobby paused mid-beat to peer up at her. "Missy needs Dobby's help?"

"Of course she does- you lunatic! "I need you to take us to the cave Voldemort took you to. Please!"

He blinked, and frowned. "Dobby can do that," he said slowly.

"Oh, good - that's good, then can we-"

Crack!

Bollocks.

Severus hit the ground panting, his vision black and empty. His muscles quivered and screamed, his bones rattling beneath flesh that felt one wrong move away from spontaneous disintegration. Never had he been more aware of his own mortality, the fact that as a human his body was mostly soft jelly held in place by some clever structuring, a formidable frame under most circumstances but collapsible; woefully collapsible.

Some part of his mind gibbered and screeched for mercy - a useless part he'd blocked off long ago until ignoring it was second nature, and yet became increasingly loud and manic by the second. Grateful, he realised - he was so grateful that he was a natural occlumens, if only so that it could hold off the impending madness just a few moments more.

The ground rocked beneath his hands as he struggled to stand. It was a silly thing, pride, but now that he had been revealed for the traitor he was he didn't want to spend a second more than necessary on his knees before this man. Realising how he'd chafed at such obsequiousness, he only thanked the gods that it hadn't been a conscious thought several months earlier, for he would have already been killed.

He wasted valuable energy by bringing himself up to a kneeling position, jerking his chin forward to look up at the Dark Lord, or what he could see of him through the blotches his torture had caused his eyesight to disintegrate into. Something was drilling into his temple, a migraine of mammoth proportions, and it seemed hilarious to him that of all his aches and pains that bothered him the most.

But then, he wasn't bleeding yet.

"Oh, Severusss..." The Dark Lord tutted like a displeased schoolmarm. "After all I've done for you... Thiss betrayal cutsss me deep, indeed."

Severus went to make a response, but his twitchy brain instead gave him a run down of what Lavender would say in this situation, of all things. Her voice in his head was snarky and bold as she snapped out a "sucks to be you", so clear it was almost like she was here. His lips twitched despite the situation; he was a man who could always appreciate irreverence, even in a life threatening situation. Plus, thinking of her was... Comforting, somehow.

Unease curled through him as he realised that perhaps he was somewhat more fond of her than he'd thought.
"...done for you, raised you like my sssson..." Severus's hearing was dropping in and out, now, so he had no warning before the pain racked through him again, spasming outwards, ebbing and flowing such that everytime he felt that sweet relief was coming another would begin. He couldn't breathe, his lungs freezing. Something was making a cracking, thumping noise and that took a moment for him to realise that it was his limbs, smacking against the floor. He couldn't even feel them anymore, not really, which sent a chill through him that combated the fiery pain.

Awareness was a blight on him. If only he could pass out, stop thinking for a moment then start again, anew…

"My lord!" a voice gasped from the doorway. Severus squinted in that direction, unable to see anything but blurry forms. The voice was recognisable enough, though - Pettigrew. But what would Pettigrew be doing here, of all places?

"Ah, Wormtail… here to enjoy the show? Perhaps you would like to… participate..?"

There was a squeak that Severus was only half-certain wasn't his own. "Ah, no - no, my lord, though I thank you most ardently for the offer. I - have come from the Potter house, as you requested."

The weight of the Dark Lord's regard released Severus immediately, the man spinning to face Pettigrew in the doorway. Severus attempted to curl his fingers into claws, to push himself up, but he was too weak. Too drained from the attempt to hold himself together. His brain played tricks on him, convincing him that the floor was moving, that his skin was crawling from his bones. Some part of him wanted to listen to the conversation, but the rest of him was focused on the minute possibility of escape, the tiny space between Pettigrew's form and the doorway…

"This is most interesting," the Dark Lord said, suddenly, as his boot clamped down on Severus's calves. He twitched only slightly at the pain of his raw skin. The weight left, and footsteps rounded Severus's head, before the Dark Lord's handsome face was thrust into his vision, a leer denoting the enjoyment the man had found in his torture, "Oh, my Severussss - it seems we are done for today, for Wormtail has brought me most… enlightening newsss…"

At this point, the Dark Lord would have killed anyone else. Any random Muggle, muggle-born, pureblood, even that you dropped in front of him would have been unceremoniously *Avada*’d, like so much litter. Not Severus - not for any Death Eater that might cross him. In his own way, the Dark Lord trusted them, and every double-cross was felt personally.

That feeling was taken out of the Death Eater's own flesh.

So Severus wasn't surprised when the Dark Lord gave a smarmy smirk. "Call Luciusss," he ordered Pettigrew with a purr in his voice. "It appearssss that thosssse delightfully convenient dungeonssss of hiss will have a gueesssst..."
"What do you mean, gone?"

Lavender grit her teeth against the haze of red that threatened to overwhelm her vision. "Not 'gone'; taken. By Dobby, of all people!"

"Dobby?" Ginny gaped. "But… why?"

She'd only been back two minutes. They'd dropped the cup off at Solus and Fritz had impatiently whisked them away here, to find the house in a state of almost complete destruction. It seemed, in their absence, that Lavender had succumbed to a touch of separation anxiety, an anxiety she had set about assuaging by turning out everything in the house in case Hermione happened to be hiding beneath a sofa cushion or in a flower pot. Immediately, Luna had hared to the window to check on her plants, letting out a sigh of relief to see that she'd as yet not made it outside.

"I don't know!" Lavender whined, shaking a stray pillow viciously. "But now she's gone, and Severus is in trouble, and I don't know what to do!"

With a shriek, the werewolf threw the pillow away from her, knocking down the one vase that had somehow remained standing through her first tirade. It toppled over, spilling wilting flowers across the floor.

"Lavender," Ginny tried to calm her, raising her hands in submission. Behind her, Regulus stared longingly at the door, caught between fear and bewilderment. He never had gotten used to Lavender on a good day, never mind today, when she was reaching new, unprecedented levels of insanity. "I need you to talk me through this. I'm sure Dobby wouldn't have just popped off with Hermione for no reason, even if that reason is unfathomable to the rest of us. What did she say?"

Lavender panted as she paused mid-swing, her head cocked to one side. In her eyes, behind the crazed fear, some strand of thought broke through. "She said 'I need you to take us to the cave Voldemort took you to'.'"

Ginny raised an eyebrow. "Those were her exact words?"
Ignoring Regulus's squeak of surprise (Ginny could only suppose he didn't think she'd know such a big word), she sighed. "Well that explains it, then. Specifics. When dealing with Dobby, one must remember to be *specific.*"

Hermione had to remember that *specifics* with Dobby were important.

She remembered this pertinent fact as she whirled through existence on Dobby's arm, the elf popping her across the country until they reappeared somewhere cold, dark and damp. On landing, Hermione reeled from the unexpected travel, stumbling backwards with a surprised gasp, her back smacking into something unpleasantly damp.

It took a moment for her eyes to become accustomed to the dim lighting, but when it did she realised that the world had taken on an eerie green cast, the air thin with a tinge of salt water. Breathing it into her lungs was a shock to the system after the temperate loveliness of their house in the country, the way it clung to her throat in a vaguely meaty way disturbing.

"Missy is good?" Dobby's voice chirped, and Hermione squinted to see him perched on a rock, observing her intently.

"Yes, thank you, Dobby."

"Dobby is pleased to be of service." He lifted his fingers to click himself away, causing Hermione to let out a yelp.

"No! Dobby, please don't leave!" Panic rippled up her throat, distorting her words into a begging plea. Dobby paused, staring at her as if she were some strange creature. His large, bulbous eyes, she noticed, were cloudy and slightly vacant, sending a chill down her spine. Used to Dobby's eccentricities, she'd not suspected anything wrong at first, but now…

She remembered how Kreacher was purported to have changed after his run-in with the potion Riddle had left to protect his potion, and how Harry had said Dumbledore had reacted to it. Was it possible that drinking it had splintered what little sanity Dobby had been blessed with?

Shoving that harrowing thought to the back of her mind, she focused on the present. The truth of the matter was that she needed Dobby right now. "Missy said please," Dobby repeated in a wondering voice.

"Yes, Dobby. I need your help to defeat the Dark Lord, please," she coaxed, stepping away from the wall. Her shirt slapped unpleasantly against her back, soaked through with some unidentifiable slime, and she just barely stopped herself from grimacing.

Dobby, his ears stood straight up in startlement, nodded vigorously. "Of course Dobby will help Missy wherever possible."

"Great, thank you." That sorted, she turned to examine her surroundings. It looked exactly as Harry had described - like some nightmare you might stumble across on an ill-fated spelunking expedition. The lake was dark and grimy, the rocky outcrop in the centre menacing in the way only dark magic could be. Something pinged off, though…

"Dobby," she asked slowly, turning in a slow circle. Yep, there was the chain for the boat, still
unearthed from Voldemort's visit. "Dobby, why are we in the cave?"

Dobby blinked uncertainly. "Isn't this where Missy wants to be?"

Duh, Hermione. "Well, yes..."

"Did Dobby do wrong?" he asked frantically, wringing his hands. "This is the cave Missy asked Dobby to bring her to, yes?"

Yes, Hermione admitted to herself, but I was expecting to be outside. Honestly, did noone guard against elves these days? These wards could keep out herds of stampeding Hippogriffs but not one measly elf? It was almost like Voldemort wanted his horcruxes to be found.

Then another idea popped into her head. "Can you get us out there?" she asked, pointing to the island in the center.

Dobby shrinked back, and only then did Hermione realise that he'd been studiously avoiding looking at it, keeping his back turned. Terror slipped across his expression, quickly lost in vacancy. Before he had a chance to give her an affirmative, she shook her head. "No, never mind. I'll do it on my own." And as for how she'd tackle the potion situation? Well. That was what the Weasley twins were for. She patted the extended pocket of her jeans comfortingly, grateful for the insidiously obsessive impulses that had her carrying an emergency potions kit at all times.

Leaving Dobby to his profuse thanks ("Missy is such a kind miss, such a generous miss"), she strode over to the boat with the hope that false confidence would carry her through where planning had failed her. She had not, after all, considered the cave and the locket much, the idea being that they could plan once they had the location in hand. Of course, she could always go back now and return, better prepared and with back-up, later, but that seemed like a waste. Especially since Lavender could, even now, be storming the battlements at Malfoy Manor. If Hermione got the locket that was one fewer defense for Voldemort, and when the time came - if Lavender were to claw him to death, for example - his death would be final.

She curled her fingers around the clammy chain, ignoring the cold in favour of care, ensuring the water wasn't too disturbed when she pulled the boat to the surface. Brackish water slid from the stern like finest silk, revealing its dry interior for her perusal. With one last glance at Dobby, who was facing the wall, rocking slowly back and forth, she severed the links of the chain and pushed off.

The boat propelled itself, leaving Hermione to try and focus on anything except what was about to happen. If her plan, what little of it there was, didn't work...

Well, she'd have to drink the potion, wouldn't she? Drink the potion, alone, try to resist the call of the water, alone, get herself back to shore, alone...

She hadn't realised how much she'd become accustomed to company until she was alone. Every adventure, she'd had company. Even in her everyday life, Remus was almost always by her side. She'd never done anything without at least the moral support of others, and she liked it that way.

For Merlin's sake, she was a scholar! She wasn't meant for this stuff! She could just about hold her own in battle, but retrieving horcruxes? The last time she'd tried that, she'd been taken down by a lousy snake bite. She'd made the plan but every part of it had been carried out to perfection by someone else - why? Because she knew her limits. Espionage and action were not her thing. Give her a map, a notebook and some highlighter pens and she'll win a war; give her a sword, and she'll probably stab herself. Accidentally. In the face.
Calm. Calm. Calm. You can do this.

Probably.

The nose of the boat tapped the rocks gently as it reached the island, pulling Hermione from her thoughts. The pedestal on which the bowl stood was directly in front of her, looming, graceful and threatening as fire.

Fire. Hermione pinched her lips, glancing hesitantly over the side into the murky waters below. She could see nothing but pale shapes, and that was enough for her eyes to adjust, defining curves and planes, cool blue ovals staring -

She hopped from the boat with perhaps a little more haste than was seemly. She didn't want to be here. Wanted to leave as soon as possible. In the distance Dobby still huddled, so close to the source of his trauma and yet far enough for him to pretend it didn't exist.

Perhaps that would work for her?

Nope. Plan first, improvise later.

With quick steps, she rounded the bowl, taking it in from all sides, as well as its gaudy little cup. Murky, thick, she could see the locket. Testing its wards she found them nearly impenetrable, except to drink.

Then, just to make sure, she lifted the cup and scooped up some of the potion, deliberately spilling it back on the retreat.

With a satisfied nod, she began to rifle through her pockets, pulling out the little black case that contained healing potions, polyjuice, a tiny vial of veritaserum and the store of Weasley products Luna had thought to bring with them. With a sense of satisfaction she retrieved a small indigo bottle, no larger than her thumb, and withdrew the eyedropper from within. Carefully, she dropped three blobs of potion onto the silly cup Riddle had been so kind as to leave out (almost as if he wanted someone to retrieve the necklace) and lowered it into the bowl.

A hissing sound cut through the air, drowning out a quiet pop, bubbles distorting the surface as it boiled off, the opalescent surface paling into white, and then steaming, until all that was left was the cool, clear, harmless translucence of water.

"Thank you, Fred and George," she said fervently, glancing in the vague direction of the Burrow. Then, with slightly more confidence, she plunged the cup full and brought it to her lips.

Before it could touch, however, a shout sounded from across the water, shocking her hands into spasms. The cup dropped from her hands, splattering water across the rock and rolling towards the edge of the lake, but she was too busy being distracted by the house-elf who'd appeared from nowhere, clutching an enraged Remus Lupin by the hand.

"You," he swore, eyes narrowed on her, gaze burning terrifyingly even across the lake filled with dead people, "are in so much trouble!"
Chapter Sixty-Eight: Shortly

Chapter Summary

Severus is probably fine, while Hermione and Remus have a domestic.

Severus came to consciousness on a thin mattress, barely providing any protection from the ground. Something poked through the material into his back, and with some difficulty he manoeuvred himself to yank it out - a duck feather. Of course it would be a feather mattress. This was Malfoy Manor, after all. Dungeons or no, standards must be upkept.

He groaned silently, squinting his eyes at the ceiling. The light was murky at best, dismal. He could just make out shapes in the corner, something far too lumpy to be human, so he assumed it was blankets and chamber pots.

"You're awake," Lucius' familiar drawl said from his side, and he craned his head just enough to see the man's platinum hair glinting in the candlelight. "I was worried you'd never recover."

Severus groaned as a wave of tremors rocked his body, throwing him back onto the mattress. "How long was I out?"

"Half an hour," Lucius replied promptly. At Severus's incredulous look, the man shrugged. "Now, Severus, have you ever known me to be patient?"

"I suppose not." Severus breathed through the next spasms, slow and steady. They petered off, and he looked back at Lucius. "Did you send the elf?"

He flicked out the ends of his robes, twirling his cane as his mouth crimped. "I did. It returned an hour ago. I don't know who you called on, Severus, but they scared Blippy, and Blippy came to us from the Lestranges. Would you like to explain?"

Severus couldn't help a smirk. Surely he was speaking of Lavender. Muggleborn or not, Miss Granger would have been raised better than to make a scene in front of guests. "Not particularly. Have you heard back?"

"Not as yet. The way Blippy tells it, there was somewhat of a commotion as she made her exit. Some girl spouting threats against my person." He pouted, running a hand down his chest. "My person, Severus. One of my favourite things."

Severus couldn't hold back a derisive snort. "Beside your cock and your hair, is it?"

"You know me so well," Lucius said happily. "But honestly, Severus, who are these people?"

"Hopefully," Severus murmured, "the people who will save the Wizarding World."

He ignored Lucius' doubtful look.

"What do you think you're doing?!" Remus snapped, his voice echoing around the cavern walls. He didn't care, though. He was so frustrated, so scared.
"Retrieving a horcrux?" Hermione said uncertainly, her voice lilting across the space between them. His fingers itched to grab her, to apparate them away, but he wasn't close enough. "Really, Remus, you ought to keep your voice down. We're not alone, you know."

Remus did know. Inferi in the water. A potion that turned one psychotic. Treacherous waters outside. It was almost as if she was trying to drive him mental. "Don't you dare drink that!" he thundered, his impotence making him angry. There was no way to get to her. Dobby was paralysed by fear, Fritz had returned to the group to help keep Lavender under control, and the damn boat was still gently bobbing against the edge of the island, mere feet from Hermione yet seemingly miles from him.

Hermione sniffed. "Don't tell me what to do," she said, lifting the bowl to her mouth. He shook from frustration. Of all the times to be stubborn…

"Hermione!" he yelled, his voice cracking off the walls like a whip. Still, she didn't stop. Her throat worked as she gulped down the potion, scooping up more and slurping it down. The wolf in his head was howling, scratching, he was seeing red, nothing made sense. His feet moved towards the water, ready to wade in, to swim to her, to fight an army of the dead just to get her to stop -

"All done," she sang, just as his toes reached for the water. He blinked away the haze just enough to see her pull something glinting and gold from the pedestal bowl and loop it over her head. She shot him a snotty look, one that was so distinctly Hermione he sighed with relief, even while his head swirled with confusion. With quick, dainty steps she boarded the boat and glided across to him.

He met the boat the second it hit the shore, throwing himself aboard and onto her. They hit the wooden floor together, him rolling them so that his back took the impact, ignoring how he soaked them with contaminated lake water. "You idiot!" he gritted out, burying his face into her curls. "Infuriating, brave, selfish, selfless idiot!"

She vibrated against his chest and a cold hand gripped his throat, terror racing up his spine. Was this the potion at work? Was it delayed? Gods - was she alright - he needed to get her to safety, now.

He scooped her up in his arms, leaping for the shore, running to Dobby and grabbing his arm. "Dobby - Dobby, take us home, please!"

It was only when they landed in the sitting room, in the midst of their friends and family, and he dropped her onto the couch, that her face became visible.

Her laughing face.

"Potion-be-gone," she giggled, holding up a crystal vial for his inspection. "Guaranteed to neutralise up to 90% of all potions. Brilliant, isn't it?"

"Remus, open up!"

"No!" His voice was haughty, furious, which was relatively amusing. He just didn't seem the angry type. Once, in third year, she'd tried feeding his Grindylow fish food (it looked hungry!), ended up giving the poor thing food poisoning, and then was caught red handed trying to feed it an anti-nausea potion, and still all he'd done was have her write an essay about the Grindylow diet. He'd always been calm, collected.

To be honest, this was a really inconvenient time for that to change.

"Get out, Remus! Bloody Hell!"
He shouted something incomprehensible back and Lavender rolled her eyes. She'd been sent to get him out because none of them thought they had time for Hermione and Remus to overcome their issues right now, and she was without a doubt the best person to coax him out with sheer bluntness. She was beginning to wonder if that had been a poor choice, however, because she was losing her patience. Three calming droughts had taken the edge off of her immediate need to go to Severus, but it wouldn't last for long. They needed to sort out a plan while she was lucid enough to care.

Everyone was on board with that.

Everyone except Remus.

She'd never seen a person so angry as he had been when Hermione had told him what she'd done. Logic out of the window, he'd started to give her a lecture she didn't want to hear. When she didn't stop arguing with him, he'd stormed off.

He was understandably mad. When he'd arrived at the house, he'd only stuck around long enough to hear that Hermione had gone to the cave with Dobby before he popped off with Fritz. Didn't hear that it wasn't her choice, or that they'd been planning on waiting, no. He just assumed that she was as reckless as his dim-witted friends and acted accordingly.

It was her fault just as much as it was Remus's, Lavender had to admit, for staying in the first place. The girl could have come back instead of staying and playing the hero. She could have sent Dobby to fetch someone else for help. But, no. No doubt she had good intentions, but the road to Hell, and all that…

Still, there was no time for this characteristic moping. They had shit to do. A minor relationship crisis that would probably end in the two of them having disgustingly soppy sex could wait.

She huffed, crossing her arms. "Bloody hell, you absolute wanker. Can't you get over your injured bloody ego and come downstairs? As enchanting as your domestic is, we do have more important things to be getting along with. Let me numerate them, lest you've forgotten: 1, destroying horcruxes; 2, saving Severus from being tortured to death; 3, defeating Voldemort before he can kill the lot of us, up to and including that Mate you're so mad at. And, finally, 4; saving thewizarding world from terror, murder and utter destruction!" She banged her hand against the door angrily. "Not to mention, saving yourself from a fate worse than hell should we happen to get to Malfoy Manor too late to save my mate because of your fucking hystrionics!"

There was a pause, and then Remus' voice, close to the door. "Do you promise not to hit me if I come out?"

Lavender considered this for a moment. "Eh. Fine."

The door clicked open and Remus' rumpled head smiled sheepishly at her. "I'm being a twat, aren't I?"

"She didn't go there on purpose. Hermione wouldn't do that."

Remus paused, his eyes focusing above her head. "I know," he said. "Can we not talk about this?"

Lavender shrugged. "I don't particularly care, but Hermione will."

He flicked his eyes to the bedroom as if contemplating another lock-in, which Lavender was just not having. For one thing, it was her bedroom. Not his. And she was very, very territorial. She grabbed his arm, completely ignoring the omega wolf in her head that went into a tizzy at her dragging her Alpha about, and pulled him down the hallway to the stairs. "Come on. They're planning to destroy
them all together before we go. The only choice to make is whether to use the Basilisk fangs or Lily's fiendfyre. Sirius and Lily are for fiendfyre, while Hermione, Regulus and James are for the fangs." That rather understated the issue, though. James was ordering Lily not to use fiendfyre, while Lily became more determined to use it simply to spite him. Sirius was egging Lily on because he's a pyromaniacal freak who probably wants to learn how to use it, and Regulus was on Hermione's side simply to be contrary.

The argument reached them before they hit the bottom floor.

"Give me it!" Lily was shrieking, her voice echoing around the house. "It's mine, James, you have no right!"

"It's dark magic, Lily! Have you forgotten that?! We're light, that's the whole point!"

"That is my wand! So help me God, James Potter, if you don't give me back my wand right now I will leave!"

"Lily, James, please," Hermione's voice said levelly. "We need to save Severus. Let's keep ourselves on target."

Lavender entered the room just in time to see Ginny roll her eyes, clearly out of patience, and in one smooth movement snatch Lily's wand from James' hand, so quickly he didn't notice until she was already across the room handing it to Lily. "Your son taught me that," she said proudly as the other redhead took her wand back. "Hex him, Lily. He deserves it." She turned to shoot James a venomous look. "Stealing a witch's wand. Fucking shameful."

"I'm trying to protect her!" James shouted, clearly beyond sense.

"I don't need protecting!" Lily yelled back, which only started up the argument again, the pair screeching back and forth over the coffee table, in the centre of which sat their box of Horcruxes. Open.

Well, that explained some things, didn't it?

Lavender strode through the centre of their sparring, reaching out and snapping the lid shut loudly. All of a sudden, there was silence.

"Thank you, Lavender," Hermione said from the corner, pressing her fingertips to her temple and massaging gently. "I was beginning to think they'd never stop."

James looked faintly bewildered, glancing around. "What just happened?"

"You came within inches of losing your balls, pal," Ginny snapped, stroking her own wand lovingly. "Try that shit again, I fucking dare you."

Lily nodded her own head, righteous fury blazing in her eyes. Lavender scowled, holding her hands up to hold back both parties. "As much as I enjoy a good old barney, and you know I do, do you think we can focus on the matter at hand? Hermione says we can't go after ol' Voldy until these are all ash. I don't care how we do it, but can we do it soon? Perhaps, now? And get bloody moving, too. Only the Gods know how long Sevvy will be kept alive, so I'd rather not leave it too long!"

Everyone made a murmuring apology, which Lavender accepted with grace - well, all except for Luna, who suddenly sprang to her feet, yelping "Gods!". She sprinted from the room, leaving Regulus looking bewildered and abandoned in their corner.
Ignoring that - Lu had always been weird, she didn't have time to contemplate the facets of that weirdness - Lavender propped her hands on her hips. "Right. We have four Horcruxes to dust. Fiendfyre, no offence Lily, is too unpredictable and dangerous. That leaves the fangs." Rifling through the bag left in a heap next to the box, she hefted the weight of a fang in her hands and smiled widely, showing off her own in anticipation. "All we need now are some volunteers."
They split into teams to do it, firstly, because according to Hermione it was too dangerous to do alone, and secondly (perhaps most importantly), because after Sirius and James broke that side table fighting over who would get the cup, noone thought they could be trusted to do it alone.

They also decided to do it separately, with each horcrux in a different room, though they'd destroy all four at roughly the same time. It was a logical decision based of the sheer power of them when together even when they weren’t fighting back. After a lecture on the subject from Hermione, they divided the objects among them - Ginny and Sirius with the diary, James and Lily with the cup, Hermione and Regulus took the locket, while Lavender and Remus claimed the diadem.

Luna still hadn't returned.

"Remember that it isn't real," Hermione was saying. "Alone, they have no power."

Ginny twitched, grimacing, but let that statement pass.

"It will show you things, but you need to stay strong, okay? It picks -"

"We get it," Sirius said, rolling the Basilisk fang across his palm eagerly. "It talks, we stab. Kabloom, the horcrux is gone. Can we go now?"

Hermione frowned at him. "I'm not sure you understand -"

"We'll be fine," James replied, eyeing the cup he held warily. "How hard could it be?"

Lavender could almost feel Hermione grinding her teeth, but she threw her hands up in defeat all the same. "Alright, then. Have it your way. Come on, Regulus. We'll take the shed."

Hermione marched out, a cloud of bushy hair, with Regulus following behind her. James and Lily
were the next to leave, heading for the basement, while Sirius and Ginny took the attic. She and Remus stayed where they were, eyeing the diadem where it sat harmlessly on the coffee table.

She glanced at Remus, holding the fang out. "Do you..?"

"No, thank you," he replied, as polite as if he'd been ordering tea. "Please, go ahead. I'll be right here if you need me."

Lavender watched him for a moment, then shrugged. His loss.

Up close, the diadem was impressive, all sparkling jewels and intricate metalwork, the wings, inspired by Athena's owls, splayed majestically over the giant sapphire in the centre. It was said that on Rowena Ravenclaw's head the wings would move of their own accord, providing the bearer with the wisdom of the creature they emulated, but after hundreds of years they simply gleamed benignly.

Looking at it, it did not appear overly sinister in itself, but the aura it projected made Dark look Light; the entrail-expelling curse a simple expelliarmus. Even to Lavender, who by all rights should be less affected by the darker end of the magic scale due to the creature that lived within her, was put off.

She braced herself, stepping slowly forward, watching the tiara closely for any change with proximity. Nothing. She thought it might have rattled at one point, but a look at Remus had simply garnered a raised eyebrow, so she pressed on. Anticipation mingled with caution within her; caution not generally being an emotion Lavender was acquainted with, it unnerved her somewhat to heed it, but after hearing tales of the Horcrux's defense system, she didn't much fancy taking any chances.

When it did change, the results were so abrupt that it took a moment for her to notice. Not that it was at all subtle, it was more that Lavender had expected billowing clouds of smoke, cracks and bangs, perhaps ghostly figures of Voldemort himself to stride forward with wand raised.

Instead, she got cake.

A lovely, rich, gorgeous torte, the kind she so often dreamed about.

"The Fuck is this?" fell from her lips without conscious thought.

"Is that…"

"Cake? Yes!" She stared at it, it's shimmering top, the perfectly tempered chocolate, the icing… her feet were frozen to the spot, ancient, terrible anxiety closing her throat. She coughed to clear it, feeling as though her breath had turned to syrup, molasses-slow as it crawled down her windpipe. Clenching her jaw, she stepped forward, then froze as a rippling wave of magic washed over her. Looking down, her fang had somehow turned itself into an ornate cake knife, one which she knew had her family crest carved on the underside - a distinctive gift from her Aunt Alice, given shortly before her birth.

Her feet were bare, she realised. Her frame suddenly wrapped in a gaudy nightgown, hot pink, that she'd thrown a tantrum in Twilfitt and Tattings to get and had worn faithfully for five years, from her sixth birthday to her eleventh.

Nostalgia surged in her, throwing a haze over her thoughts. This was a memory, she realised, a sinking feeling in her gut. She was nine years old again, right down to the braids curling around her crown, the pearly polish she'd carefully applied to her toenails and been so proud of but could now she the cracks and missing pieces in.

"Remus?" she tried to ask, fighting the submersion, even while her voice came out high pitched and
"Still here, Lav," his deep voice rolled through, the instinctive part of Lavender's mind relaxing at the sound of it. "Are you alright?"

"Just fine." She took a deep breath. She was here for the horcrux. Nothing else. Like Hermione said; it couldn't hurt her. It was just messing with her mind. She was older, now; wiser (marginally).

And she wasn't scared of cake.

She shoved forward through the mist that encased everything in an eerie white glow, blocking out her surroundings. The sight of her arms, pale and chubby instead of long and tan, unnerved her further, but she pressed on, shoving back the memories. Her mother had taken great pains to keep her pale as a child, valuing the porcelain complexion of the other Purebloods over the natural, easy tan of the Browns - the summers she'd spent, suffocating in crew-necked robes and scarves on mid-August days in the sun...

Nope. Let's not dwell on that.

She was sure the diadem-cake had been closer when they'd began. The living room wasn't this big, surely?

Then something changed, and she was right in front of it, her knife-fang raised to stab down, and just as soon as she'd thought "this seems rather counter-productive of you, Tom", a strident voice cut through the air -

"Lavender Brown, you put that knife down, right now!"

She stuttered in her movements, going to release her grip out of sheer habit, but catching it just in time. In front of her, just beyond the table, stood a tall, blonde-haired woman, her hair flowing effortlessly down her spine; perfect, doll-like features pinched in an expression as familiar to Lavender as her own. Brown eyes so light they were almost red glared at her, and her willowy arms were propped on her hips.

"So this is how you got so damn big!" the woman, her mother, snapped, glowering across at her. "Sneaking about, shoving your face with whatever's available. Even my cake - my cake, Lavender. Mine." She drew a hand down her side, as if gesturing to all of the ways she was different from Lavender. "I can afford it, after all," she said, smugly.

Lavender felt herself shuffle her feet, ducking her head shyly. "Mum-

"No, dear. That's not my name."

She took another deep breath, and blurted out, "Lady Brown, ma'am, might I please have a slice of cake?"

Her mother tipped her head, a serpentine smile on her face as she regarded her daughter. "Hm... you did ask very prettily." Hope rose in Lavender's stomach, making her feel lighter than air. Maybe this time she'll say yes, an excited voice chirped in her mind. Maybe today she'll love you enough...

"No, I don't think so," Lady Brown said with a smirk, bringing a crystal dome down on the cake, its thick glass murky and slightly smokey. "You've done naught to earn it, after all."

Petulance raced through her, and she found herself stamping her feet. "That's not true!" she replied indignantly. "I ate all of my vegetables, I cleaned my room, I did all of my homework. I helped the
elves wash up after dinner, I helped daddy with the estate management, and I mended all of my socks!"

Her mother swished her hair down her back, twirling her fingers in it as she smiled mockingly at her daughter. "Do you hear yourself? 'I, I, I'. Dear, dear, whenever did you become so self-absorbed? Not everything is about you, Lavender. You'll need to learn that sooner or later." She sneered. "As for your father, he coddles you too much. Look at yourself - have you ever seen such a poor excuse for an heiress? I see you for who you are, Lavender. And, trust me, dear, I'm doing you a kindness."

She waved at the exquisite confection on the table. "This will only make you worse. Self-indulgence is a disease, you know, and if you don't watch it, even your father will wake up and notice what an indolent little whore you're turning out to be. Then he'll turf you out, and you'll be all alone in the world, selling everything you've got for sickles. No," her mother smiled, a warped thing she must have thought was kindly. "Much better to teach you better now, while there's still a possibility of fixing you."

Cold. Everything inside Lavender was icy, empty, dull. She'd almost forgotten this - this spectre that haunted her childhood, the vulnerability, the constant unrelenting emotional pain that wore her down until there was simply nothing left of her. By the time she reached Hogwarts she'd been closed off, and the experience of freedom, of real, unrestrained emotion had been an uncontrollable novelty she'd never managed to kerb the edge of. Nor, once she grew up enough to understand the value of her tempestuous emotions, had she ever wanted to. But now... it was like she was there again. A child, with a child's mentality, listening to the words while they were still sharp, cutting her value to shreds.

"Give me the knife, Lavender," her mother purred. "You know it's best, dear."

Lavender lifted the handle towards her mum once more, then paused, uncertain. She didn't want to, but she should, shouldn't she? But she didn't want to. Wasn't this her house, after all? And she was pretty sure the cake was hers, too. And it was important, that she knew.

She raised her other hand to remove the covering.

"No!" Her mother said, voice thundering through the room. She stared at the implement in her daughter's hand, sudden fury rippling across her face. "That's my knife!" She shrieked the words, lunging forward to grab at it, missing by an inch. "That knife belongs to Lady Brown! Me! I can't."

Abruptly, she pulled back, her face closing off. "Your father's sister gave us that knife, and you dare touch it?"

As she had then, Lavender clutched the knife tighter. "Its my knife," she said, fingering the spine of it. "Auntie Alice gave it to me. The letter says so."

Lady Brown's face went a mottled purple colour, but she retained her calm; the calm that had always bothered Lavender more than her fury had, because her mother had not been a Ravenclaw for nothing. "You're wrong. That is my knife, and you're not worthy to touch it. A dirty thief, you are. That's all you are. A dirty, fat cuckoo of a thief who shouldn't even be under my roof. Now give it back, before I have to take it from you."

Lavender stumbled back a few steps, the words hitting her exactly where they were meant to - in the gut. "Mum-"

"Don't call me that!" Her mother was suddenly tall - much taller than her usual height, towering over her, eyes aflame as she went off-script, an action that suddenly brought the situation into focus. "I am not your mother. I had a child, a perfect child, but you killed it. Now I'm stuck with you! What
a joke! Who'd want you? Fat, lazy, bitchy little Lavender, can't even get a man, not even her own bloody soul mate." She laughed, a cruel sound echoing through the room, which suddenly seemed thrice as large as it had been. "What a failure you are, and look where you've ended up, just as I said you would - single and alone!"

"Excuse me," a terribly polite voice said, inserting itself into the conversation. Lavender started, turning to see Remus looking calmly up at the vision as he curled a hand around her wrist. "So sorry to interrupt."

There was a tense silence, and Lavender marvelled at the sheer oddity of the situation. Remus had, with a touch, brought her out of the nightmare she'd been reliving and into reality again. Where there had been a kitchen now was a blurry room once more, and the figure of her Mum was small again. Everything seemed ridiculously incongruous, made more so by the fact that with the small defense he'd given her with his touch upon her arm, the horcrux appeared to have gone into Boggart-esque confusion.

"Do you think he wants you? He doesn't. He pitied you, and what does his opinion matter, anyway? He's just a grubby half-breed, like you, the both of you, useless, dark-"

"Rude," Remus muttered, rolling his eyes, and Lavender giggled. That was it. Just that tiny giggle rolling through her sharpened her mind, pushed back the childish fear of her mother, the inadequacy the Horcrux had attempted to raise in her.

The weight of the fang in her hand was satisfying when she brought it down, smashing through the centre of the cake-horcrux. It exploded, a murky black cloud bursting into the air, sucking the breath from their throats in screams in concert with the soul shard's own-

Silence.

Lavender was on the floor, her face pressed into carpet, soft, tickling her cheeks. Beside her, Remus groaned, the sound long and tortured. They pushed themselves up in unison to stare at the table.

The cracked remains of Rowena's diadem stared back, the full gem glittering in the light.

"Brilliant," Remus said, business as usual. Lavender snorted.

Then, for one sweet, free, stressless moment, they, simultaneously, lifted their hands and shared a triumphant high-five.

"A diary, a bloody diary? I mean, come on. Who does he think he is? A thirteen year old Hufflepuff?"

Ginny snorted softly, watching Sirius's elegant fingers flip through the pages.

"Seriously. What'd he write in it, do you think? The snake says my bottom looks big in these robes! That page decorated with dried tear drops and little sad faces." Sirius rolled his eyes. "Right, give me the fang, let's get this over with."

He was pouting, Ginny noticed. He'd really wanted the cup. Not that Hufflepuff's cup meant anything particularly significant to him, but Ginny suspected he just thought it was the coolest. She held out the hand holding the fang to him - she was perfectly happy to let him do the work. She was too tired for this shit - retrieving the cup had officially pushed her over her horcrux capacity for, well, ever. Honestly, between the cup, the ring, and the diary - twice - she was pretty sure she'd done more to destroy horcruxes than Harry ever had, and he was the Chosen One (she didn't even get a cool
nickname - 'Gin' was alright, but it didn't half make her sound like a burgeoning alcoholic. Not like the Man-With-The- Never-Ending-Monikers). Her presence here, today, was in merely a supervisory capacity, that was all. If she never saw that diary again she wouldn't mourn it's loss.

She tried to ignore how her fingers trembled, but she should have known better. Sirius would never let any sign of distress from her pass.

"What's wrong?" He frowned, covering her hand with his, fang and all. They stilled beneath his touch, his warmth and his boundless affection automatically steadying her. She took a deep, comforting breath. "Ginny?" he threw the diary onto the closest surface and used his free hand to brush a strand of hair from her face.

She tried not to flinch at the smell of old parchment and ink on his fingers.

"I'm fine," she said stiffly, pulling away. "Let's just get it over with, okay?"

Sirius frowned thoughtfully, watching her face. "No," he said firmly. "Let's talk, first."

"Talk? "We don't have time," she reminded him. "Severus is at Malfoy Manor. We have to do this quickly to save him." Something cruel flit momentarily across his face, and she punched him in the chest. Not playfully. Hard. "Don't you dare even think that, Sirius Black!"

"You don't know what I'm thinking," he retorted.

"So it wasn't 'good riddance', then?" She scoffed when his eyes widened in surprise. "I fucking thought so. What is wrong with you?!!"

Sirius groaned, flopping onto the dusty floor. "It's Snivellus! Forgive me, but he's never been a great guy in general, and he's always been an arsehole to me and James and Remus. He almost got Remus expelled! And he called Lily a mudblood. And he keeps trying to steal her from James. I don't like the bloke, I never will, and I make no apologies for that!"

Ginny growled. Before she registered it, she'd moved, kneeling over Sirius, nose-to-nose. "You might not like Snape. You might think he's a piece of work. You might, even, want him to die. But none of that - none of that - matters in the face of the bigger picture. We will save him. We will kill Voldemort. We will win the war. And we will all - all, including Lavender - have a happy ending, do you hear me? It's one thing if events conspire to prevent this. Events outside of our control. But if it happens because you're lacklustre in your support of us, of Severus, then I will destroy you, whether I like you or not. Do you understand me, Black?"

He blinked, his eyes solemn, though fury lurked, violently stifled in the back. "You're scary," he whispered, his voice startling in the void. "Really, truly scary."

Ginny blinked, too, her mask crumpling. "Life made me this way," she whispered back, an absurd confidence in this situation, with tempers running so high. Sirius pressed his lips together tightly to hold back words and instead wrapped his arm around her shoulder, pulling her down onto his broad chest.

"I'm sorry," he said. "That was… there are no excuses. Sometimes…” he looked sightlessly away. "Sometimes I just fucking hate myself."

So defeated. So lost. Ginny relaxed into him, curling her hands in his shirt, feeling saltwater seep into it, no doubt to stain, rumple and otherwise ruin the silk. The diary's influence lurked, and she sighed. "No, I'm sorry. I should never have gone off like that. You didn't deserve it. It's just - I spoke to Tom for a whole year through that diary." she said, words stumbling out. "Confided in him. Listened to
him. Every day, whenever I had a free moment, I spent it writing in that book. Tom was my first friend. My first crush. I fell in love with the rotten piece of soul encased there even as he ate at me, devoured the light inside my heart. Sometimes, I don't think I got it all back." She hid her face in his chest, then thought better of it and forced herself upright, staring directly into Sirius's eyes.

"Everyone in my family finds it so easy to be good. They breathe Light, they think Light, they just are Light. Even Fred and George, for all of their dabbling, would balk at the grey that went into crafting the Bar-Bogey Hex. I'm different."

She propped her chin in her palm, getting more into her speech now. She'd never been one for speeches, not really; not as eloquent as Bill nor as clever as Percy, she'd always limited herself to a few sentences and a clever quip. But Sirius… she knew he wouldn't laugh at her if she ballsed it up, and she knew he was listening. Being listened to, being heard… what a treasure that was. "I have a dark place, inside me. All my own. For years I thought it was him, that he'd left it there, ruined me. But it's not. It's me. I have those same Dark impulses as you, Sirius. I understand. But it's all about control. As you can see, I'm not brilliant at it. But... you can't let it get the better of you. Not now. When you were a child… that's reasonable. Not excusable. My darkness almost killed two of my closest friends and a whole school besides, and that haunts me everyday. But now, now that I'm an adult? I understand that I can choose to be better than my darkest side.

"And - don't think I'm saying that I have it all together. I don't. I'm an absolute fucking mess, but I'm a mess with direction, rather than the all-over-the-place girl I was before. It's a constant effort to be the person I want to be but I have myself, my strength of will. I also have my friends for support, and they help me - yours can help you, if you want. Mine, can, too. And, of course... I understand. I understand the part of you that wants him to die, that sent him off into that shack-" she felt him stiffen, but rushed on. "I'm not saying anything about that, Sirius. I'm not condemning you. I'm just promising that... if you want to get past it, if you want to conquer your darkness..."

She lowered her lips to press a chaste kiss on his cheek, relishing the momentary calm. "I'll help you," she whispered her promise, and felt him quake beneath her.

Sirius reached up and gripped her chin, pulling her back until their eyes met once more. His were filled with anguish, conflict, self-loathing. And, just a small amount of hope. "I really, really love you, Ginny," he said, gently. It wasn't an announcement, nor a demand, simply his statement. Her heart melted.

"I…" her throat closed, emotion making her vulnerable, reminding her of the last man she'd loved, but she pushed through. "I think I love you, too."

His face broke into a luminous smile and he squeezed her into an enormous bear hug. "Yes! I knew you would. Now," he turned his head to look at the Horcrux. "If we get rid of that, can we make it an 'I do'?"

She laughed, pulling herself up and grasping the Basilisk fang. "Together?"

His hand curled over the back of hers, and he grinned. "Together."

Luna hurried into the woods, calling on her power with everything she had. She needed to speak to them, and she needed to do it now. Preferably lucid.

Things were coming to a head, she could feel it. It stirred those uncanny senses of her, putting her on edge the same way it had the day before the Battle of Hogwarts. Suddenly, she was uncertain, lost, and the Fates needed to give her answers.
They were there, stood in a copse, all three staring at the sky. The sight of them sent a thrill of something close to awe through her body, in spite of the dread plaguing her mind. They turned as one to watch her approach.

"The time grows near," Two said, her face dark. "So close."

"I know." Luna said quietly. "We've got a plan."

"A good one, I'm sure," One said, ruffling her robes.

"It is. Hermione made it." Luna heard the pride in her voice and didn't fight it. She was proud.

Two eyed her. "Why are you here, if you're prepared?"

Luna turned to Three, focusing only on her. "Severus," she said, her voice unusually firm. "He cannot die. Not yet."

"He can die," Three corrected her. "The question is whether he will or not."

"Don't let him die," Luna demanded. "Do not."

Two jerked at her disrespectful tone, but Three held up a hand. "What will you give in return?"

Luna didn't need to think. "Not Regulus."

"Regulus' survival is assured, even I cannot take him now, though it would be poetic." Three dismissed her with a wave. "Choose another, one who is not protected."

She thought quickly. She would never throw any of her friends to the wolves, protected or no, but she needed to offer something.

"Me," she said. "Take me. I will have served my purpose by then, and my life is limited anyway. I should be a fitting sacrifice."

Three cocked her head in amusement. "The human capacity for self sacrifice does fascinate me," she murmured. "Why?"

"I ruined Lavender's life. I made her face an attack that only mirrored the worst event of her life. I took away her fiance, ruined her chances of having a beautiful wedding and a large, loving family." Luna shrugged. "Ensuring Severus's survival is the least I can do."

Three speculated on that for a moment, her sisters watching closely. "That is a fitting sacrifice," she murmured to herself. "And Hades would owe me for bringing you in early…" She gave a full body shiver and sighed. "Oh, but… You have too many sponsors, Luna. The twins, alone…"

"He has twenty-four hours," she said reluctantly. "Rent-free, or so they say. He'll be in suspension so that our deal cannot be violated. Just long enough for me to gain permission to take you. If you have not freed him by then, our deal is struck. All protections are lifted. Either he dies, or you do."

Luna let out her breath in relief, bowing respectfully. "Thank you."

Three smiled, satisfied. "Don't thank me yet."

Two spoke then, her eyes glittering with godly pride, injured by her words and actions. "Hurry, daughter of Pandora. He may be free of death, but there is a great deal of pain a mortal body can endure before expiry. Trust us," she added, her voice a delicate threat, "we know."
Chapter Seventy: To Learn

Chapter Summary

Regulus tackles that pesky locket, while Lucius searches for absolution.

Lucius had never been a praying man, but as he left the cell containing possibly his only true friend, he begged the Gods for clemency.

It was difficult, what with his family's patron being Hermes, to ask for Severus to be spared, but he gave it his best shot. The wording was tricky - "Please, Hermes, leave him alone!" could mean lots of things, and he didn't fancy dealing with Severus' fury if he did survive only to find that his Apparation failed every time, or that noone would buy his potions. Yet, the Gods tended to have short attention spans when it came to mortal requests, whether they came from a Malfoy or not, and so he couldn't be specific, either - "Please, Hermes, don't take Severus to the Underworld, but don't leave him in limbo, either, and not even the Elysian Fields; in fact, what I'm really asking is for you to keep him alive, except that's not exactly within your purview, so if you could put in a request with the Fates and Hades, please, if you will, I'd be most grateful. Sincerely, Lucius" was much too long, too.

If only he was a Potter - which was not a sentence he ever thought he'd say, but sometimes life took you to surprising places. Potters had a direct link to Hades; he favoured them unapologetically, as descendants of 'the Wise Brother'. Indeed, it was only through the God's patronage that they were able to make their fortune - Sleekeazy's was wonderful, but not multimillionaire wonderful. Not on its own.

Lucius tried to formulate a few more prayers as he wandered up the stairs, keeping one ear open for the Dark Lord or his disgustingly rodent-like servant. Pettigrew was an eternal stain on Lucius' mind, for he was increasingly of the opinion that any man who would accept that thing as his right hand was not a man Lucius cared to follow. Especially not, if following that man led to Pettigrew spending time in his home. The boy had come to a ball here once when he had been eight or nine, and pissed himself in the portrait gallery. Lucius still did not know why, or even how the boy had gotten in there in the first place, since Abraxas had always locked it up before a ball, but he had, and it had taken weeks to get the stench of urine out of the place. They'd had to burn the Persian runner, too. Abraxas had been so angry, not even Dorea Potter's interference had calmed him down, and the Gods knew he'd adored that woman more than the whole Manor itself.

He paused on the stairs.

Dorea Potter…

Lucius hadn't run across Dorea much as an adult, though he'd always liked her. She had this irritating tendency to treat him as though they were equals, and even more, as though she was his mother, which, as a child of a single father whose mother had died in childbirth, gave him odd feelings in his stomach that he didn't want to examine. Especially not after watching his father love her from, well, pretty close by for the first twenty years of his life.

She'd cried at his funeral, Lucius recalled. Laid a wreath of dyed lilies on his crypt, a stunning silvery-blue colour his father had loved in life. She'd even hugged him - him, Lucius! - and dried his
own tears with her frilly, white handkerchief, then chucked him under the chin as if he were a child again, and drifted off back to her husband.

Unlike the rest of the Potters, that bright, shiny red-and-gold brood, she didn't care about blood status or house-affiliation. No, there was none of that nasty reverse-prejudice that prevented him from seeking help from other quarters - I.E. Dumbledore, the Order.

In fact, if he were to ask nicely enough, she might even actually help him.

Thinking of Severus, his eyes ringed with bruises, his skin a sickly yellow colour, Lucius cast a revealing spell on his home. The Dark Lord had left, it seemed. All to the better.

"Fascinating," Regulus said, and miraculously, he even sounded like he meant it. "So instead of harvesting it under a full moon…"

"...you let it soak in the power and collect the results in the morning! My tests show it makes the average flower at least four hundred percent more potent, and all you have to do is sprinkle less than a milligram of the white rose concoction onto it. I haven't named it yet," she added at his look. "I was going to patent it in a few months, once the wedding was over and done with. Didn't want to outshine their happy day, you know?"

Regulus laughed. "Hermione, from what you've told me about your friends… well, it's hard to believe they'd understand the importance of your creation, never mind let it ruin their wedding."

Hermione chuckled sheepishly. "I can dream, can't I? I know all it really, practically does is let Potions Masters get more sleep…"

"And increase the efficacy of every potion involving a lunar-effected element! That's brilliant, Hermione. Don't put yourself down."

Hermione blushed. She wasn't really used to praise from friends on her work. They mostly thought she was going off on one like Percy with his Cauldron bottoms - not that she'd ever tell them that instituting his report had been instrumental in lessening the DoM Research and Development department's incidences of exploding cauldrons by over eighty percent (which was the best one could hope for; some of the people who worked in that department were truly mental. Mad-Eye Moody had been a consultant there for most of his life, and that said it all, really).

They reached the shed then and both quieted in deference to the weight of the situation.

"Do you think you're ready?" Hermione asked Regulus, suddenly conscious of what she was asking him to do. She'd had to carry the horcrux herself because of the reaction it had to his Dark Mark, and yet she expected him to destroy it?

Regulus took a deep, considering breath, then blew it out slowly. "Yes," he smiled faintly. "According to you, I've been waiting twenty years to do this. If I'm not ready now, I never will be."

"Ha, ha," Hermione rolled her eyes as she pushed open the door, which slid inwards smoothly, and lit a candle on a shelf. The shed, like everywhere else on the property, was well-kept if bare. Someone had clearly gone over it with a duster recently, if the lack of insect life was anything to judge by, but something large had been taken from the room leaving a dark square on the floor and, peculiarly, singe-marks on the walls. A large wooden table leaned against one wall, and that was where Hermione laid the locket. "Okay," she said, glancing at it, lying innocuous and sinisterly beautiful against the rough grain. "I'll open it, you stab, okay?"
"I've got it," Regulus said, shooting her an amused look. "Do it now, before I change my mind."

Hermione raised an eyebrow, but leaned across to press the latch, being sure to keep out of its direct line of sight. The metal clasp stuck to her fingers for a moment, something dark and slimy seeming to test her will, before it released and swung slowly open. Regulus watched, his lids lowered lazily, as a dark cloud billowed outwards into the air, taking form slowly.

It dithered for a moment, as if unsure what form to take, and Regulus blinked. "Fascinating," he said, mostly to himself. He took a step forward, slowly. "The mechanics - one would have to be remarkably powerful for a fragment of their soul to have this much of a pull. I can feel it."

"Can you?" Hermione asked. Regulus nodded, and, appearing completely unbothered by the spectre before him, unbuttoned his cuffs to roll up his sleeve. The Dark Mark had morphed once more, bleeding into a splodge of black on his arm, the ink running up his sleeve in dark lines following his veins. When Hermione gasped, he shrugged.

"It's sucking on my magic," he told her, inspecting his arm curiously. "I can feel it rifling through my head, looking for my dark places. There are a lot of them, so it's having some fun. The Mark is trying to help, too - playing on my loyalties, whispering in my mind."

"How are you - how are you doing that?" Hermione whispered, awed at his composure. He flicked his eyes up to meet her gaze, lovely grey orbs, detached from the moment, and Hermione didn't need an answer. There was no emptiness in him - only peace. Peace with what he was, who he was. She envied him that, and wondered where it came from - how could a person be that resigned to who they were?

"The love of a good woman," Regulus joked, apparently reading her mind. "Luna has been feeding me some weird tea, but I don't question it. I can hazard a guess as to its purpose, however - releasing me from my bond with the Dark Lord. I wonder…" He cocked his head, eyeing the cloud in front of him. "What happens when a Death Eater destroys a horcrux?"

Suddenly, as if the threat had rallied it into action, the cloud coalesced into a woman's form. Tall, statuesque and handsome, Walburga Black stared down at her son, eyes sharp. Regulus froze.

"Going to kill me a second time, are you?" Walburga sniped, her voice somehow deeper, an echoing bass. "Once wasn't enough for you, was it, son?"

When Regulus shook himself and made to march on, Walburga's eyes flashed red, and she changed. At first, Hermione couldn't pinpoint what was happening, and then she could, and she was horrified.

"Fancy another go, my sweet child?" Walburga asked, as her skin began to flush red, flames licking lovingly about her ankles. "Want to watch it, this time?"

"You're dead," Regulus said firmly, though there was a thread of weakness there.

"I know," Walburga said. "And how I regret it. Now I won't get a third chance, will I? What did I do in my life to deserve you, I wonder? You and Sirius. Both of you, disappointments, to the very last." Walburga sighed, and with it, the flames licked up the tips of her fingers, and they blackened and crumbled. She stood in her own inferno, the fire giving off no heat, not yet, but Hermione could feel it trying. Walburga's rich robes ashed, and she watched them watch her, all imperious nobility, even as her skin crusted and flaked. "This is what happened," she said matter-of-factly, her eyes boring into Regulus's. "I was alive for it, too. I was protecting you. My son. Now look what you're doing - socialising with Mudbloods and Traitors. Living among filth. Is this what you were raised for, Regulus? Is this what I died for?"
Walburga sniffed, her breasts shrivelling, breaths shortening, all the while she appeared unconcerned. "I asked one thing of you, Regulus Black. Rid the world of the scourge. You promised to deliver. You promised."

"I was wrong," Regulus whispered.

"I'm your mother," Walburga said, her voice breaking, her face crumbling as tears welled in her eyes. Hermione saw Regulus waver, his hand loosening its grip, and panicked. "I love you, Regulus. You're all I have. After - after S... Sirius..." she choked, and Regulus cracked, rushing forward as if to comfort his beloved mother. Hermione shrieked a warning, seconds too late.

The moment he made contact with the cloud, the flames became real, eating at him greedily. The Walburga apparition disappeared, taking with her any remaining oxygen as the fire flooded the room with smoke and gas. Regulus let out a haunting yell before he disappeared into the smoke, smoke which clogged Hermione's throat and stung her eyes.

She dropped to her knees and then her stomach, automatic reactions from years of Muggle training, and peered through the tiny gap of air at the base. She could hardly see, the candle having been snuffed out at one point, and her attempts at *lumos* flickering and failing due to her choking the words. She tried to call for Regulus, but her voice was a mere rasp, and she could see nothing of him in the room, only a gaping black void.

*Air*, her mind told her desperately. *We need air.*

Using her elbows as propellers, she took a deep breath of the somewhat purer air on the floor and held it, spinning in place to search for the door. The grey-black smoke was disorienting, but the room was small, which was what had allowed the fire to spread so quickly. Beneath her hands, the floor was heating, wooden boards over hard-packed dry earth providing an ideal environment for the blaze to carry, and Hermione knew she had mere minutes, if not less.

*Where*?! She was screaming at herself, now, waving her wand in random directions, hoarsely crying every opening charm she knew. Her mind went cloudy, brain dizzying, and a lethargic sensation trickled through her arms and legs, making them heavy, stopping her from moving. She flopped to the floor, her arms falling askew-

She touched wall, burning hot wall, glowing red in the corner of her eye, and she remembered, suddenly, the Battle at the Department of Mysteries, in which they'd destroyed the Time-Turners, inadvertently but also, perhaps, luckily, for Time Magic should not be entrusted to just *anyone*, for more harm than good could be caused.

Hermione had been lucky enough to own her own Time-Turner, and therefore had been the only Unspeakable with the ability to travel on staff at that time. They'd tried everything to get it away from her; lying, cheating, attacking, *burglary*, and yet she'd stood firm, certain that no-one else could be trusted with it whereas she'd already proven her worth.

Gods, how arrogant she'd been. How arrogant she still was. Running about as if she knew what she was doing, as if it were at all feasible that she might stand a chance at winning this War. Gods - up until now, most of their victories had been sheer luck rather than any canny planning!

Now look what she'd done. Stupid, arrogant Hermione Granger had sauntered up to the shed around back, out of sight of the house, with a bloody Death Eater, to destroy a horcrux. All on their own, obviously, because Gods forbid she ever ask for help.

She'd gone and gotten them both killed, hadn't she?
Closing her eyes, she pressed her cheek against the floor, her fingers tracing patterns against the wall. Random patterns, anything that came into mind. She didn't have the energy for anything else, except small prayers - to loved ones. *I'm sorry*, she said in them. *I'm sorry, Remus. I'm sorry, Regulus. I'm sorry, Luna.* The list continued on and on and on… All of the people she'd failed, the ones she'd killed, the ones she'd simply dragged out of existence, the ones she'd be leaving to fix her mess behind her.

She swapped to runes, at one point, simply because she could. She loved runes, the elegance of them, how the mindless carving of them was the closest to art she’d ever come.

*I'm sorry, Ginny. I'm sorry, Lavender. I'm sorry, James. Lily. Oh, Gods - I'm sorry, Harry*

The wall exploded.
Chapter Seventy-One: Boom

Chapter Summary

As the dust settles, Dorea has an interesting conversation.

Hermione roused at the sudden onslaught of fresh air, her lungs frozen in shock. Droplets of something drifted down onto her face, a grey, rancid snow.

There was silence, the air rich with it, or perhaps she was deaf, for there had been nothing since the explosion. Shadows moved overhead and she blinked to try and bring them in focus: a face, pretty but masculine, mouthing something long - her name?

His brow furrowed in concern, then he pulled back, lifting his hand into her line of vision. For a second she stared, uncomprehending, and then, suddenly, everything fell into sharp focus.

"You did it!" she said, though she couldn't hear a word of it for a peculiar ringing had taken up residence in her eardrums. That didn't matter, though, for he held a mangled locket on a chain, the metal compressed then pressing outwards in a jagged star around a hole. Regulus's face reappeared, solemn and somehow injured.

Noise began to return, then, quietly at first and increasing in volume; crackling from fire, the loud thumping of debris settling, and a strange pattering almost like rain. An unholy shout went up from somewhere close by, the b volume an attack all of itself, and she turned her head to see Remus approaching at the head of a train of people, sprinting hard, his face feral.

"Hermione-!

She shot him a rueful smile then, figuring Remus could wait the two minutes until he was there, she focused on her body, which felt all sorts of battered and bruised. The one untouched part appeared to be her left pinkie finger, which jiggled merrily when she twitched it. No broken bones seemed to have been sustained, likely thanks to the fact that she had already been laid down. With great care, she proppelled herself onto her stomach, gasping at the pain, then up onto her haunches, and finally to a standing position, her head spinning madly.

And there was Remus, directly in front of her, his eyes glinting gold and a snarl on his face as he warded Regulus off and took her in his arms, his fingers gentle despite the fierceness of his expression - or, what she could see of it, what with the world being so blurry at the edges. "Are you alright?"

She swayed woozily, but managed to wave a nonchalant hand, not that he saw it, for he was too busy burying his face in her hair, panting as though he'd run a marathon. "I'm fine, I promise. Just a little-" she cut off as a swell of nausea attacked viciously. Lavender was suddenly on her other side, conjuring an ice-cold glass of water and pushing it into her hand, using the other to slap her lightly on the cheek. That ridiculousness was enough to rouse her into coherent irritation with an, "honestly, Lavender, I'm talking to you, of course I'm awake!"

"Just making sure you're not possessed or anything," Lavender defended herself, throwing her hands up in surrender. "Not that I can imagine any demon choosing to get caught up in the chaos you call a
life, not to mention the hair, but beggars can't be choosers and, besides, I've seen The Exorcist, I know how this goes!

"I've seen that!" Sirius crowed in the background; Hermione hadn't even seen him arrive.

"I'm not possessed," Hermione told her firmly. "There was never any question of a possession."

"Are you sure?" Lavender frowned. "Only, it seems out of character for you to have blown the shed up deliberately."

"I didn't -" she stopped abruptly, remembering the runes she had drawn, her mind desperate for an escape. Then, her head turned to check on Regulus, remembering the fire. He stood by the remains of the house, nuzzling at Luna's neck - she'd apparently reappeared in the chaos, too. She was confused, but also inexplicably proud that he'd managed to destroy the Horcrux under such overwhelming odds, while she'd simply been flailing about, suffocating.

And, apparently, blowing stuff up.

"I'm bad at this," she confessed, looking up at Remus. The ash from the explosion was now settling, but it had settled in a grey cap over his hair, making a jolt of fondness bolt through Hermione's chest.

He smiled as she brushed a hand through his hair, dislodging the flakes along with the image. An edge of tension lingered in his face. "You must stop risking yourself like this," he said, his voice strained. "You've cut ten years off my life."

"I'm sorry," she murmured, feeling the sincerity in her bones. "I didn't mean to worry you. None of us expected that reaction." Then, seeing he was about to lecture her, and deciding that it would be considerably less sexy than usual while she was still oxygen-deprived and on a schedule, she leaned up to press a quick kiss on his lips. "Everybody else alright, though?"

Lavender beamed, precariously perching a somewhat tarnished tiara on her head. "I was awesome," she told Hermione smugly.

Ginny, over by Sirius, looking tired but leaning happily against him, held up Riddle's diary, complete with one perfect hole through the centre. "Cathartic, I think," she said.

"Lily and James?" Hermione asked, looking around for them. At that moment, a shrill, whining shriek emanated from the house, so loud and high pitched Remus, Sirius and Lavender all clamped their hands over their ears. It stopped, there was a second of silence, and then a window inlaid into the roof slammed open. A cloud of thick, black mist flew out, followed by a head of messy, black hair.

"Alright, then?" James shouted. "I thought this was meant to be difficult?" And he flailed a hand, in which he held a mangled gold cup. "Not bad, eh?"

Then he looked up. "Oi, who blew up the shed?"

Lucius stood in the parlour at Potter Manor, his eyes taking in the details, from the portrait over the mantel to the red and gold highlights on every surface. He'd never been in a more nauseatingly Gryffindor room, and couldn't imagine how Dorea put up with it. He never could; red-and-gold was a gaudy colour scheme even without the horrendous Gryffindor implications. He was much more of
a blue and silver man, or, if he were forced to use gold, perhaps a pink; amaranth or blush. Pink-tinted ivory, too; that, he liked, though not for a parlour. It was far too expensive and lovely a colour to use for a parlour.

Hmm… now that he thought about it, he could imagine the gilding on the crown molding. Narcissa's dressing room had some lovely cherubs which would look gorgeous with golden wings, though she may object to having her room redecorated for the second time in three months…

What had he been thinking about, again?

Ah, yes. Charlus Potter's inept interior decoration and the blinding quality of his shiny gold sconces. Lucius truly, truly pitied Dorea, whom he knew was Slytherin through and through, for having to put up with this nonsense.

She seemed to manage just fine, however; comfortable as any matriarch, eyeing him with a pleasant sort of suspicion from her armchair. It may sound like an oxymoron, for her to be pleasantly suspicious, but there was no other way to describe it: she was relaxed, her smile real with an edge of anticipation to it, a languid curiosity in her eyes shaded by a deep knowledge of him that she appeared to possess.

Somehow, he thought she knew why he was here, which was disturbing, indeed. He liked to keep his thoughts to himself if at all possible, and were it not, then if at least they could be kept from his father's old paramour he would be grateful.

"Your father and I were friends for a long time," she said, the first thing either of them had said since she'd brought him here some minutes ago, with her uncanny knack for responding to whatever he was thinking at that moment. "Very close, so, you see, I know all of the Malfoy tells." She leaned over casually to refill her cup of tea. "It's impressive, truly, the control you have over your face - not a single twitch. I suppose he taught you that from birth?"

Lucius felt as though he were playing a particularly difficult game of chess, in which she was three moves away from checkmate and he still could not see her strategy. A cat playing with her prey. "Indeed."

Dorea leaned back, sipping from her cup delicately. Where was her husband, Lucius wondered. Surely if they knew what he was it would be unwise to leave his wife alone with him? If not for the fact that he was a Death Eater, then at least because he was a beautiful man, and it was his experience that other men were unwilling to leave their wives alone with him.

"He knows that you won't touch me, dear," Dorea told him, eerily. He was beginning to think that she was either a master of Legilimency, or he was simply speaking all of his thoughts aloud. "And as for attacking me? Violence is not your bailiwick. Charlus is clever enough to realise that. Now, since you're here, I suppose you have come to your senses? Throwing over that Dark Lord of yours, are you?"

Lucius gave a sardonic twitch of the lips. "Directly to the point?"

"For once," Dorea smiled. "We don't have time for dissembling, as much as I should love to. Perhaps next time; good sparring partners are so hard to find." She pushed a tray of biscuits over to his side of the table and added, "Talk to me, Lucius."

He considered this for a moment, then had to concede the point. Given that, at this very moment, Severus was laid in his cellar awaiting the Dark Lord's pleasure, it would be far too selfish of him to delay any longer. "I believe you have some connection to the Order of the Phoenix," he began,
snapping a viennese biscuit in half and popping it on his tongue. Very good, though not as good as his elves'.

"You might say that. Of course, my husband and I owe the Headmaster a great debt, one that could only be repaid with our loyalty." She paused, her eyes catching his significantly. "My sons, of course, have no such commitments."

There was a message there he was missing, and he didn't have the time to pry it apart, instead going straight to the heart of the issue and hoping the confrontation would enlighten him. "I'm afraid your sons wouldn't be much help with this matter," Lucius said blithely. "Conflicts of interest."

"Conflicts?"

Lucius nodded slowly, trying not to get distracted by the silky feel of his own hair brushing his face.

"They bear a certain… Animosity towards the person I wish to save."

Dorea watched him thoughtfully for a moment. "Severus Snape."

"Quite."

She smiled slowly, languorously. "Why, Lucius, and here I was beginning to think all you cared about was your hair. Coming to me for help to save your friend? And not even a single mention of yourself?"

Lucius scoffed. "My survival goes without saying, Mrs. Potter."

"There's that Malfoy self-serving streak." She shot him a fond look. "Luckily for you, my son and his friends have recently formed some friendships that have altered their world view. You might just get some assistance there."

Not a dim man, he rose his eyebrows. "Perchance, would this new friend be one Hermione Granger?"

She was visibly startled, to which Lucius reacted with smugness. He had gotten one over on her, for once. Hold for applause. "You've met?"

"Her reputation precedes her," he drawled, tapping the head of his cane idly.

"Then you'll know that she is very invested in a favourable end to this war for everyone." Mrs. Potter appraised him once more. "Even you, Lucius. Especially if you assist in saving Mr. Snape. I get the impression that she is quite fond of him."

Lucius examined the bite of jealousy this statement triggered in him with some confusion. *Fond of him? Of Severus?* Lucius adored the man and yet even on a good day he'd be hard pressed to ascribe such a soft emotion to him. "I was not aware they were close." He heard his petulant tone but didn't care.

She was amused, it was written across her face. "Oh, they're not. As far as I know, they've never met."

She ignored his clear confusion, clapping her hands once, sharply. A wrinkled house elf appeared, bowing its head respectfully. "Mistress calls?"

"Yes, thank you, Bell. I was hoping that you'd be willing to deliver a message to James for me? Tell him that I may have some information for his friends, if they would be kind enough to visit."
"Twenty four hours?!" Lavender shrieked, her hair fizzing. They had moved back into the house's living room, Lily casually covering the new dent in the coffee table with a tray of mismatched mugs filled with coffee. They were supposed to be discussing their next move, but that had been before Luna had dropped her bombshell. Now, everyone seemed to be frozen in varying states of shock.

"Yes," Luna said softly. "It was the best I could bargain."

"I can't believe this," Regulus whispered, his hands clasping Luna's desperately. "You bargained with the Fates? What was the price?"

"It doesn't matter," she informed him with a vacant smile. "The price will not be paid. We'll save him in time, I'm sure of it."

"You can't be sure," he said, his voice heartbreakingly tremulous. "What did you do?"

Luna pulled away gently, detaching his hands and stepping back to look at Hermione. "Twenty-four hours." Her eyes begged the older girl to move the conversation onwards. Hermione was loathe to do so, not particularly trusting Luna on a good day, but...

"A single day to save the world." Hermione shook her head in disbelief. "As if this wasn't hard enough as it is."

"Twenty-four hours!" Lavender panicked, her eyes wild. The temporary calm the horcrux's destruction had given her wore off only a few minutes ago, to massive effect. Already, Remus had had to physically restrain her from running to Wiltshire at the dubiously optimistic news that "he's not dead, yet". "How can we possibly-?"

Ginny, in the corner, tutted loudly. "You're all being so pessimistic, but you're forgetting something."

"A single day…"

Ginny scoffed. "Twenty-four hours is ages, Lav, especially for us. I mean, come on! We're awesome. Between us we've found and destroyed five Horcruxes in a matter of months. Voldemort is now entirely vulnerable to attack, and he doesn't even know it. He's just a man! Sure, Death Eaters are terrifying, but they're not immortal. If we can just catch him alone, cut off the head and the rest of it will die!"

"But how?" Hermione snapped. "We don't even know where he is!"

"Not right now, no, but we know where he might be, or where he will be." At their blank looks, she stamped her foot impatiently. "He took Severus prisoner from Malfoy Manor, yes? Malfoy Manor, with the wards, the loyal host, the isolated location and the cells in the basement? He's not going to move Severus, not yet at least. And he's not going to leave him unattended for long, either. So, either Voldie is at Malfoy Manor, or he will be soon." Ginny fluttered her hands in the air. "So, we know where to attack. All we need now is a plan."
"And a location," Hermione pointed out. "I don't know about you, but I don't know where it is, except somewhere in Wiltshire. The one time I've been there wasn't under the best of circumstances, remember?"

"I might be able to help with that," James piped up from where he sprawled across the sofa. "Or, rather, mum can. She spent loads of time at Malfoy Manor when she was a kid."

Hermione dithered. "Oh, I don't know… I don't want to get your parents involved. They could get hurt…"

"It's cute that you think you can stop my mother getting involved," James laughed. "Seriously; she can sniff out a good battle from a hundred miles away, and get there just as quickly. She's a Black, Hermione."

"Plus, she doesn't need to come with us," Lily chirped. The girl had been in an annoyingly good mood since she and James had defeated their Horcrux, to the point that Hermione really didn't want to know what had happened in the attic and probably wouldn't go in there again until it had been thoroughly decontaminated. "If she can just give us some details…"

Reluctant, Hermione bit her lip. "Maybe as a last resort?"

Lavender growled. "I think, if we have any last resorts, this is the time to use them." She shot Hermione a challenging look. "I'm with James. We should go back to Potter Manor. Now."

"Oh, but-" her half-formed protest was cut off by the appearance of a familiar house-elf on the coffee table, which was the only free space in the little room. It bowed deeply to James.

"Mistress has a message for Master James!" Bell declared. "Mistress has information, and asks that Master James and his friends come to her home as soon as possible!"

To say that coming face-to-face with a young Lucius Malfoy was a shock to Ginny would be an understatement.

Bell apparated them in in two groups, Ginny first, and her eyes had shot directly to the man, sitting casually on a sofa, sipping tea as if he belonged there while exchanging pleasantries with Mrs. Potter. His long, blonde hair was draped over his shoulder, his hand absently coming up to stroke it every few minutes. Mrs Potter was in a state of thorough animation, more so than Ginny had ever seen; as if she were actually enjoying herself, as an adult, instead of as a mother or guardian.

As they landed, Dorea turned to face them, her eyes widening in shock as they lit on Hermione's soot-drenched clothes. Her eyes travelling, she saw Regulus's torn, ashy slacks and Remus's smoke-darkened face, and let out a disbelieving noise. "What happened?!"

"Had a little problem with a magical artifact," Hermione said, her voice blasé. She turned her gaze to Lucius, her expression one of hopeful confusion. "I see you have a visitor."

Ginny heard Bell pop off to collect the rest of their gang, but kept a suspicious eye on Lucius. Dorea smiled serenely. "Ah, yes; I don't believe you've met Lucius Malfoy. He came for a visit."

A crack sounded as Bell landed with James, Lily, Sirius and Lavender. Dorea broke into a grin upon seeing James. "My sons!"

"Mum!" James shot across the room to wrap his arms around her neck in a hug. By Lavender, who was frowning and sniffing the air, Sirius practically vibrated with the urge to join them, finally lunging forward when Dorea lifted her hand to beckon.

Ginny suppressed a smile at the scene. There was no doubt that Dorea loved her boys, and they loved her exactly the same way. She felt a sharp stab of emptiness where her family should have been, but it didn't last very long, not any more. Besides, she was distracted by the blur that shot across the room, and Hermione's surprised yelp.

"Where is he?!” Lavender snarled in Lucius's face. The blonde startled to find her suddenly before him, so close she may as well have been sitting in his lap, now-yellow eyes gleaming ferociously.
Though it didn't seem possible, somehow Lavender crept closer, her teeth bared. "Tell me, you empty-headed, preening peacock of a man! Where is my mate?!

His mouth flopped open unattractively. "You mean-Severus?"

"Of course, Severus, you blithering idiot! I know you have him - I can smell him on you!"

Bewildered, Lucius looked past the werewolf to Dorea, who had been released by her sons to watch. His eyes pleaded for help, to which she shrugged, as if to say "this is a new one on me, too".

"And you are?" Lucius drawled as if he hadn't been backed into the corner of his seat.

"Lavender Brown," she snapped, flipping her hair but keeping her eyes on him. "His soul mate."

"He's never mentioned you," he snarked, but if he'd been expecting a violent response, he was mistaken, for Lavender merely sniffed.

"He's in denial as to his love for me. He'll come around." She smiled, terrifyingly, and touched his neck in a threat. "Given time, of course."

Amazingly, Lucius flashed his teeth in a charming, yet genuine, conspiratorial grin. "I know what that's like. You might be waiting for years - I was."

Lavender paused, as if torn between agreeing with him and carrying on the bad-ass bitch routine. Narrowing her eyes, she finally said, "I'm patient," a lie so bloody blatant even Dorea raised an eyebrow. "Not right now, though," she snarled, leaning closer again and flashing her teeth. "Right now, I'm about two seconds from ripping out your guts with my bare hands and hoping you stay alive long enough to eat them." Her lip curled back in threat, one hand pressed against his stomach, the other reaching out to stroke back a hank of his hair until she reached his ear. "Where. Is. He?" she demanded, whispering the words directly into his ear, lips barely a centimetre from flesh.

Lucius had paled, now gripping the chair's arms so tightly his knuckles were white. Dorea eyed him with some concern, but didn't move to interrupt, nor did Hermione, despite her nervous expression. She trusted Lavender to get this done without games, it appeared, no matter how it offended her moral compass.

Ginny had no such qualms as she watched Lavender intimidate the man who would grow up to plant a dangerous dark magic artifact in her bag, thus sentencing her to a living nightmare at eleven. He looked two words away from pissing himself, which gave her a twinge of guilt, but Lav would never let it get that far. She hoped.

"Malfoy Manor," Lucius rasped, his eyes twitching. Lavender pulled back to examine his face. "The cellar."

Luna made a whimpering noise of remembrance, and, looking over, Ginny saw her almost shaking, eyeing Lucius with a timid sort of rage. Regulus had wrapped his arms around her, but Ginny saw her straining against him, and knew it was less about comfort than about restraint. She'd forgotten - Gods, how had she forgotten about Luna? She'd spent months locked in Lucius's cellar, had not been the same for months since she'd left, had spent the year locked away in her father's house and only left to see Ginny and Theo. Ginny has never seen her so angry, never.

"The cellar?" Lavender cocked her head, eyes flashing. "And who, exactly, put him there?"

"I - I did," Lucius croaked. "I was ordered to, see."
He looked again at Dorea, eyes panicked. "But I came to get him help, too!"

"That's true," Dorea murmured. In a fluid movement, she rose and stepped to Lavender's side, laying a hand on her shoulder. "He came to me, hoping I had some way to save Severus, which allowed me to call you. He did the right thing, under the circumstances."

Lavender snarled again, but allowed herself to be pulled back a few feet. "'Under the circumstances', as if he didn't have a choice. Could have just sneaked him out, couldn't you? Could have stood up to Snake-Face. But no, you have to take the low road, because we can't possibly have you risking your neck, can we?"

Lucius stretched, feline, catlike, while keeping one wary eye on Lavender. "I have a family to protect," he said, not apologetically. "I adore Severus, I do, but he wouldn't want me to get Cissy killed just to help him."

Lavender's anger flared again, but Hermione stepped forward, coming to a halt just beside Lavender and taking her hand in her own. "He's right, Lav," she said soothingly, rubbing circles into the other girl's palm. "For Malfoys, family is everything. Severus knows that, and he'd never ask his friend to give it up."

Her eyes flashed yellow once more before settling into a turbulent violet, fixed on Lucius. "Why are you here, then?"

Lucius moved to answer, but was cut off by Hermione. She liked doing that, Ginny could tell. "He's here to help us get into Malfoy Manor," she said sweetly, turning to face him. "Aren't you? You're going to help us end this."

"Well, I didn't-" Lucius blustered, but fell silent when Hermione slashed the air with her hand. "Yes..." Hermione finished for him, her voice gentle. "Self-indulgent," Hermione finished for him, her voice gentle. "Messy. Low-brow. Yes, we know. Which is why you'll help us, and in return, we'll ensure you remain a free man."

"How-" Lily began, frowning, but Remus clamped a hand over her mouth.

"Yes..." Lucius said, slowly, as if coming to the conclusion on his own. "Yes... I rather think that's a good idea." He held his hand out to shake, which Hermione did with a bright, indulgent smile. "Why, you are quite the clever girl - tell me, 'Granger', isn't it - I don't think I've heard that name before...?"

Hermione clapped her hands loudly. "Right! Now that's settled, we'll need to learn the layout of your house. Assuming you don't want to appear actively involved, Mr. Malfoy, I think you'd best show us the best way in and out then return directly to your Manor, just in case your Lord returns unexpectedly. Lavender - an hour more of your patience, please. Dorea - if we could beg the use of your library...? Brilliant. Let's go!"
Chapter Seventy-Three: Entrance

Chapter Summary

Hermione and Ginny go all Mission: Impossible, while Lavender proves to be more observant than previously anticipated.

The moon, almost full, hung fat and low over Malfoy Manor, limning the roof and windows in silver, leaving the doors gaping, shadowy maws. It had seemed a terrifying place when Hermione had first visited, full of death, evil and darkness, but now it seemed to raise all of the hairs on her arms and neck, sneakily sinister yet beautiful. Something lived here, something much more dark, and much more powerful, than Lucius, his wife and their multitude of beauty product.

Beside her, in a particularly thorny bush that simply must have been cultivated by magic for she couldn't imagine a plant growing so naturally vindictive, James Potter lay on his stomach, next to his fiancée, whom he'd allowed to accompany them on sufferance, with Sirius on his other side. Ginny occupied the branches of a tree overhead, providing a look-out, while standing as their first line of defense; she was their best long-distance spell-caster. Approximately three hundred feet away, at the beginning of a smugglers tunnel, Remus would be preparing for their attack with Lavender, Luna and Regulus.

All members of their group had small sacks tied to their belts or wand holsters, emergency equipment for any eventuality, carefully disguised to appear a natural part of their dress in the case that they were captured, with the exception of Hermione, who had her beaded bag. And all were equipped with the bare bones of a plan; a plan thought up over the course of a few hours with Malfoy's input. It was, perhaps, less well thought out than Hermione would prefer, but Ginny had assured her that this only made it more flexible, if something were to go wrong.

All things being equal, Hermione would rather nothing went wrong.

According to Lucius, Voldemort hadn't yet returned from whatever errand had called him away, leaving the Manor nearly empty except for Severus, himself, and perhaps a few Death Eaters he was boarding, including the unfortunate Dolohov, who had had yet to recover from Ginny's adapted severing charm. They, however, were based in a guest wing to the East, whereas the cellar spanned the west side of the foundations. With luck, Hermione and her group could keep them occupied for long enough for the others to retrieve Severus. At that point, they would call the Aurors to report a home invasion, leaving Lucius with a handful of tied-up Death Eaters, a cleared name and a debt from the ministry, and a good excuse to quickly make himself scarce. At this point, Hermione and her friends would retreat to regroup, perhaps call in the Order.

Or, at least, that was the plan. One could never tell whether it would come off or not until it was underway, but she rather hoped so. War was tiring, leaving her breathless and snappish. Lavender was on her last string of sanity, and Ginny was getting bored - the sort of bored that always led to trouble (Bat-Bogey Hex, anyone?). James and Lily were begging for peace and quiet, completely ready to shaft them all and get back to their relatively peaceful life of snuggling and baby-making (though, neither showed signs of re-taking up their residence somewhere in Dumbledore's rectum, thank the Gods).

One thing after another, always; and Hermione realised that the slow pace of the last few months, all
of the planning and unravelling and research and horcrux hunting, all of which was spaced out and relatively lethargic in execution, had still taken its toll on her nerves, only she'd gotten used to it, causing the manic day that had just passed to be an adjustment she'd been slow in making.

But Severus was in there, and she had to admit that fate seemed to have come full circle for that boy - an integral part of the first War, even now, much earlier on, he had contributed much to their efforts. Much more, perhaps, than they'd expected him to, with the alliances he had now, the complete lack of motivation. Hermione had always wondered what might have become of Severus Snape had there not been a threat to Lily to force his hand - an ignoble death, would have been her first choice - yet here he was, having made his choice, once more sacrificing himself to a cause that was even less his own than it ever had been for Hermione.

They'd save him. She'd make sure of it. She owed him, not just Lavender; even if Lavender hadn't been his mate, she'd still be here, only her back-up would have been rather more unwilling.

"Clear," a voice murmured in her ear - the cue they'd been waiting for. An advanced charm, more of an enchantment than anything else Hermione had come across, the Speak-Secretly Spell connected her with Lucius and Regulus across the distance. Similar to a Muggle earwig, only not as blatantly obvious, it was a spell donated to the cause by Malfoy himself, who didn't much fancy getting caught with his pants down without immediately available back-up. Tricky stuff, they'd only managed to cast it the three times, but three was enough.

Well, so they hoped.

There was a lot of hope going into this mission. As her father would say, the whole thing was held together by some string and a prayer.

"En route," Regulus relayed from his side, which Hermione took to mean that they'd descended into the tunnel system. She took a deep breath and turned her head slightly so that she could see James, Lily and Sirius. "Ready?" she asked. On their nods, she smiled bracingly. "Alright. Go."

There was a ripple of silver and then the three of them disappeared, their lean forms obscured by James' invisibility cloak. There was a rustling as they shoved their way out of the bush in an ungainly manner, sending thorn-clad branches swaying uncomfortably close to Hermione's face, and then their absence was marked by stillness. There was a rustling, and the extendable ear dangling by Hermione's face spoke in Ginny's voice.

"Coming down."

She landed on the balls of her feet, a quiet thud marking it, and Hermione pulled herself up to standing. Both witches cast Disillusionment charms, and watched the side door. When it opened for seemingly no reason a minute or two later, they darted out of the shadows and ran for it.

When the door closed behind them, they found themselves crushed into a small boot room. It was undecorated, all bare wood, unused but for the swept areas that showed where James and his lot had come through. That trail led to the door, and they followed, only to come out at the foot of an old servants staircase. There was a door leading into the house proper, which Hermione knew the boys and Lily had used, but she and Ginny took the stairs.

The idea was to trap the Death Eaters between them in the wing and take them out systematically, which was part of the reason why the others had been given a head start to make their way into position. That, and that the Invisibility Cloak facilitated a slow entry, whereas the blurring of a Disillusionment only drew attention.
She and Ginny made their way silently upwards, counting doors as they went. Dolohov, whom they'd designated the most dangerous target despite his injury simply due to his instability, was on the third floor of the wing. He had the run of it, apparently; according to Lucius, he hardly ever left, and no one liked to be around him so he was usually alone. They would work their way down from there.

A nondescript door led into the wing, and once on the inside it merged perfectly with the wall, a pretty brocade pattern, to maintain that so-loved illusion that servants did not exist. Hermione worried momentarily about finding it again on the way out, but Ginny, one step ahead, slipped a piece of parchment between the well-fitted frame. They glanced around.

There was a multitude of doorways in the corridor, all white wood, and only one was open. With proper Auror procedure, they began to check the ones closest, with Ginny stealthily slipping in and out. Mostly bedrooms, it seemed, with a single bathroom, all empty but showing signs of residence. A toothbrush lay in the sink, a damp towel on the floor of the bathroom, the bath wet from recent use.

Just as they backed out, a shout rent the air, male and deep. Ginny spun on her heel, both girls with their wands out as they rushed to the open door-

Dolohov was not alone.

A woman stood a mere few feet from him, smirk on her face as she watched him howl in pain, doubled over. She didn't look at all well, her skin sallow, bones visible through her flesh, all the more horrific for the fact that she was wearing little-to-nothing, a scrap of black fabric that someone had once optimistically named a dress. Her hair was matted, but her expression triumphant as she kicked him again. "What did I say?" she demanded, her voice confident.

Dolohov turned his face up to her, the familiarity sending a frisson of remembered fear through Hermione. His face was much younger than she remembered, but she was shocked to see that he had the same manic, gleeful grin - and he was laughing. "Don't-" he broke off to hiss with pain, but his grin just grew more appreciative at it. "Don't touch-"

"Precisely!"

Hermione turned her head to look at Ginny, bewildered, but the girl had a look of intense deliberance on her face as she watched Dolohov reach out for the girl, who couldn't be more than twenty, only to be once more beaten back. After a few seconds, however, realisation struck. "Oh, Merlin," she gasped, pulling Hermione back to whisper in her ear. "That's Mary Mcdonald!"

"Lily's friend?" Hermione muttered doubtfully. The pictures of her she'd seen cast the girl as a mousy creature with short hair and pudgy cheeks, not unlike a gerbil. This woman, however, was beautiful despite her gauntness, her obvious terror. Looking back, however, Hermione decided that the beauty was an illusion conjured by her situation, her strength and confidence in it.

"Definitely. My God's, what do we do?"

Nibbling her lip, Hermione looked back into the room. It was a games room, with a billiards table, card tables and a chess board staged in one corner; Dolohov was in the middle of this, looking worshipful of the woman in front of him. Mary, however, looked cagey and contemptuous, and most of all, tired, scared. "Can we agree that she's a prisoner?" Hermione asked, her point somewhat undermined by Mary smacking the man across the chest with a pool cue, to which he laughed, struggling to his feet. Hermione noticed bandaging around his stomach and groin, unable to help her vicious stab of delight. At least that was one torment Mary would have been spared, though it was
likely little consolation.

She'd momentarily forgotten she was with Ginny, however, who nodded immediately. "We need to help her," she added. "She must be going mad."

Indeed, this seemed quite possible. Mary had abandoned the cue in favour of a more emotional attack, shouting insults that burned Hermione's ears while Dolohov simply pressed for more, until, quite suddenly, she burst into tears and collapsed into a ball on the ground. Ginny and Hermione, who had been planning for an opportune moment while worrying about the progress of those downstairs, both froze in horror as Dolohov's head rose slowly from its defensive tuck.

Like a woodland creature, he glanced about warily, then reached out a hand, patting Mary's arm gently. Mary shivered, her sobs wrenching her whole body as she cringed away, but Dolohov didn't seem to care. Hermione took a step forward, hand tightening on her wand as Dolohov slid over the floor, holding his arms out as if to enclose Mary in them.

The girl looked up at the last minute, seeing his approach through blurred eyes, and screamed, the sound horrifying and helpless. Scrambling, she crawled, faster than Hermione had ever thought a person could, in desperation towards the door. Hermione took a step back out of instinct but needn't have, for Mary, instead of barrelling through, simply smacked into the empty space as if it were a wall, her speed lending itself to a meaty thump. She fell back with a screech, and Dolohov took up his disturbing laugh once more, great rolling chuckles lined by madness.

Ginny tapped Hermione on the arm, and she nodded. Mary was down for the count, Dolohov battered, bruised and distracted - it was time to move.

Lavender checked her watch, worrying her lip anxiously. Her head was sharp, adrenalin keeping it so, but there was a distracting chant at the back of her mind that she recognised as her Wolf, but also herself, her more primal, irrational instincts.

*My mate, my mate, my mate-*

She shook her head, tried to concentrate on the here and now. In front of her, Remus was tripping through the undergrowth, and she had to admit he had a liteness to him, an economy of movement that was arresting. Luna glided across the floor without disturbing anything, but Regulus was more ungraciously, and Lavender appreciated that, for even with her werewolf-enhanced grace it was difficult for her to manage.

Desperation was a drumbeat inside of her chest, tightening it, speeding her breaths. The only thing keeping her even remotely attached to rationality was Remus's presence, the insistent need to follow orders and protect him, to not do anything that might jeopardise the safety of either of the Alpha pair. Beside her, Regulus checked in with Hermione every now and then, keeping Lavender calm with those updates, too. Her lack of contact with Severus, however, kept her on edge, the concern a pain of its own, wondering how he was, where he was, what they'd done to him…

Lucius claimed to have checked on him when he'd returned, and found him in a delicate position. It seemed, he told them, that either the Dark Lord had returned briefly while he had been away, in which case he himself was in danger, or one of the cronies that had access to the Manor had indulged a personal vendetta. He was sure it had been the latter, though Severus had been in no shape to tell him, and unwilling to speak at all.

Because that information didn't ratchet Lavender's anxiety up to unbearable levels, at all.
Once more, she felt her throat close with fear, and had to slow to breathe through it. Regulus dropped back, too; feigning fatigue, he ensured he was close by, ready to help, but not too close - she had her personal space, but for the quick brush of his fingers against hers in silent support. She appreciated that, appreciated his quick thinking, his silent understanding and disinclination to draw attention to her, even though she knew that both Luna and Remus knew exactly what was going on, for every time it occurred she drew energy from Remus to counter it, and his steps would falter, or he would sigh particularly loudly. If she knew how it was happening, she would stop; as it was, he simply made sure to send calming vibes down their bond, which helped, but not enough to stop it altogether.

Despite how she knew that Regulus was only being nice to her because she'd shown a weakness, and that meant he was less scared of her - less scared, but the fear remained, she could tell, and he didn't particularly like her on her own merit, either - she took his hand and squeezed in gratitude as they sped up. She didn't look at him, but saw in her peripheral vision the shine of his eyes as he looked bemusedly at their hands, then quickly released her, drawing away again. She smirked.

"We're here," Remus's low voice drifted back. He was crouched in front of them, his hand brushing through the grass gently. "Exactly as Malfoy said-" he broke off as his hands curled around something, and he sang words to it, quietly, in a language Lavender might have said was French if she didn't know any better, but sounded closer to Gaelic. The ground seemed to release some tension into the air, an earthy sigh of relief, and flexed beneath her shoes. Regulus stumbled, but Lavender, Luna and Remus remained steady as they stepped forward.

A square of dirt lifted out of the ground, rising higher and higher until it dangled playfully just above Remus's head. There were roots there, insects of varying shapes and sizes - Lavender shuddered disgustedly, more than a little disturbed by the way they writhed - but none reached down, all were kept compacted by the spell. In its place, in the ground, there was a shiny ivory trap door, which Remus managed to open with more odd French-Gaelic words, the ring of age about them.

"I'll go first," Remus said, swinging his feet into the hole, only to be stopped by a scowling Lavender.

"No you will not," she snapped, hands on her hips. "You think I want to be blamed when I have to bring you back to Hermione in fifteen tiny pieces?"

"Fifteen is awfully specific," Remus replied with a cock of his head. "I'm the best duellist - I go first."

"You're the best duellist?" Lavender scoffed. "Whatever, I don't care. You'll go second, big-head McGee, and you'll deal with it."

"You're not going first," he told her in a tone that brooked to argument, to which Lavender turned an incredulous look.

"Do I look like I have a death wish? I wasn't bloody volunteering - I was just making a statement. Luna can go first."

Luna jolted, her eyes swinging from the forest to Lavender. "I can?"

"She can?" Regulus echoed.

"Why are you all so surprised?" Lavender asked crossly. "Do you even know Luna? Haven't you noticed how she always knows exactly what's going on, what's going to happen, and why it's doing so? The Gods quite fancy her, and she's got that weird voodoo shit going on with the protective
charms. Plus, she looks like her mum - bloody gorgeous - and she's basically an Oracle, so that would distract any attackers first off. Of the four of us, Luna is the only one in position to go first." Then, after a second, she glanced at Luna again. "Sorry - nothing personal. No, actually, it is personal, but not bad personal - it just seems smarter to have your more invulnerable, powerful person at the front so that when the bad thing happens - and let's face it, it probably will - we're not caught unawares with our hands tied while you stand at the back saying 'I knew that was going to happen'."

Luna appraised her for a moment in silence, before she gave a sharp nod. "Your personality lends you less credit than you deserve," she said breezily, before stepping forward and dropping, easily, into the hole.

Remus looked at Lavender with some reprove, as if she'd done something very wrong, before he pushed himself off. "En route," Regulus reported quietly, then pushed by Lavender without looking at her. She shrugged to herself - there was really nothing she could do about it, but her best, and everyone else's, too. Severus could not die. She would not allow it. And if that meant annoying her friends - well. Small price to pay.
Chapter Seventy-Four: Blur

Chapter Summary

Lily, James and Sirius make entry.

James and Sirius were crouched to fit in the cloak, Lily sandwiched between them. It was uncomfortable, Lily noted with some chagrin; she was pretty sure this was the fantasy of most girls at Hogwarts, and it seemed like a rip off that it should be so very out of context. Not that she'd do anything like that, she told herself firmly; only, if she did, it would probably be most pleasant, and she'd be the envy of all of her friends.

Sirius was in love with Ginny, though, so that was out of the question.

Not that she'd considered it.

What ridiculous thoughts to be having at a time like this! She reproached herself, her legs moving weirdly as they crossed the corridor to the stairs. It must be something in the house, God knows the very atmosphere was debauched. She barely knew Lucius Malfoy, him being five years older than she, so meeting him in the Potter parlour had been something of a revelation. Had he always been so very pretty? He looked like a Muggle painting, something gorgeous and French; perhaps in a past life he'd modeled for them. There had been an unsettling aura emanating from him despite his angelic image, however, something that gibaed well with the underlying feeling of this house.

James's hand crept down to clasp hers, a comforting gesture, or, no doubt he meant it as such, only Lily's skin was crawling too much from the atmosphere for it to be anything but an intrusion, shocking and intimate, and she tore her hand back immediately. His head flicked around, eyes vibrant and worried, but she could barely decipher that, the mixed signals she received from her body and the very air surrounding it cloying her until it felt like she was in a bubble.

"Lily?" Sirius whispered, his fingers brushing her back, prompting her to jerk forward and nearly tumble out of the cloak. That danger allowed her to reclaim some small part of her sanity, some clarity within a storm of uncertainty.

"What's happening?" James was asking, and Lily opened her mouth to reply before she realised that not only was he not addressing her, specifically, but she would be useless to reply, anyway, for somehow, entirely without her direction, her body had swayed into James's arms and gone limp, none of her muscles responding to commands. A flutter of panic picked up in her chest but even that was smothered by apathy, a vast and endless pit of apathy.

"Muggle wards," Sirius replied, only his words sounded slow and slurred, as if travelling through syrup only to drop off at the end. "Nasty ones, too - Fuck. Why didn't he warn us? Bastard."

"But..." James's voice now decided to fade in and out in a highly irritating way. How was she meant to hear him if he insisted on talking like that? "... Hermione... fine..."

"Yes, but she... actually... Spilled blood!... Invitation?" Now Sirius was doing it too! Men were so inconsiderate.
"Shit - she's not..."

Then, for a long moment all there was was nothingness, a swishy gloopy darkness in which she swam, like a child in the womb, her hands and feet and arms and legs all still existent but somehow meaningless, surplus to requirements, and she was warm and cuddled and perfectly content.

"In here," Sirius directed, shoving open the first door he came to and directing a stunned, ghost-white James through, stuffing the Invisibility Cloak beneath his arm. Somehow, with Lily passing out, he'd become the leader, which was not a position that suited him, as anyone would testify.

There was a reason James led the Marauders, and it wasn't for his charm, nor his brains - it was his natural aptitude for such things, his singular way of bringing people together in harmony, of utilising the best of each person in order to create something bigger and better. Sirius, faced with losing him multiple times over the years, had a cruelly given but true image of his worth, and never underestimated the work the boy - now man - put in to maintaining their harmonious friendship and status, despite how carefree he might appear.

Peter was a blow. To lose Lily would be unconscionable.

Which was partly why he understood the mental collapse his friend was now experiencing, with his true love limp in his arms and only retreating further into somewhere none of them wanted to see her go. He burned with rage that Malfoy could put them in this position through mere thoughtlessness, for he was sure that was what this was - he didn't neglect to mention the wards, he simply hadn't thought to do so, hadn't realised they would matter - but his reckless need to cleave a payment in blood was sidelined by the more urgent requirement to take the lead, to salvage the situation.

Now, Sirius was not the most indulgent of sons when it came to his father's teachings, but he knew wards, had learned them in the case that he might need to protect himself from the family who taught them to him. He knew light wards, dark wards, your basic and your complex, and he thought he might be able to fix this. Enough Black blood ran in Malfoy veins to make Sirius family, and enough Black blood ran through the wards to make him familiar to them, too. If it was the wards that were causing the problem - and he was sure it would be, he could feel the malevolent oiliness of them in his very core - he could fix this.

"Lie her down there," he said, trying to keep uncertainty from his voice as he pointed at a chaise longue. They appeared to be in some sort of parlour, abandoned for the moment, thank the gods. James looked panicked at the very idea of releasing Lily, which sent a shot of anxiety through Sirius' own gut. "Please," he added gently, or as gently as he could manage under the circumstances, which was not very, but points for effort?

James stepped forward and leaned down, settling Lily across the cushions with the greatest of care, before running his fingers down her arm to take her hand. He then kneeled at her feet and stared toward the door, his face fiercely alert, silently putting his trust in Sirius to heal her as he protected them from more physical threats. Seeing this, and trusting James just the same, Sirius pushed away more anxiety to focus on Lily's impassive form.

His wand in his hand was a comfort, familiarity in a storm, and he clutched it with near desperation even as he strived to project an outward calm for James' sake. His friend was still holding Lily, his knuckles nearly white, so that were Lily awake she would have yelped and scolded him, smacking him on the shoulder or flicking his ear to make him release her, and that she was not made a sharp pain twist in his chest. She was angelic in slumber, like a porcelain doll, that fragility she held since childhood that had prevented Sirius from ever seeing her as anything but something to be protected more pronounced now that she wasn't shouting at him, or casting clever spells, or soothing him to
sleep after a nightmare. He slipped his fingers around her spare wrist, ostensibly to monitor her pulse as it weakened, but also to remind himself that she was yet real, yet living.

"Padfoot," James prodded, urgency in his voice. "Get on with it."

Sirius played with the idea of making a joke to lighten the mood but thought better of it, instead raising his wand to connect himself to the wards.

By the gods, they were a mess. A beautiful, powerful mess but all the same, a mess. A solid foundation glittered; protection for blooded family members writ into runes in the foundation, ancient shields embedded in the bedrock, the standard Muggle repellent and further anti-everything charms folded into a strong golden wall that couldn't be tampered with. None of these were particularly malevolent, simply powerful, grey. It was the spider's web of other threads that worried him.

He discarded wards over thirty years old, for that was when Malfoy's grandfather had held the property, and it was well known that he'd enjoyed a Muggleborn mistress or two. Abraxas Malfoy had added and adapted a few wards haphazardly himself, these shining indigo in Sirius's mind's eye, while Lucius had added yet more, mostly, Sirius was amused to see, wards to facilitate his somewhat unconventional love life. Silver threads here and there indicated Narcissa's involvement, all of these directed towards keeping her elves bonded to her, keeping her own quarters untouched, and protecting herself and any offspring from the Manor's capricious whims.

Two of the remaining wards fed from Lily, and both were cast in black.

One, Sirius remembered seeing in a book once, when he'd been young. He'd barely looked at it, it had so disturbed him, and not much could disturb Sirius. Designed to protect the Master of the house from the violent whims of a lover scorned, it preyed on feminine anxiety - and he did not refer to that as something solely women experienced, but rather the spell only attacked the women - by channeling it into what the book had referred to as 'more pleasing pursuits'. It was a distraction tactic at its most benign, at its worse...

That needn't be explained.

Spilling blood was the only way to avert the effects, aside from removing the ward altogether, supposedly because when blood was being spilled there was no more need for compliance. Sadly, he had no time for this. Not when there were bigger fish to fry; a thick, pulsating ward line of the deepest black. Quickly, Sirius pressed his wand to Lily's marble-white flesh, and whispered a slicing hex.

James's gasp of horror and betrayal echoed about the room as he lunged for Sirius, but Sirius held him back with a leg and one beater-strong arm as he curled Lily's arm over the back of the couch, pulling it upwards and then sharply down to encourage the flow of blood. The cut, a half-inch deep, could scar, but Sirius thought she'd forgive him when she woke up.

If she woke up.

"For Fuck's sake, Prongs, don't make me stun you!" he growled, trying not to yank Lily too hard, a difficult task with eleven stone's worth of Chaser hanging from his back. With some manoeuvring, he was able to throw James off just long enough to shake a few drops of scarlet blood to the floor, where it hissed and bubbled before melting into nothingness. Lily grumbled, the motion enough to shock James into stillness. "I'm helping her," Sirius said, remarkably calmly, if he did say so himself. Deftly, he conjured a bandage for her arm. "See?"

"You hurt her," James gasped. He might have been a little winded from the elbow to the ribs, Sirius
"To help her," Sirius groaned. "Trust me. And keep an eye on the door."

Without waiting for a response he once more slipped into the wards and contemplated the tangle the black ward created. It was a funnel, Sirius thought. A clever thing, it sapped magical energy from those within the house to store elsewhere for use by another - usually Master of the House, but not always, and not in this case. Sirius couldn't say he was overly familiar with the Dark Lord's magical signature, but this one was all velvet and ice, the faint taste of winter on your tongue and the deafening roar of an incoming storm, the shimmer of a snake's scales in the grass and the sharp bite of pain as it struck. It could hardly be anyone else.

Contemplating it, Sirius was bewildered to realise that, for the first time in his life, he was not powerful enough to do this. He wasn't clever enough, nor strong enough, to tear down this ward without killing someone. Not, as a general rule, gracious in defeat, he prodded at the line, watching it stand hard and implacable beneath his assault of pure magic and ancestral right. He had known that the Dark Lord was powerful, but that had all been theoretical; in practice, it was terrifying to behold.

So, seeing that James was still preoccupied, now stroking Lily's hair with one eye on the door, Sirius did what he'd been doing when something scared him for as long as he could remember.

He called his brother.

"Sirius?" Regulus's voice was surprised, not that Sirius could blame him. They hadn't used this spell for years, now, so long ago that Sirius hadn't been sure he still knew how to cast it, but some things were muscle memory. Twelve years of casting it in every pressurised situation he could imagine, from beatings to balls, served him well this night.

"Need your help, brother," Sirius said frankly, still eyeing the ward. It wasn't just Lily it fed off of, he saw, but him, too, and James, and Malfoy himself. Ginny, upstairs, was a victim, as well as the Death Eaters in the Manor, and Snape in the cellar. In fact, every life-force, every magical core was being leeched for this Ward, in levels; Lily took the worst of it, her blood the reason.

All except for Hermione, Luna and Remus, actually. Curious.

"Always," Regulus replied after a pause. There was a murmuring on his end, and then the sound of muffled footsteps retreating. "What can I do?"

"Tap into the wards, you'll see." The grim note in his words spoke volumes.

Their connection flickered in and out as Regulus worked, his power diverted in two directions. Wards were tricky, finicky and required concentration and power, both of which Regulus had in spades, but even then it was difficult to hold up two spells while also meddling within them. The only sign that he had succeeded was a hitch in his breathing, and his upright, perfect brother breathed a vehement "shit."

"Can we take it down?" Sirius asked, because he had been known to somewhat overestimate himself, and a second opinion was always warranted (see, Minnie, I do listen!).

Reg hemmed and hawed for a moment. "We can block it," he offered instead. "Though it might just be easier to get Luc."

"Nope." He wasn't objecting to the idea, exactly. It was more… he didn't want to hear Reg singing Lucius's praises. It had been hard enough to watch the two together during the planning session, when Lucius had strode over to Regulus and given him a *fucking cuddle*, like they were the best of
pals. "We can do it alone."

"Alright, then, if you insist." There was a definite edge of amusement to that, but Sirius ignored it in favour of familial harmony. "What do you suggest?"

Sirius took a moment to consider their options, and voted in his own mind for speed over thoroughness. "Sock it?"

A snort. "You have such a pretty turn of phrase."

A moment's more quibbling led them to a pretty good plan, if Sirius did say so himself, and so they began.

Pooling their magic was a queer experience. They'd not done it since they were children, playing tricks on Kreacher and the neighbours, but it felt rather a lot like coming home, once they'd managed to tear down the walls that had kept them apart for so many years. As children of a Sacred House, they were less brothers and more twins, close as they come, just as Bella, Cissy and 'Dromeda had been triplets. Their magic was born of the same pool, the two of them the same breed, and it had once been as natural as breathing to cast together. In fact, it was natural; one of the ancient magics that had once allowed for Covens but now lay mostly in family lines, the old ones. Regulus and Sirius matched one another breath for breath, heartbeat for heartbeat, and though they were floors apart they were suddenly together, using their combined might to face that smear of a spell.

Unable to undo it, they'd instead decided to couch it in other spells, smothering its power. To do so, they chose Narcissa's wards, cushioning one after the other in strands of their own magic, compatible but not the same, and pushing them, one by one, to the black. As if braiding, they smothered its surface in Narcissa's protection, the femininity of her magic helping to nullify the aggressively masculine undertone to the leeching spell. It took effort, and time, minutes slipping away like water through their fingers, and Sirius felt sweat upon his brow but didn't bother to wipe it away until only flashes of shadow was visible beneath the bright silver of Narcissa's wards.

"No-one will ever be able to enter her room again," Regulus observed with some amusement.

"Sucks to be darling Lucy," Sirius batted back, before a groan from the sofa caught his attention. "Thanks, Reg," he said absently as he pulled himself from the wards.

"Lily - Lils!" James cried, throwing himself forward to cover the girl as she stirred, eyes sleepily rolling in her head.

"Wha-?"

"Oh, thank the Gods, thank all the Gods, oh, you're safe, oh-"

He floundered, shaking fingers pushing strands of hair from her face as she smiled up at him. "James," she sighed, then lapsed back into sleep.

"She's fine," Sirius reassured James when he looked about to burst into tears. His fingers measured out the newly vigorous beat of her heart, while his eyes measured the blush in her face. "See? She even looks better."

"She does?" his friend asked somewhat desperately.

"Yes, Prongs," Sirius replied patiently. "Gorgeous as ever."

"No', tha's something we can agree on, Black," a voice agreed from the doorway, all gravel. Sirius
froze, just as James did the same, and the voice chuckled. "O' course, t'll be a shame to kill her, but one 'as responsibilities." A deep sigh. "Well? Are ye' gonna fight me, or wot?"

Their spin to face him, wands flung upwards, was somewhat truncated by a loud crash and roar from above. "Give her back!" a man thundered, before something shook the ceiling. The man in the doorway smirked, his wand held lazily between his fingers. "Looks like Dolohov's joined the party, too," he said happily. "Aye, no' this should be a fun 'un. En garde, gen's!"
Chapter Seventy-Four: Call

Chapter Summary

Remus, Lavender, Luna and Regulus find their way.

Luna wasn't used to being in the lead.

Not that she wasn't used to leading; she often found that her friends were so inept at controlling their own lives that she had to push them in the right direction, but this was different. Her pushes, subtle or not so, were conducted from the sidelines, the shadows. She wasn't the sort to grab a person's hand and drag them along with her plans, no. She believed in choice, and free will, for the most part, if one would be so kind as to discount recent actions.

She also wasn't an action sort of person herself. While often she knew exactly what needed to be done and when, it wasn't her position to make it occur, simply nudge others that way. And, yes, she was quite good at defensive spells, but that was only because of dear Harry, who wouldn't let a nargle go unprotected if there was something he could do to help.

So, this situation was quite new to her, leaving her feeling quite exposed, though she had to admit that Lavender had had a point. For the next - eighteen hours? - she was unable to die, so it only made sense that she should go first, before the more vulnerable members of their group.

She could feel Regulus fuming, his male instincts insulted by his lack of ability to protect her. In fact, there was a fair bit of testosterone flying about behind her, what with Remus separated from his Mate. Luna couldn't imagine how that felt; Regulus and she were rarely separate, even on these little trips.

The air suddenly tingled with invasive magic; they had crossed the wards. It slithered across her skin, leaving an oily residue that left her twitching. Despite her being surrounded by the earth, she felt less alive, less connected to her gods of earth and fire and life, the ones who favoured her so, more than friends. She was adrift.

Then, Regulus froze, concerning her. She stopped to turn, saw his lips moving, his confused mien. Remus ran into her back but she ignored him, hurrying to Regulus's side. "What's wrong?"

He twitched slightly, his eyes far away, but his emotions were calm. Befuddled, perhaps; shocked, but that was all. She watched a moment more, and he shook himself, tearing himself from whatever stupor he was in. "I'm fine, my heart," he murmured, squeezing her fingers. "Sirius needs my help - I'll catch up."

Reluctance was an unfamiliar emotion, too. So human, so very human, Luna felt it unfurl in her chest to her toes as if to keep her pinned to the ground, right beside him. "Go," he said instead, pulling away. "Get Severus."

Lavender, who had been watching quietly, shared a look with Remus over their heads. "We're not leaving you alone," she said, tone imperious. "Luna, stay with your mate. Remus and I will go on."

Then, without consulting them, she marched into the darkness, her lumos fading to a pinprick. Remus smiled wolfishly at them and loped after her, leaving them alone.
Regulus's grey eyes fixed on hers. "It'll take magic. Maybe all I have."

"Never," Luna smiled, re-entwining their fingers, feeling the golden heat of their bond run through her. "Take from me to support yourself. We'll both get through it."

A quick, grateful look, and then Regulus was back in his own head, Luna a silent observer, her wand pointed into the darkness but eyes fixed firmly on his face.

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Severus knew of her approach because he heard it.

Not in the romantic sense, even were he prone to such frippery; she wasn't singing his hearts song or any such nonsense. She simply had a distinctive sound to her, one so faint that he hadn't realised he'd even noticed until now, but made complete and utter sense; everything she did had such energy and drama and noise, that why shouldn't she have a sound to illustrate it even on the rare occasions that she herself was quiet?

Ribbons shushed, her hair bounced softly on her shoulders, her footsteps muted but rhythmic on dirt. This, he heard through the wall, his deprived senses latching onto reality with a vengeance. He refused to consider the idea that he might be tuned into her, specifically.

How he knew it was her and not simply someone else coming through the ill-used tunnel was beyond him.

It seemed that, for once in his life, Lucius had taken initiative to save someone but himself. Severus wasn't sure how to feel about that. In his heart of hearts, he'd always thought himself a plaything, an amusing distraction to the man, someone with whom to flirt and posture but never to care for. Yet, he'd dared defy the Dark Lord for him; dared find the travellers, braved their wrath and brought him help. Even given away family secrets in the doing.

Some part of him melted, for want of a better, less romantic word. He'd always held himself apart from the man, but he somehow didn't feel that would be possible any longer. Not after this revelation.

"How do we get in?" Lavender's voice snapped suddenly, muffled by rock.

"Bear with me," another voice - the werewolf, ugh, though at least it wasn't the mutt - pleaded patiently. Then a bunch of words in Breton, which he knew Lucius would have taught them because Remus, quite without noticing, was mimicking his pompous tones.

Crunching split the quiet, a grating noise not unlike nails on a chalkboard following it, long and high pitched. Severus cringed back into his bed as the noise made lights play just outside his field of vision, the tell-tale flickers of a migraine. Somewhere, there was movement, too. Gradually, he unfolded himself enough to realise that the dancing lights were not, in fact, aura, but real, actual light encroaching on the dimly lit room.

The brick of one wall had pulled itself away, like a curtain drawn back for the sun to shine through, folding back against the wall. In the gap stood Lavender, her hair a tangled mess, her pretty, torn up face as feral as he'd ever seen it. "Severus!" she cried when she clapped eyes on him, her expression clearing as is if, rather than he being the prisoner, she had just seen the sun for the first time in days. She ran to him, swinging her wand to cast some spell he couldn't hear the incantation of, and the bars of his cell simply disintegrated.

Suddenly, she was in front of him, breathing sweetly-scented air onto his face, her odd lilac eyes peering intently into his. "What did he do to you?" she whispered, bringing her hand to his face,
gently caressing his split lip and the graze on his eye from its adventure across the library floor. It didn't even occur to him to move away, not when her touch brought such peace, not when her sunny disposition had been dampened by concern, true concern, for him.

"Budge up, Lav," a lower voice said, pushing into his line of sight and unpleasantly reminding him that Remus Lupin was here, and, worse, tapping his wand across his body, muttering healing spells. He felt the magic working, warm and pleasant, but not as nice after days of deprivation as seeing that Lavender was watching the wolf's every action with suspicion, hovering over him protectively.

Experimentally, Severus stretched out his legs, relishing that the movement held no pain. Twinges from the cruciatus continued, playing up his limbs, but the bruises and sprains were gone, the cut from the glass sideboard knitted together after saturating his trouser leg and mattress with blood. Lavender smiled to see him move, then looked to Remus hopefully. Severus was struck by a feeling of foreboding, one that only got stronger when she asked, her volume still quietened in deference to him, "can I hug him now?"

Remus looked to him with a wicked glimmer in his eye, and Severus worked frantically to pull words up his dry throat, but the damned wolf grinned and said, "yeah, Lav, he looks fine."

It was… not unpleasant, actually. She was soft, very soft; somewhat wider than he was used to in Lily and his fragile mother, but he quite liked that, for she was substantial and he felt very little urgency to protect her. Not physically, anyway. She still smelled somewhat of petrichor, overlaid with flowers from her perfume and the dry, earthy smell of the tunnel.

Her hair smothered him, though. Black and olive silk caressed his face - camouflage ribbons? Gods, but she confused him - while golden plaits tickled his neck. All in all, yes, quite not unpleasant.

She pulled away and he mourned it for the second it took for Remus to shove a bottle of water in his hand, remembering abruptly his composure so that he wasn't making embarrassingly Mooncalf eyes at her. He drank the sweet nectar while Lavender and Remus debated what to do with him. Not that it was much of a debate.

"I'm taking him home," Lavender declared, flopping down on his mattress, ignoring its disheveled state and his glare. "That was the mission, and I'm doing it!"

Remus dithered for a moment, his eyes flicking upwards. "But…"

"You can stay, we'll catch up with Regulus and Luna, that's enough of an honour guard. Get Hermione and Gin out." There was a pause as Lavender tipped her head. "And the other two, if you must." Remus raised his eyebrows at her and she smiled mischievously. "Play to your audience," she added with a wink in a stage whisper, and Severus managed a rusty snort.

Remus looked like he was about to argue, when Regulus came running through the wall, his eyes fixed on the ceiling. "Change of plan," he called in a tight voice, not stopping as he lunged for the door, blowing off the handle with an economical swish of his wand. "We're going up!"

"Are you, now?" a silky voice asked, silhouetted in the doorway. Severus slammed to attention at the sound, unable to prevent a mortifying squeak of fear. Beside him, he felt Lavender begin to quake, her skin heating with rage.

Regulus backed up a few steps, his eyes going wide, as Pettigrew entered the room with a leer. Horrifying as his general appearance was, the effects of his disturbing face and crazy eyes were compounded by Lucius, in his arms, bent nearly in two to meet the other man's height. Pettigrew's wand jabbed viciously into the blonde's throat, glee shimmering across his face, while Lucius himself
seemed to have closed in on himself, expression blank and regal.

Behind him stood the Dark Lord, handsome and cold in a way that Lucius with his lust for life was not, draped in well-cut robes to his fingertips. Not a strand of hair was out of place, not a smudge dared encroach his flawless skin. "Regulus Black," he drawled, with all the appearance of delight. "Now - wasn't I told you were dead?"

"Can't have been," Regulus replied, aiming for his brother's confident blitheness but stammering instead. He masked it with a grand hand gesture. "As you can see, I yet live."

"Yes, 'yet', of course, being the operative word..." The Dark Lord flashed his teeth in an unnerving smile, eyes flickering around, discounting Regulus as no threat. Lavender, it seemed, was doing the same to him, for her eyes were fixed on the tunnel entrance, her pouty lips pulled down in a bemused frown. "Ah, Severusss--" The Dark Lord addressed him next, Lavender automatically shifting himself between them, though she still did not face him. His Master seemed to take affront, for his eyes narrowed ominously. "You did not tell me you were having visitorssss?"

Swallowing repeatedly, he managed to gasp out a noncommittal noise, and was quite proud of that, under the circumstances.

"And we were having sssuch fun, alone," Voldemort mused, stroking his wand with a long, pale finger. A tell, Severus had noticed over the last few months. Of what, he wasn't sure. His eyes shot to Lavender, landed unblinkingly. "Face me, girl!"

Lavender heaved a huge sigh, rolling her eyes as she turned slightly, just enough that both the Dark Lord and the tunnel remained in her field of vision. "Yes?" she asked shortly.

One sleek eyebrow rose. "Impudent little thing," he observed, not fondly.

She flashed her eyes to him properly, then, the violet depths positively burning. "Did you need something? Or are you going to stand there posturing all night? I do have other things to be doing."

A petulant scowl crossed Lord Voldemort's face for but a millisecond, though it was long enough for Lavender to answer with a contemptuous sneer. "Wormtail," he snarled, snapping his fingers twice. "Kill her."

The rat gave a giggle, tightening his grip on his wand, ready to pull it from Lucius's throat. The Dark Lord smiled coldly, crossing his arms. "Oh, and Peter? Make it hurt."
Chapter Seventy-Five: Leadership Difficulties

Chapter Summary

A group of tired, disoriented and grumpy adults meet.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chatter filled the room, some casual, some anxious, as members filed in to take their seats. It was an urgent meeting, they had been informed; important, but due to the somewhat erratic nature of their leader, only half of the room was wont to take such an emergency seriously. The others wished they were off doing other things; it was the early morning, after all, and these people had wives and children and jobs to which they must put in an appearance just a few hours hence. A few curious looks were sent towards the set of tools a scarred, menacing looking man was guarding up front, but otherwise it was simply a sleepy sort of greeting to one another, the more lively sharing news and well wishes.

Their leader had yet to make an appearance but his second in command stood tall, her hair tumbling over the shoulders of a gown that by its very appearance told those gathered that she, like them, had been dragged out of her bed to respond to the summons. She shared their exasperated looks, swapping impatient glances with those who had been designated seats in the front row.

"Reckon he's coming?" the scarred man asked gruffly, looking across at the clock, an embellished piece of frippery on an equally ridiculous looking marble mantel.

The woman's lips raised in a half-snarl, as if to question who dared speak to her at such an ungodly hour. "He'd better," she growled in a tone all knew to fear. "I'll have his guts for garters if he doesn't, pledge or no pledge." She fussed with the knot on her tartan robe, lips pursed tight, and the older man decided that now was the right time to return to his preferred mode of communication - wordless glaring.

In the front row, a redheaded man was trying to calm his worried wife, who had had reservations about attending this meeting since the second she had woken up, but had followed her husband anyway, because she believed in the old ways, in tradition, in obeying and supporting one's husband in Any and all of his endeavors, and also because he'd promised her a sixth child if she would but follow him (but mostly the tradition thing, yes, definitely that). Of course, 'honour and obey' said nothing about doing so silently, hence why she felt perfectly comfortable in checking her watch for the fourteenth time and hissing, "it's unseemly, Arthur; dragging us from our beds at this time of night on one of his whims. Why, you know Fred wakes up for his feedings at one-thirty sharp, and there'll be Hell to pay if I'm not there!"

Two seats down the line from the bickering couple sat a respected and trusted junior auror, his bright purple hat wobbling madly as he talked rapidly to a younger man who was receiving his fair share of odd looks, for he usually worked secretly for the group on the side and had never one turned up for a meeting. Outside of this work, his only notoriety came from having eloped with the treasured eldest daughter of an old pureblooded family, for otherwise he was naught to them but a muggleborn shopkeeper.
The auror was his friend, however, and they muttered together because they were concerned.
"Nothing?" The young man asked, his hair ruffled and unkempt. He'd already been awake when the summons had come, for his young daughter had gone downstairs for a midnight snack and in the doing had managed to pull the cupboard off the wall, resulting in a heap of broken crockery and one wailing seven-year-old, and was in a hurry to get back.

The auror frowned, too. "You know most of his information comes through the office - I'd have heard."

Shuffling uncomfortably, the father looked at the tools on the table. "I have a bad feeling about this."

Of the rest of the room, the only other person of note was one who appeared, to the untrained eye, to be a pile of paisley scarves topped with two bulging eyes, of the sort that came with an untreated thyroid condition. These eyes stared uneasily out at the room, her thin mouth stitched closed determinedly as she waited. Apprehension was the name of the game, it seemed, for every word spoken too loudly and every sudden movement was greeted with a flinch. Beside her, a kindly looking old gentleman asked if she was quite alright, to which she blinked, and mewled; "broken, it's broken, all shattered. A mistake, he made a mistake, but when, where, I can't tell."

Deciding that she was obviously off her rocker, the man shook his head and turned back to his other neighbour.

As the clock struck the quarter hour, the woman at the front clapped her hands twice, motioning for silence. "Good morning," she called in her classroom voice, and most of the room had to restrain themselves from chorusing back, 'good morning, professor'. "Thank you for coming on such short notice. I understand the difficulty of the situation, and I am all the more grateful for it. Now, I must admit; I myself am unaware of what is occurring, but-"

The door to the room swung open, crashing against the wall, as Albus Dumbledore strode through. People flinched back as he careened across the floor to the front, the visage of the eccentric Headmaster having been thoroughly banished and replaced by a look that struck fear into their hearts. His eyes were hard as diamonds, his lips tight against his teeth, and his wand clutched in hand. Without ceremony, he ploughed into Professor McGonagall and forced her against the wall, his wand at her pale throat.

"WHO DO YOU SERVE?!!" he thundered, the words imbued with such power that the floor vibrated, the knick-knacks rattling, that ridiculous clock hurtling to the ground.

"Headmaster?" McGonagall coughed, her words strangled. "What is the meaning of-" she whimpered as his wand screwed in tighter, her skin growing taut under the pressure.

"Do not test me," her boss and friend hissed. "Legilimens!"

The whole room held a collective breath as he rifled through her consciousness, Minerva's skin leeching of colour at the assault, seconds ticking by like hours until finally, finally he pulled back.

Gentle hands straightened the lapels of her housecoat, solemn blue eyes regarding her steadily, without guilt. "My apologies, Minerva," he said, his voice channeling regret for the benefit of their audience, while his eyes remained clear. "One can never be too careful."

As if pulled from a trance, Minerva's expression clouded and she jerked herself away from him, skittering across the room to stand by Moody. "Aye, and if that ain't a grand excuse?" she spat, her dainty feline fangs bared.
Reflexively, the auror shielded her as Dumbledore stepped forward once more. "Don't take one more step-" he warned in a growl.

"Alastair," the Headmaster chided gently. "You, as much as anyone, know the benefit of constant vigilance."

"Aye, a do, an' a don't think assaulting a poor wee lassie direct from 'er bed is it!"

(Minerva spent hours later preening over that comment - 'wee lassie'? At her age? She'd take it!)

Gravely, Albus nodded. "Of course, in the normal run of things, that would be quite rude of me, yes. But this is not normal." He turned slightly on his heel to bring everyone into his circle. "We have been betrayed," he declared, the words like a physical punch to all assembled. "Indeed, I learned of it this night. I was suspicious before, and yet…" he lifted one gnarled hand to his chest. "Faith burned, futile."

He looked across at Minerva sympathetically. "Your old friends the Potters have forsaken their oath."

"Impossible," Minerva replied automatically, even as her doubts from the visit she'd paid them played across her mind. "Charlus and Dorea are no oath-breakers."

"I've seen the evidence," Dumbledore insisted, painfully earnest. "At least two people have corroborated it, too. They have lied to us, Minerva. And that is not all."

Across the room, murmurings spread like ripples, fluttering through the air as Dumbledore held out a hand to his Deputy. "Please, Minerva, take a seat. You look pale."

The woman did, indeed, sway on her feet then, though it was not the Headmaster who helped her, but Moody, who assisted her over to a chair and stood beside it like a guard. "Get on wi’ it, then," he ordered Albus, crossing his arms. "Let’s hear the rest of it."

Albus sighed, but nodded, peeling his eyes away from Minerva to look out into the crowd and lock his eyes on Marlene McKinnon where she stood with a group of other girls and Frank Longbottom, all who looked resigned to what was happening next. They didn't have much left in them to fight with, if they were honest; Mary had been missing for weeks, now, and Marlene's parents were dead. Dorcas had lost her job over blood purity disputes, while Alice Longbottom's sister was in the hospital after taking a blasting hex to the face in the middle of Diagon Alley, and the couple hadn't even been allowed to see her after a Prophecy the Headmaster had heard told of them carrying some sort of Chosen Child. They'd been neatly sequestered away in the country where, they could only suppose, Dumbledore expected them to make like bunnies and have a litter for his warring pleasure.

So, no, they didn't have the energy to fight, not tonight. Resentment curled inside their bellies as they looked over the heads of the older members of the Order - none of whom suffered losses such as theirs, and yet still spoke to them as kids, still considered them mewing toddlers, and didn't consider them worthy of even a chair - into the condescending face of Albus Dumbledore, and as one, they thought bitterly, that whatever was coming next, whatever James and his Kin had done, perhaps they had the right idea.

"A reliable source informs me that earlier today Lucius Malfoy was observed visiting Dorea Potter at home. Now, this may not seem so strange to you - everyone knows of their family ties - but until today the two had not spoken since the death of Abraxas Malfoy back in 1976. How curious, that they should meet today, of all days, and in this political climate."
Dumbledore paced across the head of the room, apparently lost in the words he was speaking. "Dorea Potter née Black has always been a woman of odd allegiance. A Slytherin at school, she spent seven years alongside those we now fight; sitting with them at meals, sharing a bedroom with them, dating them. She was no different from the lot as a student; it was only after that she distinguished herself by tossing over Lord Malfoy to marry Charlus Potter. There were concerns at the time, of course, but she swore her allegiance along with her husband, and all had seemed fine…"

"But we know that Lord Malfoy continued to court her favour, he made no secret of it and continued up to his dying day, when it is said that his last request was for a kiss from her. If she stayed in touch with Abraxas, what is to say that she did not remain in touch with others? That her intentions were not as pure as she proclaimed?"

He paused to let that sink in, and then continued, in a lower voice. "She spoke to Lucius, and then called for her son, James. James Potter, whom we have all failed to get a hold of over the past few weeks, who strenuously denied all of my requests for assistance with Order matters, and who refused to allow me to visit his home - and proceeded to throw me off his tail, when I followed him to assuage my suspicions.

"My sources didn't see him arrive, but they did see him leave, hours later: along with a bevy of black-robed strangers and Lucius Malfoy himself, whom we all know is one of the foremost Death Eaters in Voldemort's ranks."

Dumbledore shot them a shrewd look. "And should you doubt this connection, if there is any room for manoeuvre in your mind, you should know that our watcher heard Sirius Black say, to Malfoy, that he would "See him at the party, later"."

A gasp went up in the crowd, and Dumbledore nodded satisfied. "As you can see, I have good reason to suspect that we have more traitors in our ranks, for if the Potters have been able to evade me this long, there is no telling who else can slip through. It appears I am not as invulnerable to mistakes as I thought; a human failing of mine, you must forgive me it."

Minerva's lips pressed tight, but she nodded at her leader when he turned to her. A smile broke out on his face when she did so, he grinned joyously. "I am glad to have your forgiveness and understanding, my dear friend, for it will be needed in the coming hours."

At this, sensing trouble, Molly Weasley puffed up like an affronted peacock. "Why?" she demanded, with only slight deference. "Headmaster, really, i do need to get home -"

"Calm yourself, my dear Mrs Weasley, calm yourself. You may leave at any time, though every wand would, certainly, be appreciated."

"Battle?" Molly squeaked, suddenly feeling faint.

"Indeed." Albus gestured to the table, cluttered with wand sheaths and defensively-charmed jewelry and shielded dragon-hide armour of various shapes and sizes. "It is short notice, yes, but who knows when we will next have a chance like this? All of the Death Eaters in one place, while we are able to take them by surprise?" He tossed a helmet across the room to Dedalus Diggle, who only just caught it. "We fight them tonight."

It was only Minerva and Moody who caught the twinkle in his eye, the change from benign to furious, the way his form vibrated beneath his skin with destructive armour. "'Tis a death trap," Minerva whispered worriedly as Albus riled up the troops.

"Aye, true," Moody concurred, both eyes, magical and mundane, fixed on their leader. "But I don'
think he cares."

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: that cupboard thing Tonks did? I did that at eight. It's easier than you'd think.
Chapter Seventy-Six: Problematic Heroines

Chapter Summary

Hermione and Ginny face Dolohov, while the boys battle.

Chapter Notes

Hi!
There are some graphic scenes here, and some emotional/psychologically difficult themes (Mary-). I don't think it's too awful, I've kept the distressing stuff to a minimum, but forewarned is forearmed and all that jazz.
I do hope you enjoy!
Love, Eli x

Ginny probed at the ward on the door with a frown, her wand twisting in her hand. "Standard," she said, frowning. "Simple enough, just need to…"

It fell in a shimmer of magic, and Hermione crossed the threshold immediately, grabbing Mary under the arms. She was horribly thin, skeletal, though she lashed out with spindly fingers at the contact. "Shhh," Hermione cooed, not looking away from the girl as Ginny made herself a human shield. "We're here to help you."

"Get off - get off - no!" Nails bit at Hermione's skin, sloughing off skin like butter. She grit her teeth, pulling hard on the writhing wraith, lifting her inches from the ground and pulling her through the door. Mary fell silent, stunned at the occurrence, allowing Hermione to soothe her.

Ginny squared up to Dolohov's downed form, with no doubt that he could bounce back at any moment. Now, the man was simply watching his prize with narrowed eyes, flinching everytime Hermione laid hands on her. "Shhh," Hermione cooed, not looking away from the girl as Ginny made herself a human shield. "We're here to help you."

"Get off - get off - no!" Nails bit at Hermione's skin, sloughing off skin like butter. She grit her teeth, pulling hard on the writhing wraith, lifting her inches from the ground and pulling her through the door. Mary fell silent, stunned at the occurrence, allowing Hermione to soothe her.

"Give her back."

Quiet. Reasonable. Ginny's fingers tightened on her wand, prepared to stun at first sign of provocation. Dolohov's own fingers scrabbled on the ground, as if searching for purchase.

"I'd rather not, if it's all the same to you," Ginny murmured. The look of abject fear on Mary's face was going to stay with her for a long time to come, stoking her smoldering rage higher. "She's not a toy."

Dolohov looked entirely nonplussed at this statement, as if it had no place in the discussion, and Ginny knew he had a screw loose. No sane man would miss her insinuations, nor would most of the insane. Instead, however, he finally looked at her properly, his eyes narrowed. "I know you…" he said, his voice slightly slurred. "I've seen you before…"

She couldn't help the cruel smile that slipped over her face as she stepped closer, wand never
wavering. "I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about," she cooed sweetly, smiling. "If we had met, see, you'd have no trouble recalling it, I'm sure." Her finger made another slow, menacing journey up the spine of her wand, and his eyes flicked to it. He didn't look afraid, though, and that jarred her, kept her on her guard.

Behind her, Hermione talked lowly to Mary. "Do you feel well enough to walk?" she asked, one hand rifling blindly through her bag, vials clicking gently against one another as she searched.

Mary's eyes, sunken in her head from hunger, watched warily. "I'm well enough to fight," She said fiercely, both threat and promise.

Hermione didn't so much as twitch at the tone, her natural awkwardness for once assisting her in dealing with this woman, for she betrayed no pity or condescension, and with each calm, uncompromising word the other girl seemed to calm more, even if her eyes kept flicking about. "Good, but you can always be in better shape, especially if we're going to get you out of here - even without resistance, the stairs alone are a problem. Here," pulling her hand out, she placed a row of vials on the floor between them, equidistant from the two. "Some replenishing potions, and the like - Pepper-Up at the end, if you insist, but I don't recommend it on an empty stomach."

Mary eyed them with the skittishness of a kicked dog, her fingers twisting. "How do I know they're not poisoned?" Her voice was harsh, but the question fair, Hermione supposed. And, luckily, she had been prepared.

"You don't. You can only trust that they are not, but that is too much to ask for now, I know. In good faith, then, I'll give you this." From her bag, once more she retracted her hand, but this time it held something that to a stranded witch or wizard is far more important than potions or food; a long, slim length of oak, the etchings smoothed from years of use. Hermione put it carefully on the floor and rolled it to Mary with a slow flick of her fingers. "I'd rather you didn't curse me, of course, but if you must…"

Several things happened at once, then; Mary picked up the wand, letting out a sigh of complete ecstasy at the feel of it, twisting her wrist back and forth. Simultaneously, the walls seemed to jerk, floor shaking beneath her, as a cord in her chest she had previously attributed to her carefully occluded memories of her previous visit to the Manor snapped loose and dissipated. From the way Ginny jerked and Mary gasped, they seemed to feel the same thing.

Dolohov took advantage of their moment of disorientation to scramble to his feet, grabbing for his own wand. His eyes fixed once more on Mary, skin losing all colour when he saw the wand in her hand.

"No!" he screamed from within the room, lurching forward. Ginny was ready for him this time and span out of the way, kicking out a leg to catch him around the ankle as he lunged for the door. He stumbled, fell, and screamed impotently from the floor; "she's mine!"

"Like Hell," Mary spat, venom boiling on her face, in her eyes. She struggled to her feet, knocking vials everywhere, and Hermione hurried to support her; Mary didn't notice her touch, so focused was she on her tormentor. "I will die before you touch me again; I will kill you -"

A crash and shout from downstairs cut off her words, and Mary flinched back, cowering automatically against the wall. "What's that?"

"That," Ginny said, her head cocked to one side, "is my boyfriend, I believe. Time to move."

Hermione looked doubtfully at Mary, who straightened up, though the vulnerable look didn't fade
from her eyes. "What, are you running a siege?" she asked with a nervous laugh. Then she looked at their faces. "Oh."

Dolohov, ever inconsiderate, tried once more to struggle to his feet. Ginny went to step in, but she was beaten to the point by Mary, who stepped neatly through the wards and swung her leg, kicking him squarely in the face. The slavish, obsessive look in his eyes snuffed out, he toppled backwards, leaving Hermione and Ginny to stare at her in shock. She glared down at him, then lifted her wand. "I'm coming back for you," she promised him, before turning and marching primly past Hermione to scoop up the potions she'd left rolling aimlessly across the floor. Meeting Hermione's eyes, she popped the cork from a replenishment portion and poured it, unblinkingly, down her throat. Then she followed it with a second, and a third, continuing to drink even as the floor shook from a curse downstairs, Ginny's head whipping in that direction in concern.

After the fourth, she wiped her mouth, then methodically straightened the dress she wore. "Well," she said, her skin starting to glow with temporary health, her face already less gaunt. "What are we waiting for? Rosier's downstairs: he and I have unfinished business."

Ginny and Hermione exchanged speaking looks as they turned, ostensibly to throw a binding spell at Dolohov's limp form. She was frail, still, obviously tired, but determined to fight. And perhaps she needed it, after only the gods knew how long in captivity she'd need to feel powerful again, need to feel in control. How much harm would they do in their well-meaning protection if they forced her to leave?

At this point, their plan was obviously going to shit, if they had recovered a hostage and Sirius, James and Lily were in a duel. What other choice did they have but to join them? Those damn Gryffindor instincts of Hermione's would hardly let her leave her friends in danger, and Ginny's loyalty would act in the same way - not to mention her bloodlust, barely sated by her taunting of Dolohov.

Had it been just the two of them, Hermione's cool, calm logic might have balanced out Gin's hotheadedness enough to send the two of them back to their meeting point with no further action. Mary, however, mooted any possibility of discussion by simply turning for the stairs. The main stairs, that would bring them directly to the fight.

Ginny didn't hide her satisfaction all that well.

James didn't know how he found himself in these situations. He really did not. Sure, he'd been a bit of a pain in his school days, and sure, he was a bit reckless, but this?

His early missions for the Order had been very exciting, very dangerous, but looking back they appeared like child's play; now he was in a full-scale battle with Death Eaters. It had began with just the one of them, Rosier, butting his head through the door all cock-like, but soon he'd been joined by four of his pals, neatly outnumbering them. James did not like what this meant for the rest of the plan, but didn't have time to dwell on it, what with the dark wizards throwing Unforgivables about as if they owned the place.

"Little Mudblood, all cloaked in light," one of them cackled from his far right, shooting curses at Lily's feet to make her dance, as if she were merely a toy with which to play. It had him boiling with anger, a rage that fueled all sorts of evil inside him, as his protective instincts were curdled into something dark. He snarled at the two who'd cornered him away from her, dropping his shield to fire out two spitting, sizzling hexes. One bolt missed its target, finding a home on a painting that squealed as his nose narrowly missed a singing. The other, however, hit the heart of his intended victim, burning a hole through the chest of his jacket and burrowing ever deeper through flesh. It had been a
stunner; James's anger lent it further power until it was no longer recognisable.

The downed man's friend froze for a second in shock, staring at the lifeless body, and giving James just enough time to throw up a shield before he was back, throwing curses with renewed vigour. Until now, they'd been sticking to the 'fun' unforgivables - crucio, the odd optimistic imperio, but now, now the man threw an Avada, the sickly green such a surprise that all James could do was watch as it split his shield, flimsy as clingfilm, and wait for its quick, painless impact-

The jerk came as a surprise, as did the sensation of falling. Is this what death is like? He wondered to himself; if so, it was horribly disorienting.

The floor wasn't as hard as it looked, soft and lumpy and sort of… Boney?

"Get up, you idiot!" a voice snarled in his ear. Startlingly close, in fact. He leaped away with all the grace of a person who'd just had their life threatened ("ungainly clodhopper" finally becomes a relevant insult. Sniv-Snape would be euphoric), in the doing narrowly avoiding getting twatted by the business end of a pool cue.

"RAAAURGH!" the woman wielding it cried, her wand sitting forgotten in her waistband. Was that - Mary?

Turning on his heel, he saw that his savoir had been Hermione, who had taken up the battle with the man who's tried to kill him with fervour. James, having seen the girl in her native environment (the library) for months now, had somehow forgotten that she was a warrior. There was no forgetting now; he thought that the image of her blocking and ducking and twirling at a speed that belied her shape would stick with him forever.

Then he remembered Lily, and all else was cast into the abyss in favour of finding her.

The girls from upstairs had joined the melee, as well as more Death Eaters, it seemed, and the room was getting crowded. Mary - for it was Mary, he recognised the tattoo on the back of her neck, one she'd had done after the 'incident' in their sixth year that Lily shared - was back to back with Ginny, Mary with one half of the pool cue and her wand in either hand, Ginny mirroring her, lashing out with the splintered end of her half whenever someone came too close. Five Death Eaters circled them, but by the terrifying grins on the girls' faces, it was obvious they had the upper hand. Beyond them, Sirius faced off with three others, laughing as he parried their curses with relative ease; he'd always liked a challenge, and judging from the smooth faces of their Death Eater masks, these three were mere newbies. Still, three against one were overwhelming odds, no matter the skill of the single wizard, so James shouted a query at his best mate before moving on.

Lily's flame-red hair was what helped him find her in the end, still facing off against the Death Eater who'd taken such sadistic pleasure in her weakness. She danced no longer, but held up a thick shield, eyeing her opponent speculatively as he cursed at her. They were one on one, but James knew that she was tiring. It was in the line of her shoulders, the stoop of her back, and the Death Eater sped up as if sensing it. James elbowed his way through to her, panic rising in his throat as her hands lowered, slowly, from fatigue.

"No - Lily!"

The curses stopped, almost as if she'd known they would, and she crumpled against the wall, breathing heavily and staring up at her opponent through her lashes. The giant she'd battled let out a bone-chilling laugh.

"You are a pretty one, aren't you, mudblood," he said, loud enough for James to hear, loud enough
to spur him to shove through two of Ginny's opponents to reach him, but instead he found himself
thrown back into the fray. Fragmentedly, while he duelled with only half an eye, he caught the Death
Eater advancing, circling her, while Lily eyed him defiantly. He said words, but the roar of his own
blood in James's ears drowned them out, and he wasn't at the right angle to read the man's lips.

"Please, no", he read from Lily's.

It happened in a second that seemed to go on forever.

The Death Eater swiped out one giant paw for her, clutching her shoulder and dragging her into his
embrace. Lily went, feebly struggling, not enough to stop herself from being folded into his body
while he laughed and jeered, on and on. James had wrenched himself from his duel to dive to her
rescue, batting away the hex that followed him when finally - the man stopped.

It was sudden, eerie. One minute he was crowing his victory, hands roaming; the next, he'd stiffened
all over, just the tiniest sliver of wood visible from beneath his arm as Lily cast.

His mouth opened and closed like a guppy, steam escaping along with a moan that spoke of a pain
James could barely fathom. Eyes flew wide, the irises rolling up into his head, and then boiling and
melting, melting, until naught was left but fleshy caverns. His skin blistered, the burgundy of broken
blood vessels spreading like wildfire, and then he spasmed, his pitiful, quiet scream breaking off into
a gurgle. His arms dropped, crusted black with burnt skin, and Lily stepped from his embrace like a
phoenix from the ashes; unharmed.

"Lily," James repeated brokenly into the newly fallen silence, both ally and enemy having paused to
witness the thug's demise.

Her bright eyes simmered with the remnants of heat as they met his, but they were more than angry;
they were sad, and determined, mutinous and pleading at the same time. James was stunned, thought
impossible, never mind answering the questions she seemed to ask in that moment. They locked
eyes, but James could feel the blankness of his own, the lack of any reassurance, and he wished he
could change that but he couldn't, not right then. It was too much.

Sirius was the one to restart the fight, almost tripping over the scattered bodies as he punched the
nearest Death Eater in the gut. James was oddly grateful for it, and wasn't that just sick, but he was
so disoriented - what world was he in, now? He just wasn't sure.

Stunning the remaining Death Eaters didn’t satisfy the curious ache in his chest, nor did it shed any
further light on his thoughts, but it was progress, for now that would have to do.

When all of the Death Eaters were down, Hermione counted the felled bodies. "Twelve," She
announced, a furrow in her brow.

"How did they know?" Ginny asked from the corner, as Lily patched up a gouge in her shoulder.

"And where is their boss?" Sirius wondered darkly.

Hermione seemed to mull on it for a few moments, then paled out. "Remus," she mouthed,
seemingly to noone, before lunging for the door. Mary followed in silence, as she had since the duels
ended. It took James only a moment to catch on and follow, too, with the others bringing up the rear.

The rest of the house was eerily silent, untouched by the storm. They tiptoed automatically, as if that
would protect them from whatever was lurking down in the basement. The element of surprise, they
had; thirteen Death Eaters down while they were still standing, noone could predict that. Hermione
and Ginny were demons in a fight, a fact James still found difficult to comprehend.
Hermione signaled to them that the stairs to the cellar were somewhere near the drawing room as they stepped onto the polished marble parquet of the entrance hall. She jerked her head in that direction, and the lot of them walked, single-file, across the floor.

Knock-knock.

They froze, their feet lifted from the ground comically as they turned to the imposing main door. "Was that a knock?" Mary asked, her voice hoarse.

"I think it was. Visitors at three in the morning? Naughty, naughty Lucy," Sirius joked, smiling when Ginny smacked his chest, catching her fingers to press a kiss to them.

"Shush," Hermione berated him, rolling her eyes good-naturedly. Her gaze turned from the door to their destination, and back to the door again, before she frowned. "Oh, bugger it all," she sighed.
"What's one more problem?"

Turning on her heel smartly, she marched to the door and waved her wand in a squat square shape, twisting her wrist at the corners. The rich, black wood shimmered out of existence, leaving a window out into the world.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that everyone's breath caught.

"I think you might have spoken too soon," Ginny muttered, her eyes fixed firmly on the kindly, wrinkled face of Albus Dumbledore.
Chapter Seventy-Seven: Of Wolf

Chapter Summary

Down in the cellar, the gang face off with Lord Voldemort

Chapter Notes

Hi!
This chapter... I don't know... I'm not sure. The anxiety!
I hope you enjoy!
Love, Eli x

"Yes, master," Pettigrew smiled, baring even, white teeth. It was odd; Lavender had always thought he'd have the long, yellowing teeth of his animagus form. She wasn't sure why, really, only that it would suit him. The bleedin' rat.

He was eyeing her as if she'd make a delicious meal, and she didn't appreciate it. Sure, she was fit - nobody would deny that. And yeah, she'd enjoyed her fair share of male attention over the years, and she did mean enjoy. None of that, however, gave him (or anyone, really, but specifically him) the right to ogle her like he was. She was a human being, after all. Not a piece of meat.

Luckily, she didn't reckon she'd ever have to deal with his weird, pudgy hands on her flesh, because his 'master' was baying for her blood. Maybe it had been a poor decision to provoke him. She didn't see how anyone could be surprised it happened, though. She was Lavender Brown, after all, of the 'sweetheart' necklace and famously insensitive comments that once led to her (in her first year) garnering detention for a month after asking McGonagall whether her cat form was why she had so many whiskers, and didn't she ever want to shave them off?

(On a side note, Professor McGonagall's close-ups had never looked so good now that she'd discovered tweezers. She should be thanking Lav.)

So, yeah, she'd pissed off Lord No-Nose (or, nowadays, Really-Sexy-Nose, but it didn't have the same ring to it) and gotten herself a death sentence, but at least she'd given Severus a few minutes of respite. Maybe for that he'd pop some roses on her grave. Maybe lie, tell a few people they'd kissed once or twice. She'd like that. In fact, since she had time to get her last wishes in while Pettigrew flipped through his mental rolodex of favoured dark curses, she could get them in now.

Or... Not? He was glaring at her. Why was he glaring at her? Honestly, she just couldn't win with this man! "What?" she hissed.

"What do you think you're doing?" he snapped. "Do you have a death wish?!"

"No, I just have faith in your greater intelligence," She growled back. "Forgive me for thinking that maybe while I'm getting tortured you might deign to turn that vaunted intellect of yours toward formulating an escape plan!"
He looked slightly gobsmacked. Mission accomplished.

"What is your name, girl?" Moldy-face (or, you know, Really-Cute-Face) demanded imperiously. "Perhaps I shall be kind enough to return your remains to your family."

Lavender found herself momentarily caught up in a darkly amusing fantasy in which her young, yet-unmarried mother opened the door to an owl carrying a box of flesh and bones, frowned at it, and told the bird that it obviously had the wrong house - not only was this not what she ordered, but it clashed with the decor, and you tell Madame Greenlake to get it right next time or I swear to Merlin she will regret it!

She sniffed haughtily. "I hardly see how that's any of your business. There's power in a name, you know."

Tom Riddle Junior, who knew perhaps best of anyone the power of a name (exactly how long did he spend scribbling in his diary before coming up with Lord Fancy-French-Death-Ponce, again?), twitched his nose in what equally might have been amusement or fury, it was hard to tell, under the circumstances. "If you weren't so blindingly Gryffindor, I might have liked you," he hissed.

"Oh, golly gee, he said he liked me!" Lavender taunted, wafting a hand in front of her face as if she might faint. "My, that's all I ever wanted. Excuse me while I turn my clothing green and silver, so that I might curry yet more favour with his Highness, the Darkest Lord to ever Dark!"

There was a split second in which she caught his expression darkening, and then Pettigrew's voice crying a gleeful "Crucio!" distracted her.

Pain. So much pain. The pain of a thousand first periods, wracking her bones, firing her nerves. She was conscious of falling, and the stabbing seemed to echo on forever, outside of reality, outside of time, as her head cracked against the wall and her limbs flailed and something warm seeped through her-

Done. She was staring up at the ceiling, her scream echoing in her ears. Some people might shame her for screaming so loud, so constantly, but she was glad to scream if it managed to cause that prick so much as an iota of discomfort. She had a particularly shrill scream, she knew, having practiced it since childhood, because her father had taught her that if she couldn't protect herself adequately then the next best thing would be to draw as many others into her orbit as possible; at least one of them would be uncomfortable or virtuous enough to assist. The same thing rang true here, it seemed, for she found her head propped carefully in Severus's lap while Remus hurried over to hold her hand, glaring fiercely at his old friend.

"You don't look surprised, Moony," Pettigrew sneered, still holding his wand at attention. Lavender could see Lucius hidden beside him, his eyes fixed just above her head - on Severus, she supposed. His pale, perfect face was like ice, but his eyes were communicating frantically, and even in her daze she could find it in herself to be faintly jealous that he had such a connection with her man.

"You've always been a shite liar, Pete," Remus spat, his hands massaging her with perhaps a tad more force than was strictly necessary. His touch, as Alpha, was intrinsically soothing, however, so she allowed it. "'Ooh, my mum died, boohoo,' like we'd fall for that."

"You didn't do anything about it," he pointed out, a hint of petulance to his tone. It seemed he wasn't pleased to be called out in front of his bossman as the master spy he was not. Bloody well served him right, the prick.

Lavender might have felt a little bit sore about the Crucio thing.
"And you didn't do anything about it. Isn't that just you all over, Moony? The peacekeeper, we called you - the bloody coward is right. Never did do anything that might go against Padfoot and Prongs, did you? Never said a word if it might mean upsetting your precious pals, even if it meant I got hurt."

"When did we ever do anything to you?" Remus seemed truly bemused. Pettigrew loved that; he was properly gearing up for a rant, only stopped by a hand on his shoulder from the Dark Lord.

"Now isss not the time," Fancy-Pants-Fake-Title (she was having difficulty being witty and controlling her spasming facial muscles at the same time, so sue her) chided him in a sickeningly paternal way. "You shall have your vengeance later, Wormtail."

"'Worm' is right," Remus muttered so that only she and Severus could hear him. "At least rats are clever." She let out a high pitched giggle that drew attention back to her.

"How very touching," Voldemort (yeah, she gave up) drawled, flicking a finger to indicate their group. Luna and Regulus closed in on either side, their wands outstretched defensively, and Lavender felt the ghost of Severus' fingers glide across her cheek. "Ssso sssweet, ssso protective." His face split in a positively terrifying smile, prompting Lavender to reassess her opinion of him as attractive. Don't get her wrong, she likes a bit of Darkness in her men, but she'd rather their go-to courting gesture be more about the jewelry and chocolates than killing innocent virgins and children so that she might bathe in their blood to stay young forever (which, sure, might be pretty thoughtful, for a certain type of woman. Not this one, though).

Suddenly, Luna collapsed to the floor, her body twitching spasmodically. Regulus fell with her, throwing himself into the line of the curse, allowing her to be still. Regulus took the curse better than anyone else had; he remained on his knees, his face held purposely slack as if experience had taught him that tensing against the onslaught only made it worse, and his eyes glared pure hatred towards Pettigrew and the Dark Lord.

Lavender was proud to say she started it. She'd started a lot in her time - the sequined ribbon trend comes to mind - but this one topped the list. Sure, she might have stopped to think it through, but for what purpose? More time lying on the floor like deadweight while each of them watched impotently as Voldemort had his fun and eventually killed them all? She didn't think so. Still weak, her memory of Pettigrew's suspiciously accomplished Cruciatux mingled with the memory of Regulus's nervous affection earlier that night nonetheless invigorated her enough to find her wand and cast the first hex.

The blasting charm, her best offensive spell, cast as she propelled herself to her feet, hit the wall between Lucius' and Pettigrew's heads, exploding chunks from its face and sending shards flying. Lucius ducked, having been watching her and Severus rather than the spectacle, but Pettigrew did not respond soon enough, taking three splinters across the face and neck, deep gashes that split so quickly and brutally that blood wasn't even welling when he realised what was happening. Distracted, his wand dropped, freeing Regulus, whose shoulders dropped heavily. He did not remain a target, however, for Luna stepped in front of him and threw a bright orange curse threw the air.

It was as if a spell had broken, and the rest of them came to life; Remus instinctively shielding Severus, who remained wandless and effectively defenseless, though not for long. Sizing up a situation was not what Lavender was good at, she'd admit it, but a split-second thought brought her the conclusion that they, even with their freedom, remained wildly overpowered. Two steps back brought her to Remus, and then Severus, and while Remus covered her she passed her wand to her mate.

He stared at the offering for only a second before taking it, looking shocked when it responded to his touch. Lavender was not. It simply proved to her what she'd known all along.
No time to dwell. Spinning, she was hit by the realisation that she'd never had to shield. Not once. Voldemort and Pettigrew and even Lucius now stood behind a large, wide, thick shield, the two dark wizards smirking as if they were but naughty puppies acting out for their attention. And they had it - or, rather, Luna and Remus had it, for they threw spell after spell at the shield only for them to bounce back. Lavender thought that perhaps her wand exchange had gone unnoticed, but wasn't prepared to take that risk.

"Enough!" Voldemort cackled. He grabbed Lucius, who was beginning to look more than a bit put out about being dragged about like a naughty child. "Stop, or he dies."

For a moment, Lavender wasn't sure Remus would; she saw the idea flash through his eyes, but when Luna dropped her wand arm, he did too. "Looks like we're at an impasse," Lavender said loudly.

Pettigrew snorted, and Voldemort shook his head in a parody of fondness. "Girl, we have yet to sssstart." He looked to Severus. "I believe we were having a discussion before we were sssso rudely interrupted, Sssoeverussss."

Severus stared back, impassive.

"You found yourself dissatisfied with your accommodations?" he smirked, waving a hand to indicate the barren walls, the hard, cold floor. "So dissatisfied, in fact, that you found yourself allied with the very ones who drove you to me in the first place?

"Perhaps," he drawled, "if I were to sssearch the house, I would find the mudblood who ssspurned you, and her lover, as well as the werewolf who nearly took you from usss? Indeed, if she isss, have no fear, Severus, for our mutual friends shall bring them to us post haste, and then our fun shall truly begin."

He smirked at them, his shield still holding strong, blurring the air between them. "In the meantime…"

It fell before they had a chance to blink, with curses - not killing curses, but curses he would no doubt classify as 'fun', all those Blood Curdling curses and such - flying. The first hit the floor where Regulus had been, the second whizzing past Lavender's war as she sidestepped to hide Severus. The third hit Remus in the leg, and he went to his knee but no further, for Severus was already using her wand to chant the counter. The air was thick with words that blurred into one, flashes of bright light in such close quarters blinding Lavender. She blinked it away, feeling an odd tug on her leg, thinking she'd been hit.

"Get behind me, stupid girl!" a voice said harshly, and then she was hidden from view, the bright colours replaced by unyielding black.

"What do you think you're doing?!" she shouted in Severus' ear, pinching him in the back, the only place undisturbed by the swift movement of his arms as he deflected curses.

"Protecting you, what do you think?!" Severus shouted in return, sounding overly cross. "In case it has escaped your notice, you are wandless! Wandless in a firefight!"

"But not entirely undefended," she muttered. And that was true - she wasn't. Werewolves like her, who'd accepted who they were and fought it not, were invulnerable to a multitude of Dark curses and poisons, up to and including an imperio. She wasn't sure why but Hermione supposed it was something to do with the Dark Magic of the curse in her mouth makeup. She'd never much wanted to test it before, but now?
Now, she felt the excitement of the wolf, feeding from her adrenalin, the claws forming in aches and slashing pain beneath her skin, the fangs pushing through her jaw. She wanted a fight - not a duel, but a fists and claws fight, where there was flesh beneath her hands, blood beneath her nails. Fighting with spells had never been her strong point, but physically?

At school, she'd always been the first to strike. She'd sort-of become known for it. While everyone else was hexing or potioning their mates and enemies after arguments, she'd start the battle right there and then. Hair-pulling, foot stamping, raking her fingers across their face (which had prompted Eloise Midgen to say it 'served her right' when she'd gotten scarred, and Padma to give her a lecture on 'Karma', whatever that was), any way to fight. At least that way, she reasoned, there was always a clear winner and a clear loser. None of this shite about holding grudges. If she'd known Hermione was as fierce as she had been in sixth year, the whole Ron situation would have turned out quite differently.

So it wasn't just the wolf that wanted its pound of flesh, it was Lavender, too. She recognised this as part of her personality, familiar, which made it all the more easy to pursue.

Severus didn't notice when she slipped out from behind him, so focused on the fight was he. Remus, too - both duellists' attention was entirely monopolised by their enemies. Regulus was back on his feet, attempting with some success to shield his friends and himself, while Luna threw out the darkest spells she could without matching them dark for dark, these ones keeping the two men they fought on their toes and focusing their way. Luna sent Lavender a nod, but it was so fractional as to be nonexistent.

Spellfire, the shimmer of shields, and the screams of the fighters covered her as she edged around the wall of the room, aiming for the gleaming silver blonde of Lucius's hair, a shiny beacon in the midst. She softened her steps, the darkness of her clothes helping cloak her in the plentiful shadows. A wary eye was kept on her friends, though after the first time she made sure not to watch Severus for too long (dueling, he was magnificent; one no longer noticed his pallor or the grease in his hair, his sheer power making even his nose regal, perfect. His frame, all tall, languid ferocity… yum), and she simply checked to ensure they were not debilitatingly injured.

Soon, she passed the half-way point, putting her squarely on the side of evil. Dramatics aside, she had come up on Pettigrew's left, keeping him between his master and her. They both appeared distracted, but she couldn't count on that.

Lucius was frozen behind them, the prop he had been for this entire discussion in truth. She played with the idea of alerting him somehow, but without a wand she was a sitting duck here, not yet close enough to attack them physically. He'd have to deal with it, she supposed.

More steps. She was parallel now, a bit behind, and she realised that someone had cast a Notice-Me-Not on her for otherwise it would have been exceedingly unlikely that she wouldn't have been seen by now. She passed through the line of his sight, then she found herself sliding closer, yet closer.

Her control was slipping, sliding, her wolf clawing through; this was her show, she of the fur and teeth and claws and spilling of blood. It was about protection as much as dominance, about ensuring that the human was hidden away safely to keep her mind intact when the time came to strike.

Lavender understood this. In position, she slipped away from herself, giving the wolf free reign. It wasn't painless, nor easy, but necessary, and a mere blip of a concern, quickly stifled in favour of what was best.

The wolf stretched, her claws lengthening, her teeth sharp, drawing blood from her own gums as they scraped along the flesh. She could smell sweat, fear, excitement from the chubby one - the slim
one gave off nothing but an oily, slightly sterile scent, clearly magically altered. The other smelled like prey, like food; this one was offensive to her nose, something in his make-up warning her away.

She didn't really care, though. Wolves were self-preservationists at heart. The choice between whatever poison lay in his blood and having her vessel, the human half that sustained her, killed with the man's cold magic was easy.

Human legs were odd, but she mastered them enough for this - for the spring that launched her through the air and onto his back, knocking him through the air, her with him - landing, and straddling, and her lips, fangs clamped around his throat, piercing - the warm, satisfying gush of blood -

Blinding white light filled the air, silence falling like a wall, and Lavender was back, snapping into place, just in time to see three figures shimmer into being in front of her.
Chapter Seventy-Eight: Rivals

Chapter Summary

Dumbledore has arrived.

"What the ever-loving fuck is he doing here?!"

Ginny was incensed. How dare he come here? Bloody Dumbledore, always stepping in where he wasn't wanted. And how did he know, anyway? Did he have some sort of sixth sense for action?

"This is not good," Sirius muttered behind her, but he stepped up and rubbed a soothing hand down her back, anyway.

"Understatement," James agreed, his eyes, too, shocked. "Is that Professor McGonagall?"

"And Auror Moody. And Shacklebolt." Sirius gave a bitter laugh. "Looks like we don't need to call them, after all."

Ginny scanned the crowd at the door, picking out familiar face after familiar face, finally finding - "Oh, Circe," she choked, her eyes wide. "Mum! What's she doing here?!" Terror whipped down her spine. "And dad - but they have the twins at home! They're only babies! What are they thinking?!!"

"Ginny, calm down," Hermione ordered in a voice that brooked no arguments. "Hysterics will not help."

"What will, do you think?" she snapped, her fear channeling neatly into fury, both buoying her up over the tide of exhaustion that threatened to overwhelm her.

Hermione shot a somewhat desperate look at the hall where the cellar door was located, then at Dumbledore, who lifted his hand to knock again. "This, maybe?"

She did not sound at all certain.

It was so quiet. Eerily quiet. Minerva wasn't sure what she'd expected from Malfoy Manor, but it wasn't this overwhelming silence.

She'd never been here, before. It was one of the few pureblood houses she'd never been welcome in, and she understood why, didn't hold it against them. Her unfortunate connection to the clergy was something the rest of Society tended to sweep under the curtain as insignificant or mildly embarrassing, like a child with a lisp or a squib in the family tree. For the Malfoys…

They'd landed with the Normans, gotten their land from William the Conquerer, and suffered centuries of persecution for it. During the times of the Witch Trials, their distinctive appearance had led to wholesale losses on their part, as every muggle seeing a pretty white-blonde around would cry 'witch!'. To them, once church was much like the other, and Minerva's place within it and acceptance of the Muggle institution had always been unforgivable.

Abraxas, to give him his credit, had been coolly polite in deference to her friendship with Charlus and
Dorea, but no closer. Lucius, at school, had been respectful but distant, enacting none of the ingratiating power-plays he so enjoyed with the other teachers. There had been no visits home here, no parent-teacher meetings within its halls. This was entirely unfamiliar territory, and she was on edge, not knowing what to expect.

Lights had flashed in several of the upper windows as they'd approached, lending credence to Albus's claims of a Death Eater revel, but the silence seemed to refute them; surely the house could not be so still and mild if unspeakable horror was occurring inside? In fact, if she were to describe the structure's feeling, it would be one of anticipation, as if it were in a neutral state, holding its breath for the next move.

Albus knocked, the sound reverberating through the air like an offense. He led their group, with she and Alastor on one side, Kingsley Shacklebolt, despite his youth, on the other. The rest of the Order splayed out in the shadows and darkness behind them, with a spare few - Ted Tonks, Alice and Frank, a few Aurors he'd picked up along the way - circling the perimeter, eyeing up the situation. They'd alert the main group of anything that should be known. Minerva didn't, couldn't, fool herself into thinking that this night might have a peaceful conclusion. The mist of anxiety held back at the edges of her mind attested to that.

The longer they waited, the more murmurs of concern shivered outwards from within their ranks. Molly had quit harping on, for now, but her presence at Minerva's back was ice-cold, terror and concern turning the air frigid. Arthur was holding her together, his presence stalwart and strong, fit for the representative of a family who could trace their tree back to Camelot; but the Prewetts were a difficult bunch and he would be unable to bear the weight for too long alone.

Albus scowled at the door, comfortable that noone but Minerva and Shacklebolt would be able to see his displeasure. He'd worked hard to keep his génial reputation, it would not do for his followers to see him do something as uncivil as scowl, especially not after the spectacle earlier that night.

Almost without prompting, her hand rose to rub at her throat, where evidence of Albus's attack had been hidden by a preemptive glamour. She had never been on the wrong side of his wand before, and the memory shook her. There had been madness in his eyes, the sort of madness one could shield only for a short time before it overwhelmed them. He was no longer the man she'd so blindly followed all these years, since the beginning of Spring he'd been changing. The stress of the War was one thing, but Minerva had been under the impression that he'd had that under control - it was the defection of the Potters, that meeting with Trelawney, that had been the true advent. Once more, she wondered exactly what had happened there, what could have been said or seen that would have such a profound effect.

All she knew was that, to him, the Potters were astoundingly important, important enough that their increased distance from the cause and now, loss, had sent him spiralling.

Her fingers lightly grazed the stinging flesh of her neck, before they were taken gently away, clasped tightly in a warm, firm, grip, and then dropped.

"Somethin's happenin', alright," Alastor growled, his eyes scouring the face of the building. "Can smell the magic. Dark, light - the whole lot."

He was right; Minerva could feel it too, the seductive coo of the Dark, brushing up against her, sliding sinuously through her own aura, soft like the fur of a great cat, all passion. The Light, threaded through, a warm motherly hug, the kiss of a loved one, the joy of home. So much magic had been expended here that the remains had taken on a life of their own, sentience within sentience, measuring them, judging. It would be absorbed, eventually, losing those characteristics of allegiance and melting into the ground and the stone, unless it found a home in those who dwelled here.
"Death, too," Albus murmured, though how exactly he knew that Minerva wasn't sure. Likely, it was one of those quirks he had, like lemon drops and obnoxious robes. He lifted his hand and knocked again, the sound ringing off into the night.

There must have been robust silencing charms on the house, for she heard nothing of an approach, making the swinging open of the door a surprise. No more of a surprise than who stood there, however.

Lily Evans was framed in the light from the foyer, her hair bleached golden-red, like licking flames. She was somewhat worse for wear, too, with ash on her arms and chest, some unidentifiable substance on her face. She looked exhausted, her clothes dishevelled and torn, but those bright emerald eyes of hers sparked with characteristic intelligence and some fierce determination.

Albus was shocked, too, though he recovered quickly, greeting her as if she had been exactly what he'd expected to see. "Miss Evans," he said cordially, shooting a suspicious look behind her. Minerva followed his gaze, and was somewhat bemused to see a set of three girls at her back, one of whom she recognised as Mary Mcdonald, if not at all the Mary Mcdonald she had come to know over her years at Hogwarts. "Miss Mcdonald. This is a pleasant surprise."

One of the other two girls smirked, which Minerva couldn't understand. This one had auburn hair, and looked for all the world like the twin of a young Molly Weasley. Just to check, she glanced back - yes, those Prewett eyes, the hair, more red than Weasley orange. The only difference was in their builds; Molly had always been a plump lass, while this girl was as slim and athletic as Minerva herself had been at that age, muscles toned by hours of Quidditch and the rigorous training that went with it. Another thing that was different about the two was that Minerva, despite her suspicious nature, had no immediate wish to use this lass as a scratching post; a desire that had always made lessons with Molly a trial. Not that she didn't like Molly, only that she had had that busybody air about her, even at eleven, and, well, cats.

The girl next to her, too, didn't look very healthy, but she was serene, perhaps a very good actress. With wild hair that flew every-which-way and curse burns in her trousers, she looked a warrior, in a way that made Minerva want to be on her side. A Muggleborn, clearly - Minerva had an eye for these things - but no less powerful for it, the air seemed to shimmer about her, waiting for directions.

The leader, her mind whispered, so she kept a particularly close eye on this one.

Albus, too, had noted their presence, but was distracted by Miss Evans' breathy words. "Professor Dumbledore! What are you doing here?"

"I believe the more apt question, Miss Evans, would be to ask what you are doing here," Albus responded sternly, looking at her down the bridge of his nose as if she were a recalcitrant student. "I was unaware that you and Mr. Malfoy were so close."

Ah. There. Miss Evans' eyes did a nearly imperceptible flicker towards the brunette, who dipped her chin slightly in acknowledgement. "We-we're not." The stutter was a masterful addition to the whole charade. "The-The Death Eaters, they, they came for us - wanted to take us - just like you warned, Professor! They brought us here-God knows why-but when Malfoy saw us - oh god!"

Did she - did she really just faint? Ludicrous child, but it did the trick, as the girls rushed forward to 'support' her limp form, and Molly, in the back, let out a distressed chirp, running toward her. She pushed everyone else back to take over, and scowled up at Albus. "Poor dear, it's okay, we're here now," She fluttered, stroking her hair. "What you girls must have been through!"

Minerva looked up to find the brunette eyeing her speculatively, even as everyone else's eyes were
on Miss Evans's. Their eyes met and held for a long second, and then the brunette's brow quirked, as if to prompt her along, and Minerva wasn't sure how or why it happened, but she found herself on the floor beside Molly, cooing comforting words at the play-acting lassie.

"Oh my word, Albus, look at them!" She heard herself cry, not sure where the words were coming from. "They've been through the wringer right good. What happened, girls?"

Mary shifted to the forefront seamlessly, telling them a story that Minerva couldn't gauge the truth of and therefore decided was a mingling of truth and lies. According to her, it happened like so:

Mary had been with her parents for the weekend in Scotland, visiting a sick aunt. This part rang true, for Gilda Mcdonald had been an acquaintance of Minerva's at school and therefore she'd visited the woman herself a few weeks ago, but by Merlin, there were a great deal of sick aunts running around nowadays. While there, they'd been attacked by Death Eaters, who'd taken exception with some of the material Mr. Mcdonald published in his column for the Daily Prophet. Her father had been slaughtered protecting them as Mrs. Mcdonald escaped with his sister, but when the wand was turned on Mary, Rodolphus Lestrange had stepped forward.

"He brought me here, where he left me with Dolohov," Mary told them, her voice ice cold. "And then the girls came. They'd stripped them of their wands, but Malfoy helped - he gave me his spare wand, which I used to Stun Dolohov while we made our escape. But He came back, and we had to fight our way out…"

"He being?" Albus asked brusquely. It seemed he wasn't as taken in by the story as the others, but that didn't seem to matter to them. Shacklebolt was busy taking notes, and Arthur had joined his wife in helping Miss Evans to her feet. The rest of the group hung off her every word.

"Voldemort," Mary whispered with an overdone shudder that earned her a glare from Hermione. "He took Malfoy because he tried to help us, and now they're in the cellar, and I'm not sure what they're doing but he surely thinks we're dead!"

"There, there, dear," Molly rubbed her arm comfortingly. "We're here now, we'll help. You girls go outside - Albus can handle it from here."

"Oh, but-" whatever Mary was about to say was cut off by the sudden scream that cut through the air, a ragged, anguished thing that had them all on their feet and running, Albus in the lead, towards the hallway. At least, that was their aim - they did not get there.

The brunette and the redhead stood together in their way, wands thrust before them. Minerva span on her heel to see that Lily had perked up considerably, and now stood with her wand trained on Arthur and Molly, while Mary idly threatened Shacklebolt, a smile on her face. James and Sirius were suddenly there, too, coming from the shadows to pen in the other members with faintly apologetic looks on their faces. At their appearance, Alice Longbottom frowned, slipped her wand from her sleeve, but stood calmly as she stared at them as if they were a puzzle to solve. The rest went still, but for Alastor, who had been silent and assessing until now. Snarling, he lunged for the brunette, and Minerva knew he'd made the same assessment as she as to who, exactly, was in charge here. His forward progress was halted, however, by the redhead, who jammed her wand into his sternum.

"I'm sorry," the brunette said, sounding truly apologetic as she slid her wand up to Albus' chest. "But we've worked too hard for this to have you ruin it now."

Just as she stepped forth, her wand at the throat of the most powerful wizard in centuries, Dawn broke, a searing, blinding white light exploding across the land, leaving them dizzy, abstracted, and vulnerable.
"See this, sister?" a woman's voice called, excited. "Such gifts our Chosen Ones bring us! How delightful!"

"Indeed," another voice answered, this one more steady, calm. "Our sisters will be pleased to take custody of them-, I'm sure-.

"Can they, though?" a third voice, melodic and thoughtful. "He barely has a soul - chewed up and spit out, it is."

"Not him," the first voice said flippantly, discarding the subject easily. "He's ours. And what fun- No, they'll take the other, for he-"

Hermione blinked away the stars in her eyes, finding herself on the ground. Her hands splayed, she felt about for purchase. Still cold, it was soft beneath her now, and mildly dewy, as though it had passed into early morning without her noticing. She heard groans echoing around her, and memory rushed back on a wave.

She shoved to her feet, wand outstretched, her first thought being 'what has he done?'. She wasn't certain who he was talking about, whether Dumbledore had managed some great feat of defensive magic while she was caught off guard or it could be attributed to Voldemort, whom Remus had informed her was in the cellar. Either way, she was prepared, a shield on her lips as she fought off vertigo and her vision cleared.

"Shit," she heard a voice swear as the field came into view, and couldn't help but concur. Instead of the opulent entrance hall she had inhabited moments earlier, there was a stretch of grass trailing off into the distance. The Manor, from the back, could be seen in the distance, but Hermione had no idea how it had gotten there - or rather, how she had gotten here.

Ginny was stumbling to her feet not far away, while Sirius supported James and Lily swayed dizzily to her right. The group they had been confronting seemed to have been misplaced, just as they had; McGonagall was helping Dumbledore to his feet in front of a crowd of dazed onlookers a good distance away.

It was the scene in the centre of them that truly gave Hermione pause, however. Three women, translucent and shimmering, stood around a grouping so bizarre Hermione had to blink once, twice, three times before it ceased being a series of disparate images and coalesced into a less that cohesive whole.

Peter Pettigrew stood to one side, his face turning slowly blue as Lucius Malfoy dug his perfect manicure into the boy's windpipe, relish sketched across his patrician features. Hermione wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry at the scene, frozen by whatever magic had brought them there.

Severus, Remus, Regulus and Luna were huddled together in a protective formation, though what
they were protecting couldn't be seen and presumably hadn't made the journey across. Arms were raised in classic duelling stances, faces contorted fiercely; Hermione could count every single one of Severus's crooked teeth through his roar of outrage, and she wondered, even as her brain warned her not to, exactly what had brought such an expression to his face.

The centre of their grouping provided the answer. Like a grotesque nativity, both clans faced the centre, where a blood-spattered Lavender Brown could be seen, half-crouched over a limp form. The jubilant expressions on the faces of the three unfamiliar observers contrasted sharply with the dawning horror found on Lavender's as blood pooled in her mouth, spilling out to drip down into her shirt. Hermione took a sharp breath of comprehension, just as the voices of the women began to infiltrate once more.

They'd never stopped talking, but it was hard for Hermione to focus on them. It was like her mind was a radio, attuned to one station, while they filtered in through the static - snapshots and snippets of conversation unless she focused her entire attention on their filmy figures, which she did now.

They shared a height, slightly taller than Ginny, and so ethereally beautiful that Hermione had a hard time accepting their existence. She palmed her wand, stepping forward - she didn't know who they were, but she knew they were talking about kidnapping, and she couldn't just let that lie. Not even if they were powerful enough to knock them all unconscious with a single blow.

Ginny and Lily stepped up beside her, too, their men on their heels. Ginny's eyes were on Luna, watching her best friend for signs of life that didn't show, while Lily looked confused but stern, standing by them without a thought. "Regulus?" Hermione whispered through the spell - no response, not from him.

The women, however, turned around.

"Ah! Look who has rejoined us!" One of the women cried in apparent delight, beaming at them. That smile. It made Hermione want to drop to her knees, promise anything and everything to these women, if only they would smile at her again!

Her grip tightened as she began reciting the Lord's Prayer in her head. It was quite clear that these were not mere witches, if only by their sheer presence.

"Calm, Atropos. You scare the girl," another woman chipped in, her tone maternal, calming as she placed a hand on her companion's shoulder. It was difficult to tell them apart, truly; they had, at the same time, no appearance and yet all appearances: their distinguishing characteristics were blurred, lost in transition, but Hermione caught glimpses.

The third stepped around them, smirking. "A Christian. How quaint. We have never favoured one of those before. Not quite so… intimately."

Hermione flushed a deep red and took another step closer. "Who are you?" she demanded, shoving the tremor from her voice with sheer willpower. "What do you want?" Her heart stuttered as she focused on Remus, his dear face a furious mask, mouth open in a shout. Was he alright? Oh, Gods, what if he wasn't, what would she do, she couldn't live through losing him again-

Nearly hysterical, she screamed, "What have you done to them?!"

"You have already given us what we want, so you needn't ask," the one who'd been named Atropos - and Hermione refused to acknowledge what that might mean - said cheerily. Her whole demeanour was Lavender-esque, effervescent and delighted, as if she were high and it only made Hermione resent her more for being that way while they kept her Mate under their spell. Remus. She was
shaking, and she wasn't sure whether it was from terror or fury. "We're just dividing the spoils, right, Clotho?"

"Patience, little one," Clotho chided her companion, eyes unsettlingly steady on Hermione. Clotho? Hermione did not want to consider this, she really did not. "You must forgive my sister. This is not the most auspicious of greetings, I realise, but she is always affected so by death."

"Death?" Hermione repeated, her voice weak as her eyes drifted back over to Lavender. "What - are they dead?!"

All three women looked at her, their beautiful faces scornful. "What purpose would there be in killing them?" One of them asked, condescendingly. "It's hardly their time."

The maternal one, Clotho, gave an insouciant half-shrug of a shoulder. "Merely paused. They shall break out of it. Sometime."

"Sometime?!" The only thing stopping her from charging them was the presence of someone's arm banded around her chest to keep her still. "Let them go!"

Rationality was a distant memory; she was barely aware of Atropos' pitying glance. Her mind was to wrapped up in Remus, Remus, Remus. Lavender had sneaked in there, too, a responsibility born of affection. She could feel, however, through their bond, that she lived, and she had no such reassurances for Remus.

"Calm yourself!" The other woman snapped. "And here we thought we'd chosen well in you - are you to make fools of us, so close to the end?"

Ginny growled in her ear, identifying herself as the one who held her back, but instead of joining Hermione in an attack on these women, she muttered in Hermione's ear. "The Gods are fickle protectors," she warned the brunette quietly. "Don't anger them."

"Don't, Hermione," Ginny groaned, and she realised that she'd plowed forward another few feet. "Remember - there are forces at work here you don't understand."

"Clever girl," the third woman hummed approvingly, in a complete about-turn. "I always did like you best."

Across the field, Dumbledore made a sudden move forward, only to find himself blocked by three gauzy silhouettes. They'd moves so fast, Hermione had only caught a blur. That show of deadly speed alone made her thank Merlin that Ginny had gotten to her before she did something stupid.

"Who are you?" he demanded, his voice thunderous across the field. Clotho faced off with him, her face bright and shiny, but Hermione saw something dark and undiscernable cross beneath her features.
"Albus Dumbledore," she said, her own voice impressive, like the clashing of great, heavenly bells. "I have wanted to meet you for a long time."

"Welcome to the party," Atropos smiled wolfishly, taking one step closer. "Who are we? What a dull question. Wouldn't you rather know why we're here?"

"Atropos." The third snapped out in warning.

"You wouldn't know who I am, of course, so answering your first question would be quite the waste of time, something you mortals don't seem to have much of," Atropos continued, waving off her sister with a flick of her delicate fingers. "Well, you may remember me, actually - we were still in the curriculum when you were a mere child. Now that I think on it… Who was it who scrubbed us, sister?"

The third pursed her lips, apparently reluctant to join in, but Hermione silently begged her to - she wanted to know more. If she couldn't fight, she would learn, and already gaps in her knowledge were being filled. Their names rang bells, brought her back to her early years in Hogwarts, when she'd been searching for information on this new world. At the time, the fact that families all seemed to, or had, in the past, worship ancient, seemingly extinct deities, had appeared archaic, just another symptom of a larger problem. Now, with these - she had to force herself to say the words, they seemed so impossible, garbled in her mouth - Goddesses standing before her, she couldn't help but remember Ginny and Luna, months ago, when they'd first landed in 1979. Ignorant Muggleborn, she had been, still was. But why? Why had she been kept so ignorant of something so integral to their society?

"It was him." The third - and this one must be Lachesis, the mythical apportioner, who set a person's destiny - said coldly, detaching herself from the situation as she turned back to their frozen friends. Hermione tensed protectively as she wandered close to Remus, but she corrected her route leisurely. "Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, who thinks he knows better than all; people, Magic, and Gods included."

Dumbledore frowned in that paternal way he had at the women in front of him. "This is a very delicate situation," he informed them patiently, to faces of barely masked amusement, replicated three times. "That man is extremely dangerous-"

"Is he?" Atropos said dismissively, looking over at Voldemort's prone form. "He certainly doesn't look it."

Dumbledore's eyes slid over the scene, as if he wasn't really seeing it. "It will take more than that to kill him, I assure you, ladies."

"We know," Clotho smiled serenely. "But our girls have done a wonderful job, all the same."

Hermione felt a warm glow of pride, despite it all, and Ginny made a noise in the back of her throat that seemed to signal agreement. Looking about, the brunette realised that the four others that made up her group were staring at the Goddesses in awe, minus, perhaps, Lily, who looked lost and confused, but seemed to be keeping her peace out of a hitherto before unseen sense of self-preservation. Professor McGonagall, over by Albus, also watched the Goddesses with a tempered version of their obvious worship, while Molly and Arthur Weasley led a group that had actually fallen to their knees. The trio hadn't bothered to so much as look in their direction, however, too busy nattering on.

"We asked them to kill him - we're lucky they weren't more successful. As it is, he's close to death. A few more seconds and we may not have gotten here in time." Atropos smiled, joining a silent
Lachesis in observing the frozen group. Lachesis had come up a halt by Lavender, closing her eyes as one might to savour a particularly good meal, her fingers twitching by her side. "Yet another thing to thank our little faerie for. She'll be having quite the Solstice, this year." Atropos shot Luna a beautiful, terrifying grin that the other girl was in no state to appreciate.

"Excuse me," Lily Evans - bless her sweet, Gryffindor soul - piped up, even going so far as to raise her hand. The three Fates looked upon her patiently, and after having seen their way of dealing with Dumbledore, Hermione was starting to think that this was a sign of deep respect on their part.

Wishful thinking.

"Yes, child?" Clotho, this time. She seemed to be on mortal duty.

Lily gave a delicate cough, her gaze skirting the frozen scene to fix on Clotho. "It's just… You asked them to kill him, but now you don't want them to?"

Hermione heard Sirius suck in a quick, deep breath, and James pulled his fiancee protectively close. Clotho, however, merely nodded.

"You are… Befuddled. I understand how this could be.

"Death is powerful; one of the most powerful forms of Life Magic there is. The Snake-Lord, his soul is rich with it, his lifeblood thickened with the echoes of a thousand deaths. It is not in the release that this power is malleable, however, but in the process.

"We wish to be restored. But we are weakened. He weakened us. Killing him would not return what has been sapped; it can, however, be taken by force. We have harnessed his magic to make this moment, outside of time, outside of his influence, so that we might correct things. Move things back on track. Reward and punishment, see.

"So long as he lingers, the loophole remains. Nothing is solid, all is flexible," she lectured coolly. "He cannot be allowed to die until our business is complete - but his weakening grip on life is what allows us to work."

"My power is back, already," Lachesis spoke as if to back up her sister's words, her soft voice carrying as she turned her head towards Clotho. "I'm back."

"Excellent. I, also, feel… renewed. And there is much to spare." Clotho gave them a meaningful look, but was quickly distracted by Atropos.

"Who'd have thought?" Atropos murmured, her eyes on the tableau of Lavender and Voldemort. "The little cuckoo, our catalyst."

"She was never destined for greatness," Lachesis sounded bitter, almost, in a way that made Hermione want to launch herself at her, claws out. Her anger, banked, roared back in a second. Of course she had been. She was Lavender. Of their group, Lavender was the most likely to forge her own destiny, if only because she was bored of the current regime. Shocked as Hermione was to see her like this, to know she had been the one to take that step, she couldn't help but think it made sense, now.

Despite her lack of particular talent, Lavender had never been satisfied to be in the background. And she shouldn't be - the ditzy, airheaded roommate Hermione had tolerated for seven years was now a fascinating, if somewhat annoying and inappropriate woman. Hermione felt protective of her, like she'd somehow acquired a little sister, and to hear her discounted…
"Calm, Hermione," she muttered to herself, clenching and unclenching her fists.

"She wrote her own fate. We all did." Luna suddenly spoke up from within the circle, breaking out of her frozen state like a dog might dry itself - with a little shake. She glanced around at the three Goddesses, looking not at all surprised to see them there. "Oh. Is it that time already?"

"Worry not, my child. Your ward is safe." Clotho informed her benignly. "It is good that you have joined us, however - we were just discussing what to do with our irritants."

"Magaera may appreciate him," Atropos said idly. "She always enjoys new playthings."

"Certainly not - he's far too manipulative. I wouldn't put it past him to convince her to reincarnate him. You know how Magaera is." Clotho and Lachesis shared an unreadable look. Hermione was completely and utterly lost.

"We could kill him," Atropos put in, eagerly. "Hades always loves a prize, and Death has been after him for years."

"But isn't he already dying?" Ginny finally put in, her eyes on Voldemort. "Wasn't that the point of all this?"

Hermione laid a hand on her friend's arm, she restraining her, the universe in order as her much lauded brain made connections, clarity returning. "I don't think they're talking about him," she muttered quietly. Indeed, none of the women were looking at Voldemort anymore, ignoring him as if he were but a prop on their stage. Following their thoughtful gazes, they pointed in an entirely different direction.

At Albus Dumbledore.
Chapter Eighty: Fate Part IV

Chapter Summary

Albus Dumbledore learns a lesson about consequences. The girls learn a lesson about mercy. Poor Minnie is both lost and bewildered, yet, still becomes a hero.

Minerva hadn't been so lost since the infamous Yule Ball Incident of 1977, during which the Marauders had somehow managed to charm everyone's robes to intermittently turn invisible. What she remembered of that night, that wasn't blotted out by the massive migraine she'd suffered for three days following, it had been utter chaos; lassies crying, lads puffed up like peacocks, strutting about in their nethers. Lads starting fistfights over other lads looking at their dates - lassies doing the same amongst themselves. One contingent of seventh-year Ravenclaws hiding in the corner, shielding each other as the spell cycled through, as they'd all come 'commando'. She and Filius flapping about, attempting to reverse-engineer the potion the bloody pricks had slipped into the laundry. It had been chaos, complete and utter chaos. Hogwarts had never seen such horror, and nobody had quite known what to do.

The bemusement of today compared, albeit in a quieter, more organised way. Her mind was a whirl of thought, unhelped by the way her entire contingent appeared to have deferred responsibility for keeping Albus in line to her. Even Alastor, good old superstitious Scot that he was, was praying to the Old Gods, his eyes closed as he invoked everyone from the Morrighan to Danu and Bile in a hoarse whisper. His eyes had avoided contact with the women from the moment it became clear that Gods walked along them, uncharacteristically submissive to their authority.

Minerva couldn't keep her eyes from them. Her magical family had never been overly spiritual; her husband a Vicar, he'd educated her instead in the Muggle 'One God' beliefs. Hogwarts was already filtering religion from their curriculum by the time she joined, and all that she learned of it had been books, theory. The occasional murmur from the Purebloods, and the invocation of Artemis at both her Animagus registration ceremony (“-the blessing of she of changeful form-”) and the child-blessing for her ill-fated infant daughter (“-of Lokheia we beg protection-”). These mere brushes with faith did not prepare her for the real thing, and it took everything she had not to give in to the pressure and fall to her knees like the rest of them.

It was easier to focus on the action than retreat in to her head and think it over, though the temptation to do the latter was strong. She was an academic, and all things therefore should be analysed - but later, should she live through this confrontation. Nothing was certain. Her eyes lingered for a moment on He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, on his prone form, seeming shrunken and small beside the lass who stooped over him.

"You can't kill him!" James Potter - and seeing him here was ridiculously normal, now, next to the rest of it. Almost expected, mundane - suddenly burst out, panic in his voice. "I know he's - not the best person, but he has good intentions, and he's - well, he's Albus Dumbledore!"

"We are well aware of who and what he is," Lachesis said coldly, frigid eyes on Albus. "He has been in our sights for a long time - since Ariana, in fact. You recall Ariana, don't you, Headmaster?" she cooed this last part, cruelly, in his direction, making him flinch.

"Albus?" Minerva murmured in question, her brow furrowed. She had been by his side for many
years now, and he had so many secrets. "Who is Ariana?" The name was familiar, but only vaguely - a whisper, overheard, at night, when she wasn't meant to be awake nor around. She'd never questioned him before, but if this had something to do with the current situation…

"A powerful, if somewhat stunted, witch," Lachesis explained. "His sister, in fact. We were rather fond of her. Clotho and I had her life plotted out to the last detail; soul bond, coven - there was some bickering over her profession, so we decided to leave that to her. Not us alone, either - I believe Demeter favoured the girl, correct, Clotho?"

"Hestia, too." The one who was Clotho smiled in remembrance. "I recall that this was what interested me in a soul I originally had no stake in. For Hestia to come out of seclusion and claim the girl, she must have been special."

"She was damaged and lost," Dumbledore protested weakly. Not that his voice was any less strong - but Minerva could recognise the signs. A slight stoop, an extra wrinkle between his eyes. "Her magic was dangerous, and by the end she was quite broken."

"Broken things can be repaired, with time and effort." This was Atropos, who'd been swanning about disinterestedly. "That you didn't care enough to do so is no failing of ours, or hers."

"We protected her!" Albus growled, his face bruise-purple. Minerva would worry about his weak heart, as she often did when he was in a strop, but she was beyond that now, swallowing the information like water to a parched throat. "For years, she was our first priority!"

"You coddled her, kept her wrapped in cotton wool, locked in your house with no recourse but to go slowly insane!" Clotho shouted that, her words a stinging whip and she hurled them with accuracy, each landing sending Dumbledore staggering back a step. "Then you ran off with your little friend, leaving your brother to care for the girl while you spread chaos, disrupting our work! All in the name of power, of immortality. And you wonder how a boy brought up under your tutelage, with the influence of Grindelwald, could possibly turn out the way he has."

She heaved a deep breath, settling back into serenity, and Minerva was reminded of endless tales of the mercurial tempers of the Gods. "None of that is relevant," she scolded herself quietly. "Ariana, however, is. For she was the catalyst for your first entanglement with the Gods, was she not? Your first attempt to thwart us, and your first success."

"I don't-"

"You speak too much," Atropos said, casually. "Always have. Always a new idea, a new theory, a new strategy or thought too brilliant to keep to yourself." The contempt in her voice was palpable as she flicked her fingers at him, and a strangled choke left his throat as he was silenced. "What is it the Mortals say? 'Loose lips sink ships'. Well, are you aware of how many wars have been fought on your words? How much Darkness you have borne? I think I might take that voice of yours away forever, just for safety."

"He shan't need it, not where he's going," Lachesis smiled ominously, and Minerva felt a shudder roll down her spine. Alastor's chanting grew louder, or perhaps it was just her, and she felt herself try to mouth along with his pleas for protection - until she recognised that he was not asking for protection.

"You might stop your prattling," Atropos was suddenly there, in front of Alastor, and he stumbled, his words stuttering before returning, stronger. "This is Olympus business. The Ever-Living ones and we have an arrangement. No Hunt will save you now."
"We have no quarrel with you," Clotho added, kindly. "We do not punish those for crimes uncommitted."

If anything, he only became tenser, his shoulders straightening. Atropos frowned at him in concentration, then let out a loud, barking laugh. It was childlike, and yet, at the same time, sultry, with a hint of an old witch's cackle riding the noise. "You poor man," She said, her voice contrastingly gentle. "Such a weight you carry. Let me lift your burden, sweet warrior." Sweet-?! "Her death was not your fault," she hummed, placing a hand on his shoulder, which he didn't flinch from - Alastor had never been the type to flinch from anything. "It was her time. I willed it to be. It had been written before her birth, whether she had found you or not. Take comfort that she found happiness before she was returned Home, rather than bitterness that she was taken at all."

Whether it was her words or her touch, something in the woman soothed Alastor, and his brow smoothed out, making him look younger, more Minerva's age. In fact, she remembered, he was slightly younger, but it was easy to forget when he was always so grim. He bowed his head, now, slightly turned away from Atropos' glowing touch, yet he stopped his chanting, words tapering off into silence. It hung, like a fog, between them, and Minerva couldn't help but think that at any other time, in any other situation, he would be embarrassed, lashing out as his dirty washing was hung up for all to see. Somehow, however, it wasn't like that. Despite the tension, unabated, there was a lessening of something, as if everyone had let out their breath.

Atropos smiled and stepped back, about to return to the circle, when her glowing eyes rested on Minerva. "Ah. Minerva McGonagall. We have plans for you."

And then, with a terrifying smile, she loped off to join her sisters in the centre, were they once more faced Albus.

"Your punishment," Clotho declared.

"Eternal torment, of course," Lachesis said, her dour tone brightening.

"Hardly a punishment, sister. You've seen how he hunted Immortality at any cost." Atropos smirked. "He might even enjoy it.

"But how, is the real question?" Atropos hummed. "What sort of torture can we provide him, the man who had everything and destroyed it all?"

Minerva was shaking. She didn't want this. Didn't want her friend, colleague, mentor to suffer. No matter what he'd done over the past few months, he'd always been, at heart, a good man. He'd taken her in after her marriage collapsed, when she'd been scared and disoriented by the world. Had nursed her through the miscarriage that tore her apart, helped put her back together again. She'd been a young girl, lost with no place in the world, and he'd found her one. She was happy. And she certainly wasn't the only one he'd helped - misfits from all across the Wizarding World had been taken under his wing over the years. Werewolves, orphans - that one Selkie, though it hadn't worked out so well in the end - he'd welcomed them all, brought them into their own.

Sure, they were all tied to him in the end - but wasn't that the least he deserved? Their loyalty? It wasn't as though he'd moulded them into what he'd needed. They were who they were, he'd given them room to grow, and they floated back to him anyway. Out of gratitude, rather than obligation.

What did they mean, he searched for power, anyway? He'd turned down the Minister for Magic position - what power-hungry dictator did that?

Her hands fistet at her sides, she opened her mouth to protest, but she was beaten to the punch.
"You can't do this." It was the curly-haired girl, who'd stepped forward with the Potter and Black heirs at her back, looking horrified at the scene. "He's not evil, he doesn't deserve this."

"How would you define evil, clever girl?" Lachesis asked ponderously. "Is it not evil to stand by while others die for you? To lovingly raise a child only to have him killed? To watch as children are harmed, abused, and do nothing to stop it? All of these things you've seen him do and yet you protest his punishment?

"It matters not, either way," she continued, when the girl moved to reply. "A mere intellectual question. We are not taking him because he is evil, but for his hubris. He believes himself a God - defies us at every turn. He is dangerous, and cannot be allowed to live. Do not feel… Guilty. This is not your call."

"Hermione," the little blonde, a double of Pandora Lovegood, who'd shaken off the spell said in warning.

"No. No, no. Because it might not be my call, but it would be my fault, wouldn't it? For leading you here, for taking this path. I'd-we'd-have to live with this for the rest of our days, and that's not fair - not just, is it?" Hermione shook her hair back, straightening her spine in defiance as a sly gleam entered her eyes. "It wouldn't simply be a punishment for him, would it? It would be one for us, too. And you don't want that - do you? Because we're your champions. I don't know much about the Gods, I admit, but I know you hold honour in high esteem. It would be dishonourable of you to repay us for our actions by damning our souls to a lifetime without rest."

Minerva eyed the girl with something akin to admiration, and she knew Alastor was doing the same. Behind his silence, Albus was pale and shivering, horror and resignation in his eyes. Atropos' face reddened in anger, but Clotho held up a hand, signalling her to keep her peace.

"We had a reward planned for you, already, child. Surely you won't deny it for the sake of one manipulative old man? Eternity is not so long - we should know."

Hermione shook her head, firmly. "Whatever you had in store, I wouldn't be able to fully enjoy it with his pain on my conscience."

Beside her, the redhead put a hand on her arm and leaned in to speak, only to be shaken off. Potter and Black were nodding approvingly. The little blonde looked pained, turning her eyes on the Fates, trepidatious.

Clotho was watching Hermione, measuring her. She was the leader, Minerva discerned, so much as there was one; more a voice of reason than one to give commands. Still, Minerva was quite sure that if Clotho proclaimed that they should spare him, the other two would follow.

"He must be punished," Clotho said, almost inviting Hermione to have a say.

Which she did, smiling. "Why not just kill him? I don't mean send him to Hades, but completely obliterate him. As you say - eternal life will only please him. Death, however - true death - is terrifying, and certainly what he fears most."

Potter had suddenly changed teams, gaping at the Hermione girl. Lily Evans, however, smiled sadly. "A merciful end is the only true punishment in this case," she agreed.

"We were going to change the world for you." This was Lachesis, matter-of-factly, to Hermione and her friends. "Pull you fully into it, a place you might belong."

"We're grateful," Hermione replied, at the same time clamping a hand nonchalantly over the
"Brash act?!" Atropos thundered. "I'll show you a brash-"

"Calm, sister," Clotho soothed.

Lachesis cocked her head in interest. "What will you do? You have no qualifications, and I understand those are important to mortals."

Minerva wasn't sure why now was the time she spoke up, but she felt an urgency in her gut. She couldn't allow this to happen to Albus. He didn't deserve eternal damnation. But he was an old man, had lived more of a life than many.

Now she knew how he'd felt, this entire war. Choosing the lesser of two evils did not feel good, not when there were people's lives in her hands. But she had been paying attention, and she knew these girls were good, and willing to sacrifice their happiness to spare Albus pain, and if even half of what the Fates accused him of was true, then they had no reason to do so.

"I will provide them with the necessary documents," she heard herself saying, her spine straightening. She didn't attempt to ignore Albus, didn't let her eyes avoid him, because turning a blind eye to the betrayal in his eyes would be worse, to her, than this action in itself. "They will take NEWT aptitude tests and my friend in Canada will forge the appropriate work."

Lachesis turned to her, calculation in her eyes. "That you would do so for a stranger commends you."

Silence seemed to be the best policy under their scrutiny, so she simply nodded and stepped back.

Clotho looked to the frozen group. "It seems we have an agreement. I do hope you won't step in for that man, however. You have run out of bargaining chips, and we might take offence."

"Oh, him?" Hermione raised her hands, palm up, in an innocent shrug. "Him, you can do what you like to."

"I'm glad for your blessing," Clotho said wryly, then signalled to her sisters. Atropos crossed over to Albus, and Minerva froze as a deer in headlights.

"I've looked forward to this," the Goddess said. A wave of her hand had Minerva flinching backwards, but instead of some grisly murder scene, she'd simply conjured up a thin, shimmering thread. In her other hand, a pair of shears appeared, and she raised it to the thread with a flourish. "It has been over thirty years since this has worked, thanks to you," Atropos told him. "Any last words?"

Albus spluttered when the charm was lifted, his gnarled hand going to his throat. "I - am-not,-"

"Yes, I thought so," Atropos nodded sagely, then, with little pomp, brought the opalescent blade down on the thread. It snapped, quickly and without ceremony, both ends drifting to the ground as Albus crumpled. A lost whimper left Minerva's mouth as she stumbled away, turning her face into Alastor's chest as he caught her.
"Shall we leave the body?" Atropos asked, prodding at him with a toe. "I assume there will be a funeral."

"Please," Minerva managed to gasp out. Atropos sent her a respectful nod, before turning back to the other girls, dismissing her entirely.

"Make of the death what you might," Lachesis allowed, graciously. "He might even be a War Hero."

"He will be," Hermione said, her eyes, too, fixed on the limp form of the Headmaster.

Atropos, Lachesis and Clotho converged on the centre of the group, all swooping down, gracefully, to touch a part of Lord Voldemort's body. "Until we meet again," they chimed, as one, before they, and the body, all shimmered out of existence.

There was a moment of complete and utter, total silence.

And then a scream broke the air.
Chapter Eighty-One: For Family

Chapter Summary

Things get resolved. Not all of the things, but some things. Also, Hermione goes on a rampage.

Chapter Notes

Hi!
Happy New Year!
Fireworks, everywhere!
I hope you guys enjoy this chapter!
Love, Eli x

"Lavender - Lavender - Lav!"

She shot awake, the scream still on her lips, tapering off into a whimper, then quiet. Over her stood Hermione, her head framed by the twittering cherubs painted on her ceiling, bushy hair a state. Behind her, Lavender could sense Remus's presence, a silent wall of strength that she pulled on until her trembling had stopped, her body settling into itself again. Her skin was damp with sweat, the sheets clammy beneath her.

"You were dreaming," Hermione informed her gently, sliding into bed beside her and pulling her into the circle of her arms. "Just a dream, honey."

"Not-a dream," Lavender managed to get out, sighing with relief when she felt Remus fold his arm around the two of them from her other side. The world felt like a much less scary place with the two of them there; she felt like a much less scary person. "Memory."

She could sense them sharing a look over her head, and resented it. They worried about her, far too much in her opinion. She was fine when she was awake. It was only in the darkness that the ghosts found her.

"Right," Remus said, squeezing her tightly once before letting go and disengaging himself from their pile of limbs. "It's just as well you're up, anyway. It's Fred and George's name day celebration, and if we're late Ginny will eviscerate us."

Lavender groaned, throwing herself back into her pillows. "Didn't I get enough Molly the first time around?"

Remus frowned disapprovingly, but Hermione gave a choked laugh that said she agreed. She sobered at her mate's reproving glance. "As much as that is true, she's doing us a favour by inviting us, and it would be rude to turn her down. A lot rides on her family accepting Ginny as one of them."
Sticking out her tongue, Lavender rolled over, wrapping the duvet more securely around herself as she did so. "I'm not feeling it today, thanks. Think I'll just stay in bed and wallow in my misery. Oi!"

Hermione dangled the duvet from one hand, having whipped it away from her. "Come on, Lavender. It's been a month. You need to get out some time."

No, actually, she didn't think she did. It was alright for Hermione, she came out the hero of the story. Interacted with the Fates, bargained for a man's life. What had Lavender done? Ripped a bloke's throat out, then stood there screaming for ten minutes when she was released from her trance. Really, there was no wonder Severus had run in the opposite direction.

"He's an idiot," Remus said sternly, picking through her drawers. Lavender wanted to rail about the lack of respect, but didn't have the energy. He tossed a beaded skirt and vest onto the bed before turning to her overflowing jewelry box. "I've always said so."

"He's a genius," Lavender retorted, a wistful note to her voice as she stroked the satin of the pink headband he threw at her. It was the same one she'd worn when they'd first met, she remembered. If she concentrated hard, she could still smell the sweat, ethanol and dust of the Hog's Head in its glue. "He just doesn't like me."

Hermione growled low in her throat, running a fond hand through Lavender's knotted curls. She couldn't remember the last time she'd brushed her hair - days, weeks ago? The last full moon, probably. Gods, but that had been awful, the only thing that stuck out since the event. Everything else was a bit of a blur. She knew that Remus had brushed it every day for a week after the confrontation, before he'd put the comb in her hand and urged her to do it herself. Hermione had washed the blood out of it after that night, but had she ever washed it again?

Everything was fuzzy, right from the moment she'd seen Severus back away from her in horror. That split-second was clear as day, a living nightmare that jumped to the forefront of her mind whenever she relaxed. It had taken a lifetime, it seemed, to understand what she'd been watching, her mouth still open and screaming; screaming from the second the spell had dropped, without conscious thought, as if she'd always been screaming but it had never been given sound before. His posture had softened, released from its precarious pose, and his eyes had shot to her immediately, taking in the blood on her face, her neck. She'd been peripherally aware of the bitter, salty taste of it on her tongue, of her fangs still protruding.

His face, so naturally pale, had gone bloodless; his eyes shuttered immediately. He'd turned away, but not before noticing the marked lack of Dark Lord beneath her. Instead, he'd turned to Lucius, who remained strangling Peter Pettigrew, hate mangling his glorious face.

"Are you going to kill him?" Severus asked, face impassive despite the surge of energy that surrounded him. Lavender noted Remus lunging for Hermione, dragging her into his embrace and refusing to let go. Regulus took Luna, pulling her gently by the hand out of the line of fire. Professor Moody - and when did he get here? When did any of them? - rushed forward, wand at the ready, with Shacklebolt following, the two of them aiming their wands steadily at the blonde.

"Put him down, Malfoy!" Shacklebolt yelled, fury in his face. "You're already under arrest - don't make it worse for yourself!"

"Excuse me?" Lucius raised an impeccably sculpted eyebrow at the Auror, not showing any signs of strain, even though Pettigrew struggled in his grip. "You're defending this - this traitor?"

"He's a member of the Order in good standing, boy," Moody growled, eye twitching with excitement. "While you're Death Eater scum."
"Auror Moody-?" Ginny hurried forward, stepping between him and his target. "You don't understand, Wormtail is the traitor, not Malfoy. We wouldn't have gotten this far without him!"

Moody turned an eye to her, impressive without his magic one, but kept the other on Lucius. "What're you saying, gel? Malfoy's a Dark Wizard. Always 'as been."

Luna pushed past Regulus at this, standing beside Ginny. "There is no law against being a Dark Wizard," she pointed out, calmly. "In fact, dark wizards are required and encouraged by society to keep the peace. At least seven of them sit on the Wizengamot."

"Miss…?"

"Lovegood," she smiled sweetly. "Luna Lovegood."

Moody took a moment to absorb this, then soldiered on, gruffly. "Be that as it may, Miss Lovegood, this man-" he looked narrowly at Regulus, then Severus, and corrected himself. "These men are suspected Death Eaters. We're taking them into custody."

"No!" Lavender didn't notice the word leaving her mouth, but she was full of panic, imagining Severus transferred from one cell to another, physical torture to the psychological pain of imprisonment. The idea that he might wind up in Azkaban, his hopes and dreams sucked away by nightmare monsters, terrified her. She couldn't let that happen - she would kill them all before she let that happen.

Severus didn't so much as look at her after the pronouncement, but his hands fisted and trembled, and she could feel his fear, too.

"Sir, please don't do that," Hermione said, disentangling herself from her Mate to skirt around them, joining her friends. As she passed, she took Lavender's hand and tugged her along, too. The four of them formed a barrier between Lucius, a now-unconscious and slumped on the floor Pettigrew, and the Aurors. "I understand that you are in a difficult position with this, but I believe we can help you."

"Help us, how?" Shacklebolt asked before Moody could get a word in.

Lavender could see Hermione scrambling for words, but she had faith. Her friend might not be the most eloquent speaker, but her plotting was unrivalled; if anyone could keep the men out of Azkaban it was her. The belief that her Alpha female would solve this problem was ingrained in her wolf, and she fed on that trust now, the only thing keeping her sane.

"You all must be very confused right now, and I sympathise. Much of what just happened was an accumulation of events that have occurred out of your sight, and that was an oversight on our behalf. You can trust us, but I know that you feel you cannot, so I will extend to you the same courtesy I offered Dorea Potter, several months ago, when we landed in her garden. She gave the innocent schoolgirl smile she'd offered every Hogwarts professor for years and watched them soften in response to it.

"If you will be so kind as to allow these gentlemen to return to their homes and regroup - it has been a long night for all of us, you see - my friends and I will follow you to the Minister's office, where we will show you our memories of the past months, and before. These are crucial to your understanding of today's events. You may bring any authenticator you require to assure you that they are undoctored recollections of our lives, and we shall go on from there. Gentlemen, I implore you to take advantage of this offer."

"We could arrest you, force you to give them up," Moody threatened, straining forward. The only
thing that seemed to stop him from charging them was McGonagall's swift approach.

"Hear them out, Alastor," she implored softly. "I know as little about this as you do, but I can sense their magic - you know I can. It's my honour as Deputy Headmistress, and three of them are lions, true as anything."

Moody glared at her for a moment, then softened, some fleeting though crossing his face. "Alright," he grunted, reluctantly. "But we're keeping Aurors close to 'em while you're with us. Can't have Death Eaters escaping, no matter what you do. And I'll be callin' the Head Unspeakable to verify your evidence, lass, so you won't get one over on me. Shacklebolt."

The Auror already had his wand in hand, pointed at his wristwatch as he murmured a charm. The band glowed for a moment, and seconds later the pop of apparation filled the air. "Called on some Seniors, sir," he explained as purple-robed silhouettes converged on the scene.

"Good lad. Now," Moody raised his voice, addressing both them and the remaining Order members, the majority of whom remained kneeling. "I don't think I need to tell anyone this, for it goes without saying - nobody will speak a word of what happened here tonight without my express permission, and certainly not before the Ministry has had time to sort it all out! Understood?"

A submissive murmuring of agreement echoed, and Moody gave a sharp nod. "Well, then. Dawlish, Mack, you're with Malfoy; Compton, Feelan, on Snape, and Doe."

"I'll be with Severus," Regulus said quietly.

"With the others, then. Keep a close eye." The Auror turned to Hermione. "We'll be Portkeying."

Shacklebolt gave an apologetic smile as he produced a battered old trinket box from his pocket and held it out for them. "No time like the present, eh?"

Lavender eyed it warily, but then her eyes flickered away as movement caught her eye. Three Aurors were leading Severus and Regulus back toward the house, Regulus turning back to mouth reassurances at Luna. All she could see of Severus was the back of his head and robes, but he showed no inclination to look back. "Sev-" she called, and he twitched, but didn't bother to turn. Hermione clutched her hand and put it to the Portkey, and they were whisked away with a painful yank, but that was nothing compared to the way something broke inside her, with seeming finality.

"Lavender!" That was Hermione's voice, sharp, cutting. Lavender came back to herself, finding herself sat on the bed, half-in, half-out of a jumper that was tangled about her neck. "Oh, this is the absolute fucking limit!" Hermione threw her hands up and marched for the door. "You look after her," she ordered Remus. "Get her to the Weasleys and apologise to Molly for me, but something important has come up." Lavender could have sworn that were Hermione anyone else, she would have cracked her knuckles in threat. With that ominous sentence, she was gone, and Remus climbed up into the bed next to her, gently pulling her arm out of the neck hole of her jumper.

"Is she going to kill someone?" Lavender asked detachedly.

"Only if he doesn't do what she wants," Remus replied, settling her jumper down properly and pressing a kiss to her forehead. "Now come on, love. Ginny made bacon and if we wait much longer, Sirius will have claimed it all, and I'm not in the mood to fight him today."

He offered his hand to help her get out of bed, and she took it, her legs feeling unaccountably weak. "I don't want any," she declared, searching with her feet for slippers. "I'm a vegetarian now."
Remus stopped abruptly, shock crossing his face. "Now that is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. And you talk a lot of shit."

"Gosh, thanks," she said sarcastically as they headed for the stairs. He shot her a knowing look as she caught the scent of frying meat and her stomach rumbled like an earthquake. "Shut up."

Ginny hummed to herself as she transferred bacon to a plate, deftly smacking Sirius' creeping hand away as she did so. She was in a good mood. A rare, brilliant mood. Her mum - her beloved, coddling, terrifying mum - had reached out to them, invited them into the fold. She wasn't going to lose them! It felt unreal, like it was happening to someone else.

Everything had changed that day. They'd gone from outcasts, confused interlopers in their world, to fully licensed magical practitioners with honorary citizenship and, for her, an actual job. Moody, Sirius' boss, had led the way, dragging her into the Auror corps by the ear. His exact words had been "lass, if you think you're wasting that wand-arm of yours on Quidditch and cooking, you've got another think coming!"

Really, it was mental. And she owed it all to her friends, old and new.

She ruffled a fond hand through Sirius' hair as she moved back to the stove, and he caught it in his, pressing a quick kiss to the fingers. Everything had seemed lost when Hermione had traded their future for the Fates' mercy. Only her quick thinking had saved them, and even then it had been a close call.

_Moody surfaced from the pensieve with a cough, his face pale. Shacklebolt, Amelia Bones, the Head Unspeakable, Acting Headmistress McGonagall and the Minister for Magic himself all followed, staggering as they attempted to realign themselves with reality, their minds struggling under the weight of what they'd just learned. Each of the girls had contributed a collection of memories, encompassing all of the war years of their youth, and deposited them in the Department of Mysteries' most powerful pensieve, one that was able to host dozens of witnesses at once, and played the memories out at several times the usual speed, like dreams. What, to the girls as they sat in the office, guarded by Aurors, had been merely an hour, had passed to the witnesses as days; days watching the War play out, including their missteps, their actions or inactions, and eventually their own deaths. They were, rightly, disoriented, even the masked Unspeakable, who clutched his cowl with shaky fingers._

_None of them spoke for a moment, all of them staring at one another silently, replaying pertinent scenes in their heads. Ginny tried not to fidget with anxiety. So much rode on this…_

_"These memories are clean. Unaltered." The Head Unspeakable turned to them, tilting his head in respect. "Your clarity of recall must be commended."_

_"Thank you, sir," Hermione acknowledged politely, even as Ginny railed in her head. Of course they were clear. They were the most traumatising events of their lives. One could not simply forget the contents of that bowl._

_"You have given us much to think about," the Minister said, his voice weak. "The layers… Much has occurred out of our eyeline. Secrets upon secrets. That the Fates themselves vouch for you is in your favour, certainly, but Time Travel is illegal. You have harboured several Marked Death Eaters, and committed several other crimes in the course of your… exercise. Miss Brown, it seems, is an unregistered werewolf. Miss Weasley has created and used several Dark curses. Miss Potter nearly levelled a Muggle village with the use of Fiendfyre. The list goes on."_
"Now, Minister, is this necessary?" McGonagall asked, folding her arms with a chastising frown. "These girls saved our world. Rid the world of a dangerous Dark Lord. The lives they have preserved deserves some recognition."

"My dear Miss-"  

"Don't let's be formal, Minister. The Gods know, after what we've just seen, we're in each other's confidence. Now, I promised to help these girls sit their exams - to the Fates, no less. I can hardly do that if they're in Azkaban. Will you force me to forsake the Fates? How will that play out in the Press?"

"Minerva, really. You wouldn't go to the press with a silly thing like-"

"I certainly would, if it would prevent a miscarriage of justice. Head Auror Moody agrees with me, don't you, Alastor?"

Moody looked amusingly like a deer in headlights. "Yes," he grunted shortly, folding his own arms. "The lasses are impressive. Light. Be a waste of good magic to lock 'em up."

The Minister turned to appeal to Madam Bones, who was here to consider the case on behalf of the Wizengamot. The woman thought carefully, then stepped slightly closer to Moody and McGonagall. "Truly, Minister - they have done us a great service, and the Wizengamot would agree. On behalf of the Old Families, who worship the Old Gods faithfully, I shall also suggest that we bring the girls into this world. It shall make our easier for the public to accept the story. Our records show that they already have covers, we shall merely entrench them. Make them real. As a thank-you."

The Minister looked aghast, but everyone else nodded. "Indeed, that is appropriate," Minerva agreed with a smile. "I shall also fast-track their exams, and contact Molly regarding her long-lost cousin."

"What do we tell everyone?" Shacklebolt asked curiously. "We can hardly say that a bunch of Time Travellers came to kill the Dark Lord."

"If I might?" Luna asked in her airy voice. "I have a solution that might suit all of us."

"Yes, Miss Lovegood?" The Minister asked in a patronising tone, rolling his eyes towards his professional counterparts.

"Well," Luna began, kicking her feet like a child. She was so small and fragile in her chair, even covered by dirt and curse marks - her feet didn't touch the ground, for Merlin's sake! "In the Muggle world, their governments have special military branches for dealing with threats - small team of specially trained Aurors. You could say you formed one of these to battle Voldemort. Us."

Hermione grinned, apparently picking up her meaning. "Oh, yes! You can say you recruited us from around the world, and trained us for this purpose. A diverse team, to please everyone - a pureblood, muggleborn, a werewolf and a Seer." She shot Luna a silencing look when the girl went to protest this title. "We brought him down on your orders - it brings the glory to you, sir, restoring faith in your Ministry, and cements our place in your world."

He blinked at them, his face lightening. Ginny could almost hear his thoughts - another term as Minister, Worldwide adulation, he'd be set in the minds of the nation forever as the Minister who brought down the biggest threat to their country since the Witch Trials.

"Ah... But..." he looked reluctant to say it. "We simply cannot have a werewolf on the team. The law..."
"Then change it," Hermione snapped, her hand flying to clutch at Lavender's knee. "Are you the Minister, or aren't you?"

The man shrank back at the bite in her voice, and Ginny scoffed. Spineless prick. "Of course, of course..." he muttered, and Hermione gave a feral smile.

"We will all be your heroes, exactly as we are, with that story, or we will send our memories to the press the second you renege, and watch them tear you down. It's your choice, Minister."

"We could arrest you," he said with false confidence.

"You just try. We have the Gods on our side."

The thump of running feet jerked her out of her memories and she turned to see a brown blur rushing past the door. "Hermione?" she called, and the figure backtracked, pausing in the frame.

"Yes, Gin?" she replied with her dangerous, sweet smile on.

She eyed her friend for a moment, gauging where she was on the murder-y scale. Not too high. Her wand wasn't in her hand, and she didn't have any offensive weapons, just a whole lot of rage. "Nothing. You have fun."

"I will!" Hermione called, slamming the door behind her.

"She is terrifying," Sirius said, popping bacon in his mouth. Ginny scowled at him, and he held his hands palm up, mouth full. Smacking him with the back of the spatula, she turned back to the stove with a smile.

The Burrow was decorated with all of the enthusiasm of the family, and full to the brim with well-wishers. Fred and George were corralled in a multi colored pen in the garden, babbling merrily at their admirers. Fred waddled in an ungainly fashion around the fence, using one hand on it to hold him up, as he commanded the attention of passers-by, while George sat in the centre, merrily drooling on a miniscule Hogwarts Express with breaks to take a breath and shout at Fred in babytalk. Bright orange and purple balloons splashed the walls and sky with colour, tables set up with streamers, cups and plates of the same colours.

They should have had this ceremony earlier, as was tradition, but with the War Molly hadn't wanted to take the risk. Now that it was over, as the papers gleefully proclaimed (complete with victorious-looking Minister giving numerous statements, and an oft-repeated press release by Hermione, Ginny, and the others - with help from Dorea, who could handle the press like a professional) Molly had finally been able to see her plans come to fruition. Now, she tottered around, high on life, greeting and laughing and entertaining her guests.

"Oh, look, Arthur!" She cried, hustling towards them through the crowd. Arthur followed in her wake, smiling pleasantly, apparently immune to the way all eyes fell on them, some curious, some amazed. The Prophet had touted their heroism widely, and their determination to simply go about life as usual had only fanned the flames. Luna had been asked for an autograph in Diagon Alley a few days before, and Hermione could barely step foot in Remus' workplace without being converged upon by fellow academics, all delighted to meet the 'brains' of their group. Yes, that's right - they'd all been designated roles by Witch Weekly, who'd dug about in their personal lives and taken interviews from everyone they could get their hands on in order to run profiles on the women who'd saved the world; their coven.

Luna had, naturally, been the Seer due to her mother's eccentric reputation - though Pandora had
come out claiming Luna as a long-lost half-sister, who still bore the stamp of their family magic in her veins. Ginny had been the Athlete, as her scores in the Auror exam came to light - she had the highest physical aptitude score in decades, despite most of the team doubting her due to her possession of a vaginas. Really, she enjoyed nothing better than shoving it in their faces, especially at their Sunday Quidditch League, where she'd won the match both times she'd played.

Hermione, naturally, had been the brains, as her regular visits to bookstores demonstrated (noone seemed to notice or care that it was also because of her werewolf boyfriend working there). The Unspeakable had reached out to her as a consultant, as they had in the future, but she'd applied to the Goblins instead, claiming that her more intimate work on Horcruxes this time around had lured her into curse-breaking. She says currently in negotiations.

Lily Evans was the Princess, for many and varied reasons, including the fact that her personal history read like a fairy tale: a muggleborn witch, misunderstood and abused by her sister, brought into a world she didn't understand and didn't fit into prevails against the odds and marries the heir to an Ancient and Noble House. She wasn't fond of the title, nor was she pleased with the idea that her accomplishment came from her recent, private handfasting, but she couldn't deny that the attention was flattering. The other girls found it hilarious, especially considering the fact that, by all accounts, the magazine had glossed over her high grades, excellent practical exam results, and the fact that she was the most popular girl at Hogwarts for most of her education.

'Prevail against the odds', indeed.

Lavender was the odd one out, and Ginny had to admit that it was partially a relief that she'd been bedridden the past month considering the way the press talked about her. The way they shifted from seeing her as angelic hero to brutal, feral murderess day-to-day was dizzying, and a surefire way to find an editor hexed if the girl had been on her feet. On the upside, if it was an upside, it seemed she'd become somewhat of a sex-symbol, with the picture of her leaving the Ministry after they had been presented with their Orders of Merlin (also, the last time she'd left the house) being blown up onto posters and pasted to young wizard's walls the country over. It was a good picture, Ginny had to admit; the woman looked resplendent in fitted lavender robes, the colour a few shades lighter than her eyes, which stood in the forefront as she looked directly into the camera with hooded eyes. The tragedy there had been carefully edited out by photographers, who preferred the emphasis to be on her voluptuous form rather than whatever personal crisis she was having. The cottage had been flooded with requests for photoshoots, not all of them seedy, and if she ever felt better she'd have a career waiting for her there. Ginny didn't think they'd know what had hit them if she did, but thought her friend was more likely to go for Skeeter's job.

"Hello, girls!" Molly pulled Lavender into a vice-like hug, apparently sensing her emotional turmoil. "It's so good to see you! Cousin Ginny," she broke her hug to come and take Ginny's hands in hers, eyes searching her face. "My!" She laughed, squeezing tight. "You look just like Aunt Cedrella! How I didn't see that…" she leaned in to kiss Ginny's cheek, and as she did so, gave her a wink. "I was always going to call my daughter Ginevra," she said softly. "You're not fooling me, my love."

Ginny felt tears fill her eyes as Molly pulled her into a motherly hug. She even smelt the same, faintly of cinnamon and flour and baby powder, just as she had even seventeen years after her youngest had left nappies. Her embrace was warm, and familiar, and she could have melted into it, but instead, as was appropriate, she pulled back and grinned enough to mask the wetness on her face.

"Thank you for inviting us, Mrs Weasley," she said, loud enough for the onlookers to hear.

"Nonsense, child, it's a pleasure to have you all. And please…" She looked pained to say the next words, as if she truly did recognise that Ginny was her child, for she would never ask a child of hers
to call her by name, "you all must call me Molly, if we're to be friends."

"Molly," Ginny said, the word feeling odd on her tongue, for while she'd forced herself to refer to her mother as such in her head she'd never said the word aloud. "Thank you," she added lamely, for lack of anything else to say.

Molly stepped back, Arthur draping an arm across her shoulders. "Right, then!" he said, as if covering for his wife's emotion. He'd always been like that, Ginny remembered. He might not suit the ideal of the Alpha male husband, but he'd always been protective of her mother, always known exactly what she needed at any given moment. By the time Ginny was old enough to notice it, she'd thought it was familiarity, but it seemed more innate as an adult. "We've got food over there, and dancing in the yard. The blessed boys are in the pen - mischief making kids that they are, we can't let them run riot or they'll set the place on fire. Our other children are about, somewhere, if anyone can find them," he gave a cheery wink while pointing in various directions. "All I would say is don't go in the shed. That's my tinkering shed, that is. In fact, I wanted to ask your friend Lily about some things, if she's around…"

"She and James will be by later," Ginny explained Apologetically. "They're have an appointment, first."

"Nothing bad, I hope?"

Luna and Ginny shared a smirk. "Nothing bad."

The house in Spinner's End hadn't changed at all over the past few months, despite everything changing around it. Regulus had moved in shortly after they'd been publicly cleared of wrongdoing in the War so that he could court Luna properly ("as any proper gentlewizard would", he'd claimed, looking pointedly at a smugly snogging Sirius and Ginny), and as a result the wards were much less, well, fatal, but otherwise from the outside it was the same dingy little hovel from before. She knocked on the door out of politeness, but she wasn't going to take no for an answer so she confringo'd the lock for good measure.

Shoving over the door, she stepped inside with such determination that she almost failed to notice the changes on the inside. The walls had been washed and repainted cream, the wooden paneling at the bottom varnished. And she could see this, too, as the light that had been missing on their previous visit had been replaced. It was enough to make her stop in her tracks, frowning.

Footsteps from above caught her attention, and then Regulus came trotting down the stairs, cloak thrown over one arm. She transferred her frown to him as he grinned at her. "Oh, good, you're here," he said cheerily, leaning forward to kiss her cheek in greeting. "It's about time. Severus is in the living room, moping about. You'll want to do something about that."

"Did you do this?" she demanded, pointing at the floor, now, where the tiling had been cleaned to a high sheen.

"Innocent, ma'am," he replied, getting a kick out of it. Of all of them, Regulus had responded best to their brief arrest earlier that month, continually making references to their few hours in custody. Hermione thought it might have something to do with his 'bad boy' image in the press; the handsome younger son of an Ancient House, who rebelled but came home to the Light in the end, saving the world as he did so. He'd relaxed now that the war was over, too - he and Sirius were tentatively rebuilding the bond they always should have had, and adding to that his plans to marry Luna at Midsummer, he was generally effervescent in his happiness. "That'll be Severus. Apparently, he cleans when he's depressed, which is something he's never done before. If only he'd stop drinking,
he'd finally be the world's most desirable roommate." With a smile, he slipped past her to the door. "Will you be at the Weasleys?"

"That depends on how long this takes," she said grimly, her eye caught by the polished banister. "Honestly, has he gone mad?"

Regulus shot her a wry look. "Hasn't Lavender?"

With that snappy comment, he exited, leaving Hermione alone in the house. Some of the rage she'd come equipped with had banked inside her, pushed back by pity, leaving her considerably more calm as she reached for the closed door to the living room - the knob of which was dented but shining. She turned it carefully, and let herself in.

This room was not untouched by whatever cleaning tornado had hit the house, either, Hermione could see, and some of the furniture had been replaced, presumably by the Order of Merlin: Second Class settlement he'd received from the Ministry. Five hundred galleons wasn't much by comparison to what Hermione and her friends had received, certainly a drop in the bucket for Sirius, who'd won the same, but Severus had put it to good use here, buying economically wise furniture that remained comfortable. Books from the floor now resided in bookshelves lining the wall, a coffee table of dark wood replaced the stained and sticky one from before. The surfaces were clean and clear, except for candles and some sparse paperwork. The moulding old sofa had been replaced by a plush one of cream, and that was where Severus lay, cradling a glass of Amber liquid as he gazed mournfully into a clean fireplace grate. Honestly, if he'd gone so far as to clean his fireplace, Hermione suspected that he was as bad as Lavender.

Still, anger came back when she looked at him, so obviously self-pitying. She could see this, and in her mind's eye, also see Lavender, curled up in bed for a month. She'd taken the separation hard, much as Hermione had for the weeks after Remus' death in the first timeline. She remembered being unable to move, to speak, not having the energy to enact any of her basic processes for she was too busy dwelling on the ache in her chest. Harry had been her only savior those long days, coming in to speak to her, to reassure her that he was there, that one day she'd feel better. When she'd finally told him what was wrong, he'd only become more supportive, and little by little he'd pulled her from her shell, dressing her, cleaning her, dragging her into the daylight, tempting her with work.

It had been a long process, and eventually she'd somewhat healed, but even now she could remember the unrelenting pain, the loss that blurred her mind until nothing else seemed to matter, nothing got through. She'd spent the time curled around her stomach protectively as if that might help heal her heart from that, his final rejection.

Lavender's wolf had taken his retreat as rejection, and now, as her own mind had so long ago, was punishing Lavender for not being good enough to keep him. But that wasn't Lavender's fault, and she had an endless well of empathy for the girl who had come to be like a little sister to her. Not so, Severus.

"Get up," she snapped, clapping her hands loudly above his head. He groaned and rolled away, but she followed. "Get the fuck up!"

Rolling onto the floor, Severus flipped over to glare at her. "Ah, the dulcet tones of a harpy," he growled, the sarcasm thick, wincing when she clapped again. "What do you want?"

"You to get your head out of your arse," she replied, just as cruelly. "Or, failing that, seeing as it seems firmly lodged up there, for you to apologise."

He pinched the bridge of his nose tiredly, closing his eyes for a moment. Hermione gave a high-
pitched whistle, which he responded to with an aggravated shout. "Is there any need?" he yelled, eyes narrowed angrily in her direction.

"Yes, there's need! Lavender is a heap of misery, thanks to you. She's barely moved from one spot. That last full moon -" she paused when he winced, which only served to ratchet up her anger another notch. "Oh, grow up, you pompous little shit! She's a werewolf - get over it! You're a miserable git, and she doesn't let that stop her, despite how she's literally the sunniest, most happy person I've ever met! At least her condition can be controlled - there doesn't seem to be hope for you."

"Do you have any manners to speak of?" Severus asked, pulling himself from the floor unsteadily. He reached for the glass of fire whiskey and scowled to find it upended on the floor. "You come into my house and insult me, then expect me to do your bidding?"

"For your health, if not mine," she threatened mildly. "You should really shower," she added, taking in the rumpled state of his robes, the hair that reached new levels of greasiness. "I mean, she loves you, but even she won't love you in this condition."

"She?" he asked warily.

"Lavender, of course." Stooping, she picked up the pillow that had fallen with him to replace on the sofa. She froze when she felt the soft satin under her fingers, eyes shooting to Severus, who - blushed?

"You've wasted a trip," he said shortly, refilling his glass from a bottle on the sideboard. This, too, was new and quite pretty, dark wood to match the coffee table, only there were tiny engravings on the corners. She leaned close enough to see that it was some sort of flower, but Severus blocked it with her body. It was enough, anyway, enough to have smug satisfaction curl through her veins. "I don't want to see her and I'm not going to. You can't make me."

"Snape, you sound like a child." She raised her eyebrows.

"I. Don't. Want. Her." He punctuated each word with a smack of his hand on the sideboard, but it didn't make them ring any less false.

"Liar," she accused, shaking the pillow she'd picked up. "Of course you want to be with her," she scoffed, rolling her eyes. "You're nesting, for heaven's sake!"

He froze, holding himself stiff. Acidly, he replied, "I am not nesting. I am cleaning. Reorganising. It has recently been pointed out to me - multiple times - that my house is a dump."

Raising her eyebrows, Hermione pointed about the room. "Clean couches, polished wood and potpourri I could accept. Throw pillows, Severus? Throw pillows?"

Severus sneered impressively, going to snatch the pillow away, but failing. "Perhaps I understand the importance of proper back support."

"This one is purple. With sequins." She turned over the pillow she held and laughed out loud. "For fuck's sake, Severus, it has a puppy on it!"

"Maybe I like dogs!" he shouted.

"You hate dogs, and we both know it. Come on, Severus. Why are you doing this to yourself?"

He succeeded in grabbing the pillow away this time and clutched it to his chest, sneering at her. "I need not answer to you, nosey cow."
"For fuck's sake, Severus - why are you doing this to yourself?"

Why? That was a good question. Severus closed his eyes, hoping to block out the world, but instead seeing her. A mass of blonde hair, lilac eyes, bent double in pain, eyes pleading with him not to leave her. He had left her, though. How could he not?

It had never been Severus' intention to fall in love the first time. Lily had just been there, constantly, and he'd not noticed what had been happening until it was too late. It had taken years to carve her out of his heart, and even then he still felt that numbing, throbbing pain when he saw her. Her scent could still send him weeping, like a child.

Lavender had been unexpected for entirely different reasons. Severus had made a habit out of self-flagellation, using his spurned love for Lily as a shield to protect him from any other. Redheads, brunettes, dark and light, he was never stirred by anyone. Then there was Lavender, which was ridiculous – she was blonde, for heaven's sake, and most of his life he could hardly stand them. Vapid, vacuous little things they were, too concerned with themselves to notice what was going on around them. And she was no different, really, when they first met. Severus should never have let himself fall in love with an idiot.

Except… she wasn't, was she? Yes, she wasn't a clever girl, but she wasn't stupid, either. Plus, she understood him in a way nobody else could – only another damaged, broken child. Severus had grown up the scorn of his father, and Lavender had grown up the bane of her mother. She understood how the unconditional love of one parent does not make up for the hatred of the other, she understood the feeling of being lesser, never meeting their standards for reasons you could not control. For all of her beauty, she got his loneliness, she'd experienced it herself. The outcast girl.

He couldn't deny that it satisfied a petty, vindictive part of him – the only part he'd thought remained, after Lily, before Lavender – to have been the one to break her heart, to reject this nymph of a girl. But the rest of him was empty, yearning for the other part of his soul. He missed her, her unexpected drop-ins, finding her on his fence, waiting to chat about nothing, about anything. She listened to him, heard him. He listened and heard her, too.

"You're a pathetic mess," Hermione was saying now, and Severus rolled his eyes. Did she not think he knew that? Did she think that it was his idea of a reasonable existence, to drown in firewhiskey? "And you're a fucking twat, too. I mean, I always knew that, but at least when you were nearing forty I could admire you for your past actions." She wrinkled her nose as she used her wand to cast a harsh scourify on him, for his sins. Her tirade didn't let up. "But you haven't done those things yet, so I don't feel bad when I tell you to get your head out of your arse."

"Excuse me?" He spluttered, rubbing his arms where her spell seemed to have peeled away the top five layers of his skin.

The devil woman raised an eyebrow. Oh, how Severus despised her. "You heard me. There's no time in war to be a dickhead about love, you know."

"The war is over," he pointed out, and she scoffed.

"Not for you, it seems." She looked pointedly around the room. "Get dressed, we're leaving. You've got a Lavender to fix."

"How does Lupin put up with you?" Severus muttered, rhetorically, though he wouldn't have gotten an answer anyway.
"Besides, it's fate. Spooky, weird werewolf magic, yes, but still Fate. I mean, it's not that I approve – because I don't, just so you know, I think she can do much better – but she loves you. Only the Gods know why, but she does."

"Couldn't they have sent the blonde one? Luna?" Severus said, louder this time. "I like her, she's not an. -" 

"Irritating, interfering little cow?" Hermione grinned beatifically, showing off her slightly crooked canines. Severus was hit with a flashback to the bitemark on Lupin's shoulder with those tell-tale marks, and shuddered in revulsion. "I've heard it all before." She was hard at work sifting through his living room, now, and he wanted to stop her, because it had taken weeks to get it this way, and he was fond of it, but didn't. At least it stopped her from attempting to touch him – for all of her blather, Severus knew enough about Gryffindors to know that he'd be lucky to escape today without a pity-hug.

Shaking her head, she turned back to Severus. "Well?"

"Well what?" He retorted, scowling ferociously.

"Well, are you going to shower and get dressed, or what? Lavender can't wait around for you forever, you know. She already went back in time twenty years once, I doubt she can manage it a second time just because you're being an indecisive little-"

"Yes, yes, whatever," Severus groaned, scrubbing his hands over his face. "Will you please shut your trap?"

"Nope!" She sang chirpily as she dragged him off the floor and through the house toward his bathroom. "I'm to look over you until you agree to see her, at least talk to her. And don't you even think of apparating!" With a grin, she produced his wand in her left hand. He dropped his own from where it was inching towards his pocket and stared, wide eyed.

"Now, see, the older you would know that I'm an accomplished pick pocket," she chastised, eyes dancing with mirth.

"You're a vindictive little harpy, is what you are," Severus grumbled darkly, still eyeing his wand – his own wand! In that witch's hand!

"That too! Hurry up, now, we don't have all day," and then she shoved him into the room and slammed the door behind him.

Lavender felt him, as it seemed she always had, her entire body stiffening. There was a murmuring in the crowd, even little Bill, whom she had been entertaining with a game of Gobstones, leaning around her to see what was going on. Footsteps, muffled on the grass but clear as everyone else had stopped moving, came toward her. She didn't dare look around.

"Lavender?" He's talking to me, he's talking to me! Her wolf went off on one, delighted, spinning. Her own self stayed frozen, fear swamping her. His voice wrapped around her like a blanket, but she shied away, rejection fresh. He sighed, coming around the front of her, so that she could see his shining shoes.

"Excuse me, small Weasley," he said awkwardly, and Bill scrambled up with a grin. Severus took his place.

Lavender drank in his appearance even as she tried not to. Sallow, more so than usual, and so thin
his cheekbones could cut her if she tried, he was still the most welcome sight in the world, still knee-
tremblingly attractive. She wanted to both crawl into his lap and snuggle up to him forever, and rail
at him for leaving her to suffer this whole time.

He grimaced and pulled something from his pocket, hiding it in his hand. "I am going to apologise to
you now," he said, looking at her hands where they fiddled with the stones. "Because I have been a
bastard. That isn't exactly rare, I know that - but I don't often apologise for it."

His eyes flicked up, meeting hers abruptly. She found herself snared by them, reading the emotion
there. Hesitance. Nerves. Fear. Fondness. Attraction. Not love, but something close, something that
might evolve there, and it gave her hope wings. "I'm not very good at this," he grumbled. "Forgive
me if I say something wrong. NO-" That word was a shout, accompanied by a panicked look and
both hands coming up, all in response to her opening her mouth. Well, really. "Don't talk, you'll
distract me."

Rude.

He must have seen that on her face, for he choked out a rusty laugh. "You're beautiful. One of the
most beautiful girls I've ever seen. But, God's, your face makes the most eloquent of expressions.
You're mad at me.

"See, I can do this," he gave a tiny, strained smile, and she answered it, amused. "I ran away because
I hate werewolves and I was scared."

Well, that statement fell like a rock in a pond. Everyone around them stared, and Severus winced. "I
like you, however. I think you're… Lovely. And kind. Too kind for me."

He took a deep breath. "You are annoying and wild and so chatty I often want to gag you, but I am
reserved and snappy and miserable, so we might match. Or, that is what your friends seem to think.
And I would like to agree. I do not deserve your forgiveness, or your time, or you, least of all, but I
hope that you will favour me with it, perhaps tomorrow evening."

Lavender cocked her head. "Are you asking me out?"

"I…" he blinked, then nodded once, uncertainly. "Yes. Oh-!" He pressed something into her hand
and peered at her defiantly through a strand of black hair. "Open that, first."

Lavender stared at the box in her hand for a moment in shock, before coming back to herself and
flipping it open. Later, she'd hear Hermione say that her resulting squeal had roused all of the birds
from nearby trees into the air, but she didn't care. In the box was a lovely, delightfully gaudy
necklace with a dainty silver paw on the end, each cushioned pad studded with dark purple gems.
Without even a thought, she threw herself across the board, scattering game pieces far and wide, and
practically strangled Severus with her limbs.

"This will be why she told me to give you it first, I suppose," Severus remarked dryly, his limbs
closing around hers. She didn't miss the way his hands wandered possessively up her back, though.

"Did you pick it yourself?" she asked, pressing a kiss to his cheek, then, unable to help herself,
continuing up his face.

"Yes," his response was muffled.

"Brilliant." Pulling back, she planted a kiss on his lips, which he showed no compunction in
deepening. It continued for quite some time, actually, with their tongues twining around one another,
his hand cupping her neck, her body flushing with desire. Only a clearing throat separated them, and
even then it took three repetitions before Lavender realised they weren't going away. "Yes to the date," she grinned, breathlessly. "You can take me to a nice restaurant, we'll have drinks and food, I'll wear a short dress, then I'll bring you back to mine and we'll fuck, and I'll mark you, because mark my words, Severus Snape - there is no escaping me now."

He sneered in response, but she could see the delight in his eyes as he leaned in to kiss her. He needed this as much as she did. He hid it well, and everyone had scoffed, but she knew her mate - and she'd told them that he liked her!

My mate, my mate, my mate, her wolf chanted happily, bounding around her head in glee.

"One more thing," Lavender cooed, her eyes warm as Severus pulled back. He narrowed his eyes in a glare but she was unfazed. "If you think I'm moving into that blasted little bonfire of a hole you own, you're wrong, mister."

He raised an eyebrow disdainfully. "Bonfire is hardly the correct way to describe it, Lavender."

"Well, not right now," she allowed. "But it will be, because if you show any intention of forcing me to live in that hovel, in fucking Manchester of all places, I'm going to burn the fucking thing down."

"I cleaned it. Redecorated. For you."

Lavender's entire face lit up, and she hugged him even tighter. "That's so sweet of you! But I'll definitely be checking on that. Just in case."

It was a good omen for the rest of their lives that he didn't bother to argue, simply rolling his eyes and pulling her in for another kiss. She thought she heard Hermione cheering, and Ginny laughing, Luna clapping, and Lily groaning, and smiled into the embrace. They were happy, now. Everyone was happy. Even her.

Not a bad ending, really.

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