The Coven Of Oz

by JessicaX

Summary

What if Glinda did get on Elphaba's broom? This story is a very long answer to a very short question. [Genfic mixed with fluff, Gelphie and more, T+, minor character death, novella]

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Notes

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NOTE: Rated T for Teen. Will contain occasional nigh-NSFW moments, including sensuality and mild gore, but nothing out of place in a PG or PG-13 movie. TRIGGER WARNING: there will be some racism and an attempted sexual assault in later chapters. See below for more notes!
Chapter 1

"Glinda, come with me. Think of what we could do! Together…"

Time dragged to a standstill as poor, bewildered Glinda-née-Galinda Upland stood somewhere she definitely shouldn't be, riddled with indecision. Never had Elphaba Thropp looked at her with such intensity, such desperation in her eyes. No one in all the land of Oz had! Not Fiyero, nor any other classmate, nor Elphaba herself before today. Even during those classes at the university in which she had spoken so passionately about the mistreatment of sentient Animals, she had not seemed so… fervential? Was that a word?

And here she was, hoping to enlist her help in this cause. Was she out of her tiny verdant mind?!

"Elphie, you're trembling."

What a crazy notion! How brazen, how reckless! She couldn't simply uproot and follow on Elphaba's heels. How could she? Her entire life was at Shiz University; her classes, hopes for a brilliant future in sorcery. Following that, a modern, Ozmopolitan life, and the prospect of becoming more than just another tittering debutante, beholden to her family name. Friends, admirers…

Fiyero…

"Elphie, you're trembling." Was she coming? Casting around for some kind of distraction, she found a large black cloak discarded upon the floor. At least it matched her hat. "Here, put this around you…"

As Glinda fastened it around her friend's bony shoulders, heart aching from the prospect of losing one of her dearest companions in such a ridiculous way as this, she decided: no, she could not go with her. Of course, she had great respect for the sentient Animals of Oz — the deposed Dr. Dillamond especially. They were every bit as important as the human persons that she attended Shiz
with. Why shouldn't they be? They could walk, and talk, and exchange ideas the same as anyone else.

At least, they could. A recent shift in tense from present to past. Catching and caging them was a deplorable idea, and she had been equally sickened by that class in which they were forced to look at the Lion in its prison, presented as a spectacle instead of a person. The Wizard and Madame Morrible should be ashamed!

But Elphaba truly was taking things too far. Some things simply defied her understanding. All of this fuss, over sticking a few pairs of wings on a few monkeys?! Her unsociable roommate could be mistaken, after all; perhaps the Wizard had simply flipped to the wrong page in the Grimmerie before handing it to her. It needn't be his fault, not necessarily. Didn't the great leader of their entire Land of Oz get any benefit of a doubt? And what was so awful about monkeys having wings? Wouldn't that only improve their lives? She herself wouldn't mind having a set, being able to soar above the clouds…

"GLINDA!"

Rousing herself from her introspection, she took a step forward. Perhaps she had taken too long to contemplate; they didn't have the luxury of time on their side. In the end, of course, it was mostly the thought of the lean, masculine Fiyero and his easy charm that prompted her to tell Elphaba what she must tell her. But she needn't be harsh about it; she could break the news to her gently, with the warmth of their friendship and a wish for her future. She deserved that much.

"Oh, Elphie…" A hand laid on the one holding the broom, causing Elphaba to blink at her in surprise. "I hope-"

There came more pounding at the door. Elphaba's emerald eyes flicked toward it, then back to her in a wild panic as a gruff voice on the other side barked, "Break it down! For His Ozness!"

Cursing under her breath, the black-clad girl straddled the broom, the Wizard's spellbook still tucked under her arm as she bade her, "Get on! There isn't time — we can discuss this later!"

"Wh-what?! We can't, surely they wouldn't truly-"

Her words were eclipsed by the sound of wood splintering. Apparently, they surely, truly would.

"Galinda, it's do or die! Get on this broom now!"

Do or die. They wouldn't use deadly force… would they?

The attic door suggested otherwise.

Before she knew what was happening, Glinda was on the back of a broom, arms looped around Elphaba's waist. They were already rising into the air before her mind caught up with her body, and she squeaked, "Wait!"

In vain. The guards were nearly within arm's reach of them when Elphaba rose above their heads, cackling madly at the feeling. Glinda was too terrified to share in her joy at the sensation of flight, but in the back of her mind, she knew it was one of the most exhilarating experiences she'd ever had in her lifetime. With an effort of will, they were shooting toward a large stained glass window on the Western wall.

"ELPHIE, LOOK OUT!"
But she needn't have bothered shouting; making things explode was something at which her green-hued classmate had always excelled, even before classes helped her hone the magic within her. Amid a shower of breaking glass, the two exited the Royal Palace.

Soon, the Emerald City was laid out below them, sparkling and majestic. Glinda caught her breath. Every street and every spire reflected the sunlight, dazzling her eyes as they hung in midair. Had any of her fellow Ozians ever seen this? Had they been so lucky?

"I don't know where to go now," Elphaba confessed, frantic voice intruding on Glinda's reverie. "Back to Shiz? Do we… should we get Nessa, or Fiyer."

"NO!" When Elphaba twisted around to look at her, strong, severe features mildly surprised underneath the brim of the large black hat, Glinda shrank back from the stare as she added, "We… don't have the right to drag them into our sensationifical mistake! This is something we've done, we…" Her face went completely ashen. "We're criminals. You are, and I'm your accomplice, and…"

Setting her proud jaw, Elphaba turned back around and gazed down at the ground, at the guards amassing in the streets, though they had no hope of catching the two women suspended at such a height. Eventually, her eyes slid closed in shame. This was a deeper look of pain than she had ever seen in her roommate's forestful features, which looked yet greener due to the twinkling emeralds that lit up the cityscape below. But she did not speak on that matter.

Elphie looks so phosphorescent in the sunlight, she suddenly noticed. Though that thought seemed to come from nowhere.

"We'll go to my home, to my father. They won't think to look there right away, and then…"

"And then?"

"And then… I don't know."

Glinda swallowed hard as she tightened her hold on Elphaba, the vertigo finally catching up to her adrenaline-soaked brain. "Th-then maybe we'll drop in on my family? Or… well, we'll just have to think about that later, I suppose. But yes, let's go see your father, and hope that he doesn't… turn us away."

"I'll head West first," Elphaba said, even as the broom tilted in that direction. "To confuse them, and then North until we're past Shiz, and then back East to Munchkinland. Might save us having any unpleasant surprise visits, at least for a while."

"A better plan than I had, which was 'say you're sorry'. Don't think that would work now."

"Probably not, but… oh, let's just be rid of this place!"

And without another word, Elphaba shot off toward the lowering sun, gliding over the tall skyscrapers, the gorgeous palaces and museums. Ones Glinda was terrified she would never see again.

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The Coven Of Oz

A Canon Divergence in Three Parts
By Jessica X
Only once they had made good their escape and circled the Emerald City and its environs by a wide berth did either of them speak. It was Elphaba, turning in her seat to make herself more easily heard. Her voice was hoarse from the earlier shouting, and perhaps with grief, but Glinda didn't want to assume anything.

"Before we left, you were going to say something."

"What?" Glinda whispered, then cleared her throat and repeated it louder, so as to be heard over the sounds of rushing wind. "What?"

"You… were going to tell me you didn't want to come."

Her heart seized. "Oh. Well… please, Elphaba, try to understand… it's not that I-"

"No, no. You had every right not to… follow me on this dangerous crusade. I'd think you a coward, but not a fool; I'm the fool." Her body became more and more tense, which was impossible for Glinda not to notice due to their close proximity. "The Wizard, Madame Morrible, and the entirety of the Ozian military… they're all intent on the suppression of Animal rights, and here I am, thinking any good and decent citizen of Oz should want to band together to stop it! They should, if they have a damn conscience, but they…"

Some time went by with the wind whipping at their faces before Glinda prompted in a soft voice, "They?"

"They have something to lose. I do not. I'm just a hideous green bean with a weird trick or two up my sleeve — unlike them, who all have family and reputations to protect."

"Hmm… that is true." Wincing at how that had come across, Glinda hastily added, "About them, not you, obviously! Because you do have a family, right? And… and a couple of friends, at least. And you're not hideous, just perhaps… deciduous!"

The hands tightened on the broom as she growled, "Why was I put in this position? All I've ever wanted was to… work with the Wizard, ask him to guide me, and maybe…" Her voice had grown more and more embarrassed, and she finally fell silent again. "Nevermind. I'm just a romantic idiot. And he's just a charlatan. Maybe we really were made for each other from the beginning. A couple of bumble-brains."

In all of those words, Glinda heard something unsaid, as she was so used to searching for when her roommate spoke. An apology. The antisocial thing had been so opposed to interaction in the first place, and only through steady insistence from her — and from Elphie's sister, Nessarose — did she begin to blossom from her tightly-clenched bud. Of course, she still preferred isolation and study, but at least they had begun to get her to attend various social activities, to travel all the way to Emerald City, even if only for one short day. There had to be some room left for understanding her idiosyncrasies.

"Aww, Elphie…" How could she word this? "It isn't that I didn't want to come with you, alright? I admire your stance, your zeal! You've got a moxiness when it comes to Animals, and I think you have a chance to do some real good in this world! Or did have, anyway… I just… your cause is not my cause, you know? So it wasn't about you, it was… a difference in interests! Does that make sense?"

After a moment to mull that over, she more than heard Elphaba sigh. "It does. I'm… you're right,
and I should have waited to listen to you instead of pushing you to join me."

"Too late now," she muttered.

"It is."

"Oh, no, I- that isn't how I meant- I don't blame-"

"You should; you have every right. I let my fury at how the Wizard tricked me make me forget that you were there, and that you were with me. That my actions would reflect badly on you, as well. That was selfish." Another sigh, louder, more stunned. "Wow… I've completely ruined your life."

"What?! Come on, Elphie, don't be so dramatical. Nothing's 'ruined', we just have to… okay, I don't know exactly what we 'have to', but there's a thing we have to do to make this right, and we'll figure out what it is! Together!"

"But you shouldn't…" Shaking her head back and forth, she admitted, "Guess it doesn't matter anymore. Let's just figure out where we're going and what we're doing right now, and the rest of it later."

Nodding, Glinda pressed her face into Elphaba's back. Her warmth was becoming more and more necessary, with the chill wind pulling her own body heat away. That was odd; given how cold and standoffish the woman had been during their year at the university, she would never have guessed she had any heat at all. Like the reptiles she resembled with that green skin and those sharp features. A pleasant surprise, especially in such a time of need.

*And that's how things will be for a while,* she admitted to herself as their speed increased, skimming them over treetops. *Until we get this all straightened out, we're going to need to stick together, whether we like it or not. Just hope we don't end up hating each other before it's all said and done. Not two best friends like us. Wouldn't that be an awfully tragic tragedy?*

*To Be Continued…*
going to start slow, burn slow, and end… somewhere you might not be expecting. Even I didn't expect it! Also, I hope this type of story hasn't been done before, but I'd rather write it than go digging through other fics to double-check, haha.

Also, word of warning: Gelphie isn't the only ship that's going to be represented. It's the focus for most of the first two parts, but there's more going on in this fic than just that. Sorry if you get bored in the non-Gelphie-focused sections!

Though in third person, a very large percentage of the story is from Glinda's limited perspective. However, once or twice it'll jump to someone else out of necessity. I'll try to make it very clear early on in the chapter who's shoulder we're looking over (if it's not Glinda).

Also… it's gonna be LONG. Part 1 is the shortest, but part 2 is a doozy. 3 may lose some people entirely before it hits the grand finale and the resolution of all things; it's a rough read. But I hope most of you will keep loving what's bubbling up in my witch's kettle enough to read onward.

Jessex
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year! Let's get underway! I know these chapters are a bit short, but I'll try to crank out one a week or so. Keep things moving along. Enjoy!

The sun had nearly set by the time they arrived in Nest Hardings, faces red and bones weary. Glinda tried not to make her disappointment obvious; it was such a modest village, smaller than any she had ever visited. But she supposed that was better for their current needs than a large, sprawling city.

"It's not much," Elphaba said as they drifted to the center of the tiny collection of buildings. "But I called it 'home'. As much as I ever wanted to call anywhere 'home', that is."

"It's so... quaint!" she attempted. Hearing Elphie sigh told her that the attempt was not successful.

They landed in the front garden of a medium-sized, yet impressive, home. Out of all the homes in Munchkinland, in the dull and colourless countryside of corn fields, this was likely the finest. Blue paint clung to the eaves, and green and yellow on the shingles. The door was white, with polka-dots of various colours. Her Gillikin sensibilities recoiled, but she attempted to quash them downward. It was only polite, and if she couldn't be a polite Upland, then she was a disgrace to the storied and prestigious name.

"Well, don't just stand there holding down your gorge, Galinda. Let's go in."

Pouting, she fell into step beside her as they paced along the footpath leading to the door, over which hung a brass plate with the words "COLWEN GROUNDS" engraved upon its gleaming surface. "I told you, it's 'Glinda' now."

"You told Fiyero it's 'Glinda' now," she countered with a smirk. "I didn't know if you meant for me to call you that, too. Hard to get used to it, though."

"I mean for everyone to! In memory of-"

"Yes, yes, Dr. Dillamond."

"Don't you believe me? That I really do want to honour his memory?"

"He isn't dead!" When she saw Glinda flinch, she lowered her voice. "Fine. Glinda."

"Thank you. It has a certain... other elegance, don't you think? Like the word 'glide'."

"Or the words 'gloom', 'glob', 'gluttony', and-"

"OOH!" she burst out, fists clenched. "Elphaba, sometimes you are impossible!"

"Sometimes I'm 'glib'?" Against her will, Glinda snorted, and Elphaba favoured her with a rare smile. It vanished as quickly as she reached the front door, hesitating.
"What's the matter?"

Shrugging, she whispered, "I don't know if he'll be happy to see me or not. The trouble we're in… he might run me off, or just berate me for neglecting Nessa."

"He's your father," she urged gently. "You were upset, and by the time they were chasing us down, you didn't have any choice. I'm sure he'll take your side in this once you explain everything. That's what fathers are for!"

"Right." Her tone was disbelieving. Unable to stall any longer, she knocked.

Within a few minutes, the door was thrown open by an aide of some sort, who asked what business they had. After an instant, however, she recognised Elphaba — for how could one not? — and welcomed them inside. Once Elphaba had leaned her conspicuous broom in the corner by the umbrella stand, the woman led them into a small receiving room to wait for the governor himself.

"Is there any special term of address for the governor of Munchkinland? His Munchkinness? Lord High Munchkineer?"

"Stop," Elphaba hissed, though she seemed close to laughter. Glinda frowned, because she had been asking in earnest; she might not think much of the country itself, but she didn't want to offend the prominent government official. Nor her friend.

Presently, the man came in, and Glinda couldn't have been more wrongfooted. Mostly because, as she realised with some small amount of personal embarrassment, she had been expecting the man to be green. Silly as that seemed now, she had to quickly memorise that this tallish man with pale pink skin and thinning dark hair was the one who had raised Elphaba — and on his own, following her mother's death birthing her younger sister.

"Elphaba, what is- oh, oh my. Who might this be?"

Startled from her own depths of worry, Elphaba said, "Right! Sorry, Father. This is Ga- I mean, Glinda Upland."

"Of the Upperuplands," she elaborated with a curtsy and a cherubic smile. She knew that her fair hair, comely figure and obvious breeding was the quickest way to win any man over. Maybe, if she applied these shallow talents, she could help put Mr. Elphaba in a pleasant enough mood that their story would not alarm him. Talking of which… she certainly couldn't call him "Mr. Elphaba" to his face. "And whom do I have the pleasure?"

"Governor Frexspar Thropp," he introduced himself with a stiff bow. "Charmed. Now, what's all this about, Fabala? I should have at least have appreciated some kind of word sent ahead to let us know you would be arriving, especially during the semester."

Glinda turned toward Elphaba with an overjoyed expression. "Fabala?!" This would bear further investigation. Was it a nickname, a middle name?

"Shh!" Elphie hissed, her cheeks flushing to a deeper forest green. Then she turned back to Frexspar with a clearing of her throat. "Father… something has… happened."

"A good something?"

"Not really," Glinda muttered under her breath, though she felt bad for saying so.
By the time the spindly aide had returned with tea for them, the tale had been told. As they went along, he exclaimed at certain junctures and asked a few clarifying questions, but mostly he remained silent as he listened to his daughter recount their journey. Then, at last, they finished up with their setting down in his garden and awaited a response.

"So… you've come all this way just for fear of how the Wizard might retaliate?"

"Yes," Elphaba whispered, ashamed and dejected as she watched the man turn the Wizard's book, the "Grimmerie", over and over in his hands. "Glinda may have been right when she asked me to apologise, but… oh, I couldn't, Father. Not after how he tortured that poor Chistery — all the monkeys! They didn't ask to be wingified!"

"It's true, they sure didn't," Glinda agreed. This was one of the few points on which she could readily lend her opinion, as with many of the others, she had to keep mum so as not to disagree with her friend in front of another party.

"I see. Well of course, I do sympathise with your cause, but shouldn't the Animals speak for themselves? If they can, that is."

"They won't be able to if things continue the way they are!" Elphaba urged, taking easily to the subject matter. Glinda politely looked down into her teacup. "Don't you see? The Wizard and Morrible are dead-set against them being recognised as legitimate citizens! They already have been, and now they want to take those rights away? If the rest of us don't stand up for them, then… there won't be anyone to stand up for any longer! They'll be reduced to animals instead of Animals, and after having been in Dillamond's class, I can honestly say that would be a true shame!"

"It would be," Glinda added again. "I can't pretend to understand this issue entirely, but… well, isn't it only fair to let the Animals talk if they can talk? The whole thing is most confusitating."

"And you agree that the Wizard is corrupt?" he pressed her, eyes narrowing at the petite blonde as he set the book down on the table. She squirmed. "That he tricked my Elphaba into doing a dastardly deed?"

"Indeed, he do— I mean, did. Though… it could have been an accident, a sorcerous snafu, but not such a small one if it turns so many monkeys into monkey-birds!" Shrugging, she attempted a smile. "But still, you can't blame Elphie for being upset, as much as Animals mean to her, now, can you?"

"Oh, I certainly can."

"Yes, of course not. And see, that's the- wait… you said you 'can't', didn't you?"

"No, I said that I can." Arms folding over his chest, he turned toward his daughter again. "How could you have gone off on this fool's errand? You know why you were sent to Shiz in the first place."

Glinda answered for her. "Of course. To learn. Get an education, make her way in the world. Be the best Elphie she can be!" Neither of them answered. When a moment had gone by in silence, she attempted to field her own apparent mistake. "Is… is that wrong? Forgive my misunderstanditude, but what else on Oz would you have sent her to a university for?"

"To care for Nessa," Elphaba breathed softly, eyes pointed down toward the expensive rug.

"Precisely," he said in a cutting tone — and truly, Elphaba looked as if she were being sliced to ribbons by his words. "Of course, it was expected that you would also study while you were there; only natural, it being a school. But you were never to sacrifice Nessarose's needs for your own. How
could you have ignored that when I made it explicitly clear?"

The meek voice with which Elphaba spoke shook Glinda's worldview more than she would care to admit. She'd never heard her talk to anyone in such a nervous, deferential tone — not even the Wizard. "Father, I… that was not my intention! She has Boq now, he dotes on her, and… I was only meant to be away for one short day…"

"No day is any shorter or longer than the other!" Privately, Glinda knew that was a lie, what with Summer and Winter, but she didn't bother to correct the man. "A full day without her sister?! You know she cannot manage on her own, not in her condition!"

"Oh, she does fine on her own, mostly," Glinda tried to reassure him with a small smile that she hoped looked encouraging. "Her arms are getting stronger from using the wheelchair to and from classes, and when…" But his look withered her, and she went back to sipping from her cup.

"I'm sorry," Elphaba told him, though her tone was getting less gentle. Her anger was rising to smother her fear, little by little. "But as I said, she was not alone, and I could not have predicted—"

"You selfishly went for a holiday in the big city, while poor Nessa remained at Shiz without anyone to aid her aside from that boy. What if she had needed a bath? Or help with her clothes? What if she fell and could not get back into her chair?" Wringing his hands, he stood and began to pace. "I should send word to the school, make sure she has not been in an accident of some kind…"

"Father…" Letting out a humourless laugh, she said, "Don't you care that I'm in danger? Can't you… well, intercede somehow? Get them to listen if I apologise on behalf of myself and Glinda? It galls me, thinking about apologising, but I don't want her reputation to be completely ruined by my actions!"

Rounding on her, he glared down with beady eyes, completely disgusted. "You even put this blonde tart's welfare over Nessa's! I might have known not to trust you out of this house!"

"Well!" Glinda couldn't help gasping at the offhand insult.

"I want to do what's right!" Elphaba countered, cheeks the darkest green she had ever seen them. "For Nessa, and Glinda, and the Animals! Why does one have to be more important than the rest?!"

"Because she is your sister! She needs you! Your friends and those creatures will get along just fine without the great Elphaba Thropp to advocate on their behalf!" Wagging a finger at her, he followed up, "This is selfishness and pride! You ought to be ashamed of thinking so highly of yourself!"

Setting her jaw, she pushed to her feet. Her voice was completely stricken, but she was doing a good job of keeping her eyes dry. "Fine! Father, I… I really had thought I could come here for some support, even though we've always been so- but I s-see now that I was mistaken! I'm… I'll just pack some things, and be on my way!"

"Running away now! That's your plan? To flee in the face of your problems? You've already done it to Nessa, why not to your father, as well?!"

"Please," Glinda said gently from her seat, "can't we discuss this like civilised-"

"You have no idea!" Elphaba shouted, and Glinda recoiled. "No idea what it's been like, living with the two of you! The delicate flower and her enabling gardener! Just because my thumbs are already green didn't mean I wanted to obsess over the Rose's welfare like you do! By the lost Princess Ozma, I… I did everything to please you, to protect her, to… my whole life has been about Nessa, and you begrudge me this one day?! You really are the absolute worst parent a green girl could have!"
"She needed the both of us! There isn't any 'want' or 'wish' about it!" Tears were in his eyes, though they did not fall as Elphaba's were by that juncture. "Do you have any idea what will become of her now that you aren't there to support her?! She'll have to come home, to abandon her studies, and all because you-"

"NO!" Breathing deeply, she forced herself to stand stock-still for a few long seconds. Then she said in a hollow voice, "No. She… will be fine. Someone else can look after her, and of course they will. Everyone loves her. I was the mistake, I was the one who you couldn’t…" With a crooked, bleak little grin, she bit out, "At least now, there isn't any chance I'll be around to make another mistake that hurts her directly. Count your blessings. I hope you two are a lot happier now."

As Elphaba strode to the door, Glinda scrambling to pop up and join her and barely remembering to scoop up the Grimmerie along the way, Frexspar snapped, "You walk out of this house right now, in the middle of this conversation, and you will never be welcome here again."

"Very well," she breathed, positively trembling where she stood. "If you say it is so, then it is so… Governor." Then, without another word, she stormed out into the hallway.

"It's been very nice meeting you," Glinda told him with another curtsy as they retreated. "The tea was tea-vine!"

To Be Continued…
Chapter 3

I'm going to try to cut the chapters differently than I originally had them so there are fewer but each one is longer. Some of them ended up really small on accident, and that's pretty unsatisfactory. What's the point in uploading like 5 words?! Anyway, hope you're still enjoying this!

Only once they were in the air again did Elphaba feel truly regretful about storming off. But not for the reason Glinda expected.

"Now I haven't any spare clothes," she growled through her grief, wringing her hands on the broom handle. "Why didn't I go upstairs and pack something? Most of my things are at Shiz, but there was a dress or two left in my wardrobe…"

"If they were anything like the dresses you had at Shiz, I can say with confidence that it's no great loss," Glinda attempted. But she felt Elphaba tense further, so she hugged her a little more, reaching one hand up to clear the tear tracks from her chartreuse cheeks. "Aw, I'm sorry… gosh, I didn't mean to rub salt in the wound. You don't need that from me right now. We'll get you some nice dresses soon — frilly pink ones, with bows and lace."

Glancing over her shoulder at her, she sniffled, "Do I look like pink or bows or lace would do me any favours?"

"Pink goes good with green!" The look was withering, so she finished, "Alright, maybe it doesn't, but… well, how about a deeper red? And there are more fanciful black outfits than the ones you wear we could try! Chin up, chum!"

"You would look at a raincloud and tell it that its silver lining will show up any day now," Elphaba laughed wetly, though she did sound the slightest bit mollified. It was the best Glinda could hope for after she had been dealt such a blow.

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Several hours of flight put them wearily touching down in Upper Applerue, very near the Glikkus region that lay between Munchkin country and Gillikin, where Glinda's family resided. As bone-weary as they were, Glinda had little problem parting with a few coins of her spending money to secure them inexpensive room and board for the evening. Scouting around rather quickly and quietly, they saw not a single soldier on alert; still, Elphaba wore her cloak close around her neck, hoping fewer people would catch sight of her hue.

They spoke little over their meal, but once they had worn their way into second glasses of the weak tavern wine, Glinda decided to at least attempt to coax a little conversation from her friend.

"Things have always been this way," Elphaba sighed, slamming her tankard down in disgust. "It used to not bother me, funnily enough; I thought it was my penance, for… well, what I told you that night."
"That you caused Nessa's condition merely by being green," Glinda scoffed. "Silly little Elphie. A baby can't control her parents' actions. Not even a green one!"

That did threaten to turn the corners of her friend's mouth upwards. "I know. Now that I'm older, I… well, I know it, in my mind. But in my heart, I still worry about it. That Nessa…" She looked down at her fingers on the tabletop, eyes pained. "Silly Elphie, indeed."

"Not 'silly Elphie' now, only 'silly Elphie' then. Now, you're… well, you're a woman who should have been told she was worth as much as her sister at least a few times. Mr. Governor sure did a bad job of that, didn't he?" When Elphaba didn't respond, she reached over and patted her forearm. "Hey. You're not going back there, anyway, so who cares what he thinks?"

Her sigh held the hint of tears, but she didn't respond.

Stuffing themselves into the same bed was an ungainly affair, but they managed it with a spare pillow between them to keep from accidentally elbowing each other. They still kept brushing limbs against unknown bits, anyway, which Glinda knew was a ridiculous thing to bring a flush to her face, but it did regardless. What was this feeling? Why in Oz was she so giddy?

Before she could catch hold of the reason herself, Elphaba hit upon it first when she suddenly admitted, "I… haven't done this before, either."

"H-haven't what, stayed in an inn this drab? I agree. It's… rather rustical. Is this 'camping', are we camping?"

"Slept in the same bed as another person," she grunted in the near-darkness. "Even when I was an infant, I never slept in my parents' bed; always in the bassinette. Something about my baby teeth being too sharp, and me always biting someone. And then Nessa and I had separate rooms. So… other than my mother and father, you're the only person I've ever slept in the same room as, much less…"

"Well, don't worry so much," Glinda whispered as she settled under the covers. Even though she had slept across the room from her solemn classmate for months, she still couldn't help feeling the vaguest bit flustered and vulnerable sharing a bed with her, their bodies only separated by a single pillow. But it wouldn't do for Elphaba to know that; she didn't want to seem childish about the whole affair. "I assure you, sleep works the same way in the same bed as it does in two different ones. Close your eyes, and stop being awake."

"Well, naturally." After a few quiet minutes, she whispered, "Glinda?"

"Yes?"

"Thanks for… standing up for me. And for not… not making a big deal about that ugly scene of mine. Getting emotional. That's another thing I'm not used to doing with someone else around."

Grinning into her pillow, she muttered, "Anytime, Fabala." That earned her a good kick that she didn't even protest about; it was well-deserved.

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Flying all day and all the next night, they managed to reach Gillikin just as the sun was rising. They spoke little, and truth be told, Glinda napped very briefly; she'd never gone all night without her beauty rest, and found the flight most trying. It was a miracle that she never slid from the broom and plummeted to her death.
"It's almost as sophisticated as the Emerald City," Elphaba breathed as they made their approach to the sprawling grounds of the Upland estate. There were more floors and wings to the manor than one might shake a stick at, if one were the type to shake sticks at things. Humdrum as she found the sight herself, Glinda couldn't deny that Elphaba seeing it for the first time would undoubtedly stir such a reaction.

"It is! Well, maybe it isn't so Ozmopolitan, but you can't deny the richness and 'old world' charm is rampant throughout the region," she tittered as they made lazy circles downward, finally plopping onto the grass of the back garden, very near a pond. "And thank you for not splashing us in with the fish! That would have made a fine first impression on my family!"

A gleam of mischief sparked in Elphaba's eyes. "Really? It's not too late for me to throw you in."

But before Glinda could reply, a member of the staff jogged across the grounds to meet them. Already out of breath, the grey-haired woman stuttered, "M-Miss Galinda! Y-you're back from Shiz!"

"Yes, Ama Clutch," she laughed warmly, embracing her like a friend rather than a servant. "Oh, but I've missed you! How have Momsy and Popsicle been these past weeks? I haven't had word from home in a while, you know!"

"Well, they've been well." There was something being held back in her tone, and Elphaba frowned to hear it, but Glinda ignored it soundly. She was too overjoyed. "Come inside, please!"

Very shortly, they were shown into a much richer estate. Elphaba didn't ever seem to much care for pomp and frippery, as Glinda knew, so while she might have taken her time to really drink in the lush surroundings, she didn't make any large gasps or otherwise overreact. That had been taken care of during their descent. However, she did offer a quiet, "Very nice."

"Isn't it?" Glinda conceded as they strode through the sprawling entryway. "We Uplands are, after all, descended from the Arduennas. Would be a real pity if we were and had nothing to show for it!"

"Yes, a pity," Elphaba said in a flat tone. Which Glinda also ignored.

They were finally received on the second floor balcony, where tea had been laid out and a dimple-cheeked woman with a powdered wig sat primly, fanning herself with a fan that looked as if it should be on display in a museum rather than left for everyday use. Other than the elaborate costuming, and a few lines around her eyes and the corners of her slightly-wider mouth, she and her daughter may as well have been sisters.

"Mother dear, this is Elphaba Thropp," Glinda offered, after another curtsy for her own mother. "Of the Colwen Grounds Thropps. Elphie, this is Larena Upland, of the Upperuplands."

"Charmed," said Larena in such a refined voice that the air around her seemed to increase in quality. "I understand you are sharing rooms with my Galinda?"

"Glinda," she corrected her mother under her voice.

"Yes, ma'am," Elphaba answered, trying for a curtsy herself but ending up performing an odd, ungainly bow instead. "For this past year at Shiz, ma'am."

"Of course, at Shiz. And have you… worked out the contentiousity between you?"

She glanced at Glinda, who smiled awkwardly, then back to their host. "Ma'am, I believe our difficulties were merely a symptom of our not having been properly introduced. We're very different
people, you see."

"I do see." Her daughter winced at the baldness of that statement, but if Elphaba found it offensive, she didn't say as much. "Well, any little friend of our Galinda's is welcome to visit along with her."

"Thank you."

"Now, to what do I owe this sudden pleasure, offspring of mine?" she asked in the same refined tone, only a slight upswing in pitch denoting that she was more concerned about the answer to that question than the others. "As far as I am aware, this is not the end of term quite yet. Won't you be missed at Shiz?"

Dipping her head, Elphaba took the initiative, even though Glinda had been opening her mouth to speak. "Ma'am, I'm afraid I've made a terrible mistake."

"Oh?"

That "oh" fetched the entire explanation of the events spilling forth. After having already been required to elaborate for her own father, it seemed Elphaba was getting better at retelling the tale; she paused less times, and summarised certain points better. Her nerves were about at the same heightened level as before, however, but that couldn't be helped. Once she had wrapped up, she sat back with a humble expression and awaited summary judgement.

"I see," Larena mused in a mutter, fanning herself more furiously. "That is… quite worrying. And you now believe you would not be allowed to apologise should you come forward of your own volition?"

"Exactly," she sighed with a sad nod. "And Glinda was only along for the adventure of it all, and… she did care for Dr. Dillamond as much as I, but this wasn't her fight to… well, fight. So if I could apologise for both our actions, and explain, the Wizard might take pity on her! But now… now…"

"Quite, quite. You're concerned that no amount of explanation will be satisfactory. Vexing, indeed." Turning back to Glinda, she said, "And you have nothing to say on the matter?"

Rousing herself, she squeaked, "OH! W-well, I do, and I would! If I should?"

"You should."

"Well…" Reaching over, she grasped Elphaba's hand for solidarity. "She is my good friend, you understand — and I don't blame her for wanting to protect the Animals from whatever's happening, whether it's an accident or an onpurpessident! Maybe… she shouldn't have read the spell, or should have simply put the book down when things went kerflooey. But that's easy to say now, isn't it? In the 'then', she was angry and frightened, and I was also frightened, and we ran."

The woman inclined her head. "That is an easy enough to understand reactionism, my sweet Galinda."

Again, quietly, "Glinda."

"However, I believe the fair and decent thing to do would be to turn Miss Elphaba here over to the authorities."

"What?" Elphaba croaked. "Turn me in?"

"Mother!"
"No, no, it is the wisest course of action," the woman went on, her other hand raising to forestall their outbursts. "Galinda will state that she was not fully aware of the nature of the crime when the two of you fled. Then, upon coming to her senses, you did the fair and decent thing. Elphaba will then throw herself on the mercy of the Ozian courts, and it will be up to them to weigh the truthfulness of her recounting."

Blinking rapidly, Elphaba looked between them. "Oh. I… well, that does sound… I mean, even though I know I did nothing wrong, it's… when you put it that way, the courts are supposed to be unbiased…"

"No!" Glinda burst out, voice more pleading than outraged, but a bit of both. "Mother, what you say sounds reasonable, but what if they don't want to hear her side? I'm… well, I'm a bit worried they won't, and then what? Will she go to prison? Or worse?!"

"My dear, my dear, don't be preposterous! Our Wizard is most fair and would never send her to such an dismal, abysmal fate without good and fair due process. Don't you believe in our civilised society anymore? Or are you a radical now, much like your friend?"

"Does it make me a radical to think everyone ought to be treated with fairness?" Elphaba demanded with firm resolve.

"It does when the establishment does not agree on who 'everyone' is."

"Then I'd rather not be a part of any establishment that would shout down a voice who wants to be heard. I think that's deplorable, don't you?"

Leaning in, the heavily-powdered woman said in a sterner tone, "Not outside of the proper channels we have set up to protect law and order. You cannot combat injustice with further injustice!"

"Please," Glinda interjected, voice meek but still a voice that she was using. "Elphaba feels very strongly about this, and she still wishes to apologise and clear my name, so… so can't you both forget about this nitpickery and let her stay here until she figures out how to do what she wants to do? Anyway, we're both very tired, and… and it would be nice to try this again when we've had a little nap."

Elphaba, taking her cue from Glinda, held her tongue. After a thoughtful moment, during which she continued to squint at the green stranger, Larena sighed and sat back again, fanning her face. "Perhaps you have a fair point. We'll continue this another time. For now, please avail yourselves of the guest quarters."

"Oh, we won't be needing them; Elphie can sleep in my room."

"Most unusual," the woman blustered. "We have a room for each person who resides on this entire region, and you wish to… double-up?!"

"She'll be lonely in one of those big old rooms by herself; she's not used to bedchambers being so voluminous." Elphaba's mouth wrinkled at that comment. "And anyway, my bed is big enough for ten people, so we might as well get some use out of it, right?"

The woman gave a light shrug. "It is highly unheard of, but I suppose it can do no real harm. Very well; give us a peck and you can be off, my sweetling." Glinda stood and leaned in to leave a tiny kiss on her mother's cheek, earning her a pat on her curling golden hair. "Good girl. Rest well."

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"Ohhh, this is much better," Glinda sighed as she flopped down on the fluffy down comforter draped over her bed. "I've missed this! The beds at Shiz are nice enough, and I'm not afraid of 'roughing it' in an inn like last night, but this is home!"

"R-right," Elphaba sighed as she perched on the very corner of the bed. "Roughing it."

"What's the matter with you?" When there was no response, she slung her leg over so that the very tip of her boot bumped Elphaba's thigh. "Hey! What's the matter, you don't like comfort?"

"Not particularly. But… it isn't that." Her eyes swivelled to Glinda for a second and away again. "What if your mother's right? I really did make a mess of things. It wasn't my intention, but now we're hiding out from the Wizard's soldiers, trying to figure out what on Oz to do next. And you, innocent in the first place!"

"You're innocent, too, Elphie," she sighed as she peeled off her boots, each one kicking at the other incessantly until they thumped to the floor. "Just in a… complicated, not-innocent-looking fashion, that's all! But I think we can do something about this, I truly do!"

Rolling her eyes, she fell back beside Glinda, though a little closer to the end of the bed, with her lower legs dangling off. "Maybe I should let them clap me in irons. You can stay here and be safe, and I'll just be… what my father said. Irresponsible and bad."

"He didn't say you're 'bad', Elphie. Just… well, he…" Finally, she grunted, "Okay, he was a meanie-poo."

"So you're meanie-poo's daughter." Against all odds, that made Elphaba laugh harshly. "That's the cutest way you could have insulted my parentage." After a pause to think, she went on, "Okay, okay, so… maybe I shouldn't turn myself in. But what if I penned a letter?"

"A letter? To whom?"

"To the Wizard. I'll write at once — tell him I'm sorry for the disturbance, and that I'll return the Grimmerie and, well, myself… if he promises that you won't be hunted down, as well. That should do it."

Glinda rolled over to face her, eyes wide. "Elphaba… I mean, I find it touching, but you don't have to take the fall for me. I'm an adult as much as you are, and I can handle my own consequences, same as you!"

"But you didn't do anything! So why should you have to handle consequences for… for just existing in the wrong place at the wrong time?!!" Elphaba was breathing hard from sheer frustration. "I'm sorry I asked you to come with me, that I… got caught up in my own aptitude for sorcery, and you being my friend, who also wanted to be a sorcerer, and… and my overprotectiveness of Animals, and I didn't stop to think! It's all my fault, it's all m-"

"Shhh, shhh," Glinda whispered as she embraced her, rubbing a hand up and down her back. "Elphie, you didn't- this isn't something wrong you did, it's just something that happened to us! The Wizard…"

"But Elphaba wasn't moving. Little by little, she began to relax, but she still barely breathed, didn't respond to her friend's words. It was a full two minutes before she raised her arms to embrace her back."

"There… that's better, isn't it?" After they both sighed, she drew back and patted down her tight
black bun of hair, now revealed in the absence of her hat. "Good, good. I'm gladful."

"Thank you. I… well, I'm not used to anyone but Nessa hugging me, so… I'm sorry if I wasn't…"

"If you wasn't what?"

"Wasn't very good at it." Glinda laughed, and she looked away with shame. "Sorry."

"No, no! Just… come on, how can you not be 'good at' a hug? That's a lot of preposterosity!"

Leaning in, she embraced her a second time, and Elphaba froze up. "Okay, don't do that, though. Just relax."

"Told you."

"That isn't what I meant; you being a little stiff doesn't mean you're hugging *me* badly, just that I don't think you're enjoying my hug if you're so busy being afraid of it! Consider this a free lesson on how to hug a friend."

With a put-upon sigh, Elphaba hugged her back more gently, more tenderly. After a moment, they both sighed and relaxed into the sensation. "Oh… alright, that does feel better. You were right, and I apologise."

"Good." The hug had begun to go on a bit overlong when Glinda pulled back and kissed her on either cheek, which earned a blustery sputtering from her friend. Her smile was sweet and encouraging, and Elphaba returned it after a few more seconds, unable to do anything else. "Now, let's catch a nap so we can listen to my mother tell us how life works."

"Alright." But as they crawled up toward the pillows, a good three feet away from each other this time due to the enormous expanse of her expensive bed, she whispered, "You sure do offer to teach me how to be a normal girl often enough. I hate to tell you that you're wasting your time."

"How do you mean?" she sighed as she settled in.

"I'm greener than avarice. 'Normal' isn't in the cards for me, and you can't make it happen with… hug lessons and hair-flips. It isn't that I don't appreciate everything, because… at least you'll still try! Just don't want you getting your hopes up that any of your trying is going to pay off."

"It's my pleasure," she told her earnestly, reaching across for her hand. Elphaba didn't take it at first, but when Glinda just left it there for nearly a full minute, she made a scoffing sound and squeezed it. "There. Now, tomorrow we'll do something about your wardrobe, and have another talk with mother, and maybe even see what varieties of makeup go good with green. I refuse to believe that there isn't at least *one* shade of lipstick for everyone!"

Chuckling quietly, Elphaba muttered, "I think we've found your crusade."

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Alas for both of them, they were woken a few hours later by a pounding at the door.

"Miss Galinda! Miss Galinda, please!"

Rolling out of her bed, Glinda landed on the floor with a sound *thump!* "OW! What's… ow, my nose!"

"Miss Galinda, are you decent?"
"Yes! What's going on?" She had just barely wobbled back to a standing position, noting that Elphaba was still rousing, when she heard a key turning in the lock. A moment later, Ama Clutch was edging in around the door, easing it gently closed behind herself. "Ama? What are you doing?!!"

"Being a help, I hope! Rather than an old busybody!" Glancing back at the door again, she scurried over to their bedside and hissed, "I'm not sure how you want to proceed, exactly!"

"Proceed?" Elphaba put in groggily, most likely hoping to move the conversation along.

"Yes! Only… Miss Larena has sent one of the footmen to fetch the constabulary!"

"WHAT?!!" Glinda burst out. When the other two shushed her, she lowered her own voice to a whisper and repeated, "What?!"

Wringing her hands, the older woman went on, "I'm afraid so! All day, she's been agonising over what to do, jammering on and on about her 'conscience'. She's so convicted her way is the only way that she's gone ahead with her plan for Elphaba to 'turn herself in!'"

"I'm just volunteering for so many things lately," Elphaba grumbled.

"How awful, how terrible, how…" Glinda struggled to come up with another adjective, but in the end she simply shrugged and whispered, "What should we do?"

"You can stay here," Elphaba said as she donned her boots, lacing them up. "This is your home, and I've only been dragging you around until this point. But I think I'll be someplace else when they arrive."

"What? You're… leaving me?"

"Isn't that what I ought to be doing? Not getting my friends any deeper into trouble?" Finally having finished with her boots, she stood, crossing to where she left her cloak, hat, and the borrowed Grimmerie.

"Oh… ohhhhh…" Hemming and hawing on the spot, Glinda began to pace, wringing her hands as badly as her Ama now. "Shoot, this is a catastrophocalypse if ever there was one! Do I go with you and make sure you stay safe, or try to stall them here?"

"You don't even have to stall them," Elphaba sighed while tucking the book under her arm. "Just… tell them I swept you along and you're not to blame for any of this; it would be the truth."

Biting her lip as she watched her reach for her broom, Glinda realised that it was now or never. The "never" most likely being "never see Elphaba again." Even though the two of them weren't as instantly inseparable as she had hoped for her university roomie, it could be intellectually argued that the initial strife made them deeper friends for having overcome it; having to fight their way to a mutual understanding made them appreciate each other more. But did she appreciate her enough to become a fugitive with her? She already had, but until now, there had never been a moment to stop and think about it. Now that they had a moment — barely — she found herself completely torn. This was a choice she could never have predicted being demanded of her, and essentially she had been asked to make it several times in a pair of days!

"If you don't mind," Elphaba was asking her Ama, "how long do you think I might have before they arrive?"

"I shouldn't want to dawdle more than another ten minutes. The boy is a quick little thing, but he had only just left before I rushed up here to warn you." Sighing deeply, she glanced behind her. "You
might have fifteen or more… if he can't find them straightaway…"

"I appreciate that; I don't think I'll roll those dice. Alright, well, Glinda… I suppose this might just be it." Approaching, she grasped her shoulder. "You take care. I hope your life brings you bliss, I really do."

Her heart seized. Before she could stop to overthink the knee-jerk reaction, she was smiling and snapping, "Excuse me? How dare you try to leave me behind! What a mean thing to do, after all we've been through! Makes a girl feel unappreciated!"

"I… what?"

"My only question is, how are we going to bring a trunk full of my clothes along if we're flying on a broom?" she blustered, striding to the far side of the room to drag one of her glittering, ornamental trunks closer to the center of the rug. "We didn't have a chance to pick up anything from your house, and that's a shame — but there has to be a dozen things in this room we can sell off to make a little travelling money!"

Elphaba was now standing near the window, completely dumbfounded. After a moment, Ama Clutch did grind back to life, but her movements were still jerky and uncertain like a Tik-Tok toy that had long been in disuse as she helped Glinda toss several of the simpler dresses from her wardrobe in. They were followed by a jewellery box, a candelabra, and several items from her vanity. It did leave the room looking a bit bare, but at that point, she was too focused on having the task finished.

"How can you want…" Clearing her throat, she seemed to change her question. "How in Oz are you going to get that thing on the broom? It doesn't seem to be stopping you from packing it to the brim."

"To the brim for the broom!" Glinda laughed. When neither Ama or Elphaba seemed to find her comment amusing, she shrugged. "Isn't there something in that magic book of yours that'll help us?"

Rolling her eyes toward the frilly canopy above Glinda's bed, she laid the book down upon the spread and rifled through the pages for the same spell she had used on the broom. Eventually, she did find it, and began to chant in an even more confident tone than she had used in the Wizard's attic. There didn't seem to be as much of a change… at first. Then, it began to lift very slightly off the ground. Only an inch or two, but more than either of them had expected. Glinda clapped her hands excitedly, and Ama clutched her heart in shock, never having seen such sorcery in person.

"You did it, Elphie! Oh, Madame Morrible knew what she was doing, taking you into her private sessions!"

Elphaba's wonderment at her own success evaporated in a cloud of sudden anger. "Don't you remind me! How dare she take my talents and… and use them on those monkeys like that! How ugly, how duplicitious!" Shaking her head, she snapped the book closed and paced over to slide it into the trunk, both she and Glinda latching it closed. "Well, I guess that's everything, but… this is your last chance."

"For what?" Glinda asked, the picture of innocence.

"For freedom instead of fugitivity."

Waving an elegant hand, she scoffed, "Who needs freedom when you have friends?" Still smiling, she crossed to the bed and tugged on an ornamental rope, tassels and all, until it came free of the canopy over her bed and fell to the floor. "Help me with this?"
Shortly, they had the chest fastened to the end of the broom. It would perhaps be ungainly in the air, but there were worse arrangements — such as having nothing to their names whatsoever. Elphaba shook Ama Clutch's hand, and Glinda embraced her tightly.

"Write if you can, when you can," the old woman bade her sincerely, kissing her on the cheek. "And do try and clear your names, if you can, when you can."

"That's the idea," she whispered, eyes wet. "I'll be back someday, I promise. Take care of yourself!"

A heavy sound came from downstairs, just as Ama was going to reply. Glinda and Elphaba exchanged glances before the latter hissed, "Up and on, let's go!"

"Right! Goodbye, Ama, I'll see you again!" Dashing back over, she helped Elphaba throw wide the windows before they both mounted the broom, in the same fashion as before: Elphaba steering in the front and Glinda nestled behind her. Rising into the air, they gently edged out into the open air and off into the sky, the trunk only thumping against the bottom of the windowsill once before it was also clear.

And the swarming guards in the streets below told them they had escaped in the nick of time. News was spreading. They wouldn't be free to roam wherever they pleased for much longer; the Wizard was on their heels.

To Be Continued…
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Told you I was going to keep this moving! We should also have another fic going soon on this account again - though I'm going to try to hold off on beginning that one until more of Coven is complete (so I don't wind up in the situation I had with Bind Us/Precious Little Knives lol). Enjoy!

A brief discussion followed as they retreated from the Upperuplands, winging their way further East to Pumperdink. Glinda had requested that be their next stop, and Elphaba was too worried about keeping her eyes peeled for the local law enforcement to worry overly about why. At least it was unlikely that the formerly royal armies could have swept that far north, if indeed they were still being pursued.

"Of course we are," she told Glinda impatiently as they drifted over the tops of the trees of the Great Gillikin Forest. "Didn't you hear the way those guards were shouting at us? And I have his Grimmerie!"

Redoubling her grip around Elphaba's waist, she said reasonably, "But it was such a little mistake, wasn't it? Taking the book. Why, the library at Shiz doesn't call out the army for an overdue fine!"

"You've seen what this book can do. Flying brooms and trunks and monkeys, and that's from a single spell! What do you think we can accomplish when we start learning about the others?"

"The others? You mean… you mean you intend to continue sorcerism?! Oh, that seems- I mean, with Morrible and the Wizard, and now we're- do we really want to dig ourselves any deeper? The teensy bit we've learned so far is already turning us into wanted criminals!"

"You have a better plan?" No answer. "I thought not."

"Fine, I don't, but that doesn't mean we should be stealing any more spellwork from His Wizlyness! If we give the book back now, with only the one spell used… maybe he won't mind at all! What's one flying broom between friends, right?"

Elphaba sighed as they wove between two taller treetops. "I doubt it will be that easy. But… perhaps we should ask for word at our next stop. See what the situation is in the Emerald City, if the search has reached this far North. Or if he's called it off; we could get lucky."

"Agreed. And I'll handle that job, since you… well, you're…"

"An artichoke."

"More noticeable," Glinda finished lamely. It earned her a rueful chuckle.

"Where is this we're heading, anyway?"

"My granny's house. She's not as rules-oriented as my parents, and might have some idea where we can go if the Wizard can't be reasoned with. Which I still think he can, once everything's a little calmer!"
Her response was scarcely a whisper. "Let's hope you're right — on all counts."

Granny Upland lived in a small domicile on the outskirts of the nicer side of Pumperdink — which is to say, it was still grander than Elphaba's childhood home in the governor's estate in Nest Hardings. Such a disparity between Gillikin and Munchkinland was well-known, but only hearing Glinda's descriptions of "quaint little bungalow" and "cozy Pumperdink" really drove it home. The hour was quite late, so they felt guilty ringing the bell to fetch anyone, but it was either that or sleep on her doorstep.

"Yes?" asked the Quadling servant whose round face was sandwiched by the door and its frame. Elphaba blinked and drew back in surprise, having at least expected a Gillikinese person to answer.

"Pardon the late hour and our intrusionary ringing," Glinda said with a curtsy. "But is the mistress of the house still up to receiving guests? I'm her granddaughter, Glinda — or Galinda, as she might remember me."

Elphaba's face fell into her palm.

"She is, but only just. One moment, please." The door closed, leaving them on the stoop as the sounds of footsteps receded. Within another five minutes, the servant returned and showed them in.

"Galinda, my dear, precious child!" the wizened old woman cried as she hobbled in on a cane, reaching out with the free hand to first grasp her forearm, and then draw her in for three-quarters of a hug. "Ohhh, I did wonder if I'd get to see you before your second year at that infernal university began! You're looking well, quite well!"

"Good eve, Granny! It has been ever so long, hasn't it? Oh, and this is my travelling companion, Elphaba!"

"Saint Aelphaba?" the woman gasped, obviously teasing. "Why, as I live and breathe; we've been blessed with a visit of a divinitous nature!"

Laughing, she turned to pull Elphaba closer, the latter hitching a pained, polite smile into place. Glinda already knew by now that she found being compared to the holy figure from Oz's history books beyond grating; anyone would, especially given the legend of Aelphaba disappearing nude into a waterfall. She could hardly blame her for wanting to distance herself from any kind of story that would encourage boys to ask her to shuck her clothing anytime it's raining. Not that it had stopped Glinda herself from making a remark or two when they were newly acquainted; she felt a little guilty about that now, but youth and idiocy often went hand in hand.

"Silly Granny. No, no, she's the daughter of the Eminent Thropp, the Munchkinland governor! Isn't that nifty?"

"Indeed, indeed. By the look of her, I'd have guessed she's from the Emerald City!" Chuckling at her own joke, Glinda merely grimacing and Elphaba too used to such remarks to react, she motioned for them to join her on the sofa. "Come, sit, sit. Have some Quox nuts - roasted just to the right darkness, very good for you."

"I'm allergic, Granny," Glinda told her patiently. "You knew that."

"Stuff and nonsense! Try a few, these are really quite good!" Glinda mimed reaching toward the bowl as the old woman turned toward Elphaba, pulling back her hand with no nuts in it once the attention was no longer on herself. "And you, Miss Aelphaba — how did you come to
companionably travel with my little apple-cheeked granddaughter? And why are you wearing her hat?"

"Her hat?!"

The conversation meandered around from there, and they never did broach the subject of the Wizard and stolen spellbooks. This wasn't helped along by the fact that Granny was getting a little hard of hearing in her old age, and occasionally had to ask for clarification on several points. The effort of explaining fleeing the Wizard's palace in fear of their lives would be made that much harder.

At last, they retired for the evening. Nestled in one of the guest rooms that had two beds, they weren't awake for much longer. Already, Glinda felt odd with Elphie so far away; it had only been a couple of nights bunking together, but she had found it comforting to have her friend so close by, within reach of her hand should she suffer a nightmare. She hadn't enjoyed that type of reassurance since she was a little girl.

"Can't believe you pawned off your dear, sweet grandmother's hat on me just because you didn't like it."

"Shhh, Elphie! I did like it, but didn't think it suited me. But seeing it on you, I genuinely think it works quite well." At least that last part was the full truth; she might feel guilty about deceiving Elphaba before, but the end result was that she now had a hat that looked as if it had been fashioned specifically for her head. All's well that ends well, as they said. Whoever 'they' were.

"Fine, fine. But don't think I'm…" A yawn interrupted the rest of her words. Smiling to herself, Glinda decided to interrupt that train of thought.

"Don't worry about it. Let's get some rest. Then tomorrow…"

"Tomorrow, we'll figure out our lives," Elphaba promised her. "Whether I should go on alone, and you stay here, or… something else."

Glinda smiled across at the other bed's occupant. "A girl could start to think she's not wanted with talk like that." But before Elphaba could reply, she yawned and snuggled into the pillow. "Goodnight, Elphie."

Harrumphing, she returned, "Goodnight, Glindie."

"Watch it, Fabala."

~ 0 ~

A week passed with little change. Though Granny played a wonderful host, she was useless at actually focusing on any deeper, darker subjects. Any time Glinda began to ask for help, or Elphaba attempted to confess her sins for a third time, she would change the subject. Whether this was by design or by chance was unclear.

Glinda did steal into the main square of town the fourth day, asking around the local watering hole. With a scarf on her head, she looked like any other Northerner, and gave her name as Gayelette — earning her some titters at the odd-sounding moniker. No one had heard any juicy gossip from Emerald City in a good, long while. She caught snippets of older bits and commented on them as if they were news to her, but otherwise came up dry. That was a positive thing, after all; the longer it took for news of their exploits to spread, the less frantically they would have to relocate.

Between chats, she also managed to pick up another dress or two that would fit Elphaba's taller
frame. This involved a lot of over-describing to the clothiers, but in the end, she got the job done. She was tempted to pick up more travelling supplies, and did get herself a lovely pink cloak for those breezy flights high in the sky, but otherwise abstained. They should discuss what they might need together before she burned through their meager coin and had to pawn more valuables.

"Listen to this," Elphaba said from her perch on the bed, fingertips holding the pages of the Grimmerie open. "My Ancient Lurlinic is as rusty as can be, the characters are so hard to read… but I think it says, 'To turn a frog into cheese.' What possible use could this be?!"

"Don't look at me, Elphie; you know I can't read that gobbledygook."

Sighing, she nodded as she flipped through more pages. "I could probably teach you if I wasn't awful at it myself. Still… maybe if I spend enough time with this thing, I'll sharpen my skills. Learn to read Lurline's old scribbly mess as easily as Standardised Gillikinese."

"Maybe so — except I thought we would be returning that when we could," she reminded her pointedly.

"Right. Right, yes, we are." Nodding resolutely, she shut the book and set it aside. "It's just all so fascinating; not so much that I want to learn the spells, just that I want to know what spells there are to be learned. Does that make any sense at all?"

"It does; you have a thirst for knowledge. Always did at Shiz, too! I think that's commendable and worthy of respectfulness."

"Why do you always make up words that sound like other words, but longer?"

Blinking, Glinda looked down at the hole in Elphaba's cloak she had been patching and tried not to let herself blush. "W-well, I… it's fashionable. Don't they sound nicer when they're longer like that?"

"No, they sound longer." When Glinda only pouted a little more, she stood and brushed her knees off, then strode across to the window. "But what do I know?"

"You know Lurlinic, for one." Her patchwork could wait; there was no hurry. Crossing the little room, she stood by Elphaba. "Have… you thought about what you're going to write to the Wizard?"

"I have."

"And?"

Her fingernails dug at a small knothole on the windowsill. "And I still have no idea. Well, that isn't accurate; I have many ideas. All bad."

"Aww… here, why don't we get started? There's a stack of papers on the writing desk, and I'm sure it won't take us more than a few tries digging in before we strike emerald." Before Elphaba could protest, she took her by the elbow and turned her so that they were facing each other. "I'll take dictation; I may only know one language, but my penmanship is exquisite."

That time, Elphaba only smirked at her odd little phrasing. "Alright, then. Suppose we might as well give it the old Shiz try." Once Glinda was seated at the writing desk and had unstoppered the inkwell, she asked, "Ready?"

"Hold on, let me test the nib." She scratched out a couple of words on a spare scrap of paper that had likely been torn in half to dash off a quick note. Satisfied, she redipped her quill. "Okay, let's have it!"
"Okay. Hmm… here. 'Dearest Wizard'- no, wait, forget that. He's not dear to me, he scarcely knows who I am!"

Glinda frowned up at her. "You're so nervous and I haven't even written anything!"

"You know how much I used to respect him! Even if… well, everything's gone wrong by now. But that's- okay, focus. I need to focus." She began to pace as she thought, and then suddenly began, "'Dear Wizard. I am deeply regretful that I… absconded with your Grimmerie.' Does 'absconded' sound okay?"

"Divine, Elphie. Keep going, this is all fine so far."

"Good. 'With your Grimmerie. It was never my intention to do so, especially because I did not know it existed before that day. However, the consequences of the spell you bade me read were not… were not…' Um… I didn't know what it was going to do…"

"Readily apparent?"

"Readily apparent to me until they had already been read. Seeing the monkeys in such pain from the spell I read for you frightened me, and I panicked. I hope you can understand how I reacted. Therefore… it is with great regret that I apologise, and offer to return your Grimmerie to you, intact.' How is that?"

Glinda read it back to her, and Elphaba nodded along, still pacing. Then she asked, "Were you going to mention him letting us go?"

"Right, yes — that's what's next! Okay. '...to you, intact. In exchange for this, I wish you to grant Glinda Upland a full pardon, for she was an innocent bystander in all of this. As for myself, I will accept whatever punishment you deem appropriate.'"

"Wait, Elphie," Glinda said, just having finished writing down the last word. "What do you mean? Couldn't you ask for a pardon for yourself, too?"

Sighing, she turned weary eyes toward her friend. "It's asking too much. Look how far we ran off with the book! You really think he's going to just shrug and say 'oh well', especially now that we know how powerful it is?"

"Well… no, but it doesn't hurt to ask!" Dipping the quill again, she added on her own, '"But I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive and forget.' There, that way you're only asking, and not making it a condition of the Grimmerie's surrender."

"That's good, that's good," Elphaba confirmed as she hunched over the back of the chair, gazing down at the sheet. "And it looks clean and neat so far. Well done."

"Thank you," she whispered with a tiny smile. "Might not have many talents to my name, but penmanship is one of them. Okay, what else?"

"That's it. I don't want to beleaguer the point and take up too much of his time. Sign it 'Sincerely and ashamedly,' and my name."

"You sign your name," she asked once she had put down the rest, holding out the quill. After a brief moment of indecision, she did, with a flourish and some slight blotting that made the final letters look a bit spidery. Then she handed back the quill and reached to pick up the page. "W-wait, don't you want to use pounce first, so it doesn't smudge?!"
"O-oh, I… you're right, how stupid of me. What is wrong with my brain today?"

Smiling up at her as she reached for the pounce pot, she whispered, "You're fine. Just… nervous. I understand." She sprinkled the fine powder on the page, soaking up the extra ink. Then she turned toward the window, picking it up by the edges. "Can you…?"

"Yes, of course." Elphaba gently eased the window open, and Glinda blew the dust out into the late evening. Once the window was shut and they were back by the desk, Elphaba read over their work. "I hate it. However, I honestly don't think I could make a better job of it if I tried again, so we might as well leave it this way."

"Fine by me. Just hope it does the job that it should do."

Then they sealed it inside an envelope, took a deep breath, and turned in for the evening.

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Another day passed much the same. Still they got nowhere with Granny conversationally, and still they had no clear idea of where to go, what to do. Elphaba wasted great gobs of time leafing through the Grimmerie, but it was more to keep from pacing or talking to herself than out of a desire to plumb the depths of its material. Glinda tried to take up most of her time mending clothes or chattering, which she could tell was beginning to get on her companion's nerves, but she had no better notion of what to do with herself. All her life, people had been shunting her in one direction or another; the few independent thoughts she had summoned were all very closely related to ones others had stated at one point or another. Life with Elphaba was highly challenging in ways she never could have predicted.

The next afternoon, Glinda was on her way back from the market with a few minor odds and ends when she stopped in at the Bittuvalai Inn again. She asked the same old questions, expecting nothing more than the same old answers.

She was sorely mistaken.

"You aren't a 'Gayelette' at all!" one of the men accused once he'd clapped eyes on her. "You're a Galinda!"

"That's Glinda, please!" she snapped — before she could stop herself. Covering her mouth with her hand, she hurriedly added, "And I don't know what you mean!"

"Knew it!" he said, nodding over his shoulders. "Ain't any girls 'round this pathetic town as lovely as her, she had to be from somewhere's else!"

Smiling in spite of herself, Glinda tittered, "Oh, you do go on, sir!" Then she noticed the patrons were closing her off from the door, attempting to corral her into the corner. "W-wait, you don't go on… I m-mean, you should let me go, please!"

A squat, middle-aged woman demanded, "Or what? You'll curse us?"

"Curse you? Please, how would I even know how to do such a thing?! I am but a poor student from Shiz University; I barely know how to put one wand in front of the other!"

"WITCH!" a mousy-looking man somehow managed to shout at the top of his lungs, bringing around the few other patrons who had been ignorant of the scene.

"Who, where?!" she squeaked innocently.
"You won't get away from here so easily, witch!" the woman went on as the dozens of pairs of eyes fixated on her, seeming to drill right through her body. An urge to poke them welled up within herself. "We'll turn you in, we will, and our names will be praised by His Wizliness!"

"Perhaps there'll be a reward!"

The moment the first man said that, there were many murmurs of assent. That did not tip things in her favour at all. Glinda's blue eyes swept up and down the scrubby wooden tables and chairs, to the well-polished bartop and the bartender crouched behind it. She could only hope he wasn't going for some sort of weapon he kept just in case of similar disturbances. Ordinarily, she would have been glad of the protection… but not when she wasn't the one being protected.

"Please, look at yourselves!" she urged as she pressed back against the wall, palms finding its surface as her cloth sack swung from her elbow. "I h-haven't cursed you for threatening me already, so how could I be a witch? Y-you're being silly, all of you!"

"Silly and rich, soon enough!" said the mousy man.

There was nothing else to be done; she had to think of some way to trick them out of attacking. Glinda reached into her bag and pulled out a beetroot. "Do you see this?!" she screeched, causing them all to hesitate. "One false move, and I'm warning you… I'll do to you what I did to him!"

A collective gasp went up. That was enough; she had thrown the shadow of doubt across their zealouousness. Tossing the beet into the air, she dashed for the door, only barely glimpsing that several of them dove to catch what they presumed was a transmogrified person. One man had to be elbowed out of the way, but he was surprised enough that she could manage it and make good her escape.

How much longer will they stare at it, waiting to see if it speaks? she couldn't help thinking to herself as she dashed up the lane toward her Granny's house. The situation didn't merit such japes, but she felt she had to take the amusement where she could find it.

Once bursting through the door, she saw Granny perched on the sofa with a cup of tea in her hand, and Elphaba poring over the book. They both started, a few drops of tea falling to the rug from the cup.

"They're coming!"

Immediately, Elphaba shot to standing. "How many?"

"From the look of it, the entire village!" Glinda panted as she leaned against the door. "Oh… oh, we have to fly! I don't want us to still be here when they catch up, and ruin my Granny's lovely Quadling rugs trying to catch us!"

"What's all this about?" Granny asked in mild confusion, squinting as they began to head for the staircase. "Who's coming?!"

There wasn't time to explain to the poor old thing. The minute they reached the bedroom, they began to cram everything into the trunk as quickly as was possible; Grimmerie, new purchases, even one of the pillows from the bed wound up padding the inside. Of course, the flying spell was still in action upon the trunk, as a spell cannot be undone once it's been said, so they tied it to the back of the broom as efficiently as they could without muddling the process and prepared to leave.

"Really, this is a most unceremonial exit you're making!" Granny pouted as they began to approach the front door.
"I am sorry, Gran!" Glinda bade her, wringing the old woman's hands. "I've been trying to find a way to explain, but I... oh, it's really just so horribliffic, I don't want you to think any less of me! Of us!"

"We can't endanger your safety because of my mistake," Elphaba cut off further protests. "We'll just... well, I don't know where we'll go now that we've run out of relatives. But we'll figure something out."

Granny tutted her disapproval, but still patted Glinda's elbow. "You do as you must, dearie. Just take a few Quox nuts for the road!"

"Gran, you know I'm allerg-"

"We have to go now!" Elphaba hissed, gesturing to the windows. Indeed, there were mobs already gathering outside, stirred up by the ones from the tavern. They weren't knocking on the front door quite yet, but it wouldn't be long.

"Why does it feel like we're always rushing off somewhere?" Glinda sighed, embracing her grandmother. "We'll be back, though, you'll see!"

"Very well! Safe trip, don't do anything I wouldn't do!"

As they stepped outside, they did notice a few eyes turn in their direction, but they were already mounting the broom and readying to take off, not wasting a moment. By the time anyone had roused themselves enough to dash in their direction, it was too late; they were airborne.

However, the moment they were skimming past the upper-story windows of the homes, they began to feel sharp pains inflicted upon their legs and hips. Glinda glanced down and let out an exasperated squeak.

"What is it?" Elphaba asked through clenched teeth. "I'm concentrating on flying!"

"They're throwing rocks! Oh, of all the uncouthful, ridiculous- how can they be so rude?!" As they passed a particularly thick knot of Gillikin citizenry, she shouted down, "WHAT CHILDREN!"

"WITCH!" was all she heard in return, and had to flinch back to avoid a sound clouting of her nose with what seemed to be half a brick.

"Forget them," Elphaba snapped over her shoulder as they began to rise high enough that it would no longer be a problem. "They've made up their minds."

One last sound of a rock smacking against their trunk reached them before Pumperdink was behind them, the shouts fading in their wake. Alas, Elphaba was right about one thing: they were out of family members to beg for sanctuary. Where in Oz would they go now?

To Be Continued...
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

This is the end of the first "part", which is the shortest of the three parts. Just worked out that way! Don't worry, the second part will start with chapter six – you don't need to look out for some separate fanfic. Stay tuned for the story to really pick up!

Unfortunately for the two wayward students of Shiz, escaping the Gillikin town was not the end of their problems. Munchkinland and Gillikin were both dangerous now; their families were from there, which was sure to be widely known in a short amount of time. The Glikkus was too close to both regions to make for a wise choice. Anywhere close to the Emerald City was just asking for trouble. Since the East and North were completely out, this left the Vinkus to the West, and Quadling Country to the South. Both areas were considered a bit "primitive" by Gillikinese standards, which didn't thrill Glinda to consider, but she agreed that desperation made it unwise to stay somewhere more comfortable out of distaste.

Thus they came to find themselves wandering through Quadling Country, searching for a likely destination to put down roots. Even temporary ones. They flew when there was nothing around for miles, and walked when worried about the locals figuring out Elphaba was a budding sorceress. Weeks passed, and all they found were barren wastelands interrupted by small cities — none of which seemed to have space for two strange foreigners. Though a lot of the Quadlings didn't speak Gillikinese very fluently, only their native Qua'ati and a few stray sentences of the Northern tongue, every city or village seemed to have a handful of those who did, as little as it mattered if they had no good news.

So on they marched, through marshlands and forests. Glinda was forced to occasionally pawn some small bit of jewellery in order to finance their expedition. At first, she laughed about it, but the longer things went on, the sadder she felt to be parting with such heirlooms. Most of them had no real sentimental attachment, but a few had been more painful to relinquish. Elphaba would lament the necessity of it, and Glinda would reassure her that a few baubles were nowhere near as important as food. Either way, they weren't burning through them very quickly; it would be some time before they had to worry about money.

At great length, they came to a smallish village past Utensia, close to where the Kells mountain range separated Quadling Country from the Vinkus. Elphaba was able to find out in the marketplace that there was an odd little house up in a tree that had recently been abandoned by an eccentric old man who decided he was off to find the Truth Pond. As he hadn't particularly "sold" it to anyone, there was no need to worry much about the formalities of property; essentially, they were squatters. If the man came back, they would probably be expected to generously return the small home in the condition in which they had found it.

Which, as it turned out, was not spectacular.

"Oh, what a sty!" Glinda breathed as they both attempted to sweep out the rustic confines. "But I suppose we could be sleeping under a bridge... again..."

"We'll have to replace that bed," Elphaba sighed, opening the door for Glinda to flush the debris out and into the branches below. "It's lumpy and smells of things I'd rather not specify."
"Just the mattress, Elphie; the frame seems sturdy." Clearing her throat, she leaned against the broom. "And… I did mean to ask you."

When Glinda didn't elaborate, she prompted, "Ask me what?"

"Well… this is certainly my first time as a fugitive, I hope you know. So forgive me if it seems like an, erm… selfish question. But should we consider getting a second bed?"

"What? Oh… well, yes, I suppose we should." Elphaba put a hand to her chin. "The extra expense isn't welcome, but it's not quite as large as the beds your family are used to, is it?"

Shrugging, Glinda took up the broom yet again and went back to her sweeping. "No hurry. Maybe we'll get the new mattress, and consider how uncomfortable we are or aren't with two bodies in it, and decisionify again afterward. When we better know what our money situation's going to be."

"Right. So… so that's settled."

"Yes, I suppose it is."

"Do you mind?"

"No! Of course not, it's a smart way to handle our money. And even if we don't get a second bed, you're a lovely person to sleep with!" Looking around, she saw Elphaba blinking at her, and she smiled sweetly. "As a friend, of course! Sorry, that did sound… well, it sounded like something else, and I apologise."

Nodding, Elphaba let the door swing shut and went back to the cluttered kitchen to see what she might do there. "No apology necessary. Do you think we'll ever get this kitchen in working order again?"

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Even the new mattress was underwhelming by the pampered girl's standards; lumpy and dingy-looking. If they had only picked one up in Utensia, it probably would have been a lot nicer, but that would have necessitated dragging it an unknown distance. Not practical at all.

They were both in agreement that Quadling Country, which the rest of the Ozians considered to be a rather "backward" region, was the very last place they would expect the "fugitive witches" to turn up. No soldiers from the Emerald city had been spotted thus far, and they seldom heard any gossip from further north. Going into Utensia or Quox would have to be a thing done sparingly; the less they showed their faces in larger cities, the safer they would be all around.

A month crawled by as they attempted to set up a comfortable living space. Glinda again appointed herself their "public liaison", and began to grow comfortable speaking with the Quadlings. They were a simpler people, but charming in their own way; she thought it a great shame the Ozians further north thought nothing more of them than potential servants and savages. Meanwhile, Elphaba continued to pore over the Grimmerie whenever her attentions were not required on household upkeep, and Glinda would even occasionally glance at it, though she felt a great deal more guilty about doing so.

They also mailed off the letter to the Wizard — from the post office in Utensia, not their actual home address of One Quoxwood Branch — and decided to give it a good fortnight before checking in to see if they had a response.

Little by little, Elphaba's reticence to actually try out the spells she was studying began to weaken.
Soon, their tiny home in the boughs was filled with small objects that floated back and forth, did cartwheels and hops, or would attempt to speak only for the sounds to be incomprehensible. Glinda began to swat them away as frequently as she did the biting flies of the nearby marshes.

Other than that, things went along fairly swimmingly between them. They had arguments — a great many, on a daily basis — but there was always a resolution before the pair turned in for the night. Either the problem would sort itself out, or Glinda would beg to work through it so that they wouldn't go to bed angry. At first, Elphaba had been resistant to this policy of hers, but after the first few weeks of their spending their time exclusively in each other's company, she seemed to accept it. After all, it did make for a less hostile living environment.

When word did come from the Emerald City at the end of that first month, it was not good.

"'His Wizliness wishes to command the two wicked witches, Elphaba the Evil and Glinda the Ghastly, to submit themselves before the mercy of his throne and accept their fates. Should they resist, they will be ferreted out most expeditiously. Signed, Madame Morrible, Press Secretary.' Can you believe that?!

Sighing, Elphaba stirred the pot on the stove as Glinda shook her head at the newspaper. "Sadly, I can. That's more or less the response I expected from him, after everything."

"I meant that she got the job of Press Secretary! What are her credentials, I ask you?" When Elphaba only snorted, she went on, "He had the gall to name me 'Ghastly'! Oh, the impudentness! I'm so-look at me! Have I ever come close to being ghastly in all my life?!

"Not very," she had to admit with a chuckle. "You're about as ghastly as a sugarsnap."

For whatever reason that she couldn't quite specify, Glinda felt pleased at this comparison. With a small titter, she said, "Aww, I think you just called me 'sweet'."

"Oh, I did not," Elphaba blustered, turning back to the stove. She was just in time to catch the pot before it boiled over. "Look at this, your ridiculousness almost cost us our dinner!"

"Yes, all by myself, I ruined your stew. Come on, Elphie, don't be like that."

Pursing her lips, the green-skinned woman considered for a moment before she merely stirred the pot and turned back. "Alright. Sometimes you just seem so… overly sensitive."

"And you aren't?"

"NO!" When Glinda merely gave her a hard look, she rolled her eyes and tapped the spoon on the edge of the pot. "Not as much."

"Better." Popping up from their small, scrubbed wooden table where she had laid the paper, she joined her in the kitchen. "Anyway, I suppose that's that. No point in returning the book if you and I have already been declared Ghastly and Evil. He'll just send us to Southstairs Prison and we'll never see the light of day again, and all because he asked you t-"

But Elphaba's finger had fallen onto Glinda's lips to cut off her tirade. It flustered her whenever she did that — which was often. Why, she couldn't say, other than the fact that the average Ozian had never dared take her personal space for granted in such a way. After a few more seconds, she smiled and whispered, "I know."

"Good," she breathed, slightly muffled until the finger fell away. It was true that they had been over the matter enough times by now. She straightened her dress and cleared her throat. "Now then, what
lovely dinner has my Elphie prepared for us this evening?"

"Set the table for us and you'll find out, Sugarsnap."

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Another fortnight passed before they were forced to flee once more. As they had taken the precaution of enchanting a small bird who lived up in the branches to call out if they saw approaching soldiers, they were more than ready to take off at a moment's notice. Now, in addition to Glinda's spectacular trunk, they also had a plain blackish one with more of Elphaba's effects and room for their mundane kitchen items. This did have the unintended consequence of making them look a little ungainly, taking off on a broom with two large rectangles thumping along in their wake, but at least they didn't have to run off and leave all of their things.

Only their home. Much though they both told themselves that they would not grow attached to One Quoxwood Branch, they did over the scant weeks spent there. Silly though it was to make a home at the top of a gnarled trunk, it was easy enough done with a little love and tenderness given to the abode.

The only comfort came in knowing they had been able to get a lot of use out of that time of preparation. They now had full bedclothes, kitchenware, tools of various shape and purpose. Ingredients for the spellwork that was not verbal-only. Other reading, which Glinda had insisted upon because sitting around in a tree all day grew tiresome after the first week or two. Elphaba had been able to garner some funds by using what they had told the local populace was "revolutionary carpentry" — that is, she enchanted some of their ploughs and wheelbarrows to be the barest bit lighter with a modified version of the flight spell, claiming she was simply a master woodworker. It was perhaps vaguely dishonest, but it did what she claimed it would do, and they were grateful enough for the easement of their labour that they paid the two women handsomely.

Their flight carried them East, toward Munchkinland, then further north to stop in on Glinda's gran in the Glikkus again, update her on their situation. This time, she insisted upon giving them Quox nuts, which Elphaba took and put in her pocket to throw away later. Also, a few coins, for which they were quite grateful. They didn't stay longer than an hour or two, and were on their way before raising the alarm this time.

Luckily, travelling by air afforded them the choice of looping wide around Gillikin and over the Impassable Desert, which would have surely killed them if they tried going by foot. It was known that some went forth into it, and some returned, but neither Elphaba nor Glinda could recall anyone having gone so far as to see the much-discussed kingdoms of Ev or Ix that lay beyond. Nothing was known about them other than names. Of course, now and then a senile old fool would claim to be from such far-off destinations, but nothing came of that besides encouraging them to tuck into bed and stop sniffing the poppies.

"Maybe someday, we could be the first," Glinda said as they landed in a snowy Gillikin forest, just on the edge of the mountains in the West, past the Upperuplands.

"First to what?"

"To visit Ix. They call it the 'Rose Kingdom' — doesn't that sound positively beautimous?"

Chuckling as she dismounted, Elphaba stretched her back and legs as she scanned the trees. "Sounds awful. A whole kingdom of thorny roses."

"Maybe it's not covered in roses," she protested. "Maybe everything is rose-coloured, like the
Emerald City! It's not really nothing but emeralds."

"Or maybe all they eat is roses. That's completely unappetizing to me, I'm sorry."

Pouting, Glinda plopped down on the nearest patch of soft brown grass and folded her arms over her chest. "Do you have to shoot down every happy little thought I have? Honest to Oz…"

"But it's fun," Elphaba teased. When Glinda didn't respond, she rolled her eyes and retrieved some of their dried provisions from the black trunk, passing a bit over to her companion. "Eat."

"No, it doesn't taste like roses." But she took some, anyway. "Sometimes, I don't know why I agreed to come along on this crazified adventure."

"Neither do I. Never have."

Glinda turned her head, eyeing the green cheek of her friend as they sat side by side under the shade of the leafy canopy, away from the worst of the snow and frost. As they chewed, she thought and thought, knowing she was close to some kind of revelation that she needed to share with Elphaba. She merely needed to let it simmer in her mind until it was ready to serve.

It wasn't until they were on their second hard biscuit that she turned to her and said in an earnest voice, "Am I a Goat?"

"I…" Swallowing her bite down, Elphaba fixed her with a confused look. "What?"

"Am I? As good as a Goat. You seem to be all about protecting the rights of Animals, every little hair or feather on their heads, and… here I am, your best friend, and you don't seem to mind what happens to me."

"You're my only friend," she corrected mildly. "And who said I don't care?"

"You never seem to. I came with you, to make sure you weren't lonely and didn't get hurt, and you act like it was a stupid idea, and I never should have come." "You shouldn't have. I made that clear a long time ago."

Turning her eyes away, she reached down to pick at a blade of brown grass, lips pursed to resist an emotional outburst. "But… I thought maybe, after all this time… you'd appreciate my being here. Instead of hating me being in the way."

"Glinda, what's the point of-"

"Am I just in the way? Is that all I am to you, an annoying little girl who's tagging along? I've tried my bestest to be beneficial, and not burdenous."

"You have been," Elphaba sighed tiredly. "I do thank you when you help, don't I? I'm not ungrateful. I just think it's an awful idea for you to feed your entire future to the Shifting Sands for my single-minded crusade. How well we do or don't get along… it's beside the point."

Taking a risk, she took up Elphaba's hands, ignoring the disgusted outcry when she felt a half-biscuit squished between their palms. "Listen. I know I've said it, I… maybe my words weren't wonderful enough, or smart enough. But I'm gonna say it again, and I hope this time, my mouth doesn't muddle my meaning."

"Off to a fine start." When Glinda blinked, she shrugged and explained, "You spend a lot of time
trying to make what you say sound fancy instead of just getting it out so it's understandable."

"Fine." Squaring her shoulders, she stared straight into Elphaba's glittering eyes, causing her to blink and draw back slightly. "Then listen and listen good; you're my best friend. I'm awfully fond of you, in a way that goes beyond 'old roomie'. It's… I gave up chasing after a handsome prince who could have guaranteed my future so I could come along with you! Doesn't that tell you anything?!!"

"It tells me you're either reckless, or a masochist," she sighed.

"Maybe I am, maybe I'm not. But… it's not just because I don't know what I'm doing. There's more than bubbles between my ears! I don't throw around 'best friend' like it doesn't matter, you know. Some people do have five or six, but I only have one, and you're it. You're the green gal Glinda gets to galavant with. I don't see it as a bad thing, or punishment, or… nothing truly bad. This is where I want to be. If you and I could be somewhere warmer, without the Wizard chasing after us, that'd be splendiferous! But I'd rather be here with you, sitting in a freezing cold forest, than by myself in the Royal Palace."

For a few seconds, Elphaba merely blinked back at her. She opened her mouth as if to scoff, closed it, turned her head away. Then she peered back over at her from the corner of her eye.

"You're… serious about this? I don't understand, Glinda. Why would you care so much about some fool who… who's everything you're not? Dirty where you're clean, dark where you're light… ugly where you're beautiful."

"Now, stop that. I've already told you that you're beautiful, too; it's just an… alternate beauty, isn't it?"

"Sure, but you only said that to make me feel better."

"Not true. I just… wasn't looking at you the right way before. I was looking for all the things I'm used to seeing in Gillikin high society, and of course, you're none of that."

Almost as if the question had been straining to explode from her for years, rather than possibly a few months, Elphaba snapped, "Then why? Why do you like me?! I don't get it, I do not understand, it makes no sense! I'm just this, this… ugly, gnobbly shrub of a woman who got her mother killed! Who drags her best friend into fleeing for her life instead of getting the education she needs, a- and deserves! So what the Oz is so heel-clicking great about me?!!"

When tears began to roll down Elphaba's cheeks, Glinda instantly found they were doing the same on her own. So she wrapped both arms around her friend, rocking them both gently.

"Shhh," she finally sobbed a bit later, when she could. "I'm here. You're okay, I… you're okay." All her words were gone from before, when she needed them the most. Now all she wanted was to reassure the long-wounded "witch" that she was not so wicked, and that she was not friendless. It was the least she could do for someone with such beauty hidden behind green and black. Though it would have to wait for a time when she could find her inner dictionary again. No one else was going to do it for her; there was no one else in their lives at all now.

They really did have a long, lonely brick road ahead of them.

END OF PART ONE
Chapter Notes

Sorry about that huge delay - that was totally unintentional. I've been trying to make a game, which I know, is a completely ridiculous thing for me to do considering I've never tried to do that before. Also, I'm terrible at it as it turns out, haha. BUT! If I ever finish it, you'll be the first to know - I'll also probably post it to AO3 if it's at all possible.

Hopefully, the length of this chapter (and the sheer amount of events set off in it) help to make up for it! We're doing a time-hop forward. Part Two is much longer, and Part Three will be about the same length as Two. Have fun!

~ PART TWO ~

CHAPTER SIX

"Come on, Illianora, spill! What did they say, exactly?"

The round-faced girl smiled back at her friends, swinging her legs back and forth just below her chair in the corner of the inn they so often met up in for lunch. Any fool could tell that this was a unique opportunity for her to be the center of attention, and she was about to milk it for all she was worth. Not that anyone other than the barkeep and the one or two of the customers were going to pay them the slightest bit of attention — and the former only because he distrusted anyone who had not come to the age of adulthood.

"Oh, come on, you don't want to hear this boring old Emerald City gossip."

"We do, we do!"

"Okay," she giggled, relenting far too easily. Scooting a bit closer, she said, "Well. First, they were making this big proclamation about appointing Fiyero to be Captain of the Guard!"

There were a chorus of gasps. One of the other girls whispered, "Not Prince Fiyero!"

"Yes! I mean, I really wanted to go congratulate him… tell him personally how proud we all were of him. A Vinkus man being given such a high position in the Wizard's army! Put in charge of the search for the Witches themselves! But I couldn't get close, of course."

"You wanted to tell him how much you wanted to be his wife," another girl accused. When Illianora only shrugged, they all laughed. "Knew it! You're shameless!"

"Oh, stop that; you know I'm only interested in Liir. Even if Fiyero is a handsome devil." Then her eyes sparkled. "But I haven't told you the half of it! The press secretary — Marble something — she announced that after almost two years of searching all of Oz, they're finally tracking down where the other two Wicked Witches are hiding!"

More gasps, these of a different nature. Darker, more fearful; still just as excited and eager for hearsay as the ones over the guard captain, but laced with the appropriate apprehension.
"Well?" one of the girls needled, given that Illianora had taken overlong continuing. "Where?"

"Here."

"Here? You mean the Vinkus?" When she only shrugged again, she pressed, "Not in Kiamo Ko?!" They turned to each other with whispers of alarm. This was a lot more personal, more pronounced, than the quick jolt of adrenaline they felt about the vague existence of the witches. This was local.

"Well, maybe not in Kiamo Ko specifically, but in the Vinkus, at least. We all know they've patrolled our streets enough to have flushed out any two witches."

"Have they? I hear they can shed their skins as easily as a snake!"

"Don't be ridiculous, Sarima," another girl snapped. "Go on, Nora, tell us what else the Marble woman said — further north? South? Or out West?"

"Might be West, because they kept calling them 'The Wicked Witches of the West'... though that could just mean in the Vinkus," she added in a thoughtful mutter.

Sarima pushed a hand into the side of her face. "I was a lot happier dreaming about that Prince Fiyero than worrying about witches holding us for ransom." The others were quick to agree.

"That was about it," Illianora reluctantly admitted. "Just to stay alert, try to tell any Animals that still speak that she and the Wizard are offering a reward for any information on where the witches went."

"Weally?"

"Weally- I mean, really. Oh, and that they're keeping a close eye on the Witch of the East; you know, the one in Munchkinland?"

They all muttered lazily about that for a moment. By now, the strict policies and threats of that particular "witch" were well-known everywhere, even if they weren't nearly as sensational as hearing about fires and explosions and freed Animals courtesy of the other two. With no more exciting news about the East to pick apart, they just muttered for a minute or so about her before letting the subject return to the more immediate threat.

"I've heard that one is green and the other is blue," a girl whispered. "And that when they get mad, they switch!"

"That's ridiculous, Nastoya. How can a person switch colours?"

"How can a person be green or blue in the first place?" Sarima cut in, shaking her head.

After a moment, Illianora asserted herself again, hoping to recapture the spotlight from her friends. "Well, they say one of them was from Gillikin; the emerald mines are near there. Maybe there was an accident, and now she's green forever! Wouldn't that be awful?"

As they continued to chatter on, a robed figure passed behind them and left a handful of coins on the counter before making good her discreet exit. For the time being, she had heard quite enough to be going on with.

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"...And that's the scuttlebutt."
A green chin nodded up and down as two spindly fingers stroked either side, glittering emerald eyes sharp as they always had been. "Intriguing. Not that I know what 'scuttlebutt' means."

"It means the butt of a scuttle, of course! Come on, Elphie, aren't you frightened?"

"Why should I be?" Gesturing around at the sparkling insides of the cave, she announced, "Saint Aelphaba is safely tucked into this hidey-hole behind Wicca Falls, where none may enter but her closest companion, Glinda the Ghastly. What's to worry about? They're no closer to finding us than they were last year. I doubt they could find their hats if they were on their own pointed heads."

Glinda the Ghastly scowled as Elphaba chuckled, folding her arms over her chest. "I don't find that particularly humourous, you know. Just because I'm resigned to living like a common criminal on the lamb doesn't mean I want to joke about it."

"Who's joking? Maybe I really am Saint Aelphaba." At Glinda's eyeroll, she gave one of her own. "Fine, you aren't in a laughing mood."

"I'm not. But... I do have some good news to go with the bad." Reaching behind her, she produced a large, round disc of light-tan bread, lips pulling into a small smile. "See what I picked up?"

"Ooh, honey loaf!" Elphaba breathed, smiling in spite of herself. "It's been awhile since we splurged. By Oz, to eat something besides fish for once!" Her fingers twitched toward it, then pulled away. "But... you bought it, I should let you break the bread."

"Here, then," she giggled as she split it in two easily and passed half of it over. "Eat up. No sense waiting another hour until supper."

As Elphaba drew it closer, she glanced upward. "You always give me the bigger half."

"Well..." Squirming, she shrugged and feigned indifference. "You're taller than me, aren't you? More to feed. I'm just being practical."

"Sure," Elphaba chuckled, breaking off a small piece to nibble. They ate in comfortable silence for a few minutes. Then she said, once her hunger was not so gnawing, "I'm worried about the Animals."

"This again," Glinda sighed.

"No, listen; it's been a week since I heard from their camp in the Great Gillikin Forest. The Crows were supposed to come days ago. What can be keeping them?"

For a minute or two, Glinda simply watched her companion wring her hands. It confounded her, but yet again, as she had the past several times this subject turned in such a direction, she found herself very faintly jealous. Why should she? It was because the Animals demanded Elphaba's attention, of course, but the part that confounded her was that she cared so deeply whether or not her friend had concerns outside the two of them. Perhaps it could be merely attributed to them spending far too much time together; they were becoming codependent. It was to be expected when you were living in a cave with only one other person, but sometimes, she worried that it was going to ruin her for keeping company with others. Would she remember all of her social graces, her manners, once this crisis was over?

It had to come to an end. It had to; the Wizard and Morrible couldn't possibly keep up this witch hunt forevermore! Someday, they would find a way to bargain for the Animals to be left alone, and to return the Grimmerie to its rightful owners. She had no idea how such a plan would come together, especially after two years of feeling defeated, but she was determined to make it so. Until then, she supposed she would have to put up with playing second chair to Elphaba's zealous crusade now and
then.

Her friend must have sensed her displeasure. After swallowing her current bite, she said in the soft voice Glinda had grown so accustomed to over the past years, "I missed you the past few days."

"You did not. You're just sorry I didn't bring back a Pig for companionship," she griped.

"Glindie…"

Chewing on her lip for a moment, she decided not to be too mean; it wasn't worth it. "Did you really?"

"I always do. If only I didn't stick out like a green thumb, I could go with you when you head into the cities."

"Yeah, I know. Any, um… progress on degreenifying yourself?"

"Nope," she sighed, glancing over at the Grimmerie's vaunted place on a very basic table on one cave wall, next to a candelabra of wax stumps. "You know, I did manage to turn my knee orange yesterday."

"Oh, can I see?!" When Elphaba only snorted, she wilted and mumbled, "Don't joke! I don't like it when you joke about magic, it seems… I don't know."

Throwing up both hands, Elphaba began to rise, only just catching the last bit of her honey loaf before it toppled to the grotty cave floor. "No joking about magic, or Animals, or Saint Aelphaba. What can we joke about?!!"

"We can joke about how ugly I'm getting, without my makeup artists and hairdressers." When Elphaba only frowned deeply at her from the "kitchen" area of their hovel, Glinda pursed her lips. "You know I stopped caring about that after the first few months, but you still won't laugh. I always thought you'd be thrilled I gave up on that."

"But you gave up on them because they're out of reach for you, not because of disinterest." Having stashed the rest of her bread for the time being, she returned to help Glinda up. "You know I would give you back those things if I had a spell for that."

"Don't turn my knees orange," she warned, and Elphaba grinned in spite of herself. "But… you're learning to do much more important things than giving me supernatural lipstick."

Glancing around the cave, as if someone would jump out and interrupt them, Elphaba leaned in and pressed her lips against Glinda's ear. The latter shivered at the feeling of air caressing her lobe and neck, at the closeness of the vibrations of sound.

"I perfected fire."

"Perfected?" she breathed, licking her suddenly-dry lips. Elphaba knew that she was still a bit skittish about being so close as that, and she often used it to tease. This time, she could tell it was unintentional, so she did not bop her on the nose.

"Yes, perfected. Here…" Raising a hand, she began to whisper under her breath; seemed she didn't even need to read the words from the Grimmerie's pages anymore. In the very center of her palm, a plume of pale green flame began to flicker and dance.

"O-oh! It's a tiny fire! You've really done it, you- and it's not even raging out of control like the last
A smile ghosted into the corners of Elphaba’s mouth, and she fell silent, allowing the flame to continue its presence there. After a few more seconds, she closed the hand and it vanished. "Yes. It… well, I still feel guilty about our hut down in Yips, so I promised myself I would only practice somewhere safe. The connecting caves go deep enough that it’s easy to find somewhere without any wood or brush. Look how much it’s paid off!"

"It’s truly wonderful, and wonderfully true; your control is getting as good as your arcane arsenal!" With a little titter, she went to join her in working on getting their supper finished. Honey loaf was well and good, but it was not enough sustenance. "And I’ve barely mastered the flight spell; everything else, I have to read it out of the book or I’ll mess it up. Even then, I still mess it up sometimes!"

"Glinda, that’s alright." Perching her free hand on her forearm, she went on, "You’re the one running around Oz, trying to acquire things for us, listening in on gossip. I’m stuck here all day, hiding and waiting to talk to Crows, so this is the way I can be useful. Well, other than fishing." As she stoked the fire higher underneath the several fish spitted on a stick, she added, "And anyway, you’re a lot further along than that and you know it."

"Maybe," she muttered, embarrassed by the attention toward her inferior spellwork.

"Definitely. Just keep at it and you’ll be floating around over Oz in no time."

Soon after, they set to plating and eating the fish. Though they were literal cave-dwellers, Glinda had still insisted they could bother to pick up kitchenware and eat as civilised as they could manage. Elphaba cared a bit less for manners, but she still did her best to maintain some decorum for her companion’s sake. After all, small gestures such as those went a long way toward keeping the peace.

It wasn’t until they were washing up that Elphaba announced, "I’m thinking about visiting my sister."

"Oh?" Glinda asked as they stood in the mouth of the cave, hands outstretched to let the waterfall blast away the food remnants. They sometimes lost dishes that way due to unexpectedly powerful bursts of water, but they knew now to tighten their grip against the torrent. "You… want to see Nessa? Why?"

"It’s all this talk of her being ‘wicked’ like us. The details are so vague, I don’t… what are they talking about? She never acted the slightest bit wicked in all the years I’ve known her, which are all the years she’s had. I know it’s not really the focus of what we’re trying to get done, and it might not help us clear our names, either. But… she’s my sister, isn’t she? For better or for worse."

At that, Glinda had to nod glumly. "I might be an only child, but I imagine having a sibling must be the bestest. A very special bond, especially! So… so why should I stand in your way if you want to see her?"

"Because it’s foolish," Elphaba sighed, turning away with the cleansed dishes to dry them over the table. Glinda hurried to follow. "It’s a needless risk of exposure. I’d have to be careful flying almost literally from one end of Oz to the other, and for what? To have Nessa snap at me that I’ve ‘disgraced the family’, probably."

"Oh, come on, Elphie. She wouldn’t be that cruel!"

"Wouldn’t she? You’ve met my father. She’s his child."

"So are you, and I don’t see you being that cruel." When Elphaba glanced at her, she shrugged. "Not
that often. We have our quarrels, but we always work them out, and you're very rarely cruel without cause."

"But I am cruel, then. Right?" Glinda didn't answer right away, and Elphaba sighed. "I'm sorry, I... sometimes, I get so passionate about saving the Animals from being muted and massacred..."

"I know," she soothed with a hand on Elphaba's back. "Of course, I understand. And... even though I hate it when you shout at me, you've never struck me or... or insulted me unless I've already insulted you somehow. So I think you're quite an admirable person, overall."

At that, Elphaba snorted and patted Glinda's arm. "Such lavish praise. If you don't want me to go and see her, I won't, but... oh, I just feel like I must. Something in my gut tells me it's important."

A sigh escaped Glinda's lips as she pondered. Not that there was much to ponder at all. "Your gut has served us well a few times before now, so I feel like it would be sheer ridiculosity to ignore it now. Go to your sister; I'll hold down the fort here."

"No, no; I must wait for the Crows. But once they have arrived... shall we go together? I want her to know that we're on her side if she's being wrongly accused." In an undertone, she added, "Besides... if she isn't wrongly accused, I might need your help escaping her clutches."

"Her 'clutches'!" Glinda giggled. But when Elphaba didn't laugh, her own petered out quickly. "Oh. You really think... little Nessie? The one in the chair?"

"Just because she's in a wheelchair doesn't mean she poses no threat. You didn't grow up with her; you don't know how manipulative she can be if it suits her purposes. Maybe she isn't a villain, but she's no perfect princess, either."

Nodding, Glinda whispered, "I'm sorry. You're right, I don't know a twigging thing about her."

"No, I'm sorry," Elphie sighed as she put away the dried dishes and utensils. "No point in spreading doom and gloom about something that hasn't happened yet."

"Then it's settled. Once we hear from our fine feathered friends, we find your family for a visit."

Elphaba had been nodding along until the very end. "You mean 'visit', don't y- oh, nevermind." But Glinda was so pleased with herself that Elphaba couldn't frown for long.

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Déjà vu settled upon Glinda when she spied Colwen Grounds for the second time in her life. However, it was not quite the same as the last occasion. Munchkinlander guards paced up and down the street, spears in hand. There was a distinct lack of civilian presence throughout all of Nest Hardings, now that she thought to look. How could things have changed so drastically in a couple of short years?

"By Oz," Elphaba breathed. Glinda tightened her arms around her waist to comfort the poor, shocked woman. "My home looks like a prison..."

"Or a fortress," she muttered. "Elphie, where would your sister be?"

"Upstairs, the third window from the right in the back. It's... oh, I wish I could have perfected that invisibility spell! All the rocks just turned lighter and lighter shades of grey, they never vanished entirely!"
Sighing, Glinda patted her side and whispered, "We'll just have to be quick. Act when the guards aren't looking. We can do that; I'm even wearing this hideous black cloak and it's the dead of night, it ought to be simple enough!"

"Ought to be, yes... but will luck be with us?" Neither of them dared answer.

With some relief, they found the window unlatched, and were able to slip in undetected. Of course, that didn't last long.

"ELPHABA!" Nessarose shouted. It had been so long since Glinda saw the black-haired, wheelchair-bound beauty, but she looked no less elegant now than she did in their days at Shiz. The chair squeaked as she made her way over to them, struggling to push it along with her own slender arms. "Wh-what- GUARDS! What are you doing here?!"

"Nessa, I'm sorry," Elphaba said in a stage whisper as she paced forward, their broom forgotten. "I just... I had a powerful feeling that if I didn't come soon, you..." Her gaze dropped and her voice petered out, as meek and cowed as Glinda remembered from when they met with her father.

"What? Come on, out with it!" Nessa's voice grew more terse as she went on, "You've spent the last two years terrorizing all of Oz, casting a shadow over the name of Thropp! And now, what, you want to waltz back in? To smooth things over?"

"Believe me, I'd love to smooth things over, with both you and Father. But that isn't why-"

"Oh, that's fabulous." A humourless laugh floated out of her throat. "With Father! You really must be a powerful witch now if you think you can manage that!"

Elphaba looked mildly confused. She glanced at Glinda, as if she might hold some key to deciphering her sister's words, but Glinda merely shrugged her own ignorance. Even if she did have any idea what this was about, she was smart enough not to butt into a family discussion. "What do you mean?"

"He's dead, you ignorant celery stalk!"

Glinda swooped forward as fast as she could to catch Elphaba before she crumpled to the ground, and just barely made it. Still, a struggle ensued as Glinda had to use all of her feeble muscle to support both of their weights — made all the worse for Elphaba going entirely boneless.

"Dead... no, he's... he can't- wh-what are you saying to me?"

"Dead. You know, deceased, passed on? Dancing with the Unnamed God? He's gone forever, and it's all your fault!"

"My fault?" Elphaba rasped. The accusation seemed to give her back some small shred of herself in the form of indignation. "H-how? I haven't even- I was on the other side of the kingdom!"

"Exactly." Her fists trembled on the arms of the chair as she shouted at her sister, voice turning hoarse, "After he learned what you'd done, how you'd disgraced us, he died... of shame! Embarrassed to death. You didn't have to lift a finger."

At the last phrase, Elphaba's posture went rigid. "I didn't have to- what are you implying? That I wanted Father to die?!"

"Didn't you? He told me what you said when you came begging for scraps, for protection. How you complained about me getting all of the attention! Look at me, Elphaba!" One hand swept down at her
legs as her eyes bored straight through her green sibling. "How can you blame him for wanting to help me more? I am broken! But your legs work just fine; you can stand alone! Why should he help you when you can help yourself?"

"You… you little…" Elphaba's hands worked into fists and back, and she clamped her mouth shut.

"Me, what?" A brief pause. After a moment, she bit out, "Go on, say it. Say whatever horrible thought is in that horribly wicked brain of yours."

"You think you know so much," Elphaba hissed at her. "But you're wrong. I never wanted Father to- all I wanted from him was love and acceptance. But he could never manage it. I was always treated differently because of how I look, which is something I cannot help. And he did it anyway. When you're the colour of Truth Pond scum, I guess that's how you get treated."

Nessa's expression darkened, even though Glinda would not have thought it possible given how dark it was before. "You take that back. He was always saying how proud he was of you, how you had grown up strong and independent. I don't want to hear these lies."

"He never said it to me! Never even said… that he loved me. The only things he said to me were about you, Nessa — unless he was insulting me, or telling me how much I've been fouling things up. Which, of course, was also usually about you."

"So instead, everything should have been about you?! Fine, that's rich; poor Fabala, she's green! It doesn't change anything else about her life, she can walk and dance and go wherever she pleases, but poor Fabala!"

"Don't call me that," Elphaba warned.

"Or what? You'll curse me?" A scoffing noise as she folded her arms. "You have everybody fooled that you're a witch. As if you could manage anything but weird explosions! Well fine, blow me up, sister of mine. If that's what you want, go right ahead; then you'll have both of us out of the way. The last Thropp can have Colwen Grounds all to herself."

The three of them stood in a tense silence for a long moment. Finally, assuming no one else was going to do anything to diffuse the situation, Glinda cleared her throat and asked something that had been bothering her.

"Um… I've heard the people of Oz calling you a witch, too. What's up with that?"

"What? Oh… oh, nevermind their nonsense," she brushed aside. "They don't like my policy changes."

"Policy changes? I don't understand, I thought your father… was…" Then her eyes widened slightly. "Nevermind, I get it. You're the new Munchkin Mayor."

"Eminent Thropp," she corrected.

"Whatever. So what kind of policy changes? You have to be this tall to ride?" Glinda held her hand only a few feet above the ground, alluding to how diminutive a lot of Munchkinlanders were. Not that Nessa or Elphaba were among their number.

"I closed our borders to emigration and immigration. No one goes in or out. It's a temporary measure for everyone's safety. And I increased taxes to funnel into our military, and the Lurlinist Pike Guild; you know our family doesn't believe in Lurlinism, but they're our strongest defense force."
Elphaba nodded her understanding. "Yes, I suppose you work with what you have. Why so much fearmongering, though?"

"That's you, too. What did you think would happen? You zoom around the kingdom, allegedly rescuing Animals and brushing aside the Wizard's forces like they're ants! Everyone's terrified of you!"

"You don't seem to be."

"That's because I understand who you really are; a coward. You made a mistake, got on the wrong side of either the Wizard or Morrible, and you won't face them directly. So you scurry around, using this weird thing with Animals to distract yourself. Isn't that right?"

Elphaba glanced at Glinda, who shrugged. Then she turned back and said, "Not exactly right, but not exactly wrong."

"Oh." Nessa seemed somewhat surprised by the admission. "Then… you really are afraid of the Wizard."

"Of course. Who wouldn't be? You see what he's doing to the Animals, silencing and herding them up to be slaughtered. Whether it's him or if it's Morrible's idea, they're both to blame."

Rolling her eyes, the girl tried to wheel over toward a small wooden cabinet that stood in the corner, but she was having such a hard time of it that Glinda tutted impatiently and strode over to take the handles on the back of chair, wheeling her the rest of the way.

"Thank you," Nessa said curtly. But at least she said it.

"No problem. Do you need help with anything?"

"I can take care of myself," she assured her, glaring over at Elphaba. She opened the door and withdrew a crystal bottle and a decanter, setting them on top. Then she glanced back at the other two as she poured herself a generous helping of a thick, dark liquid. "Can I offer you something? I have Qwice Wine, Gilligin, a pretty good year of Munchcatel…"

"Ooh, I haven't had a good Munchcatel in a while!" Glinda whispered. Nessa smirked slightly as she withdrew another bottle. "What?"

"Nothing. Just that you seem like the type for a sweet wine, that's all."

"Thank you, I think!"

"Nothing for me," Elphaba said flatly. "I'm flying later."

With a shrug, Nessa handed Glinda her drink and lifted her own to her lips, draining a third of it in one go. When Glinda wheeled her back over to Elphaba, she sighed as if irritated, but it seemed to be because she was getting closer to her sister and not from Glinda's actions directly.

"Alright, we've taken care of the small talk. Why are you here now? What is the point of this visit? You've gone two years without darkening my doorstep, so I can't fathom why you would now."

"Because I have a feeling something truly bad is coming. For you." When Nessa's eyes rolled, she snapped, "I don't care if you believe me or not! Or I do, but… oh, forget it. You obviously neither want nor need anything from me, and I don't care if you do. I just didn't want anything horrible to befall my only sister without trying to warn her."
"You can't give me anything I want," Nessa said softly. "You can't bring Father back, you can't make me able to stand. You can't even make Boq..." But then she cut herself off, gripping the glass tighter. "What's the point of you being a witch if you're useless?!

Unable to stop herself, Glinda whispered, "Hey now, that's not quite fair, is it? Elphaba's not a genie, she can't just grant your every wish. Sorcery is a skill like any other skill; she can only do what she knows how!

"Then why don't you ask yourself; what has her priority been? Me? Of course not. I've never been her priority."

"You've always been my priority," Elphaba bit out. "Ever since you were born, Father made sure you were the only thing that mattered. Only... only going to Shiz made me begin to see how much I was missing in my life. Being friends with Glinda."

"Aww," Glinda tittered softly, allowing herself a shy smile. "It's no big deal. I just wanted to help you feel pretty and popular for once."

"And you couldn't do that for me?" Nessa snapped. "What a selective fairy godmother."

Glinda turned on her, hands on hips. "That's enough, missy! You're already pretty! Prettier than me, lately! But you don't get popular by trapping everybody in their homes, do you? And speaking of Boq, I set you up with him in the first place! So don't tell me I haven't done anything for you, you, you... jerkity sad sack!"

Elphaba gasped. Nessa looked affronted, of course, but Elphie was the one most definitely shocked that Glinda had said something so hostile against another person to their face. Glinda knew she didn't do that often; it was part of being a member of high society. One didn't go around openly criticising your peers! But in this case, Nessarose was being unkind and unfair to her best friend. She had earned a little payback.

"Well, I..." Nessa took a drink to give herself an excuse not to speak for a moment. Then she said in clipped tones, "You're right, I can't deny you did encourage Boq to approach me. I'm sorry. But Elphaba... I'm not wrong about that."

"She loves you. She just... you can't be her whole life, y'know? But she never wanted to have to leave you for more than one short day. And we're here now, aren't we? You have no idea how long and hard it was for us to come visit you!"

At that, Nessa did look up at her sister, eyes narrowed. "Yes... how long did it take you? Where are you living lately? I'm curious."

"And I'm not that stupid. You'd sell that information to the Wizard in exchange for more protection in a heartbeat, wouldn't you?" When Nessa merely shrugged, Elphaba grunted, "Typical."

"Well, you can't do anything else for me. And it would be your own fault if you slipped up and told me; I'd feel no guilt over it."

"Of course you wouldn't." Elphaba folded her arms over her chest and went on, "Well, I can't bring back our father or get you out of that chair, so you'll just have to enjoy the visit for what... it... hmm."

"For what it hmm'? What on earth is that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, nothing. Glinda, may I speak to you for a moment?" When Glinda merely shrugged and trotted...
over to join her in the far corner of the chambers, Elphaba steered her over close to the window.

"What? What is it?"

"You've been studying the Grimmerie, too, right?" At Glinda's nod, she hissed, "Do you remember anything that might make Nessa able to stand? I could put a flight spell on her underwear, but I think that would go pretty quickly awry — and she wouldn't really be walking."

Glinda's face screwed up in concentration. "You know… I have seen something, but I can't remember where! I think it was some spell for enchanted shoes, but it was for dancing, not walking."

"Yes, exactly, exactly. But as we now know, if we tweak a couple of spells… combine them…"

"The Glowing Stone," she breathed, referring to a rock that now glowed always. They actually had to stick it in a box overnight so that its radiance wouldn't keep them awake. "You're right, that was two different spells! But can you find two that will help Nessie?"

"I don't know. But…” Sighing, she glanced over her shoulder. "That unpleasant toad does not deserve my help, but I won't feel good about myself if there was something I could do for my sister, and I didn't."

"Well, that's definitely… a type of motivation, I guess," Glinda said with a weak laugh. "You start looking for the other spell, I'll stealify her shoes, okay?"

"Oh." Casting another look over at Nessarose, she whispered, "That might not work out as well as you would hope, but see what you can do. I'll get to work."

Vaguely confused by that last warning, Glinda shrugged and left Elphaba to withdraw the Grimmerie from inside her inky cloak. "Listen, Nessa?"

"Yes?"

"Uhh, hey." Her finger pointed down at the padded footrests of her wheelchair. "Do you mind if I borrow those for a moment?"

The girl's reaction was immediate. Glinda could practically see her withdrawing from the conversation a small amount, the way her hands fidgeted with the hem of her blouse, her eyes lowered, fluttered, glanced back up at Glinda. After a few seconds of this twitchiness, she asked a simple question.

"Why? If you're going to tease me…"

"We're going to try a spell. No promises!" she warned, before any hopes could be raised. "Just… a little something. If it doesn't work, at least we tried, right?"

Thoughtful, she looked down at the shoes. They were quite elegant: sueded blue slippers with small pearls trailing along embroidery that graced each side. Somehow, they had been secured well enough that not a single pearl had been lost — or else it was because they had never been walked in.

"Do you h-have to take them off?"

"Hmm. Maybe not, but it sure seems safer to me. Do you really want us to try throwing magic at them while you're still wearing them?"

"Well… alright, that is a good point. I don't trust Elphaba particularly, but I have this feeling you
wouldn't lie about something this mundane." She began to bend forward, then was stopped by
realising she was still holding her drink. "Oh… this is hard enough normally without being
inebriated!"

Chuckling, Glinda knelt and said, "I'll get them, don't worry. Relax."

"No! D-don't…" After a long pause, she looked away, cheeks rosy with embarrassment. "Okay, but
don't… don't look at my feet."

"What?"

"Please? That's all I'm asking."

The whole matter puzzled her. What was the huge crisis? Shrugging her agreement, Glinda did as
she was asked; she looked long enough to get a good grip on the backs of the shoes, then slipped
them off without ever glancing down. Hearing the quiet *thud* of Nessa's ankles into the padded rests,
she whispered, "Sorry!"

"It's alright," she said with a nervous chuckle. "At least I can pretend I moved them on my own."

"If you say so. Um, be back in a minute!"

Once Glinda and Elphaba were crowded around the Grimmerie, scanning its pages with the shoes
placed above it on the small table, she was able to help look for the proper spell. As they debated the
pros and cons of certain choices, another question niggled in her mind. When she decided she
couldn't ignore it any longer, she asked.

"So what's with Nessa's feet? She wouldn't let me look at them."

"Hm?" Elphaba was clearly distracted, her index finger running along a passage. "Oh, nothing's
wrong with them. Other than the fact that they don't work, I mean." Seeing that didn't satisfy Glinda,
she sighed and said, "It's… hard to explain."

"You don't have to if it's all that difficult, Elphie. I'm just a nosy-pants."

"Just… well, it's our Father's fault. Not that it was something 'bad' he did, exactly, but he was trying
to make her feel better about her condition. She was having a hard time with it one day, about how
everyone kept staring at her lame legs while she was out. So he told her that they were just jealous of
her shoes. When I was older, I kind of realised that he had been making everything up as he went,
but he told her that she looked so pretty in her chair, and her shoes were so lovely, that everyone was
envious. From that day on, he kept finding newer and more intricate slippers and boots and any other
kind of shoe for her."

"That's sweet of him," Glinda said softly, smiling to herself. She knew Elphaba probably didn't see it
that way, but she couldn't deny the doting man had at least done that much to make his handicapped
daughter feel less unsightly. "But I still don't understand."

Shrugging, Elphaba turned the page, still more focused on her work. "Nessa drew the conclusion
herself. She noticed that people are told they look nice if they're wearing pretty clothes, and that it's
shocking — taboo, if you will — if they're seen wearing too little. And since my father had made
such a big deal about how lovely she looks in her top-of-the-line shoes, combined with already being
ashamed that her legs don't function…"

"*Ohhh,*" she breathed as the last piece fell into place within her mind, pounding her open hand with a
fist. "So going barefoot is the same thing as going naked to her? How very odd, indeed!"
"Yes, it's odd," Elphaba said sharply, looking up at last. "And I'll thank you not to tease her about it. I think she's silly, but to her, it's reality. So just… don't let slip that I told you any of this, alright? I'm sure she's already embarrassed enough at being 'exposed'."

That did make Glinda squirm in secondhand embarrassment. "When you put it that way, I suppose I would feel a little strange if some old classmate asked if I'd hand them my brassiere. But okay, I won't say a word."

It was another ten minutes before Nessa asked, "How's it coming?" When neither of them answered, she did not pester them further — merely sat in her chair, anxious to have her shoes back regardless of whether or not they were any improved from her sister's efforts. Glinda had to resist the temptation to glance down whenever she peered over at her; she knew it was the mere matter of being commanded "do not look at this" that made her want to look at all. Funny how the power of suggestion could sway one's attentions.

When Elphaba began to chant, low and long and focused, Glinda saw Nessa stirring out of the corner of her eye, saw her getting closer a little at a time. Clearly, it was a struggle for her to make it there, but her curiosity at their spellcasting fuelled her actions.

"Is it finished?" she asked in a quiet whisper when the vermillion lips had fallen silent. "Have you really… I mean, is there any chance…?"

"They look… different," Glinda breathed, raising a hand toward them. At first, she felt a thrill of dread to touch the shoes, but when she truly thought about how much she trusted her travelling companion, she picked one up as Elphaba did the other. "Are they… silver now? Or red? Maybe that's just the light from the fireplace."

"It is, I think," Elphaba agreed, just as captivated by them despite having performed the spell herself. After a moment, Glinda turned to look up at Nessa apologetically.

"Um… is it alright if I put them back on?"

"Y-yes," Nessa said breathlessly, cheeks still rosy but her eyes eager as they took in the shimmering shoes. "I want to know if this has worked at once!"

So Glinda obliged. This time, she couldn't help but look because she had to guide the shoes on properly… and there really wasn't anything to see. Nessa had dainty little feet, of course, but they were no more or less remarkable than any other pair she'd ever come across. Then the shoes were on, and both she and Elphaba were standing back to observe.

But before Nessa could attempt to stand, the door squeaked open and an unimpressive figure strode inside. Short in stature and with a drab face that was not entirely unpleasant… and was a bit familiar.

"Madame, I've prepared your- oh!" His eyes went wide to see the other two. "Goodness, it's-GUARDS!"

"Shush, Boq!" Nessa commanded him with a wave of her arm. Glinda flinched, even though the guards had not come the last time Nessa herself called. "Wait a moment. I… I want you to see something."

"Madame, these are criminals! The Wizard will want to be warned wight away!"

"You mean 'right aw-' Oh, I should know better by now," Elphaba admonished herself.

"We can't waste any time! Quick, I'll go and get them while they're… still… what on Oz?"
Boq found himself unable to finish the thought. His previously-disabled mistress was now standing, pushing unsteadily to her feet from the chair. It was already miraculous enough that she was standing unaided, shoes dazzling with white and red flashes — but there would be more. One foot at a time, she began to take steps, arms out to either side. After the first few, she began to tip, and Glinda and Elphaba both dashed forward and righted her again.

"Th-thank you," she breathed as she stood. "But… I think I…" Another few steps, without their aid. "I'm getting it. I'm walking. Ozma Above, I'm walking!"

_To Be Continued…_
"I did it," Elphaba breathed, beside herself as she watched her sister walk closer to Boq at the speed of an unsteady toddler. "Finally, from these powers of mine… something good."

Glinda heard that — the deep guilt that laced through every syllable, quiet as the rustling of grass in a breeze. She wrapped that up and tucked it away, needing to study the truth of it later when she had the chance. There and then, she wanted to keep watching. To find out what their former classmate would think of Elphaba's sister having the use of her legs for the first time in her life.

"Oh, goodness," Boq breathed, a hand at his mouth. By the time her hands lay upon his shoulders, she was laughing, the pure, unfiltered laugh of someone who had been relieved of a burden for the first time in her young life, but he was merely struck dumb. Finally, his head swung around to point at Elphaba. "You… you did this, didn't you?"

"I did. It's… the least I can do for my family, now that I've discovered this power. Maybe it's too little, too late, but I tried."

While the young man was still glancing between all of them, beside himself, Nessa took up one of his limp hands. "Don't you see? I… I can travel with you now, I don't have to keep you here! We can open the borders for the both of us! With my legs now working, a-and me knowing Elphaba isn't wicked after all… what's to stop us now?"

For a few seconds, the room was at a standstill. Glinda and Elphaba were shifting uncomfortably, feeling the splashback of the intensity Nessarose was radiating at her accomplice. Privately, Glinda wanted to breathe a sigh of relief at Nessa realising how mistaken she had been about her sister, but this didn't seem to be the time nor place — especially when she was reeling from the knowledge that the Munchkinland borders were only closed because she wanted to keep Boq on a short leash. Was she really so selfish as that?

Meanwhile, Boq himself looked between her and the others, struggling to come up with a reply. At long last, he said, "Oh… this is wonderful news. It changes everything!"

"I know! Everything!" Then she blinked in mild shock as he began to walk past her. "Wh-where are you going?"

Much to Glinda's horror, the staturally-challenged man grasped one of her hands in both of his. She was still blinking at that when he whispered, "Oh, Miss Galinda… how long I've waited to tell you!"

"Tell me what?" A heartbeat later, she added, "And it's 'Glinda' now."

"How much I care for you! How enchanted I've always been with you from the very beginning!"

All three women burst out in a single word: "WHAT?!"
"Your soft, gentle grace, that flawless blonde hair that curls gently to your shoulders, and- well, I can't say enough about your smile!" Sighing like a besotted child having been given his first puppy, he held her hand up and pressed it into his heart, earning only an exasperated gasp from Nessarose. "And I know that I might not be able to win you over, given that I'm just a Munchkinlander, but… oh, can't you give me a chance?"

"Gosh!" Glinda breathed, fluttering her eyelashes. In point of fact, her hair looked like a wind-tossed tree branch, and she didn't feel particularly gentle or graceful anymore. But she would be lying to herself if she tried to claim the flattery did not feel the tiniest bit gratifying. Therefore, she simply fluttered her eyelashes and giggled when he pressed a kiss to the hand. "That's so kind of you, Biq! I had no idea you felt so strongly!"

"No," Nessa breathed, staggering closer to her sister, a hand over her mouth. Glinda hated to see the woman so joyful one moment, and so crestfallen the next. She might have been a stranger to her, but she was still a person, and deserved to enjoy being able to walk for the first time in her life without the moment being ruined by something as stupid as this! How could he be so insensitive?

"Well, what do you say?" he persisted.

"Sorry," Glinda breathed softly, trying to cause as little of a scene as she could. "I hardly know you, and even back at Shiz, I was always more partial to Fiyero! Remember him?" That didn't seem to make a dent, so she continued, "Anyway, it doesn't matter because I'm just not interested in pursuing that kind of relationship right now. With anyone! So… so maybe we can be friends. Wouldn't that be nice?"

Slowly, his energetic expression began to lessen, a little at a time. He didn't quite frown, but he looked like the light behind his eyes had been snuffed by a strong breeze. Then he said, "I won't give up. You don't realise how earnest I am, and that's fine; I can wait. I'll wait a thousand years!"

"NO!" Nessa burst out. And when they turned to look at her… she saw something between her fingers. Something that did not belong to her.

Elphaba immediately burst out, "You give that back, Nessa!"

"There has to be something," she murmured, flicking through the pages of the Grimmerie with desperation. "Something in here to… to keep Boq from leaving me!"

"There isn't," Boq told her confidently, abandoning Glinda's hands with some obvious regret. "If Glinda isn't interested in coming with me, then I'll leave on my own."

"But haven't I been good to you?!" she demanded, wetness streaming down her cheeks. "These past two years, I gave you everything, I- I brought you here, gave you a place to stay, and didn't make you wait on me when you wanted time to yourself! I even…” Her eyes turned away, stung by the tears. "I even let you handle my *shoes*!"

The exasperated Munchkin threw up both arms as he exclaimed, "Who cares about your stupid shoes?! What possible reason would anybody have to care about that?! I didn't mind helping you, waiting on you when you can't wait on yourself, but I didn't want to — I wanted to be free! For *all* of our people to be free! Can't you see what you've been doing to us?! You're turning our homeland into… into a prison! It's horrible, and I want no part of it anymore!"

When he took a step toward the door, she shouted, "You'll never leave! The guards will stop you at the Emerald border, you know that! So… so just come back right now, and all will be forgiven!"
Boq barely spared her a glance. Instead, he looked at Glinda. "I really will wait for you."

"Yippee," she muttered under her breath.

"You ungrateful snake!" Flipping another few pages, she slapped a hand in the middle of the book and shouted, "HA! Your heart will be mine forever — it's right here! Ah... Tum... Tah... Tae..."

Instantly, Elphaba was by her side, eyes flicking between the page and her sister's manic gleam as she continued to chant. "Wh-what are you trying to do to him? Your pronunciation sounds..." She squinted down, then looked up at her with a stricken expression. "Nessa, h-how is your Ancient Lurlinic?!"

"A-AH!" Boq exclaimed, collapsing to the floor. "M-my chest, it's- what's h... happeni..."

That was as far as he got. His mouth hung open as he twitched and lay still.

"Boq?" Nessa's eyes flew wide as she took a hesitant step forward, gazing down in horror at what her ill-conceived spellwork had wrought. "BOQ?! What happened?!"

Not quite as distraught as the Eminent Thropp but still worried, Glinda flew over to Elphaba's side and hissed, "Can't you do something?!!"

"You know I can't! You can't reverse a spell once it's been cast — and I didn't cast it, anyway!" Snatching the book out of her sister's hands, she began to page through it. "But maybe there's something else..."

"This is your fault!" Nessa was screaming as she crouched on the floor next to the man's body. "If you hadn't shown me that horrendible book, I would never h-"

"OH, STUFF IT!" Glinda screeched down at her, fists down by her side. "What kind of woman are you?! Casting a spell on poor little Biq just because he's not interested in you? That's pretty petty, Netty!"

"Nessa!" she corrected without thinking. But she was already looking down at him again. "And... oh... I know it is, I... please, just save him! Do something, anything!"

But Elphaba was already doing something. Book clutched in one hand, arm acting as a makeshift stand to prop it up just below her bosom, her other hand began to swirl through the air as she chanted, filling the room with a thick presence that could only be felt, not seen. Glinda knew such a gesture wasn't strictly necessary, but given that Elphaba was far better at spells than she had ever been, perhaps there was some merit in doing it, after all.

"S-something's happening," Nessa whispered, edging away from his body. "What... but this isn't... what have you done?"

"What I can," was all she panted once she was through, sagging with the weight of having poured her heart and soul into the effort. Magic seemed to sap her stamina when it was a stronger spell. "I... I'm sorry."

All three of them gaped down at the form below them. It was no longer a Munchkin. Truth be told, it wasn't even a person. Gleaming tin caught the firelight from all over his form, barrel chest that looked like a giant boiler, legs that looked like stovepipes. He who had been Boq was no more; whatever he had become was something else altogether.

"Elphaba... he's a tin toy. You've turned my beloved, sweet, brave Boq into..." Bitter tears slid
down her cheeks as she grasped his arm, and she shivered. "Oh, what have I done to deserve this?! Why would you do this to me?!!"

"I've only done as you asked. All I've ever done is what you asked!" No answer came. Snapping the book shut, she tucked it under her arm. "Nessa, I have done everything I could for you but it has never been enough. And now I see that it never will be. Good day to you."

"Wait, Elphie," Glinda whispered, taking a quick step forward. "She's grieving, she- maybe if you-

"No. We are finished here. Come along, Glinda, we'll... we'll leave her to her toys and her tyranny."

And that was that. Nessa spoke no more for all her weeping, and Elphaba seemed to have nothing to say. Glinda took a step toward the broom, then rushed back to Nessa, ignoring the impatient tutting from their broom-pilot.

"Listen," she whispered to Nessa, who only sobbed louder. "You... may not be able to hear me right now, but... you mustn't blame yourself. Or Elphie. This just... this is just a big tangle of accidents all in the same ball of yarn. I am sorry about your friend, though. He didn't quite-"

"Leave me alone!" she screamed, raw and unhinged. "He could never love me while you existed! I never want to see your flawless face again!"

"Y-you can't mean that," she breathed. "How is it my fault if y-"

"GO!"

So they went.

"That was an awful thing to have happened," Glinda breathed as Nest Hardings fell away beneath them, the sky swallowing them up as the guards finally began to pour into Colwen Grounds. "I just... don't know what she thought she was going to accomplish by bespelling his heart that way! And then she blamed you for not 'fixing' it right! What more does she want?!"

"He was already dead," Elphaba said flatly. "She wanted the impossible, as usual. Poor, stupid Nessa. There are no shortcuts out of the afterlife without much too high a cost."

Glinda thought that sentiment was a bit harsh, but she held her tongue.

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As they sped off through the night, it became clearer that Elphaba was closing herself off. The more Glinda tried to encourage her to talk about what she had just experienced, the less she seemed to want to say. She could understand; if it had been her spellwork that turned a man to metal, she would be losing her marbles, too. However, there was no sense in dwelling on it.

Which she finally got Elphaba to respond to, just as they were passing over the Forest of the Fighting Trees.

"I know," she snapped angrily. "None of this is precious Nessa's fault, none of it's my fault. Or Boq's. You understand that, right?"

"Yes, of course," Glinda sighed in relief. "It's just one of those things that happens sometimes, right? When-"

"It's the Wizard's fault."
Her heart sank, the relief already gone on the winds behind them. "Really?"

"Don't you see? He's the one who drove me away, who… set me up to take the blame for those monkeys being changed! With me gone, disgracing the family name, Father worried himself into the grave. Father being gone made Nessa have to step into his place, since I was a fugitive — and she was in the position, she had the power to force Boq to stay by her side. We both know that old phrase about absolute power corrupting absolutely, don't we?"

"Well… it is a bit of a stretch, but I can't say there's any incorrectitude. So the Wizard pulls strings and everything spirals downward. So what? It's not like we can do anything about it."

"Time Dragon take it all, we can, too! And… we are!"

Both hands gripped hard on the broom handle, bringing them around to aim slightly south from their previous heading. Squealing and holding onto her friend more tightly, she called out, "Where are you taking us?!"

"To the Emerald City! This stops NOW!"

All that could be heard floating out behind them after that was Glinda's wail of despair and resignation.

~ o ~

A stroke of luck befell the pair as they flew in through a high window and entered the Wizard's spacious throne room: it was unattended. Glinda bit her lip to recall how things had taken such a dark turn the last time they visited; a few misplaced words of a spell, a breaking of trust, and their entire lives had changed in an instant. Even now, she felt they were making a grave mistake in returning to the scene of the crime, but Elphie had refused to heed her warnings all the way there.

As they neared the "great and terrible" mechanical head that he used to intimidate the masses, Glinda leaned over and again whispered, "This is stupid. We're going to get ourselves thrown… underground!"

"No, we will not," Elphaba protested firmly, laying her broom down as she paced back and forth. "He'll be here, and we will have words. And you and I both know my explosion spell has never been explosionier; if things go wrong, I'll 'create' a new exit for us. Please, don't be worried."

"Pardon me if I worry anyway. I can't believe you wanted to come back here! Is your memory that bad that you already forgot how he tried to shoehorn you into Assistant To The Regional Wizard?"

Sighing, she scuffed at the floor with her travelling boot as Elphaba looked this way and that, a hand shadowing her eyes. "And it doesn't even look like he's here, unless he's turned into a tapestry."

"I HAVE NOT!" the head boomed.

"OH, my Ozness!"

Elphaba did not react with quite the same level of shock as her compatriot. Instead, she merely sighed and called out, "Enough of the theatrics! I'm here to talk, but not to a giant puppet!"

"FINE." A moment later, the white-haired, pot-bellied old man emerged from behind the enormous bust of himself, smiling apologetically at the pair. Though he always looked rather grand in his top and tails, watch chain swinging from his vest pocket, the smear of grease on his cheek somewhat diminished the overall effect. "I was repairing one of the mechanisms; this thing breaks down more often than you'd think!"
"Your Wizardship," Glinda said immediately, bowing, then trying to turn the bow into a curtsy in mid-motion. "How have you been keeping?"

"Oh, well enough, well enough," he said in a genial tone. "Knew you'd be back. Oh, I knew you would, even after... well, that strongly-worded reply to your letter."

"You threatened us," Elphaba said without embellishment.

"Morrible threatened you," he nuanced, holding up a finger as his other hand grasped his lapel. "Her word choices, not mine. Besides, that letter was meant to be encouragement! A petition for you to come back and compromise. Surely you realise that I wouldn't waste such a resource as you and Miss Galinda on imprisonment, don't you?"

Glancing back and forth between them, Glinda cleared her throat and said, "N-no, we didn't. And it's 'Glinda', if you please, Wizliness."

"Glinda, Elphaba... the witches." Waving a hand at their glares, he said, "I don't see why a witch is so much worse than a wizard, anyway. That's up to the people of Oz. It would be interesting to ask them why one label is less palatable than the other when they have the same connotation: a person who, one way or another, suddenly finds themselves a bit more... magical than before."

"You don't have any magic," Elphaba accused baldly. "If you did, you wouldn't have tricked me into hurting Chistery and the other monkeys!"

A heavy sigh floated out of him, rustling the hairs above his lip. "It is true. All of my 'magic' is slight-of-hand, a shrewd use of modern invention... I'd try to protest, but you're a bit sharper than the average citizen of Oz."

"Then what do you want from me?" she demanded.

"To combine forces. My wit, and the people's faith in me... you and your perky blonde pal's powers, and we could do great things together! And you wouldn't have to keep running... wouldn't have to plan your own futures..." He leaned over to one side, as if hoping this would lend the other two a new perspective, as well.

"I like being in charge of my future," Glinda pouted. "It might not be a great one right now, but isn't that the only thing we truly have in the end? Control of our own fates?"

"Quite right! Quite right, my little dewdrop," he said with a nod, rocking back onto his heels. The "dewdrop" curled her lip at the term of endearment; he ignored that. "But there's a difference between getting to make the important choices, and having to make them all. Isn't there?" When neither of them responded, he spread his arms wide. "Let me take care of both you girls. You did a thing I found very disappointing when you took that book, very distressing, but if you just return it, swear to fall in line with the way things are run in the Emerald City, I promise you'll live like princesses!"

That only pulled an eyeroll from Elphaba. "I never had any desire to be a princess. Nor for someone to take care of me. Besides, what guarantee do we have that you won't just throw us in the dungeon when you have the Grimmerie?"

"You have my word."

"What's that worth in emeralds?" Glinda scoffed. "Nothing! You did set your soldiers on us, purely because we ran away when you tricked us! As far as I'm concerned, you're a... a naughty little boy who threw a tantrum because we didn't give your toy back!"
"But you took my toy," he said reasonably. "It did belong to me, didn't it?"

"I wonder." Narrowing her eyes, Elphaba paced back and forth in front of the Wizard. For his part, he tried to maintain that same genial facade, smiling beneath his mustache. "You can't use the book. We can. That's a very interesting fact. If I were to make a guess, I'd say it definitely doesn't belong to you."

Shrugging his shoulders, both of his hands went to the lapels of his coat. "Very good, very good. Though I didn't purloin the tome, if that's what you're implying. I found it. Here, actually; here in the palace."

"That's awfully forthrightful of you," Glinda said.

"Why shouldn't I say as much? Knowing it used to be here won't change the fact that yes, I'm the ruling head of Oz, and yes, the book belongs to me right now since it was in the palace when I found it. Correct?"

"Supposing we accept that," Elphaba continued, "what's to stop us from seizing control of the throne?"

"Um," Glinda began, but a wave of Elphaba's hand silenced her. She wanted to hear the Wizard's response.

"Oh, not much. I never asked for this, or planned it in advance. I was merely blown here by the winds of chance! When the folks in Oz needed someone to believe in, I swooped in from a land afar, and… well, the rest is history. Who was I to resist being worshipped like a king? I'm no George Washington." He held up a finger when he saw a pair of green nostrils flaring in anger and impatience. "However! I believe I should remind you that Madame Morrible is also lurking about here somewhere. If you try to depose me by force, she'll show you just how much power she has at her command."

"She couldn't read the book, either," Elphaba shot back, striding toward him. "Only a handful of spells; less than Glinda now. Which tells me she isn't so powerful after all. If she were, why doesn't she fix the real problems in Oz?"

His head cocked slightly as he considered. "Is that what it tells you? Hmm. Might be. Or it might not be. Who can say?"

This finally forestalled the two witches. They certainly weren't about to go around ceding points to the pompous windbag — not after he had either requested or allowed Morrible to order them to surrender and "accept their fate". But he was certainly giving them something to think about; a warning.

"What do you say?" he finally whispered when a time had passed and they did not respond. "Come on board the S.S. Wizard. Be part of my little family! Oh, I'd so like to have someone a little less… belligerent than Morrible to associate myself with. A couple of… apprentices? Peers, junior wizardesses?"

"You would pardon us entirely?" Glinda pressed him, voice cautious but hopeful. "For taking the book, and running, and any spells we used? That sounds too good to b-"

"Wait." Elphaba held an arm out in front of her friend as she took a step forward. Glinda couldn't help but feel both irritated at being silenced, and proud of Elphie for asserting herself. "You've made a habit out of telling lies to the people of Oz. How can we believe a word you say?"
"Ah, well, that's... you see, I'm..." He chuckled. "You've got me, I suppose. Haven't been a very honest chap, have I?"

"You can do something to prove yourself." Drawing herself up to her full height, she ordered, "Release the monkeys. As a gesture of goodwill, not as part of our negotiations. I've never done anything dishonest, and I don't think Glinda's capable of that at all."

"Hey!" she hissed. "I can fabricate with the best of them, probably! I just... haven't needed to very much!"

"But that's all you've ever done," Elphaba went on as if she hadn't been interrupted. "Lie, over and over. You're the only one whose word is in question. We need some proof up front that you can make good. Set those monkeys free, and we'll talk."

For the first time, they could both clearly see the indecision cross the old man's face. His lips worked and he paced back and forth, debating the pros and cons — sometimes aloud, under his breath. Then he shrugged and turned back to them.

"Done."

Striding over to the enormous head, he reached inside somewhere they couldn't see. A cranking sound filled the room as a large door wheeled up the wall, opening the way for a flood of winged monkeys to come pouring out. Their fur was the colour of coal, their leathery bat-wings stretching out from their backs; no doubt they had been cramped in such close confines with each other. The one named Chistery came up to Elphaba, regarding her with caution.

"Fly," she bade him urgently under her breath. When he only tilted his head in the other direction, she motioned at him with both arms, flapping and shooing. "Fly free! Chistery, you're free, isn't it wonderful?! Go, fly!"

"It's okay!" Glinda put in, using her sweetest voice. "No one will stop you this time! Fly away, little monkey!"

The other monkeys didn't have to be told twice, but Chistery ambled a lot more slowly to the windows. Turning her back on him so that he might get the idea, Elphaba strode over to the doorway and peered through to a cage in the corner.

"And it looks like we missed one," she sighed.

"N-now wait," the Wizard began to warn her, eyes widening as he tried to rush over. "Please, that's not-"

Too late. The cage was filled with a baa-ing instead of a chittering. Elphaba staggered back in shock when she recognized the occupant.

"No. N-no, y... Dr. Dillamond?!"

"By Ozma and Lurline," Glinda breathed.

The Wizard hurriedly approached the dumbstruck woman, her green lips parted wide as she gaped down at the Goat who had once been a wise, capable teacher. Now, all he could do was bleat and gaze up at her balefully, perched upon a bed of straw.

"He's been well taken care of," the Wizard attempted. "Hasn't wanted for anything. Nor have the monkeys! We... well, them being a problem for us didn't mean they should starve, does it?"
"What have you done? Why can't he talk?" When no answer came, Elphaba took over for the man's habit of grasping his lapels, shaking him by them as she snapped, "Tell me!"

Flinching afresh at her volume, he hissed, "We couldn't keep letting him speak out, could we?! All that dissent and chaos, it's… not ideal, not good for the kingdom!"

"How is she doing it? How is Morrible doing this to them?!" He only winced, so she finally dropped him, turning instead to wave her hands in a whirl and blow the door to the cage with one of her trademark explosions of pure magical energy. Dillamond bleated and ran around and around in a panic, finally bolting through the hole once the smoke had dissipated and running off to the far end of the room.

"GOLLY!" Glinda hissed as she pushed up from her crouch at the explosion. "Couldn't you at least warn me? I'm on your side, you know!"

"The deal is off," her companion growled down at the defeated man. "There's no sense trying to reason with a charlatan, a… an old humbug like you! Become your apprentice?! I am nothing like you and I never will be, and I will fight you until the day I die!"

"Please, this is all a misunderstanding!" the Wizard wailed. But he was drowned out by the sound of the giant doors being wrenched open, of boots thundering across the stone.

"The guards!" Elphaba cursed. "Glinda, grab the broom!"

"You bet I will!" But as she picked it up, she noticed the one in the front of the group. "Oh… oh!"

"Oh, what?" Joining her side, she got an eyeful and said the same herself. "Oh!"

Fiyero Tiggular, his tall, dark looks and lean form, was leading the charge. Fiyero. He definitely looked a bit different than the last time they had seen him, encased in a captain's uniform such as he was. But it was him — a yet more dashing version, if the women were being honest with themselves. Glinda gripped the broom handle tighter, feeling her insides clench, her mind race and grow lighter at the thought of all the myriad feelings she had for him in their days at Shiz.

And he was as shocked to see them as they were to see him. "I don't believe it," he breathed, staggering to a halt, the muzzle of his rifle lowering as he took in the sight of his old friends.

"Thank Oz!" Glinda managed to breathe. "It's so good to see a friendly face!"

After a beat, Elphaba managed to breathe, "I… I thought you might have-"

"Silence, witches!" he commanded, raising the gun again and licking his lips thoughtfully. Elphaba and Glinda were just exchanging a glance when he snapped to the other guards, "Fetch me some water!"

"Water, sir?" one asked. "Isn't it a funny time to come over thirsty?"

"You heard me — as much as you can carry! Go!" They did as they were told, running off. Then he swung back to look at them. "You two have a lot of explaining to do."

Taking a step toward him, Glinda began to plead, "Fiyero, it isn't what you thought! We- that is, everything was- I didn't mean for-"

"I said, silence!" She shot backward, squeaking at the firmness in his voice and the incongruity of being bade to speak and then silenced. To the Wizard, whom had just been reaching up to pull a
lever, he said, "Ah, ah! Don't even try it, Your Ozness, or I'll tell these two what the wonderful Wizard is really like."

This must have held some significant sway, because the man withdrew his hand, sinking down to the floor. Elphaba watched this take place, then turned to Fiyero and said in a gentler voice, "What are you doing? Aren't you going to catch us, put us in that cage?"

"Yes, after you frightened me half to death!" Glinda hissed at him. "Waving a gun around in a royal location!"

"No, I don't want to catch you." Again, he stared down at the Wizard, breathing fast and shallow as his chest heaved. "I want you to be free, and this is the only way I can help you."

"I need a drink," the Wizard muttered as he withdrew a green bottle from inside his coat pocket, uncorking it.

"So you truly want to help?" Elphaba asked. "But… what will you do? Leave the guard, just to tag along after us? For some reason, I can't see you doing that."

Nodding sadly, he glanced around the chamber. "Maybe not. But at least I can rest tonight knowing I didn't ignore my convictions."

"For a man with no brain, he sure is full of ideas," Glinda half-laughed. However, Elphaba didn't seem so amused. She approached him with wide eyes.

"Fiyero… we have to save Dr. Dillamond. He must be so frightened!"

Glancing between her eyes and those of the gin-guzzling Wizard on the floor, he nodded. "I'll search for him. You two have to escape; more guards will be coming, and Morrible, I'm sure. If you stick around… there's only so much I'll be able to do to protect either of you."

"Come with us," Glinda urged him, eyes streaming. His eyes were focused on Elphaba, which stung, but she went on, "We have a place - it's not much, barely a hole in the wall. But we're safe there!"

"Meet me in my family's spare castle on the mountain that overlooks Kiamo Ko," he hissed at them when they heard noise in the hallway outside the open doors. "It's abandoned — you'll be safe, and not in a hole! Now go, I'll find you when I can!"

"But you-"

"We have the water, sir!" one guard shouted as he came tromping inside. Fiyero had already raised his rifle to aim at Elphaba and Glinda, though they only gaped at him.

"Good! Throw it upon them — you've heard the rumours!"

Though both women shared a curious glance at that ominous line, they obeyed; not wanting to stick around for an impromptu bath, the witches took flight, Fiyero taking aim and missing them by a wide margin with the single shot he fired off even as water splashed uselessly against the floors. Glinda just caught the look of longing in his clear, piercing eyes before he was out of sight. Lost to them both yet again.

To Be Continued…
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Really, I am sorry about the long delay. Mostly a lot of personal business that doesn't matter in the slightest, haha, but I've also just been really distracted by leisure pursuits and other projects. I promise I haven't forgotten this fic and it will get posted.

It would take another full day of circuitous travel before they made it back to Wicca Falls. First, as per usual, they plotted to head East to confuse their trail, then this time South and West over Quadling Country until they could skirt the Outer Vinkus northward to their home. Though Fiyero's offer of lodging at an abandoned castle had been tempting, they both agreed that the safety of their little cave was what they needed that night.

However, they only made it as far as the Thousand Year Grasslands when the weather began to turn. At first, it only seemed to be a stronger headwind, but they were still leagues away from Neverdale when they were forced to land amongst the tall fields. As ungainly as their landing might have been, they were thankful it had not been any rougher or they might not have lived to tell the tale.

"Great Oz, what is this?" Glinda yelped as their cloaks were whipped around them.

"A storm — and a twigging good one!" Having to hold down her hat and broom, Elphaba felt herself being buffeted around, and in the open grassland there was nothing behind which they could take shelter. "Glinda! Don't let go of me!"

Lying as flat as they could, they were able to keep from being knocked down or otherwise inconvenienced. The broom was the worst of it; so much wind seemed to encourage it to take flight, and there were times both witches had to leap atop it to keep from losing it altogether. On one such occasion, Elphaba just scarcely managed to snatch her hat before it was carried off into the wild blue yonder.

"It's just a hat!" Glinda called out over the gale forces. "We could get you another one!"

"You gave this to me!" she cried as she stuffed it into her cloak, no longer trusting it to stay atop her head. "I could never let it be taken from me in such a… an unworthy fashion!"

Glinda had no answer to that. She felt one in her heart, thought of one, but the words sounded so silly that she couldn't quite force them out.

Once the worst of the winds had finally died down, they cautiously began to stand. Then the air stilled completely. It was so sudden that Glinda found herself half-crouched and blinking, completely at a loss for what she should do next.

"That was horrible," she finally breathed. "Just… just whipped up out of nowhere, and we almost crashed!"

Elphaba took her rumpled black hat out of her robes and plopped it on her head. Glinda often wondered if she had a spell on it that helped keep it secure during their usual flights. "No… not 'horrible' — Morrible. I don't know why, and I don't know how, but she's to blame for this wind."
Her companion clutched at her arm, and Elphaba embraced her back to afford her some comfort. "She knew we were flying. Maybe she thought we'd slam into the Kells!"

"Oh, Lurline knows what she thought! That devil woman, that, that… blowhard!"

"She did at that," Glinda quipped. Elphaba only glared. "Sorry. My mouth gets ahead of me when I'm scared."

At that, Elphaba ran a hand over her hair, sighing. "I'm sorry. This whole situation is so infuriating to me that sometimes I forget that you must have your own feelings about it. But we'll-"

When she suddenly cut off, looking upward, Glinda's eyes followed to see a flock of crows swirling into the sky. Whether they were crows or Crows was unclear. It was such a stark omen, like a black cloud rising from the far East, that she found herself holding her breath, as if waiting for the consequences to crash down on the pair of them immediately.

"I'm… I'm afraid again."

"What?"

"Nessa," Elphaba breathed. "I'm sorry, I know I've said this before, and things turned out so badly… but…"

She dropped her eyes, both frustrated and full of hot shame. But Glinda couldn't hold it against her. She didn't even wish to try. One hand passed up and down her friend's back as she leaned up to press a kiss into her cheek.

"Let's go check on Nessie. I know you won't be able to sleep if we don't."

"Sometimes, I think you know me a little too well." They both shared a bleak smile before mounting the broom and taking off at top speed.

As it happened, there was something to distract them from making it to Colwen Grounds. A very prominent, very strange something.

By the side of the Yellow Brick Road, very near Nest Hardings and the seat of the Munchkinland government, was an odd little house. This wasn't all that strange to Glinda on its own; why shouldn't someone live just to the side of such a well-travelled route? Would be easy enough for their friends and family to find them. However, she could tell by the look on Elphaba's face that this was a house that did not belong.

Upon getting closer, it was easy to see why. The house seemed to be a single large room, and was drably painted a greyish colour. It was the single most unimpressive building Glinda had ever seen in all her years — including some of the Quadling shacks. No polka dots on the doors, no stripes on the eaves… not even a little gargoyle by the chimney. Just plain, grey wood, slapped together into an ugly dwelling, which only looked yet uglier for having just appeared there. The state of disrepair seemed to suggest it had been _dropped_, but that was impossible… wasn't it?

"I don't know what to make of it," Elphaba breathed as they descended. "How could a house not be there a couple of days ago, and suddenly be here now?"

"Maybe it was already there, and it was just so boring nobody ever noticed," Glinda reasoned. "I mean, it's a teensy grey hut. Who cares?"
Apparently, that was not a popular opinion, as a crowd had already formed. Several members of Nessa's Pike Guild had come to regard it warily, polearms at the ready in case some beast or witch came charging out to have their heads. Many other citizens were also beginning to approach in a slow trickle from the city proper, slowing yet more the closer they got.

"We probably don't have much time, Elphie. What should we do? Stop here, or go on ahead to check on Nessa?"

"She's already here."

The nature of the scene before them began to seem different now that they could see Nessarose flanked by her guards, staring down the house as if it were already alive and ready to gobble them up. It would have been comical if the witches weren't equally frightened.

"Elphaba!" Nessa screamed the moment they came into view. "What have you done?!"

The green woman started. "What have I done? Come to see if you were alright, that's what I've done, and no more! What's happened?"

Though the polearms raised to pierce them when they drew close, Nessa's raised hand forestalled them. They did not draw back, but remained at the ready, waiting for her signal. Unlike before, she was now dressed to the nines, black-and-white striped socks drawing attention downward to her glimmering shoes. Though her violet cape and silvery dress were no less impressive.

"She cleans up nice," Glinda muttered out of the side of her mouth. Elphaba only elbowed her as they drew within easy speaking distance.

"Elphaba, I need you to swear to me," she said in a tight voice, chest heaving with the force of her every breath. "You are the only powerful witch I know of in this entire kingdom. I know you did this, I know it! But... if you swear on our mother's grave that you did not, I may consider that something else happened."

"I swear on both Mother and Father's graves," she told her solemnly, handing the broom to Glinda so she could stride forward and take her sister's hands. But Nessa drew them away. Elphaba sighed and said, "Nessa... I'm sorry. I'm sorry about Father and about Boq, but I did not do those things myself. The latter was an accident — I was trying to help!"

"And what about Father? You drove him to an early grave! How could you betray Oz this way? I don't care about your reasons, about Animals or... or whatever! You turned your back on Munchkinland, and the Wizard!"

Her voice was hard as she hissed, "He gave me no choice. I tried to meet with him, to smooth things over and give him a second chance, and... and he has only proven to me that he is not fit to lead the Land of Oz. Too weak to stand up for what's right, too..." She shook her head. "I don't know what we should do, but I have to do something! If I just stood by and let him use the Animals' freedom to distract us from the real problems in his people's lives, then I wouldn't be able to live with myself!"

The more Elphaba went on, the more uncertain Nessarose seemed to be. But then she waved a hand to the side. "Enough! I... I don't believe you. There's no proof of any of what you say, and until there is, it's just... just noise!"

Elphaba wound up to speak again, clearly incensed, but Glinda cut across her, "But we really didn't cause that storm! In fact, it almost knocked us out of the sky, clear on the other side of Oz! Do... did you see anything? If it happened here, what did you see? Anything at all!"
"Nothing. Just the cyclone coming from the South. I… well, I've never seen anything like it! And
there seemed to be something in the eye, but no one could tell what it was until it fell on…"

Something was too silent in the way Nessa cut herself off. Her lovely eyes were wide and fearful as
she glanced between the two others, as if she knew to continue would be to bring doom upon
herself.

"On what?" Elphaba whispered. "Or who?"

"Whom," Glinda corrected. Both Nessa and Elphaba slapped one of her arms apiece, and she
stepped back, rubbing them with a pout on her lips.

"Come on, Nessa. Tell us."

After more hesitation, she glanced over at the house, then back at them again. "Do you… remember
that boy, Fiyero? The one who was at the Ozdust Ballroom wi-

Neither of them let her finish. Both witches raced toward the drab, dilapidated house with all the
speed they could summon, cloaks billowing out behind them.

"Can you see anything?!" Glinda shouted a few minutes later when they had circuited the house.

"Only from here!" Elphaba announced from the front. Glinda circled around to join her, where they
both crouched down. "Can you see? There, through this gap!"

"No! Move over!" Given the new perspective, Glinda squinted through the crack, raising the small
wand she had once been given by Morrible and lighting the tip with one of the paltry few
enchantments she had memorised. "Oh, look there, around the center! I see something!"

Sitting back a few seconds later, they exchanged a worried glance. The house was not flush with the
ground everywhere, but there was little chance he had come through the ordeal unscathed. Most
likely, he was already dead and cold.

"We can't be too late," Elphaba breathed, beginning to tremble. "I… I refuse to believe it!"

Laying a hand on her arm, even as her own eyes streamed, she whispered, "I… I don't want to turn
him into Biq, but… but if there's anything we could do… shouldn't we try?"

They should. And they would.

"What are you doing?" Nessa demanded as they knelt a few paces away from the front of the
structure, withdrawing the Grimmerie and leafing through it. "Not this again! You can't be serious!"

"You have no idea how serious," Elphaba snapped. "If there's even the slightest chance…"

"But it's madness! You know what happened to my Boq, so what- how could you ever consider
doing such an awful thing to anyone else?!"

As Elphaba continued to flip pages, Glinda screamed up at her, "I love him! So if you don't mind,
you can shut your twigging mouth, you… you dictatorly traitor!"

"This one!" Elphaba cried out, slapping her hand between the pages. Glinda leaned over her, a
dubious expression in place. "What? What's the matter?"

"Isn't that the one you tried to use to make our straw-stuffed mattress softer?"
"No! No, I don't think so…" She peered down at the page, then glared up at Glinda. "This isn't the time to second-guess me! It's the best spell I have!"

"Then I'll cast another one," Glinda said as she leafed through the back of the book, ignoring the outraged cry from her companion. "If we both concentrate, and don't get distracted by the other person's spell, then it should be fine! We've both cast spells at once before!"

By this time, Nessa was flapping around near their shoulders, whispering, "Are you sure any of this is wise? Maybe we should just… let him be…" Hearing how that sounded, she added, "Because of what we did to Boq. I know, I've seen how important he was to both of you, so… do you really want to wish the same fate on him?"

Glinda felt a pinprick of curiosity at that line. They both loved Fiyero. She had suspected, given a few of the glances they exchanged, turns their conversations took over the years — but had told herself it was ridiculous. Fiyero had never expressed any true interest in Elphaba, other than his farewell the day they left for the Emerald City. And anytime she lamented losing him, being apart from him, Elphaba had said nothing. Only let her prattle onward like a child.

What would have happened if they did not have to run from the Wizard's armies? Would they have fought over Fiyero? Lost their friendship because they both desired him? She couldn't imagine it now. Yes, it was possible, but she simply did not think she had the stomach to fight with Elphaba about something that seemed so… petty.

And she couldn't focus on that. Stopping her thoughts in their tracks as she landed upon a page, she whispered, "I have mine; it's a protection spell, but I think if I modify it… say an 'ah' instead of an 'ey'?"

"Yes, we'll have to do what we can. There's no time." Holding the middle sheaf of pages exactly vertical, they both tilted their heads so they could read the script of their respective spells. "Nessa, do you mind?"

"Do I mind what? Oh." Stepping between them on her still-unsteady legs, Nessa grasped the middle pages, trying to hold her fingers out of the way of any words. "This is insane…"

"Good. Thank you." Clearing her throat, Elphaba began to chant, "Eleka nahmen nahmen, atum atum, eleka nahmen…"

But Glinda had to block that out, and fast. If she let herself get rattled or distracted by the other incantation, it would only muddle her own, so she set to work immediately, speaking the words and swirling her hands to help pull in the mystical energies of spellwork. Line after line flew from her lips as she read aloud, until she was completely lost to time.

Finally, she let her spell loose. An instant before, she had more sensed than actually saw Elphaba's hands fly forward to do the same; the light was so subtle that she was sure most non-witch residents of Oz would see nothing at all — only the results, which would not be visible due to flying under the house.

That was the intention.

Something obstructed Glinda's spell from reaching Fiyero where he lay. Two somethings: dusty brown shoes, adorned with a buckle but otherwise very plain. Her eyes screwed up, puzzled as she stared at the twinkling light of her magic befalling them. What were those doing in the middle of the road?
Then she realised the shoes had not been abandoned. So narrow had her focus been on casting her spell that she hadn't even looked further upward until the magic began to fade, settling into its new home. Up the dingy white socks, the rolled-up cuffs of blue material that seemed to be pants — except it stretched up over a middle and a chest, even hooking over two shoulders by way of straps. Only by the time she saw rosy cheeks, a gaping mouth, and brown braids did Glinda finally realise…

This was another person. Quite a tall person for the average Munchkin, and dressed in such strange garments! But there the stranger stood, all the same, open-mouthed and completely shocked by the sight of witches doing their witchly business.

"What…" Glinda cleared her throat, fingers finally beginning to curl away from the Grimmerie. 
"Who- I mean, where did you come from?"

Nessa dropped the pages as she drew back, as surprised as her former classmate. Elphaba, however, had scarcely taken her eyes off the eaves underneath the house; she was willing Fiyero to present himself, for anything to take place. Inwardly, so was Glinda, but she was also worried about what she might have done to an innocent bystander with her spell.

"G-Goodness me!" the person squeaked — a woman, if the voice were any indication. She hadn't been sure, what with how she looked. "Y-you talk! You queer little folk can talk!"

"Of course we can!" Nessa burst out, more startled into responding than meaning to have said anything. "Y-you… how did you do that?"

Still heavily distracted by her surroundings, the strange girl breathed, "Do what?"

"Make a house fly! I've… not even our great and terrible Wizard can do something like that!"

"A housefly? I- w-well, you don't 'make' houseflies, th-they come on their own! Of course, Uncle Henry's always sayin' that I don't help any, on account of I leave the butter dish out, a-and then they come 'round because they can't resist Aunt Em's butter, s-so… maybe I do make houseflies, after all, and if that's gonna be a problem, then I'm awful sorry! But the butter dish is closed up right now, so they shouldn't come; should they?"

No one responded. Not a single Munchkinlander did more than cough.

"Do… you mean to say that you can lift an entire building… with only the use of a butter dish?" Glinda finally asked dubiously, trying not to sound too disbelieving.

"What?!" she squeaked, a hand flying to her bowlike mouth. "Oh, no, no, no! I can't lift a whole house! Goodness, I'm only a little thing, aren't I? Ain't heard of anyone liftin' anything like a house all on their lonesome! Not without a pulley! A-and I haven't got a pulley! There's one in the barn, but the barn is…" Her hand swept to one side, but a second later it fell as she gaped at the rolling fields of blue maize, the swaying of the Fighting Trees. "Is… not here. Or I'm not there. Am I? M-maybe I'm not even in Kansas anymore…"

Nessa reached down to help Glinda up, and she gratefully took the hand. Privately, she worried about unbalancing the new-to-walking woman, but things turned out alright. Then she straightened her cloak and asked, "Dear thing, what's your name?"

"My name? Dorothy. Dorothy Gale, if you please." She reached out to the sides as if to curtsy, then seemed to start when she grasped only at the sides of pantlegs. Dipping her head shamefacedly, she announced, "I… I'm so underdressed, I… you all look so lovely, and I'd b-been out working with Uncle Henry before the storm! What a state to be in when I meet new people!"
"A pleasure to meet you," Glinda said, curtsying and managing it just fine. "My name is Glinda Upland, of the Upperuplands. This is Nessarose Thropp, the Eminent."

"How do you do?" Nessa greeted her with a wooden bow, as if not quite sure she ought to be bowing. Really, everyone was shocked; it was only Glinda's breeding that allowed her innate sense of decorum to override her complete surprise.

"I do well! Oh, it's nice to meet you both!" For the first time, the girl chanced a hesitant smile as she turned to where Elphaba still crouched over the book. "And… and who might you be?"

After a moment, Elphaba glanced up at her. Her expression was slacken, empty, and Glinda felt her heart seize to see her that way. "It didn't work."

"What?"

"The spell. It didn't work, he… he isn't…" Then everything about her changed. Boiling to her feet, she bellowed directly at the girl, "What have you DONE?!"

Dorothy shrank back from the shout, all of her budding good humour replaced with fright. "Done? Wh-why, I haven't done anything at all, I p-promise!"

"This is your house, isn't it?" No answer. She took a step forward, hands curling into fists as she bore down on the girl who was just scarcely shorter than herself. "Answer me, you fool!"

"Y-yes! It's my home, I- what is it, what's wrong?"

"You MURDERER!"

Elphaba's hands had just barely begun to swirl, to conjure a spell of some sort, when Glinda dashed forward and tugged the arms down. "Elphie, stop!"

"NO! Let me go, let me go this instant! She can't be allowed to get away with this, I won't-"

"I don't understand!" Dorothy was wailing, backpedaling toward her house and tripping over a crack in the bricks, so that she sat down hard in the grass between road and house. "AH! What- oww!"

At the same moment, a small black creature came pelting out of the house, as well. It yipped and barked at Elphaba, and Glinda didn't quite know what to make of it. It seemed like some sort of cross between a dog and a cat, but it was unlike any creature she had ever seen.

"She'll be shredded to pieces," Elphaba was growling, straining against Glinda's grip. Nessa merely stood nearby, indecisive but eyes wild at the scene playing out. "Crucified and whipped until — no, that isn't fitting at all. I'll just have to drop this godforsaken house on her!"

Gritting her teeth, Glinda tried to turn her around to face her, but it was slow going, and the barking from the odd little thing was distracting. Once she managed it, through a lot of grunting and straining, she snapped, "FABALA!" That got her focus, alright. "You can't do this to her! You are not a perpetrator of murderosity, and I won't let you act like you are!"

"It was Fiyero!" she snapped directly into her face. Glinda couldn't suppress a wince. "How can you not be upset? Don't you care? I thought you loved him!"

"I did!" Tears were on her cheeks already, and she hadn't the slightest clue when they got there. "And I do! But… but if he has gone… oh, Elphie, what's it going to change to take revenge on this poor young one?"
The words began to sink in. She knew they did; the way Elphaba's eyes turned down and to one side showed her as much. Given more opportunity, she could have talked some sense into her companion.

However, they never got a chance to sink in any further. At that moment, there came a great **BOOM!** that filled the area, startling the Pike Guild and all the Munchkinlanders further back.

"AHHH!" Dorothy screamed out, covering her head with both arms and pressing herself back against the steps as the small dog-cat ran to her, nosing at her arms.

Rising up from the billowing smoke in the middle of the road was a sight that sent chills down Glinda's spine. High, forbidding white hair, pinched, fishlike pale features, and a billowing dress that disguised an equally-billowing figure.

"You," Glinda breathed, a hand going to her mouth.

"How dare you attack this poor girl!" she announced, raising an arm to level a crooked finger and a pointed, painted nail at the two witches. "Have you evil witches caused enough harm to Oz?!"

"Here's someone I can drop a house on," Elphaba growled, eyes narrowing to slits. "Madame Morrible… I might have known. I might have known it was you!"

But the moment she took a step toward the vile press secretary, she snapped, "Guards!" And the guards fell into line between them. The armoured and polearm-wielding Munchkins, looking quite uncomfortable but resolute, aimed the weapons in their direction.

"Wait," Nessa said in disbelief, taking a step out from behind her sister. "What are you doing? I haven't given an order — and I order you to stand down!" Nothing happened. "I demand you step aside until I call upon you!"

"They aren't yours to push around anymore," Morrible chuckled darkly, with a wolfish look that only they three would ever see. Dorothy was cowering by the house, the guards facing the wrong way, and all the citizens of Nest Hardings too far away to see anything clearly. "Several months ago, I learned of the coup they were planning against the Wicked Witch of the East, and decided to bide my time. Why dirty my own hands when it's not strictly necessary?"

"Wicked… Witch of the- who is…" But it began to dawn on the poor paraplegic. Her eyes swept to Elphaba, then back to her traitorous troops, none of whom met her glance with even a hint of sympathy. She breathed, aghast, "Me? You think me a witch?"

All Morrible said in response to that was, "Blood will out." Then to Elphaba, she snapped, "I suggest you leave this place, before I am forced to attack you forthwithly! The Wizard is still most displeased you could not see his generosity for what it was, and you've caused enough trouble for too long!"

"Not half as much trouble as I-" But the tugging at Elphaba's arm told her Glinda did not agree, so she turned to hiss, "What?!"

"Let's go. They're all stacked against us, we… we can't stay." Her longing eyes flicked to the house again, but she only sighed before saying, "Please, Elphie? Let's just… fall back and figure out what to do without all these stabby things pointed at us!"

The green nostrils flared. Then she hissed, "No good deed goes unpunished. I spared the brat, and all of Munchkinland is still against me, are they?"

"No! They just… don't know what to believe right now! Please don't-"
"FINE." Picking up their broom, she mounted it immediately and glared across at their adversary, who looked like a cat with a mouthful of bird feathers. "This is not the last of me, you tyrant! May you and all who serve you meet the ghastliest of ends!"

"That's my line," Glinda hissed. "I'm the Ghastly one!"

As she swung on behind Elphaba, Morrible called out, "So be it! Retreat like the cowards you are!"

Glinda could tell this was as important to Morrible as the confrontation itself: building herself up as their saviour in the eyes of the Munchkins, even though she had scarcely done a thing other than exist. It was all showmanship. She and the Wizard really were a match made somewhere unpleasant. Still, she couldn't spare her the brainpower. Turning to Nessa, she asked, "Are you coming?"

"NO! What makes you think I'd ever-" The points of the spears raised toward her when she tried to take a step toward the Pike Guild, and she turned back to the two of them, face paling and eyes downcast. "Well… as long as you're offering…"

"Mark my words!" Morrible was calling out at their backs as the three so-called witches took off into the Western sky, leaving behind a potential new friend, and the remains of an old one. "You will come to rue the day you ever crossed wands with a real witch, you… you pretenders! You charlatanous charlatans! Stay gone, if you know what's good for you!"

*To Be Continued...*
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Well... Camp NaNo really shot my plan to keep up with this fic in the arse. I'm still recovering, really. Hopefully you can all forgive me! But I really do want to start posting this regularly until it's completely available now. Time makes fools of us all!

The only thing more crowded than a broom with two occupants is a broom with three. It was already obvious before they took to the air, and only became galling and inconvenient the longer they flew. Glinda was used to having Elphaba several inches in front of her, hanging on by way of her hands around her friend's trim waist. By this new arrangement, the petite blonde was literally in her lap, with Nessa hanging onto the back of them as if her life depended on it.

Which, in all actuality, it did — not merely because they were so high in the air, flying over hill and dale, but because there was no longer a place for her in Munchkinland. Despite the rumours of her hardline policies, Glinda had never expected to watch a coup d'état play out in front of her! But that was exactly the situation. Now, even if they dropped her off in another country, the Wizard and Morrible would definitely want to either clap her in irons, or bring her in for questioning about her sister.

"Everything is gone," Nessa was blubbering behind them as they began to near the Kells, and thereby the Vinkus. "M-my home, all of my things… Father's legacy, Mother… m-my Boq…"

"Time to face facts, Nessa," Elphaba sighed gruffly. "Boq was never yours to begin with; always too interested in Glinda."

"Don't remind me, or I'll knock her off this broom."

At that, Glinda couldn't stay silent anymore. "Really? That little pipsqueak gets it into his head that I'm his special lady, and it's my fault?! What kind of senseless sense does that make?"

"You led him on! With your… your blonde hair and your sparkly eyes, and y-your… your two legs that worked! And I didn't stand a chance!"

"Listen to yourself, little sister. Glinda can't be to blame for being born with an emerald spoon in her mouth, and she never gave him the slightest time of day." With a sigh, Elphaba then admitted, "No more than I could blame her for charming Fiyero."

At that, Glinda tightened her grip on the broom handle. "Y-yes… we both cared for him a great deal, and will miss him. I think it's… it's best we left it at that."

Elphaba's hands were around Glinda's middle, holding onto the broom. The only way she could show affection was to lean in and kiss her cheek, so that's just what she did, surprising the blonde. "I'm sorry I lost my temper back there, it wasn't very… well, I'm sorry, and I'm glad you were there to talk some sense into me. I just wasn't expecting- I mean, anyone but Fiyero! It isn't right, it isn't fair!"

"Bet you'd rather that house fell on me," Nessa sobbed. "W-well, so do I! Nobody wants me around
anymore, n-nobody in Munchkinland, not…" She had obviously been about to mention Boq again, but caught herself. "All I have left to my name is these shoes…"

"Well, at least you have those, so why don't you dry up? Glinda's the one who's really experiencing a loss here; your would-be boyfriend is still alive! Sort of. But Fiyero isn't so lucky. Right, Glinda?"

With a heavy sigh, Glinda tried to piece together her thoughts. "You know… I'm still sad, and I know I'll want to have a good cry later. He didn't deserve this, not at all. But I… well, it seems like it's been so long since I've seen him, even though it was just a day ago! Before that, it had been years, I… well, what I'm trying to say is that I guess my schoolgirl crush wore off, that's all. Stupidifying, isn't it?"

After a few seconds, Nessa said, "I don't know what that means."

"Nevermind," Elphaba sighed, perching her chin on Glinda's shoulder by way of comforting her. "Glinda should probably write her own special dictionary."

But once they reached the Kells and began to pass into "Winkie Country", as Nessa kept calling it even though that was an outdated and offensive term, it was Glinda who requested they stop into the castle at Kiamo Ko, after all. He had offered it, and they all now agreed that it was the least they could do to pay their respects, and see what use they might make of it — Nessa less enthusiastically, but she agreed all the same.

The castle itself was not nearly the shining splendour that the Royal Palace presented. In fact, quite the opposite: it was dark, ominous, and forbidding. There wasn't much use in questioning why it had been abandoned. Severe crenellations lined the top of every wall around parapet walkways like fangs, gouging into the sky. The sprawling mass was dotted with circular towers, small windows that were dark and empty, pinnacles, bartizans, and a buttress here and there. Steep cliffs on all sides meant there was only one way in: the winding, rocky path that led up to the front door. Being caught off guard would either require flight, or for all inhabitants to be sleeping.

"Well, this is depressing," Nessa said immediately as they touched down on one of the landings. "Big, but depressing."

"My thoughts exactly," Glinda said. "But let's take a look around inside, shall we? Appearances can be deceptivatious."

A quick tour was enough to tell them everything they needed to know: it was empty. Every bedchamber had a bed and mattress draped with a sheet, but not made up. The enormous kitchens had bare cupboards, but were fully stocked with pots and pans, and a stove ready for wood. The pump for the well creaked but it worked. All in all, a workable living space.

Hours later, they had become separated from each other, and it took a goodly amount of time for Glinda to find her way to the throne room. It was nowhere near as impressive as the Wizard's, as covered in dust and cobwebs as the suits of armour and tapestries were. Once there, she decided to brush off the large, ornate throne and sit upon it, waiting for one of the others to happen along her. Some life she'd turned out to have! Stuck in a dreary old collection of rocks with two witches. To be fair, she was also a witch now, as far as the larger share of Ozian society was concerned, but that was as unprecedented as the rest of it: what had led her to this life? She dreamed of the days of her youth, when her only desire was to be the Wizard herself. Even though her parents had tried to explain to her that only the Wizard could be the Wizard, she didn't care; it was the only job she wanted. That, or a mayor of some sort. Being a useless debutante with a powdered face and powdered wigs was not at all appealing.
Yet that was the direction she had been headed in before Elphaba helped her begin magical tutelage under Morrible. All in all, she had to say this was at least better than a future as some accent piece for a lordling.

Or Fiyero. That was a future that was no longer open to her. Tears threatened, caught in the back of her throat, but they wouldn't quite come. Maybe she was too exhausted. Or maybe… she wasn't as attached to him as she had once assumed. But it felt unkind to speak of the dead that way.

She had probably dozed off, because she didn't hear the door creak open; only heard it thud shut. Elphaba was there, a small magical flame held in her palm. Apparently, she and Nessa hadn't found each other, either.

"Hmm?" she muttered, still too groggy to say anything more.

"I've been looking all over for the both of you," Elphaba grunted. Spotting a torch in one of the sconces, she lit it with the flame and then let the magical one wink out. "This place is massive!"

"Yeah," she yawned, stretching out her limbs. "Ohhh, it is. Do you… think that's why it's abandoned? They just didn't have any use for all these rooms?"

Chuckling, Elphaba came over and squeezed into the throne next to her. "Maybe. Or that it was too difficult to reach on foot; that would be reason enough."

Glinda slipped an arm around her waist, grateful for the companionship. Elphaba seemed to have also been exhausted by all the walking and the events beforehand, because she let out a long, weary sigh. A few minutes passed in comfortable silence this way. Then the tears began, but only for Elphaba; her own eyes remained moist but did not leak. Maybe she had truly underestimated how much her companion cared for the previously-aloof prince. Was it always that way, or had his donning the uniform of a royal guard changed her viewpoint?

Some five minutes later, when she had dampened Glinda's shoulder enough for one day, she pulled back to wipe at her cheeks. "S-sorry about that," she finally breathed. "You m-must… be wondering why I'm so em- so emotional over someone who I d-didn't have m-much in common with."

"I am," Glinda admitted gently. When Elphaba cringed, she hurried to add, "But it's okay! Honest! It's… can you tell me how long you've had feelings for him? Or is that a little too personal?"

"We've lived together for two years, so it would be silly for me to say anything's 'too personal' now." They both chuckled sadly. "Um… almost as long as you have. Do you remember when we rescued that Lion cub from the classroom? It… started then. He was so kind and compassionate, even though he liked to pretend he didn't care about a twigging thing. But I knew he would only have eyes for you."

Did he? Glinda had to wonder. All she whispered was, "How did you know that?"

"Because you're perfect. You have style and grace, money, a dazzling smile. The scintillating siren of Shiz. And what am I? Just an artichoke."

"You're an emerald shining in a coal-black world," Glinda corrected her, squeezing her in closer. "And I'm not as great as all that. But thank you."

"Stop. We both know that not a single man in their right mind would ever want anything to do with me."

"We know no such thing! You're beautiful, Elphie; I told you, it just… takes some getting used to the
green thing! But once you do, all you can see is your sharp, handsome features, your clever eyes…” Glinda reached up and caressed her cheek. ”Warm lips…”

A moment passed as they held still. Then Elphaba turned away from her, hands clutching at the cloak where it covered her knees.

"I thought… you weren't going to bring that up again."

"Bring what up?" Then she blinked in recognition and ducked her head. "OH! Sorry! That wasn't- I didn't mean to make this about that, it was just a- I was trying to be complimentatious toward you, that's all!"

"It was a one-time mistake! I told you! And… and I wanted to put it from my mind completely, and here you are, dredging up old-"

"I'm sorry, Elphie, I really am," Glinda told her urgently, taking up her hand and squeezing it. "But at least I'm not teasing like last time; you had every right to be angry. I just… wasn't thinking about how embarrassed you were."

"Then why tease me now?!" she demanded, eyes haunted when she turned back to Glinda. The shorter woman felt sick to see the tracks of moisture on her cheeks, so used to Elphaba never crying as she was. "Isn't it all the more cruel?!"

"Teasing? How was I teasing?"

"You said I have warm lips!"

"B-but you do!"

Rolling her eyes, Elphaba scoffed, "Right. As if anything about me is warm! All sharp angles, like ice!"

"Your lips are warm, Elphie! All of you is! You're… I wasn't teasing or fibbing, it's the truth!" Swallowing hard, she shrugged and pushed ahead, "Yeah, we agreed not to talk about it anymore, but we never said we wouldn't think about it! And… well, I can't help it, a woman's mind wanders when she gets bored sometimes!"

Another silence. This one lingered, crept into their bones as they squirmed in the throne, which was large enough to seat two but now seemed too small in spite of that.

"I was just trying to keep warm," Elphaba told her softly. "You do believe that, don't you?"

"I… believe it's what you think. But I have wondered…"

"Wondered what?"

"Whether or not a little something else was skipping around in the back of your mind, and you just didn't realise it? And not just your mind, either." Though her friend shivered, she pressed on, "Of course, I know it would be unusual, though. Anything elsewise. Nevermind, forget I brought it up; I'm just being the same silly ol' me."

Elphaba's hands grasped Glinda's shoulders, and she again felt the excited, vulnerable feeling that sometimes swept over her whenever her friend was filled with that type of intensity. It was overcoming her all too often lately, and she felt her resolve against its portents weakening. The memory of that cold winter night, huddled for warmth in the cave behind Wicca Falls, lips meeting in
a way neither of them intended for them to meet... it was one she revisited often, and with waning regret. By now, she cherished the memory — even if the passionate woman staring down into her eyes might feel differently.

"Why do you always insist that we don't need separate beds?"

As her pulse sped up another notch, she whispered back, "Wh-why don't you ever insist we do? Elphie, you know it takes two to tango."

"I already know that... that I could never ask for a better friend than you," Elphaba whispered, eyes still leaking as if she simply didn't know how to shut the water off. "Isn't that enough? Why are... does everything have to change?"

"Who says anything has to change? Maybe the change happened already, right under our noses." Then her eyelashes fluttered as she stared downward. "Listen to me, flustered and spewing out strange words, I... neither of us are those types of women, right? It's preposterosity personified! All I w-wanted to do was explain my comment about your lips being warm, so you didn't think I was teasing, or trying... to..."

When Elphaba's hand came up to cup her cheek, she froze entirely, waiting to hear what she might say. Once it came, everything not only unfroze, but began to pulsate with urgency.

"That you would want to see if they're still as warm as in the winter?"

Immediately, Glinda pulled away. She didn't want to, but it felt of the utmost importance. "Wait. We can't, we... okay, I th-think we're both a little fragile from what happened — from Fiyero. I don't know about you, but some part of me's been holding onto him as a kind of... 'default intended', even though we haven't seen him much lately. S-so it's natural when having someone pulled away from you like that, you... you reach for the next closest person to... take their place."

Elphaba was definitely listening. Her throat worked to swallow, and she smoothed down the front of her cloak and dress. "You're right. Absolutely right, it's just... this is not the time to... to figure this out. Not when we are still grieving."

"No, it isn't. But..."

"But?"

Glinda felt her face grow hot, her stomach full of a cyclone. "Tonight... when we sleep..." She pushed up from the throne, putting her back to Elphaba. Forcing herself to say more. "If you need me for anything... any kind of comfortatious purpose..."

"I won't," she told her firmly. "I'm not going to use you, just because I'm distraught over someone else. You mean a lot more to me than that!"

"Even if I'd be willing?" If only the blood would stop rushing in her ears, maybe she wouldn't feel so on edge!

"Even... then," Elphaba said, though with more uncertainty. "I... Glinda, you never cease to surprise me. Two years of friendship, and I still..." Another sob, but when Glinda whirled around it was to see Elphaba also standing, swiping at her eyes and trying to compose herself as best she could. "Thank you. I don't think I'll be needing anything like that, but there aren't words to tell you how much I appreciate the offer."

Glinda wrapped her up in a tight hug that had Elphaba grunting, and she returned it a moment later.
"Elphie! If… if a house falls on you, I'm really… I can't handle that, I can't! Promise me you won't let that happen!"

A wet laugh escaped her before she whispered, "I'll glance up now and then, just for you." Petting over her blonde hair, she began to steer Glinda toward the door of the throne room.

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They finally found Nessa in one of the towers, lamenting her existence and clinging to some kind of golden cap she had turned up in one of the cupboards. It looked fancy and expensive, but also garish; Glinda couldn't imagine there being a time when it would be in fashion.

"Why, Elphaba?" she whispered earnestly. "Was I just cursed from the beginning? My legs don't work, I can't win over the one man I care for… betrayed by my subjects, blamed for Fiyero… wh- what's the matter with me?"

Though Elphaba seemed about ready to say something unkind, Glinda put an arm around her and said in a gentle tone, "Nothing, dear! This is nothing more than a string of bad luck, that's all! I know you'll turn it around — we all will!"

"B-but you brought this on yourselves! You stole the Grimmerie, defied the Wizard! At least it makes sense he would turn on you! Why would the Munchkins turn on me? Didn't they s- see that I was only trying to keep them safe?"

"Oh, stop that," Elphaba spat. "We've already told you a dozen times why the Wizard turned on us, and you know it's no more our fault than the storm dropping a house on…" She had to bite back a sob. "Anyway, the Munchkins might have been safe, but they had no freedom. Of course they protested!"

"Who wants freedom if it gets you killed?! With you and the Wizard feuding, everyone's been in danger! Letting them go to the Emerald City, or even worse, the Vinkus?! They'd all end up—"

"You don't care one bit about them! You closed the borders to keep Boq from leaving you, and I'm not going to tolerate your bald-faced lies!"

At that, Nessa backed up a step, hands wringing the cap. "Y-you… w-well, of course I wanted to protect Boq, too! He's one of us! I wanted to protect us all, and he's the most important one to me, it's- they aren't separate! I can't believe you would accuse me of doing that for purely selfish reasons!"

"Nessa… I'm not going to listen to this anymore. In my opinion, you need to face the truth about yourself, and until you can do that…" She threw up both hands and turned toward the door, leaving both of them behind.

"Wait! Elphaba, please? I- I don't know what you want me to say! Fabala!" But Elphaba had already gone.

"Well…" Clearing her throat, Glinda patted her shoulder. "That didn't go very well, did it?"

"She doesn't believe me. Maybe we haven't ever been the closest of sisters, but… she really doesn't think I care about the rest of Munchkinland." Her face was stricken, ashen, and she pressed one hand to her forehead. "My luck isn't changing. Maybe it will never change!"

With a sigh, Glinda steered her over to the lone wooden chair that resided in the desolate tower room and sat Nessa in it. "You need to take a deep breath and think. Come on, has the Munchkin Country
ever closed their borders before? Even during the old wars? No, that simply isn't done! Oz has always been an open and accepting kingdom!"

"B-but I... you and the Wizard, he was hunting everywhere..."

"Just say it out loud. Tell me why you really made that decree, just admit it to yourself!"

Tears leaked down her alabaster cheeks as she gazed down at the fists perched on her knees. But after a moment, she whispered, "B-because... Boq wanted to go to you. And I knew if he did, he'd get himself killed, and then I'd lose him forever, I... th-that was not something I could let happen!"

"There," Glinda soothed her, petting over her shoulders even as her own stomach was spasming at yet another instance of Boq's unwelcome affections. "You see? You can be honest."

"But it was still for everyone's good, I r-really believe that, even if... even if you're right, it w-was only for Boq that I first thought of..." One hand came up to swipe at the tears. "You and Elphaba m-must really think I'm a disgusting, manipulative witch to do something like this, b-but I swear to you now, Glinda, I... n-no one has ever mattered to me more than him, and if I let him go that easily, then my love wasn't real! But it was! Nobody thinks it was, but he was my one true-"

"That isn't how you treat someone you love," she corrected her. "I know, I know you were trying to protect him, but you can't do that by taking away his rights! That's the opposite of true love, that's... ownership!"

"NO! No, you're wrong! I never 'owned' Boq and I wouldn't want to!" But her sobs gave her away; she knew Glinda's accusation held a grain of truth, but admitting it would destroy her. Which her following words seemed to confirm: "P-please, Glinda, j-just... I can't!"

Those words sounded familiar. It took Glinda a moment to realise it was what she had said about handling a life without Elphaba. Same level of emotion...

"Listen," she whispered to Nessa. "Just for a moment. Now, I really do think you need to stop all this fibulation and own up to how you treated him — even if you didn't mean to," she overrode her impending protest. "Elphaba's cross with you because she thinks you're acting like a little Muchkinling pitching a fit, and, well... if the slipper fits..."

Glancing down at her own silvery slippers, Nessa whispered, "I... I miss him... I know you're right, that I'm acting very ungrateful, but I'm not! It's just... how can I be happy about being able to walk if I'm walking alone?"

"You're not alone. You have me, and Elphie. Or you will once you two can talk things out, anyway."

"Yeah." Giving a glum little nod, she let Glinda wipe away her tears and pat her on the head, even though they were almost the same age. "I'm... I need a little time. I tried to find linens for the beds, or food, but there isn't any... and all I want to do is curl up in bed and hate everything!"

"We all do, from time to time. Here, now — follow me. We'll do what we can, find what we can."

So Glinda and her friend's little sister set out to explore the castle, glum as the latter was. Something to busy their hands, since all they could think about was their lost loves. It would have to suffice.

*To Be Continued...*
The next week was relatively peaceful compared to the ones before. The trio of witches spent the lion’s share of their time sprucing up their new base of operations. Though Elphaba and Glinda had briefly debated returning to Wicca Falls, they decided to relegate that to an emergency fallback location. For some reason, it seemed right to honour Fiyero’s last wish that they relocate to Kiamo Ko Keep, and it was certainly a threatening and impenetrable fortress.

At some point, as the least conspicuous of the three, Glinda again made her way into town and retrieved food and other supplies for them. She heard a lot of rumours about herself and her two associates, but she tried her best to block them out in favour of pretending she was no one important and getting her shopping and errands done so she could make a discreet exit.

Glinda also began to hear scattered whisperings about the girl they had met briefly — Dorothy The Tall, with the grubby clothes and the vacant expression — being protected by Morrible The Magnificent. Apparently, she had magical golden shoes, which were said to be leading her down the yellow brick road straight to the Emerald City. Someone even said she had men made out of straw and tin accompanying her, but that could be so much nonsense the local biddies invented to make the tale more fanciful while they did their washing up alongside each other. Regardless, this didn't concern her much; Elphaba might harbour a grudge for the death of Fiyero, but she herself knew it had been some kind of misunderstanding. Besides, the girl couldn't hurt a fly, and didn't seem to have an inkling of magic about her. It only made sense to leave her to her own devices, and to worry about their own predicament.

As they worked on making the Keep livable, Elphaba was the one who spent the longest poring over the Grimmerie. Nothing new there. Glinda did notice Nessa stealing a look now and again, but she seemed too enthralled with using her magically-revived legs to worry overly about spellwork herself. Also, her looking at it only seemed to irritate Elphaba, who was no less frosty toward her than she had been a week before.

As far as sleeping arrangements with Elphaba…

They tried their best to ignore the discomfort from their talk the day they first arrived. However, it lingered like the foul stench of a Kalidah carcass, always invading the small moments when they weren't otherwise occupied. Luckily for Glinda, she felt so fond of Elphaba that she didn't feel any true fear it would damage their friendship. Yet despite that, and despite the myriad rooms in the old castle, neither Glinda nor Elphaba ever requested to change sleeping conditions. It was almost as if they were afraid to do so after a solid two years of sharing a bed; what would it change between them? Perhaps it would be more terrifying if it turned out to change nothing at all. Either way, the castle being drafty and eerie as it was seemed to serve as their excuse for continuing with things as they were.

Nothing changed much between the two sisters. Nessa did attempt an apology once or twice for her previous behaviours, but they were so riddled with excuses and counter-accusations that Glinda
could hardly blame Elphaba for rejecting them. Once, the argument grew so heated that Elphaba literally conjured a fireball to throw at her, but when Glinda stepped between them, she calmed and allowed it to dissipate. All she offered was a terse apology before sweeping from the room to find somewhere she could be alone.

As she spent most of her time. Once in a while, she would show her new discoveries to Glinda, boast of a spell that she had deciphered or some kind of trinket she had enchanted. The one that fascinated her the most was the eyepatch: it looked to be an entirely ordinary one, but when worn it showed the viewer anything that could be seen from one of the crows that made their nests in the towers. Glinda expressed her disappointment that she was using an innocent animal as a test subject for her magic, but Elphaba tried to lay her fears to rest.

"Not an animal, but an Animal," she told her as she scribbled notes on a free page, ones that made little sense to anyone other than her. "The Crow gave its full support when I asked, so long as I promised to take care of its brothers and sisters if the spell went wrong. It didn't, and I still plan to fetch it some grain as payment when we have a chance."

Glinda sighed as she sat on a bench in the bedroom that had been converted into Elphaba's "study". "So why do you want to be able to see what a Crow sees, anyway? I just don't know why you're doing all these things!"

Elphaba looked up at her with one eye, the patch still covering the other. "Because it's necessary. Have you forgotten the Wizard and Morrible? They still want our heads on pikes!"

"The Wizard doesn't! Not really!"

"Can you be sure? What if all those nice words of his were just a lot of hot air?"

"We can't be sure, of course, but… I don't think he's all that bad, really! And anyway, what's that got to do with putting enchantments on birds?"

"Ahh," she said with a sly grin, tapping her eye. "The Crow circles the castle, and I see everything it sees. If soldiers come to surprise us with an attack, it won't be that much of a surprise, after all."

Glinda's mouth made a small "O" as she began to follow the logic. "Okay, I see. Or rather, you see. That's pretty clever!"

"Thank you! I mean, maybe it would have been smarter to enchant something I don't have to wear on my eye, since that can be pretty disorienting. But I think I might try that with another of the Crow's friends. Maybe… a mirror? Or a crystal ball?"

"A mirror sounds good; that way, any of us could see it at any time." As she approached, Elphaba was still scribbling, but then she slid her hands over her shoulders to encourage her to stop. "Now, can we take a little break for supper? Nessa is making a vegetable stew for us."

Elphaba's lip curled. "No, thank you. I'm not a fan of that watery broth she calls a stew."

"If you don't eat it, I'm going to take your pillow."

"Go right ahead."

Puffing out her cheeks in irritation, she changed tactics. "If you don't come down to supper, I'll find a spell to change all your clothes to such a bright pink that they will be visible from the Glikkus."

"What?" Finally looking up, she rolled her visible eye as she grunted, "I don't want to eat with
Nessa, and I don't want to eat Nessa's food. What's so hard to understand about this?"

"She loves you very much, and so do I! Forgive us for being concerned about you!" As Glinda stood and began to stomp off, she shot over her shoulder, "I'll keep my word! Lurid, flowerriffic pink!" And she then shut the door on a string of grumbles.

~ o ~

Though it wasn't until they were halfway through eating, Elphaba did come down to the kitchen to partake of the stew. As it turned out, Nessa had figured out how to thicken it up a bit on her third attempt, even though it was scarcely more flavourful for the thickening.

"Nessarose," she said simply as she sat.

"Elphaba."

"Glinda," Glinda said, not wanting to be left out. Elphaba scowled at her, so she merely fell to sipping. They all did; as it turned out, dinner was going to be an austere affair.

A few minutes later, Nessa asked, "Is something wrong with your eye?"

"What?"

"Your eye. There's a patch over it."

"Oh." Gesturing with her spoon, she said, "It's a spell."

"Ah. Well, I'm sorry, then."

"Sorry?"

"That your spell went wrong. It's to be expected, trying all of these for the first time."

Pursing her lips for a moment, Elphaba then snapped, "Nothing went wrong. My eye is fine; it's the eye patch that has the spell on it."

"Oh." Swallowing thickly, Nessa's eyes flicked over to Glinda, who nodded encouragingly. "Well… I'm glad. I hate to think of you having to wear a magic eye like my magic shoes."

"And what's wrong with your shoes? Aren't they good enough for you? If I'd known you wouldn't-"

"Elphie," Glinda hissed, eyes narrowed. "Come on, don't be so contrarywise! Nessa's just saying she's worried about you."

"Because I'm not a capable enough witch," Elphaba responded, eyes still on her little sister. "Obviously. I'm just the older sister who can never do anything properly. The story of my life, isn't it?"

Nessa sighed, finally setting her spoon down in her bowl and blotting her mouth with her napkin. "Fine. You don't appreciate my food and you don't appreciate my company. I guess I'll find somewhere else to be less bothersome."

"Oh, ENOUGH!" With a few muttered words, Glinda took out her tiny practice wand and whirled it in a wide circle over her head, "AaAwha Wenn Nam Hora!"

A thin beam of light rocketed through the air to collide with the door into the dining room. As the
other two witches looked on in horror, it transformed from wood into stone, flush with the wall.

"GLINDA!" Elphaba gasped in shock, gazing at the door for a long moment before whirling to glare at her, hands on the table. "What have you done?!

"Turned it into stone. For one hour." Sitting back down and fluffing her decidedly-unmussed hair, she said primly, "Now, then. You two sisters are going to come to an understanding, or I'll cast it again when the hour is up. Do we understand each other?"

Nessa was already walking over to the wall that had once been the way out. Her hand pressed up against the cool stone, smoothing over the seam. "It doesn't open; it's stone, it's really stone. Why... I can't believe you did this, we're trapped!"

"For an hour!" Glinda assured her. "Come on, you really can't survive that long with Elphie? What's the matter with you two?!"

Levelling her hand at Elphaba, she snapped, "She's always taking everything I say the wrong way! Always has, and always thinks the worst of me! Just because I didn't want Boq to leave-"

"Because you wouldn't let Boq leave!" Elphaba shot back. "I thought he was an irritating little toad, but he had every right to be a toad of his own! Not your plaything!"

"Enough of this! I... I can't go into it again, I'm trying to put it behind me and you both keep bringing it back up!"

"Well, that's just too bad, isn't it, Sweet Nessa Rosey-rose?"

At that, Nessa's face paled, and she looked down at her shoes as she stood by the defunct exit. "Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"Call me what he called me. Not with... that tone, not in a bad way."

Elphaba spread her arms wide as she stood, glaring at the girl. "Why shouldn't I? You still act like Father's going to save you, fix all your mistakes, clean up your messes! Or get me to do it, as was the case nine times out of-"

"He's DEAD, you terrible green lizard! How can you be so cold?"

"Because he didn't care one little slip about me!" Her voice was pure acid now, and she strode right up to Nessa, nose to nose as she shouted, "You were the favourite, and I was the faux pas! A useless, a nothing, a... I could have died and he wouldn't have shed a single tear, and we both know it! So why should I have the tiniest shred of regret that he's gone?! What difference should it make to me when he didn't even love me?!!"

"Because he did! He just... didn't know how to show it to you! Fabala, you were always-"

"Don't CALL me that!"

At this point, Nessa screamed at her, "NO! You can't take that from me, it's mine! I called you that first, and I always have, and I can't stop now, it's not fair!"

"Oh, but it's fair to stop me calling you Sweet Nessa Rosey-rose? I'm not a child anymore, and neither are you! Call me by my given name, you overgrown-"
"Don't take it from me!" The screams were growing more hoarse as tears streamed down her cheeks, and she raised her fists to pound on Elphaba's chest and shoulders. "Stop being such a… such a witch!"

"I AM a witch. And I have news for you: we're all witches now, Little Nessie!"

As the tears continued to run down her cheeks, Nessa turned to press her side against the wall, sniffling and sobbing. Elphaba raised her hands as if to grasp her, shake her, but instead she turned away from her and folded her arms tightly against her chest, standing there and seething for all she was worth.

When nobody spoke for a minute or two, Glinda walked over to them, laying a hand on Elphaba's shoulder. "I… know you're upset-"

"Leave it."

"But," she persisted, in her sweetest, most unctuous voice, "I think you should ask Nessa why she still wants to call you by that name."

"I don't care! That isn't me anymore, and…" She turned to glare at Glinda, clearly wanting the conversation to end. But when Glinda merely glared back, her resolve firm, she dropped her voice to whisper, "It's the name my father would use to get me to comply. To lay a thick blanket of guilt over me until I relented. All it does is anger me and make me want to do exactly the opposite of what the other person is saying."

"That isn't how Nessa sees it. Just ask her, I'm sure of this. Call it a hunch, or woman's intuition, or whatever you want." No change. "Go on."

"Fine." Turning around, she snapped as if it were an accusation, "Why do you want to keep calling me Fabala, like a child?"

"You don't care!" Nessa bawled.

"No, I don't!" A rough elbow from Glinda connected with Elphaba's ribs that surprised her into asking, "But what's the reason, anyway?"

Sniffling and rubbing at her face, the younger woman said, "Because it's you! Because… oh, it's stupid, but… I created that because I couldn't say your name right when I was little, and it became something, a part of our family history. And it was…" She threw both hands upward. "Maybe it really is childish, I'm sorry. It won't ever happen again."

"What were you going to say?" Glinda encouraged, ignoring how Elphaba was still stonily silent.

"It was…" Her eyes were pointed away into the shadowy corner as she said, "That name was the one thing that I did that mattered to my sister. I knew Father put me on a pedestal, and I loved him for it, even when it chafed occasionally. But… Elphaba always resented helping me."

"I resented helping you at the expense of myself."

"I didn't ask you to do that! I know Father did," she headed off Elphaba's vocal and violent protest, "and I know I took your help for granted, I know that! I do now, anyway. Maybe I never knew how much until… until you vanished for two years. Yes, I had Boq, but it wasn't the same; he wasn't my sister."

"You didn't want a sister. You wanted a slave." When Nessa opened her mouth, she held up a hand.
"No, I'm sorry, but that was how I was treated and expected to behave. You can't say enough 'I didn't mean to's to change how things were back then."

"Can I apologise?" When Elphaba didn't answer, she looked down at her own hands as she clasped them in front of her chest. "I'm very sorry. I know it can't make up for... for how much Father demanded of you, or how much I did because I took you for granted. I'm... I don't know what else to say except I'm sorry, Elphaba. That's all I've got."

Elphaba didn't answer. She only stalked off to the opposite wall, squeezed herself into the corner, and left the other two women blinking after her as she squatted down and pulled her knees up to her chin to wait out the rest of their hour.

"Great," Nessa breathed, voice still trembling.

"Aww, it went better than you think it did," Glinda promised her in a whisper. "You'll see. She's got years of bitterness all built up inside her; one apology can't get rid of all that, not this fast. Mayhaps, if you give her a little time...?"

"Mayhaps," she muttered. "I guess I never realised there was so much... so much of this between us all these years. I thought we had a great relationship before this mess with the Wizard took you two away from Shiz! And now, all she can do is point out how bad I've been at being her sister all along."

Shushing her gently, Glinda petted along her shoulders and steered her to one of the chairs. "It's alright. I was pretty obtusical when we first started at Shiz myself, you know. I..." Glancing down at her hands, she hesitated a few seconds before deciding that it was worth the sacrifice if it would make Nessa feel less self-hatred. "Do you remember how I set you up with Boq?"

"I do," she sighed wistfully, coming so close to smiling without accomplishing it. "That was the nicest thing anyone's ever done for me."

"Hold that thought," she said out the side of her mouth. Too late to turn back now. "The only reason I sent him after you is because he wouldn't stop nipping around my heels. And, well, I thought you looked so lonely that if he asked you, it was pretty likely you'd say 'yes'."

The words began to sink in, little by little. Finally, she managed to whisper, "Oh." And that was all.

"Plus the hat I gave Elphie that she likes so much? It was one my granny gave me that I didn't care for. So... maybe they weren't really unkind things, but they weren't done purely out of the goodness of my heart. Merely out of convenience."

"Boq never loved me." Nessa said it to herself, not to Glinda. She said it two more times as tears stung the corners of her eyes. Then she merely began to cry quietly, and nothing could be done.

Glinda spent another few minutes trying to console her before she gave up for the time being and returned to Elphaba's side. But no amount of prodding and goading could get her to budge. Gradually, she became so frustrated with her friend's unwillingness to compromise or reason, and with Nessa being so grief-stricken that she couldn't even speak, that she relegated herself to sitting at the table and drumming her fingers on its smooth surface until the spell lifted.

"Perfect," Elphaba grunted, standing the minute the door turned back to wood. "And if you try casting a second spell, I'll snap that wand of yours in two."

"Yes, Ma'am," Glinda grumbled as she watched her march out of the kitchen. She even gave a little salute.
Very little changed for another few days. Glinda and Nessarose did enjoy a few more productive conversations between the two of them, but she didn't succeed in encouraging Nessa to try her luck with her sister again. Elphaba was even less receptive. She tried to divide her time evenly between the both of them, but spent a lot more time off by herself, tidying or otherwise making herself useful.

However, the castle became a lot more lively when Elphaba came rushing into the voluminous dining hall where Glinda was trying to swat down spiderwebs with an old, stripped-bare broom handle.

"Ohhh, I don't like it," she was hissing, wringing her hands. "I don't like it in the slightest — not a winkie bit!"

"Elphaba, language!" Glinda gasped as she let the handle slide down into the corner. "Now, what's all the commotion?"

Taking the eyepatch off, she passed it over to Glinda with a stricken expression upon her green features, which were greener than usual. "See for yourself!"

Unsure of what else to do, Glinda raised the patch to her eye and closed the other one, squinting into the circle of darkness. Much to her surprise, she did not see darkness at all.

Laid out before her was a small pack of people travelling along a winding dirt path that led up through the peaks of the Kells. Trees and small bushes were dotted around sparsely, leaving for them a dark and desolate surroundings. The "them", as it turned out, was a curious little party indeed — led by Dorothy, the girl with the now-golden shoes. She looked a bit different than when they had last seen her, with her hair in disarray, a basket dangling from one elbow, and a lovely white linen dress as was sold in the Emerald City having replaced her rough blue clothing, but now dingy in spots from her journey. Though she didn't look too different from before, it was still odd to see such a drastic change having befallen her in such a short time.

Along for the ride were a trio that looked quite as strange. A man made of straw, stumbling and bumbling as he walked. Another of tin, clanking noisily with an axe slung over one shoulder; that one looked familiar somehow, but Glinda only assumed she had seen a statue very like him at some point in her life. So the rumours had been true! The third was actually a beast — a lion, powerful and muscled, stalking at their sides. And all the while, Dorothy's small cat-dog gamboled around their heels, yipping at this and that.

"What on Oz…?" she breathed.

"Don't you see?" Elphaba hissed, which felt strange to hear when her vision was full of such a foreign scene as that. "Maybe the other two mean no harm, but the lion certainly does, and that axe slung over that clattering collection of scrap metal is no child's toy! And they are headed straight for us!"

"What?!"

"Just so! I first learned from the crows that they were crossing into the Vinkus this morning, and have kept my eye on them. Their path gives every indication of being angled toward Kiamo Ko. I can't be certain, of course, but… well, it only makes sense that they're coming this way, doesn't it? What else is there in this region of Oz that such an odd group would be concerned about? Mowing the Thousand Year Grasslands?!"
Mouth hanging open, Glinda slowly pried the patch upward. She had seen quite enough for the time being; watching further only made her feel like a voyeur, and she was unlikely to learn anything else. "Elphaba… I… you don't really think they're coming for us, do you? They don't even know where we are!"

"Who's to say that we haven't been seen at some point or another? Despite our best efforts," she added in a grumble. It was quite true that they had taken every precaution.

"But why should they? That girl doesn't know the first thing about Oz, so I doubt she wants to do anything to anybody!"

"Or so she says." Shrugging her shoulders, the green-skinned woman took the patch back and stared down at it, shaking her head slowly. "No… no, we can't be sure of her story. She did murder our Fiyero, or have you forgotten?"

"Thank you very much, indeed! As if I ever could! But that's not the same as saying she meant to do it! And… oh, just suppose she really is some big, bad hag from who knows where. Why didn't she take care of us right away? We were pretty stunned to see her, standing there in those strange clothes, and all she did was talk to us! So how are we supposed to believe-"

"Enough!" Elphaba cut her off with a wave of her hand. "Of course I can't know for sure she's a witch, or anything of the kind. That isn't what I'm trying to say; only to argue that she could be. And if she is… we must be prepared. Ready to fight back!"

Both of Glinda's shoulders shrugged dramatically. "Now you're talking about fighting! Neither of us knows the first thing about fisticuffs, much less how to engage in a… a sorcerous skirmish!"

By this point, Elphaba was striding in paces around the room, hands wringing. Glinda knew she was as terrified as she was angry, and a dozen other emotions in between. It was up to her to soothe her nerves, if only she could figure out how!

However, as it turned out, they wouldn't have the time. They were both distracted by a loud shriek from outside.

"Was that Nessa?" Elphaba whispered immediately, hand clamping on Glinda's arm.

"Sounded very Nessish! Let's go!"

Boots clicking against the stones, the two women raced out the door and down the hallways to the staircases. Eventually, they were able to pick their way out to the courtyard, where a sight unlike any other greeted them.

Nessarose crouched on the ground near one of the ominous old statues of a king long forgotten, clutching something shiny to her chest. Crowded around her prone form were at least a round dozen winged monkeys, chittering and grasping at her clothing and her limbs, but being too mischievous and uncertain to truly get the job done. Whatever that job was intended to be.

"Get them OFF!" Nessa screamed the moment she saw Elphaba standing nearby. "I- I don't want- NO, NOT MY HAIR, let it go!"

It didn't take Glinda and Elphaba long to recognise the culprits; they had set them free themselves, after all. Striding forward, Elphaba decided to cut through the situation with her usual grace and charm.

"ENOUGH!" she shouted, setting off a harmless magical explosion in midair. The only ill effect was
the acrid smell left behind and the sound that made Glinda's ears ring. But the monkeys were most certainly alerted. Shrinking back in fear, they grew still and quiet, heads and eyes rolling this way and that as if some flying beast had let loose the noise.

"You will behave," she commanded them in a firm tone. "Considering it was I who made you, and I who set you free, it seems a pretty poor 'thank you' to attack my sister! What a bad move, bad indeed!"

Most of the monkeys only chittered more, hopped up and down and covered their heads with their hands. However, the one called Chistery scampered forward to peer up at her, eyes seeming very slightly more canny than the others.

"Ba… bad?"

That seemed to shock them all, Elphaba included. After a few seconds of silence, Elphaba took a step forward, eyes full of wonder. "You… are a Monkey?"

His head dipped, and he did not try to speak further. The others jabbered on in their animal-talk, but Chistery did not turn to them, nor did he draw any closer. At last, her hand came to rest on his shoulders.

"You've had a hard time of it lately, haven't you? Cooped up by the Wizard, forced to be the subjects of his experiments. He ought to be ashamed."

As they shared this strange bond, whatever it was, Nessa began to creep around the edges of the courtyard toward Glinda. One of the monkeys started toward her again, but the others grasped him by his tail to keep him from following. They knew by now that it would spell their doom.

"I wonder…" Glancing over her shoulder at the two of them, she turned back to Chistery. "If you help me… I promise I'll keep doing my best to get stronger. All of us will. We'll be the greatest team there's ever been, and the Wizard won't stand a chance at stopping my crusade."

"Crusade?" Nessa blubbered. Though Elphaba glared at her, she didn't snap back anything needlessly cold.

"To free the Animals. To restore balance to every non-Munchkin and non-Winkie. Vinkan," she corrected at Glinda's surprised look. "They deserve all the rights we have, and we all know the only reason the Wizard is saying otherwise is… is to give them a straw man to distract them from the droughts, the problems with the crops. Other governmental affairs."

"I thought you said the straw man is on his way here," Glinda asked. The glare was turned in her direction, but she glared right back. "Okay, fine; you still want to wrest this world from the Wizard. Why?"

"Why not? He has power, and he's using it to an awful end. Only the most despicable of scum would attack innocents simply to obscure how pathetic his leadership truly is. Wouldn't you agree? Oz is better off in our hands than in his."

Squirming, Glinda glanced down at the still-distraught Nessa for help. When all she did was press that blasted golden cap into her face and sob, she sighed and took a step forward. "I don't know about all that. But I do agree that letting him stomp us into the dirt doesn't sound like my kind of party."

"What…" Swiping at her eyes, Nessa finally managed to push herself upward. "What are you going to do, Fab- Elphaba? How can you possibly stop the Wizard himself?"
A look flashed across Elphaba's face when she heard her sister correct herself; Glinda thought she could tell it was one of regret. But all she said was, "One step at a time. Now, I think he's a charlatan, a real old humbug; after all, his 'big face' act was just a bunch of levers and pulleys, as we now know. But he has Morrible at his beck and call, and she... she is truly a monster."

"Agreed," Glinda sighed.

"Wait," Nessa cut in as she stepped closer. "Why is she a monster? I'm sorry, I'm not trying to be rude or pestering, but I don't understand."

"Because it was at her encouragement that I cast that first spell on Chistery and his friends," Elphaba informed her, sounding more measured and less insulting for a change. "And she can use magic, even if she's unable to read the book. I wonder if..." Her eyebrows knitted slightly. "Perhaps there is more to understanding the Grimmerie than just a knowledge of Ancient Lurlinic. I have wondered that, since some spells that I can read fully elude me, and others come so easily despite my not knowing every word."

Once that had sunk in, Glinda started. "You've been casting spells when you don't know all the words?! Elphie, that sounds disasterful — why would you ever try something so perilous?!"

"We have to try. We have to know all we can." Pacing back and forth for a moment, she raised her hands up toward the leafy branches above the courtyard and clapped them sharply three times. The Monkeys shrank back from the noise, and even further when a full murder of Crows swept down upon the square, one particularly large specimen settling into a stance before his mistress.

"What might we do?" his scratchy voice asked.

"Go to the travellers, Draven. See if you can determine why they're coming this way; I don't know if the others are automatons or people, but the girl seemed to have a level head when last we met her. Even if she means us harm, she might at least say so if she's honest. Maybe she can be reasoned with."

"At once!" he screeched, and the other crows began to caw in echo. Then they took off into the sky, a swirling cloud of blackness that blotted out the sun.

When they were alone with the Monkeys again, Glinda whispered, "Why send them when you have these newly-feathered fellows?"

"They're a little more... imposing," Elphaba told her, glancing at the monkeys again apologetically. Most of them did not seem to even notice she was speaking. "The Crows, not quite as much — and Draven is an eloquent speaker. He simply doesn't think it necessary to mince words. I think it's harder for the Wizard and Morrible to work their black arts to silence those whom they can't reach so easily. Like the flying Animals of the Vinkus, of course. Chistery might be as verbose as the Crows if they hadn't got to him..."

But as the three women glanced at the sky, they knew it was unlikely they would ever know the full details of their enemies' inner workings. Perhaps that was for the best.

To Be Continued...
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Life is terrible sometimes. And wonderful sometimes. I've just been going through a few months of "terrible" and am trying to claw my way through to the wonderful side. Thanks for your patience if you're still reading.

Half an hour passed. In that time, Glinda had taken Nessarose inside to get a bracing cup of tea to help soothe her jitters over being attacked. Elphaba spoke with the Monkeys, helped them come to an understanding; they would stay on and try to help to repay her for their freedom. She made it clear it was not required, but that she would be appreciative. From what she could puzzle out of their responses, they considered themselves honour-bound; to them, it was not a matter of opinion. They owed a debt and they would pay it.

Then horrible news came to Elphaba through her eye patch. Her sister and friend looked on anxiously as she stood stock still, letting out horrible, wailing sounds. When they could finally rouse her back to them, she had very little to say.

"All the crows… Draven… dead."

Some time passed as they got yet another cup of tea into Elphaba's hands. Nessa stayed well away from the Monkeys, but Glinda had an easier time steering her to a bench closer to the door inside. Once her sister had a few gulps of the steaming liquid inside of herself, she was a bit more open to speaking.

"The man of straw did it," Elphaba said hoarsely, tears clinging to her cheeks. It was odd how Glinda had never seen her cry much back at Shiz, and now it seemed to be happening on such a regular basis. "Murdered my murder! They scarcely… had called out to them to halt, and he started scooping them out of the air, twisting their n-necks… I'm…"

Again, Glinda held her close, pressing her lips into her cheek now and again to show comfort. After a moment, Nessa picked up one of her hands and began to pet it, and Elphaba didn't even have the heart to snap at her or wave her off.

"They must pay. All four of them — and their little dog-cat, too! I'll see to it personally!"

"Elphie," Glinda warned her, tone becoming a little firmer but still more or less gentle as a babbling brook. "You can't just… just pay them back, an eye for an eye! Isn't our entire goal here to be kind to Animals? Doesn't it seem kind of contrarious to go around passing judgement on these strangers?"

When Elphaba turned her glittering eyes upon Glinda, wild and dangerous, Glinda felt a couple of different emotions well up. Though the first and largest was fear, followed by concern, deep down, buried beneath the ones she knew were acceptable… was excitement. Seeing her friend so passionate made her heart beat so fast, and to deny she wanted to see what she might do with that passion was difficult, indeed. But somehow, she managed.

"We can't let this go on," she snapped, rising from the bench. "One way or the other."
By the time the three women reached the Monkeys, Nessa's hand was in Glinda's for comfort. Elphaba wasted no time clapping for their attention. "Yes?" asked Chistery, creeping closer on all four limbs.

"Go and find Dorothy and her thugs! Bring them here! I'll have them stopped or die in the attempt!" When they merely blinked up at her, concerned and vaguely confused, she waved her arms and shouted, "FLY!"

They flew.

"At least there's that," Nessa breathed when the square was empty, sinking down to her knees as she finally let her adrenaline ebb away. "Must we deal with such foul beasts?!"

"They aren't foul," Elphaba said, voice still strained from having been so upset before. "They're just as entitled to be who they are as you or I! Without b-being… being decapitated!"

Glinda stood and patted her on the shoulder. "They have every right to get ahead in life, it's true!" When Elphaba glared daggers at her, she whispered, "What? What'd I say?"

The now-useless eye patch was discarded once they returned inside to make preparations. Likely, she would try to bespell it again, perhaps to see through Chistery's eyes. But Glinda would not have been surprised if she instead buried it in honour of her fallen feathered friends. They had not been together long or for very often at a time, yet she knew the Crows were good friends of hers; Glinda herself had also come to think of them as allies, even if they made her mildly uncomfortable. She only hoped they would find time to mourn them once they had tended more pressing matters.

Though Nessa seemed the least desirous of defending herself, a long poker from the kitchen fires was in her hands by the time they gathered on a parapet walkway, facing the direction in which the Crows and Monkeys had departed. Glinda had her wand out, hanging loosely at her side with a small bag of red powder clutched in the other hand, while Elphaba had her broom nearby as she paged through the Grimmerie, looking for any last-minute aides to their situation.

And then the time was at hand. The creatures circled above them before diving low, bringing five squirming forms within reach. Glinda's heart leapt into her throat, but she knew all was not lost; after all, they might have been outnumbered before, but with the Monkeys on their side…

"Elphie, I'm afraid," Glinda whispered. "I'm tired of confronting people!"

"Stand your ground."

"But what if that straw-man twists my neck?! That doesn't sound like any fun, not any fun at all!"

Gripping her shoulder, Elphaba spun her just enough to look her in the eyes before whispering, "I will die before I let anyone harm a curly hair on your head."

Again, her heart thundered so much within her breast that she thought it might explode.

"Let me go!" begged Dorothy as she was lowered to the ground before them by the Monkeys. "P-please! You can't be- what do you want with us?!"

But around that time, the thrashing girl's dark eyes settled upon the firm, severe features of Elphaba. She stilled when they were being lowered to the ground, completely captivated by the murderous glare from the witch, unable to reply right away. Nessa's eyes were only for the tin woodman, but the other two were fixated on the foreigner to their land.
"Well?" Elphaba demanded as the others were brought in for a landing, thrashing about as they were.

"W-Well, what?" she whispered hoarsely.

"You have killed my friends. Family. And you come now here to kill me." Striding forward, Elphaba raised both arms and grasped the girl's shoulders, bringing her in to growl, "I should snap you in half like you've done to the Crows!"

"They attacked us!" she squeaked. Spotting a flash of the lion's mane, she turned toward her travelling troupe, desperately demanding, "Didn't they? Gosh, weren't we only protecting ourselves? Haven't we any right to do that?!"

Shaking her briefly, Elphaba spat, "You killed them all! Give me one good reason I shouldn't do the same to you before you've got a chance to do it to us!"

Before Dorothy could reply, the lion sprang from the Monkeys, paws extended and jaws wide, roaring for all it was worth. However, Glinda had been ready for this. Shaking open the pouch, she tossed it directly into his face, watching the great cloud of dust swirl around his muzzle as he shook his mighty head to and fro. Of course, he still ended up knocking her off her feet, but as she scrambled back from her he sagged to the ground.

"NO!" Dorothy screeched. "What have you done to him?!!"

"Be more concerned about what I'm going to do to you!" Elphaba snarled.

"Do what you want!" the weird little tin soldier shouted. "This one is mine!" And with no further ado, he jerked from the Monkeys' heedless grasp, able to stay one step ahead of their attempts to catch him up again as he flew not at Elphaba... but at Nessa.

"AH!" she gasped, staggering back as the blade of his axe rang out against her poker. "STOP! You don't have to- wh-why attack me?! I'm h-hardly any threat!"

"You're the only threat that concerns me!"

While Nessa was still struggling with him, Glinda pushed to her feet and away from the beast who had taken a snoutful of her poppy-powder, stirring restlessly but unable to rouse himself. Then she glared down the only one who had yet to attack them, other than the useless black dog.

"Well? Are you next? Do I have to show you what this wand can do?!"

"Not me," the scarecrow said with an odd, carefree chuckle. For that was what he was: a scarecrow. She hadn't quite put it together before seeing him up close. Definitely a man made of straw, with painted eyes and mouth, and a large-brimmed hat perched on top of his straw-stuffed head. The laugh was charming... and vaguely familiar, but she wasn't sure why. "But you might have to if you lay a hand on Dorothy. She doesn't deserve to be punished, and I won't let you harm her!"

"You all deserve to be punished!" Elphaba screamed out. "And you will be — right now! Come on, let's go! Come along!"

The Monkeys helped to hoist the lion up and drag him along, but a few more were needed to prise the tin man off Nessa. She gratefully followed, pointing both his axe and her poker at him in case he managed to give his captors the slip again.

"Come to my castle," Elphaba muttered under her breath as they descended deeper and deeper into
the castle, conjuring a flame when it grew too dark to see. Glinda noticed Dorothy flinch in sheer terror when this happened. "Drop a house on my beloved, kill my Crows, come to my castle and try to kill me! And you claim you aren't even from Oz! What liberties you from the Northern Kingdoms take with everyone! Well, I won't have it. I won't!"

A little "hmm" floated out of the scarecrow, but that was the only reaction from the companions. For her own part, Dorothy began to plead with them, voice shaking, eyes and nose streaming. "Please! W-we had no choice, we- I didn't even want to be here, but-

"Do you ever SHUT UP?!"

Laying a hand on Elphaba's arm as they finally reached the lowest floor of all, Glinda whispered, "Maybe we should listen to her, Elphie. I don't really get what's going on, and I'm sorry about Draven and the others, but… I think we have ourselves in the middle of a misunderstanditude."

"Well, I do not," she snapped as she lit a few of the torches in the wall sconces with an idle gesture. "I think they must be locked up for what they've tried to do here today! They can rot in these dungeons for eternity, and I won't care one thin whit about it!"

"I agree," Nessa breathed warily, eyes still on the thrashing of her assailant. "Whatever th-they're doing here, however they think we've wronged them in the past… they obviously mean us harm. Incarceration seems wise, does it not?"

"You'll pay for this," the tin-plated assailant growled, again trying to lurch away from the Monkeys. It seemed they learned from their previous lapse, catching him up easily and holding him in check. "I'LL PART YOUR PRETTY HEAD FROM YOUR SHOULDERS!"

"Shame on you!" Glinda spat at the man. For whatever reason, this cowed him instantly, and he fell limp and silent. "Thank goodness — there's an echo down here, and all that noise…!"

The lion was the first to be locked away, easy as that was while he was almost entirely comatose. The scarecrow went willingly when he saw they only meant to lock them up, which then left them to wrestle the tin man into a cell, clap him in irons so that he wouldn't run back out again, shove a length of chain between his jaws to keep him quiet, and shut the door.

"There," Nessa sighed in relief, finally lowering her two weapons. "Now it's just the girl."

"Very well," Dorothy said in a prim and proper voice that didn't seem to befit her, shaking as she was. Glinda narrowed her eyes at her, a little surprised at this odd attitude. "I'll… I'll go in, I'll be good, if you promise not to forget about me! Th-this can't be forever, alright? Please don't say it is, you mustn't!"

Waving one of her hands as if batting aside the words, Elphaba snapped, "Very well, very well. Just go in and give me time to-

But she hadn't noticed the plot the girl was hatching. Sometime while begging for her life, or perhaps before that, she had produced a large jug from within her ever-present wicker basket, uncorked it, and the instant Elphaba seemed distracted enough for her to act, she hurled its contents upon the witch.

And nothing happened.

That isn't quite true; something did happen. Elphaba spluttered and shook her head, startled out of whatever she had been saying previously. Then she blinked down at the girl in wonderment.
"What… I… what is this?" Raising a hand to her cheek, she rubbed her fingers back and forth and sniffed. "It's… just water. Is this water?"

Glinda hesitantly approached as the others who were more or less lucid looked on, the Monkeys having recaptured Dorothy after their lapse. Feeling oddly brave, perhaps because they had successfully captured the intruders, she pressed a finger to Elphaba's hand, then raised it to her own lips, darting the tip of her tongue down to retrieve a single droplet.

"Good water, too! Not like that murky muck we have at Shiz, oh no; this is pure Gillikinese mountain springwater, or I'm not an Upperupland!"

By the time they returned their attentions to Dorothy, it was to see she was slack-jawed and staring at Elphaba, as if she had just appeared from within the jug herself. A moment later, when she registered their glares, she began to shake and whimper.

"What… precisely is the meaning of this?" Elphaba asked in a strangely mild tone.

"Oh… oh, I didn't… they said it would work, th-that it was the only way, and I kn- I knew I could never- but it didn't work, and now I'm done for! Wh-why did I ever think I had a chance?! Ever since I f-first saw all these witches, and the Lollipop Guild, I should have known th-that I-

"The what guild?" Nessa asked in confusion. "Where was this?"

"Where my house landed! They were with you, weren't they? Carrying those spears! O-only now Madame Morrible said she's in charge of the Guild with you gone from the East!"

Grasping her shoulder and shaking her again, Elphaba demanded, "What didn't work, you stupid child?! Speak up! What's the purpose in throwing water on me? Did you think I was on fire? Did you think me an enormous plant and you were going to make me sprout flower petals?!"

Glinda noticed Nessa straining not to comment on that last question.

"WAIT! P-please, I'll be good, I'll g-go into the hoosegow, I promise, I w-was only doing as I w-was told, Uncle Henry and Aunt Em alw-ways told m-me to do as I'm told or I'll be- I'm sorry, you'll never know how sorry!"

"What did you mean to DO with that water?!"

"OW! You're hurting me!"

"I'll hurt you worse if you don't-""

"ELPHIE!" When Elphaba rounded on her, eyes wild, Glinda hissed, "Look at the girl for a twigging second, will you?"

"I am looking at her!"

"No, you're looking past her to how much you want revenge! Really look this time!"

Grumbling all the while, Elphaba turned her eyes down. What she saw was a sobbing girl, even younger than they had been when starting at Shiz. Her white linen dress was grimy and ripped in a few places, her arms bruised, nails filthy. The dirt on her cheeks had been cut through by tracks of tears, and her hair was disheveled so badly that it would need to be well-combed before it could be put right again. The only part of her that remained much as it was the last time they had seen her were the shimmering golden shoes, standing out oddly against her pleasant-but-plain looks and her
"Come now," Glinda said in a more reasonable tone, taking the girl's other shoulder. The way she flinched away spoke volumes to her state of mind, but Glinda tried again, whispering, "Why did you throw that water?"

"Th-the Wizard… he s-said if I killed the witch, I c-could… I could go home… to Kansas, b-but I didn't want to, I don't know how to kill anybody! Th-then I heard down in the square of the Green City-"

"Emerald City," Glinda corrected automatically without thinking about it.

"Y-yes," she said, before falling to a coughing fit. A growl of impatience sounded deep in Elphaba's throat, but Glinda swatted her on the shoulder with her wand to keep her from interrupting. "I overheard some of the queer little folk there s-saying that… that pure water might melt the Wicked Witch, s-so I figured… I might manage that! I hadn't any other plan, you know? If she r-really was wicked, then she'd have deserved it, a-and if not, th-then nothing would happen! Besides, I can't take up a sword or a pistol, I don't know a lick about such things, and I c-couldn't make myself do it if I did know how!"

Having absorbed this revelation with lightning speed, Elphaba sighed, "How idiotic the citizens of Oz are now that they can believe something like that. Incredible!"

"That's what I said," the scarecrow scoffed from behind his bars. "And I don't have any brains!"

While Glinda was squinting over at him, trying to summon something from the depths of her memory, Elphaba remained focused on the girl. "So. You meant to kill me, after all. Watching you crying and carrying on like that, I was starting to think maybe this had all been a simple mistake. But here you are, admitting that you just attempted to end my life."

Dorothy gaped up at her again. "B-but… they said you were wicked and horrible! That you were terrorising everyone in the whole land of Oz, and th-that… I'd be doing them all a favour if I got rid of you! And his secretary was so nice to me, that I thought it must… must be true…"

"That sounds extremely familiar," Glinda murmured out the side of her mouth.

"Maybe you are wicked! I don't know, I don't know anything! All I know is r-raising crops and milking cows, I'm… I'm nothing but a homesick girl, so when he said it was important, th-that I had to do it if I wanted to go home… what else could I do?!"

"You could have not tried to commit murder yet again! My crows are dead, my Fiyero is dead, and you've just admitted I was next on your assassination list! Even if you were coerced and lied to, it doesn't make any difference!" Pushing her into the waiting arms of the monkeys, she snapped, "Throw her in a cell!"

"Elphie!" Glinda gasped.

"I said to put her in a cell, not hang her from a tower!" she snapped right back as they locked her up. "I'm… I'll have to think about what to do with her! Aren't I allowed to think?"

At that, Glinda couldn't argue. On the one hand, she thought Dorothy sweet and sad, a tragic figure. On the other, she didn't trust her any more than Elphaba did. At a loss, she looked over toward Nessarose.

"Don't ask me," she said flatly, dropping the poker now that danger had passed. "All of this is… I'm
simply exhausted from all the walking. The magic of the shoes might help my legs move, but they
still get tired, and so does the rest of me."

"Let's leave them to rot while we discuss the matter," Elphaba bade them. "We… can speak more
freely when we're not in front of the prisoners."

As they filed out, Glinda caught the scarecrow gazing balefully at the three of them, as if having a
very private, very intense thought. She quirked an eyebrow, but all he did was flash back a silly little
smile that had her rolling her eyes as they filed up the stairs.

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"They can stay down there forever."

Nessarose nodded her agreement as they gathered again in the throne room. Though it was not a
location with anything they might find useful, it seemed somewhat appropriate that they use it when
discussing the fate of their new prisoners. "I wouldn't shed any tears if they did."

"You only think that because you don't want to deal with Boq," Elphaba sighed. "Though I'm glad
you're in agreement."

"The girl… I really can't be sure," Nessa sighed as Glinda looked back and forth between them. "I
want to believe her, but after what she did to the Crows, and having Boq along... how can we take
her at her word?"

"Wait, wait," Glinda said with a raise of her hand. "What's this about Boq?" They both simply stared
at her. "What?"

"You really didn't recognise him?" Elphaba said in stunned disbelief.

"No! I was too busy worrying about Dorothy, and that crazy ranting... the... oh no." Hand flying to
her mouth, she breathed, "He's the tin man! Isn't he?!"

Nodding, Nessa turned away to pace toward one of the windows. "I knew it was him at once, but he
tried to kill me almost immediately so I had no chance to mention it. You two probably didn't notice,
but even the girl was shocked by how violent he was. And... and so was I."

"And I was not," Elphaba put in. "If I didn't have a reason to hate Boq before — which I didn't, not
really — I most certainly do now."

"Why?" Nessa snapped suddenly, voice boiling with acid. "As you're so fond of reminding me, it's
my fault he turned out this way. Right? I drove him to this by trapping him in Munchkinland, then
almost killing him, and... and I'm no better than you, or Dorothy, or anyone else who's tried to kill
someone the past few weeks."

They were all silent for a moment as they absorbed that statement, and all its accompanying
implications. It was Glinda who cleared her throat to say, "Maybe so, Nessie. But what I got out of
just now was... Elphie has a reason to hate Boq, and that reason is...?"

Sufficiently prodded, Elphaba rolled her eyes. Maybe Glinda was being painfully obvious about
what she was getting at, but she had no valid reason to sidestep her efforts. "That he attacked my
sister. No one gets to do that but me." When they both turned shocked expressions on her, she
ducked her head and added, "Not in the way he did, of course!"

"Of course," Glinda harrumphed, though she was smiling. It might have been a small victory, but she
"Now we have a problem," Nessa sighed, brow furrowed as she stared out the window. Too distracted to have fully realised what Elphaba said. "My ex-paramour and a strange girl from the Kingdom of Kansas, and her other weird accomplices... what are we supposed to do with them all?"

"Tin Man can stay locked down there until he rusts for all I care," Elphaba announced. "But you're right, the others... is it strange that I feel it difficult to hold a grudge against the girl, even though this is her third attempt at murder?"

Nodding, Glinda prodded at her chin with the tip of her wand. "Yeah... she really does seem to be a victim of circumstance. She claims that she has no powers, and if that's the truth, then there would be no way for her to drop an entire house on Fiyero, would there?"

"There's still the Crows to answer for," she said firmly. "Though I can see how an entire murder of crows swarming them all at once would be intimidating, they killed every last one. That's quite an overreaction!"

"As for throwing water on you, my sister... you heard what the Wizard told her." Nessa looked apologetic as she finally turned to look at them again. "He had us all fooled before he turned on us, with his promises of prosperity and apprenticeship, and so on. We were supposed to have an alliance, he and I... and then betrayal, just because the Munchkinlanders stopped approving of my policies! I find it pretty easy to believe that if he swore to send her back to her home if she took care of a witch that was 'wicked and horrible', it would be easy to justify... you know."

"Wait," Glinda said as she took a step toward her. "An alliance? You and His Wizliness? When did this happen?"

"While you two were off 'finding yourselves'. It wasn't a very close alliance; he merely visited to make sure I was settling in as Eminent Thropp, and... well, and he asked me to report to him if I had any contact with you." When she saw two sets of eyes widen in her direction, she held up a hand and said, "But I didn't! I... well, I wasn't sure what to think between you giving me the shoes, a-and what happened with Boq... so I just stayed silent. I figured if you really were as wicked as he believed, you wouldn't have helped me, and... and he'd track you down eventually, anyway."

"Why didn't you help us in return for helping you?"

Her narrow shoulders shrugged. "Despite what they said about me... I'm no witch. What could I have done?"

"She's right." Unexpectedly, this admission came from a very weary Elphaba. "As much as I don't approve of her methods of presiding over Munchkinland..."

"Tell her, not me," Glinda said. "She's right here in the room, you know."

"Fine. Nessa... I'm..." Sweeping her hat from her head, she turned it between her fingers for a moment. "I'm sorry I've been so harsh on you, even if you have deserved it. You're my sister, and... and family is supposed to get second chances. And third... and fourth..."

Though she was smiling, what Nessa said was, "This does not sound like much of an apology, but I think I understand. Just promise me that you understand that, whatever our problems were, you're always going to be my Fabala."

"I promise I'll try not to hate you calling me that," Elphaba said through clenched teeth. They nodded to each other. "But I think we should table that and our worries about the past until after we deal with..."
the present."

"Right," Glinda said, tapping her chin. "The queer quintet who came calling."

"Er… yes." Elphaba shot her a mildly confused look before turning to look in the general direction of the doors. "What ever are we going to do with them?"

"I have an idea. You and Nessa should look through the book, see if you can find something to take a little of the tension out of the tin boy. Maybe a magical muzzle for the mangy beast. As for me…" Pursing her lips, she paced back and forth for a few seconds before asking, "Do you either of you have some rope to spare?"

To Be Continued…
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Maybe we can think of this as a sort of Halloween celebration? Whatever, enjoy!

The dungeon was no brighter or cheerier when Glinda tromped down there early the next morning. She tried to put her bravest face forward, walking with a confident stride and a smile on her face. It felt a bit farcical to be so chipper in such a ghastly location, but she did her best not to think about that.

"Hello, hello!" she called out as she carried the shallow basin closer to the cell in which the lion slumbered. Ignoring the other prisoners stirring nearby, she kept her full attentions forward. "Bet you've had a pretty heavy nap, now, haven't you?"

A dull roar rattled out from the lion… who turned out to be a Lion. "Leave me alone, willya?"

"OH!" Glinda nearly dropped the bowl. "Y-you can speak! Goodness, why didn't you say anything before?"

"You didn't give anybody enough of a chance! Captured us, and carried us through the air — and Lions ain't meant to fly, you know! All that… air, and the ground below was so tiny…" His great head shook his shaggy mane as he rolled over onto his stomach, eyes baleful as he glanced at Glinda and then away. "And I knew you were gonna hurt Dorothy, and I had to do something!"

Pursing her lips, she finally did set the bowl down. "Now, now, don't kid a kidder; we both know you were coming here to melt Elphie, and that's not any better than what you thought we were going to do to you! Right? Isn't that so?" When he didn't answer, merely looking sad and forlorn, she sighed. "Can I put this bowl in there without you pouncing on my hands?"

"I suppose so." She was just able to slide it through the gap under the door, though she winced when it scraped against the stone floors loud enough to rattle her nerves. "Thank you."

"Isn't much, just milk from the cow we keep in one of the spare rooms; we weren't expecting to need to feed any Lions." Then she turned back toward the other cages. "As for the rest of you… well, I haven't any idea what a scarecrow or tin man eat, so we'll figure you out soon enough. Dorothy…"

The little girl was balled right up into the corner of her cell. Her head poked up when her name was said, but she made no other move to answer or approach the bars.

"Go easy on her," the scarecrow pleaded gently. "I might not be able to think, but I think I can recognise a pure heart when I see one."

As Glinda passed his cage, she squinted for a moment at his lumpy visage. "Don't I know you?"

"Oh, I don't know. Do you know?"

"No, I don't know. Calamity and woe!" Shaking off the vague feeling creeping around the back of her neck, she went on to the cell the girl was in. "Alright, listen. If you promise to be good, we can take you upstairs, get you washed and a hot meal. But it's… well, there are a few conditions."
When the girl's wide eyes caught sight of the manacles she produced from behind her back, her face turned white. "O-oh… oh, I really am in a pretty pickle…"

"You did try to kill my best friend," she reminded her in an easy tone, though her eyes narrowed very slightly as she spoke those words. The girl retreated behind her grimy arms. "Do you want to come out here or not?"

She did. It took a minute or two of gentle prodding, but she got her to agree to the terms. Glinda tossed the manacles through the bars to land near her feet and told her to close them around her own wrists behind her back, which she did. Then Glinda unlocked the door, strode in, and helped her to standing.

"Ohhhh," the scarecrow moaned anxiously as they headed toward the stairs.

"Don't worry, I'll take good care of her," Glinda promised with a polite smile. "And then maybe you and I can have a little chat afterward, hmm?"

"I'll hold you to that. Both of those, really." Again, she glared at him as if she could bring the memories back by pure force of will. Giving up on finding out for the time being, she prodded Dorothy up the stairs.

Neither spoke until they were on the landing for the next floor. Then Dorothy asked in a meek voice, "Are you really going to feed me? Or… or did you just not want my friends to be worried? Am I gonna be hanged?"

"Why are you so ready to die?" Glinda muttered to herself as they walked. However, the girl seemed to have excellent hearing, and didn't seem to realise the question was rhetorical.

"Because it's m-my own fault. All of this." When she got no reply, she pushed onward, "Didn't you say a feller of yours was under my house when it fell? He died. I…" Another sob. "Oh, he died, and it's m-my fault, and all the crows, and y-your friend with th- with the water…"

"Calm down," Glinda soothed her as they found their way into the kitchens. "Just… what do you mean by any of this? I thought you said the cyclone wasn't your fault."

As she was manoeuvred into a chair and gently pushed to sit, Dorothy collected her thoughts. "I… well, the twister came, and… and I wasn't paying it any mind, see, because all I could think about was far away things. Uncle Henry and Aunt Em are always after me b-because I can't keep my head out of the clouds, you know. And I w-wanted…" A hiccup as she tried to keep from being too emotional. Without success. "I wanted to see the rest of the world! To make it out of Kansas and really see it, maybe China, or France! Those fancy places you hear tell of!"

"So then, why don't you go to one of those? I've never heard of any of them, but they have to at least be as interesting as Oz." As she spoke, she began to collect the ingredients for a light breakfast, to cook and serve to their "guest". She wouldn't dare be accused of poor hospitality, even to a prisoner!

"B-but don't you see? It's my fault for wishing for such things when I h-had a perfectly nice life at home with my aunt and uncle! What a horrible, ungrateful girl I am!"

She began to sob afresh, and this time she couldn't even bury her face in her hands; her shoulders jerked as if she had tried, and when she failed the sobs only got louder. Sighing, Glinda gave up the food for a moment, instead striding over to clap her hand on the girl's shoulder. As she might have expected, she flinched away, so she had to redouble her grip.

"What kind of preposterosity is that, now? Nobody ever killed anybody just by wishing for
something; it takes wishing and action. Do you have any power to summon a storm? Even a light drizzle?"

"W-well, I… n-not that I know of…"

"Then there you go. It was just that you were in an accident. We wouldn't even be having this conversation if you had wound up dead from the house falling — you're both victims!" Dorothy nodded. "As for the rest… I don't know anything about the kingdom of Kansas. Why don't you tell me a little about it while I cook?"

So she did. As Glinda put the tea kettle on and fried up some potatoes and sliced tamornas, mixing the later into some griddle cakes, she listened.

Dorothy Gale came from a very rural region of Kansas, which sounded a lot like Munchkinland or Quuddling Country. It was not a kingdom, as she explained, but a "state", which led to some brief misunderstanding when Glinda asked, "State of what? Confusion?" But the girl went on to explain that it was a small region of a very large country. Their king, called a "president", was content to let each state rule itself, only owing them some taxes and allegiance to the country as a whole. That was an interesting political system, and she resolved to ask her about it in more detail another time.

As she had mentioned once before, Dorothy had been living the life of a simple farm girl, hanging around and helping with the chores. She was of marrying age, or nearly so, but her aunt and uncle — who seemed to have adopted her when her parents died, and Glinda quickly discovered that pushing into that subject made the already-anxious girl nearly catatonic so she refrained — seemed content to keep her around to aid them with work and provide further company. Apparently, she was only allowed to go to school with the other children, and otherwise discouraged from straying outside the farm; once her classes were complete, she might not even get to go to university. Privately, Glinda thought that was a bit selfish of them, but she tried not to say as much.

Having finished eating and moved on to their tea, Dorothy went on about her chores around the farm, the few people in town she knew. Glinda found herself a bit bored by the minor details, but also charmed by how sweet the girl was once she got to talking. More importantly, she seemed a lot less terrified of her surroundings when given freedom to babble.

"...and I wish the house had more food stocked up when I was thrown here," she wound up as she reached the bottom of her cup. "All we had was some bread and butter, a few eggs — and there wasn't time to cook them or anything, so I left them behind. Probably gone rotten by now."

"Oh, it's only food," Glinda tried to reassure her. "Just be grateful you survived! A falling house, and you came out without a scratch!"

Dorothy flashed a nervous smile. "W-well, I suspect that's because I was in bed asleep. You see, I was awful scared for a long time, but when nothing else happened… even a twister starts to be dull if you're in one for hours and hours."

"Suppose it would," she chuckled as she set her cup down. "Now, let's get you into a bath. Is there any special thing you Kansasians do when you bathe?"

"We use water and soap. In a washtub. Is… is that special?"

Once the plates were drying on the rack next to the sink, Glinda put the irons back on her wrists and took her "guest" down the hallway to a bathing chamber, where she began to heat up a large pot of water upon the stove in the corner. She asked Dorothy to undress, but the girl balked.
"What's the matter? You haven't got anything I have, I'm sure!" Then her expression turned more serious. "Unless people really are different in Kansas in more ways than I expected…"

"I… w-well, it isn't decent, is it?" she whispered fearfully. "Even Uncle Henry turns away when I'm dressing, and he's kin to me!"

Laughing despite her best efforts not to, Glinda came over to pat her on the shoulder. "But we're both women! Anyway, I'm sure Uncle Henry wouldn't have cared about his niece, either. Didn't he ever help you bathe when you were little?"

"When I was little, yes! Not when I'm a… almost a full-grown lady! And… and well…" Her eyes turned away, cheeks flaming hot as she tried to feign that she hadn't left a sentence dangling. But when Glinda only stood there, staring at her expectantly, she finally whispered, "Y-you Oz women aren't like American women."

"What's that supposed to mean? And what's an American?"

Ignoring the second question, Dorothy whispered, "The Tin Man told me. H-how you and the Wicked Witch of the West are."

"The who?!" Thinking about that for a moment, then she gasped, "Do you mean Elphie? Because she's been living here in the Vinkus?"

"I s-suppose, if that's the green one's name. It's what they call her in the Emerald City, didn't you know?" Glinda shook her head, so Dorothy ticked off on her fingers, "You're the Witch of the North, and the one with the shoes like m-mine is the Witch of the East."

"Ohhh. Wonder who would be the Witch of the South." The Witch of the North took a moment to ponder that as she filled the washtub partway with cold water; the boiling water from the stove would mix with it to make it a pleasant temperature. "Well, I don't see what difference there is between Ozian women and Americal women. You look like you have two eyes and ten fingers to me."

"Not that difference. That… that you…" But Dorothy couldn't continue. She looked both as shy as ever, but also as if she felt a bit ill.

"What did the Tin Man say? I'm very curious now, for reasons I'll explain once you tell me."

"That you're a queer folk. That y-you don't hold with the Good Book, and… and you and the Witch of the West… are together like a m-man and woman w-would be!" she managed to stammer in the end, turning away entirely and hunching her shoulders.

That brought Glinda up hard. She had been about to flippantly ask which book was the "good" one, but she found herself distracted by the notion Dorothy had heard from Boq. Was it that obvious? No, it couldn't be! The few times they had even come close to displaying such feelings toward each other were in very private locations, and nothing had come of them, anyway. The much more likely scenario, which made her blood boil as much as the bathing water, was that Nessa's unwilling target of affections had felt so spurned by her own rejection of his advances that he decided concocting a rumour like that was the easiest way to make himself feel less maligned by her disinterest. She wanted to walk straight downstairs and thump him soundly, but in the end, it didn't really hurt much to spread a rumour. Not that one, at any rate.

Especially when it might be true, a quiet voice in the back of her head whispered. But she ignored it for now.
"And what did the others say about that?" she asked idly, watching the water boil. Trying not to let on how much she cared about Dorothy's answer.

"Well, the Cowardly Lion didn't seem to care one way or the other," she admitted, voice still quavering. "Which was strange, since I thought animals didn't do those kinds of things! With the same sex, I mean. But he says he's seen it with Tigers, and Bears, and all sorts of Animals, so I guess to him, it's not as peculiar as it is to me."

"Oh my," Glinda tittered, bemused by the girl's views on the topic. "Lions and Tigers and Bears! And your straw-headed friend?"

"He mostly always says he doesn't know anything, and that's what he said about this, too." Their eyes met again, and Dorothy gulped. "W-well, I... I know it's not Christian to believe any rumour, so I'm sorry if it isn't true, and... and you've been so nice to me, always, and maybe it seems ungrateful for me to repay you by saying so! But I'm just t-telling you what I heard!"

Nodding for a moment, she walked over toward Dorothy. The girl shrank back against the wall, but when she felt her hands trapped between herself and the cold stone, still manacled, she arched her back and turned her face up toward Glinda, breath coming in shallow gasps. She was definitely getting close to a full-blown panic - and it wasn't only the threat of physical violence.

"Listen," Glinda told her in as gentle a voice as she could manage. "Nobody's going to hurt you. We're still trying to decide what kind of punishment you deserve, but... gosh, I don't know how else to say it without sounding crass!" When she laid a hand on Dorothy's shoulder, the girl squeezed her eyes shut. "Whatever you might think of me, I'll never hurt you, okay? Or... well, do anything you don't want me to do. In any way."

Tears leaked from the corners of her eyes as she cringed away from Ginda's nearness. "B-but you're a... what's that word? Deviant! You're a deviant, a-and I've heard about what they d-do from the preacher, th-that they'll take a girl a-and... I know y-you've been so nice to me, but I've n-never met a deviant before myself, and don't know w-what they will and won't do, I don't know, I'm s-so scared, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry!"

At that, Glinda couldn't help catching her up in a fierce hug, petting her hair and shushing her very gently, rocking back and forth. Once she had thrashed around for a few seconds and come to realise she wasn't being hurt, the girl began to cry in earnest, and slowly the thrashing tapered off as she began to sniffle and lean into the contact, glad for the comfort after so much coldness. Her own heart felt tight and sad, but she knew that was more empathy than anything else.

Also, she was having a much harder time maintaining her impartiality. How in Oz could a girl that fragile and weepy ever pose a threat to them? She had made a bad choice in putting her trust in the Wizard, but it also had been the only choice open to her at the time. No one else had a way to transport her back to the land of Kansas that she called home, so far as she knew. Between that and the popular opinion that she and Elphaba were the worst kind of villainous witches, it was easy to see how she had decided she was on a holy pilgrimage instead of an assassination mission.

Even more intensely, she felt fury that her companion had filled her head with so much nonsense as they journeyed together. Boq would have to be addressed as soon as was humanly possible.

When Dorothy was only sniffling and no longer sobbing, she pulled back and left a gentle kiss on her forehead, earning a quiet sigh as her eyes closed. Then she whispered, "Listen. I promise you're safe with me, but if you'd rather, I'll step out after I pour the hot water in, and you can bathe yourself.
I'll come back with some clean clothes for you. But you absolutely have to promise me you won't run away."

"Gosh, I do, I do! Cross my heart and h-hope to die!"

"That's all well and good, as far as it goes," Glinda said, raising her index finger. "But it sounds a little vague, doesn't it? I need an actual promise. Maybe you didn't have much choice, but one way or the other, you did try to kill my-

"I know," Dorothy groaned out, still as bleary-eyed as before. "And I'd apologise a million times if I thought it would put everything right as rain, but I know it won't! So... so I don't know how else to..."

Cupping her apple-cheek, she said in a firm but kind voice, "Earn our trust back. That's what you do. If you try to escape the first time we give you a chance, then that's it — back to the dungeon, since we clearly can't trust you!" Dorothy let out a little squeak, and Glinda felt bad that it came out sounding like a threat, so she shushed her and petted her face again. "But you won't do that. I don't think that's the kind of young lady you are at all. You're a promise-keeper. So promise me, okay?"

A glint of determination crept into her eyes, and she stood the tiniest bit straighter as she said, "I promise I won't run, a-and I'll clean behind my ears, and... and then I'll wait like a good girl for when you bring the clothes. Is... is that what you want?"

"That's all I need to hear, yes," Glinda laughed, patting her again as she backed toward the stove. The "clean behind my ears" bit had been unnecessary, but she assumed that was something her aunt demanded of her on a regular basis. "And I hope you don't mind, but unlocking your wrists will be the last thing I do before I leave. You understand."

"Yes, of course," Dorothy sighed glumly. "Earning trust."

So Glinda poured in the hot water, testing it to make sure it was just about right. Then she unshackled the prisoner and asked her to do the same; she dipped a finger in, hissed, and said it would probably be alright in a few minutes, once the heat begun to fade.

"Good. Now then..." She picked up her hand and patted it, and that time, Dorothy flinched a lot less. "I'm going to lock the door, just as a precaution. Not because I really think I need to — and I'm hoping soon enough, I won't have to at all."

"Y-yes, ma'am." As Glinda turned away, she said in a soft voice, "Is it alright if... your name is Glinda, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is."

"May I call you 'Miss Glinda'?"

Her smile was faintly enchanted as she said back, "Yes, you may, Miss Dorothy."

It wasn't until she was off down the hall to confer with her fellow "witches" that Glinda realised something odd. Though she had turned aside Dorothy's accusations, said a few reasonable things in response to allay the girl's fears, she had never outright denied that she and Elphaba were illicit lovers. Out of everything, that may have been the most telling.

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"So you trust her that much?"
Glinda shrugged as she watched Nessa and Elphaba struggle with the chickens. They had been a recent addition to the "farm" they were keeping against all reason inside the castle, and a large part of the reason they were considering moving all the animals to the courtyard. It would be more trouble to go down there and deal with them due to the extra distance, but animals really did belong out of doors rather than in.

"She's a sweet girl, really. Everything I've learned about her this morning tells me that she has no idea what to make of Oz, or the Wizard or any of it!"

"But she tried to kill me!" Elphaba protested as white feathers flapped in her face. "And Fiyero, and the Crows, even if they weren't by her own hand! Motives aside, do you really expect me to just let all of that go without a second thought?!"

"No, of course not! But maybe after a second and third and fourth thought, you can see that she didn't think she was hurting Elphaba Thropp, the saviour of the Animals, good chum to me, sister of Nessarose!"

With a nod, Nessa came up next to them, wiping sweat from her brow as she put a few more eggs into the basket Glinda was holding out. "It's true. She thinks of us as the Wicked Witches of the Insert Region Here."

"Or she did," Glinda added. "Now…"

"Now she might not." Elphaba grunted as she tossed one of the chickens over her shoulder, where it flapped frantically to slow its descent and succeeded. "Well… I suppose you have a point. The other prisoners, however, do not have the same excuse."

"By 'other prisoners', you mean Boq. And I quite agree; he knows us too well to justify the… oh, what he told her! It's none of his beeswax!"

"Yes," Nessa murmured, eyes narrowed at the two of them. "But I have to admit, I wondered a time or two myself whether or not you were… 'companions' in more than one sense."

"Nessa," Elphaba grunted in warning.

"What? You have to admit, it's not as platonic as it could appear! I can't imagine running off to live with anyone for two full years! How should I know what happened in all that time?"

"Nothing happened!" Glinda burst out, a little too shrilly. When Nessa's eyebrows went up, accompanied by a very low chuckle, she pursed her lips and tried not to think about how much warmer her face felt. "And besides, that isn't the point! The point is, your former boy toy and our former classmate sees no problem filling her head with nonsense and taking a swing for your neck with blade!"

At that, all her bemusement faded away, and she looked down. "You're right. I… shouldn't be teasing, it's not helping anything right now. Clearly, we are too late to win Boq over, and… and I have to…" She took a breath to steel her resolve. "He'll never be mine. And I need to let go of the idea that he ever was, really."

"Good girl. A man who tries to murder you is a man you can do without!"

"By that logic," Elphaba interjected as she struggled to close the pen they had fashioned, "we can do without Dorothy, too. They both attempted murder yesterday!"

Rolling her eyes, she snapped, "She threw water on you! Unless you're a sugar cube, I highly doubt
that was going to do a twigging thing!"

"Not that she knew that. I'm talking about the intent, not the act itself. That girl marched right in here with what she thought was a weapon that could kill me in cold blood, and she used it."

"Well, as I was trying to say before, she knows you as evil personified. The Wizard had her totally convinced that it was the right thing to do, and she wanted to go home so badly that she was even more willing to believe him. Can't you see that if she knew who you were, she'd never-"

"No, I can't see that. Do you know why? Because we don't really know anything about her!" Throwing both arms up, she said, "She's not even from Oz! How can we know what the people of this Kansas think? How they feel or behave? She might be capable of lying right into your face and sounding as earnest as you and I right now!"

Glinda strode right up to her, hands on her hips. "Really, you could be right. I'm not saying you're wrong. But you didn't feel that poor girl sobbing onto your shoulder this morning! She doesn't seem that different from you and I, and I'm going to choose to believe her!"

Her two-year companion's green features didn't flinch at all. "And I'll choose not to. Not yet."

"Fine!" Turning away, she pursed her lips in thought, then gave a slight toss of her head. "Maybe that's the best thing. You can stay skeptical, so if she really is pulling the wool over my eyes, you'll catch it. Though I really, really believe she's not!"

"And I'm impartial," Nessa put in, as if feeling a bit left out. "So… I can help support one of you if I've noticed something, one way or the other."

"It's nice to know her attempt to kill me has shaken the both of you so deeply," Elphaba said with a scowl. But when they merely glared at her, she rolled her eyes and admitted, "With water, I know. You're right, I'm perfectly fine, but I still don't like anyone trying to shuffle me loose the mortal coil!"

"The Wizard and Morrible are the ones truly to blame, Elphie. Be mad at them, not at the poor girl they duped into doing their dirty work."

A green index finger jutted up at her. "Now that I fully agree with. Alright, go give her the clothes, we'll finish up here. And… she can eat lunch with us. Afterward, she goes back to the cell-"

"Elphie-"

"And we'll try speaking with the scarecrow," she pushed ahead forcefully. "You said you already traded a few words with the Lion, so I'd like to try him next. Boq… well, we'll figure out what to do with him eventually."

Nessa didn't say anything as Glinda gathered the eggs and the small bundle of fresh clothing and left, but neither did she look all that cheerful.

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"And you mean it?" Dorothy asked through the door as she changed into the clean clothes. "They won't mind me eating with them? Y-you don't mind?"

"Not at all! Though… well, I'm sure you can understand Elphie is a bit less thrilled with you than myself and Nessie, but just mind your manners and… y'know, don't throw any more water at her…"

There was a mild thunk! from beyond the door, a muttered oath, and then she panted, "I w-won't, of
course! Even if it did work, I'd never do it again, knowing that now you're my only hope to get home!"

"Right! Um… about that…” Twisting her fingers, she said, "It's not that we have any way to get you home that we know of, you know? I've been working on a floating bubble charm that gets me a few feet off the ground, and we could try that out on you, but it's still a little… funny…”

"Oh, that's alright!" she said in a cheery voice. "I meant that you'd try! The Wizard said he would, but he also said I had to hurt people to do it — people he said were evil, but aren't very evil at all. So… so I'm still not sure I'm any better off than I was before, but as my Aunt Em always says-

"Lurline Above, here we go again," Glinda muttered under her breath. She seemed to parrot anything her caretakers said as if they were messages from divinity.

"-she says, 'You make do with what you have.' And what I have is you and the other witches, since I can't very well try and kill you while I'm a prisoner, and you've been so kind to me anyway, s-so the Wizard won't help me anymore. And if he wants me to hurt people who haven't done anything wrong, then he isn't a good Wizard at all, is he?"

"No, I suppose he isn't," Glinda chuckled pleasantly. "Elphie and I really used to think he was, you know. Simpler times."

The door was thrown open the next moment, and the first thing Glinda's eyes were drawn to was the twinkling golden shoes, of course. The rest of her outfit was one Glinda had worn herself; a ruffly blue dress with large white bows on the front and back, and puffed sleeves. The hem had just touched the ground on her, but on the other girl, it was a little higher. Such a garment wasn't exactly fashionable now, especially not at that length, but it would do for the time being and was quite nice compared to what she had on before.

"Splendid," Glinda said with a little clap of her hands. "You look lovely!"

At that, Dorothy's somewhat tired and confused look turned into a shy, pleased one as she dipped her head and curtsied — much more successfully than her last attempt. "Thank you, Miss Glinda! I… oh, it's far too nice for me, I don't own anything like this! Just the gingham dress I left at the Royal Palace."

"Well, you look lovely, all the same. And now, I am sorry, but…” She raised the manacles again. Dorothy's smile vanished, but she didn't protest or get any more upset than that. "Sorry."

"It's alright. I'd be doing the same thing if I were in your shoes." Once they had been snapped shut, she cleared her throat and asked, "Speaking of which… do you… know how I can get these off?"

"Get what off?" Glinda asked as they started off down the hall.

"The shoes. I've tried everything, and so did the Wizard and his secretary, but they won't budge for anything! She even tried to pierce them through with an odd, shiny little bodkin, but it broke in two!"

"We'll see what we can find. I expect it's- wait." Her eyebrows knitted as they walked. "Do you mean to tell me you bathed in your shoes?!"

Sighing, she glanced up at Glinda briefly before answering, "I kept my feet out of the tub. If I can't get the shoes off, then the water would just get trapped in there with my socks, and nobody wants soggy feet if they can help it!"

"Of course not! Gosh, that must have been a real trial! I'm sorry… but perhaps Elphie's seen a spell
in her book that can get them off of you. After all, you can't wear the same pair of shoes forever, even if they are golden!

In what seemed like no time at all, they were at the kitchen, and Glinda knocked three times. Then she barged in to see the two sisters busy with lunch. Dorothy didn't speak, her easier manner gone and replaced with the nervousness that they had come to expect from her. When Glinda cleared her throat, it was only Nessa who glanced up from the stove.

"Afternoon. You can have a seat, we're almost through here."

"Y-yes, ma'am," Dorothy whispered, curtsying again as best she could and walking stiffly to the table, perching on a chair as soundlessly as she could manage and sliding into it. Her damp brown pigtails even seemed to hang more limply, though Glinda knew that was probably her imagination playing tricks on her.

When Elphaba turned back, she didn't say anything to Dorothy. Merely looked to Glinda and said, "How will you take your tea?"

"A little lighter, I think; I've had a cup with our guest this morning already." She turned to look at said guest. "And you?"

"I-I'm fine," she breathed.

"You are not," Elphaba said shortly. "How do you like your eggs?"

"My… eggs? I haven't got any eggs." The withering look made her squeak, "S-sunny side up! Sir! M-ma'am!"

As Elphaba began to flip the eggs in the skillet, Nessa brought over a plate laden with buttered toast and a pot of jam. It seemed their lunch was to be a second breakfast. Dorothy bit her lip but said nothing as Glinda put a couple of pieces on each plate.

"Jam?" she asked Dorothy, hand just taking up the spoon in the jar.

"Me? Oh, goodness, if I'm allowed it, then yes, thank you."

In short order, they all had their plates full. Neither Glinda nor Dorothy dared ask Elphaba if she minded Dorothy regaining use of her hands. Perhaps they all knew that their prisoner was past the point of flinging substances at the witch, but with Elphaba already in a sour mood due to the attempt on her life, it seemed unwise to press the matter. Therefore, it fell to Glinda to spoon-feed her, being the one who had adopted her as a sort of surrogate little sister for the time being.

"Very well," Elphaba said once their plates were nearly empty. "I have to ask you a few questions, now that we're all full and… calmer than yesterday. I should hope you'll answer truthfully, because it is not in your best interests to lie anymore." The girl nodded, and Elphaba nodded in turn. "Good. Why have you come here to Kiamo Ko?"

Only the first question and Dorothy had to look away. "T-to… to vanquish the Wicked Witches, especially the Witch of the West, and to bring back proof to the Wizard."

"Alright. And why would you do this?"

"So that th-the Wizard might send me home, to Kansas. I haven't the foggiest clue where I am, so how can I get home without the help of someone so powerful?"
"Yes, of course." Folding her arms as she leaned back from the table, she cut such an impressive figure that Glinda had to suppress a shiver. When did her Elphie learn to be so bold? "I think you should know that the Wizard, despite all of his promises, is a humbug and a swindler."

"R-right, he may be. I reckoned as much when I met you all again, and… you do frighten me something awful, but you can't be anywhere near as foul as he had me believe! Not when I did what I did, and you didn't even tan my hide!"

"We frighten you?" Elphaba almost seemed to relish that concept.

"Oh, yes! Why, I haven't ever seen a green-skinned woman before! Brown-skinned, I've at least heard of, or seen while in the city, but… green?! It's a shock to me, ma'am, meaning no offense to… to who you are, or anything! I'm just not used to anybody being green when they haven't been wearing cheap jewellery!"

At this, Nessa tittered, but tried to turn it into a cough when Elphaba's eyes narrowed in her direction. Dorothy and Glinda exchanged a glance; that remark may have been true, but it wasn't going to help convince the Witch of the West that the little would-be assassin could be trusted.

"Well, just so that you don't think it's common in Oz, I'm the only artichoke around here so far as I know," Elphaba told her firmly. "I'm used to the remarks, they follow me everywhere."

"Oh? Well… I had guessed you were from the Emerald City," Dorothy said.

"Afraid not. Though it was nice to be in a place where I matched, truth be told." Tapping her fork against the side of her plate for a moment, she sighed and said, "You don't seem to have learned much about Oz since you landed here, but then again, I've never been flung into a foreign kingdom, so I guess I can concede that much. Did you see any green folk when you visited the Wizard?"

"No," she admitted uneasily. "Lots of folk dressed in green, but not green themselves. I just… well, I didn't see the whole city, now did I? B-but of course, if you say you're the only woman like you, then I believe it."

Elphaba's grin was poisonous. "Really? You believed what the Wizard told you, too. Do you believe everything you hear?"

"Well… yes."

The admission surprised them. Nessa broke her relative silence to ask, "Really? Just like that?"

Nodding emphatically, Dorothy said, "Sure. See, girls aren't supposed to know things, anyway — that's what the farmhands tell me when I complain about my schoolwork being too hard. So I figure, if a woman older than me or a man tells me something, I may as well just believe them, and then change my mind about it later on if I'm told any different."

All three former attendees of Shiz University recoiled at this mindset. How could anyone let themselves grow up to think any man's opinions held absolute sway over their own? But the girl certainly seemed to be in earnest. Blissfully ignorant.

"Fine," Elphaba said at length, seemingly exhausted. "Well, I… think that's enough for one afternoon. We'll return you to your cell. Perhaps we'll send for you again tomorrow morning."

"Oh!" Dorothy gasped, surprised. "W-well, I would be glad of the company. I do like talking with the Lion and the Scarecrow, but Lion's so blue all the time, and the Scarecrow doesn't know much, so the chatter starts to go stale after a while."
"Very well. Glinda, if you'll esc-"

"Can I ask you something?" Then she seemed to realise she had interrupted and cast her eyes downward, whispering, "S-sorry."

"Go on."

"Well, two somethings." Elphaba's eye twitched. "First, c-can I have some scraps for Toto?"

"Who is Toto?" Then she sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. "Ah, your strange crossbreed pet. That's fine, I wouldn't dream of starving him. What does he eat?"

"Oh, any old thing. And… w-well, I don't want to press my luck, but Glinda s-said… something about h-helping with…” She got so flustered with all of them looking at her that she couldn't finish her request.

"The shoes!" Glinda yelped, remembering with a slap of her palm against her forehead. "Goodness, in all the excitement, I almost- yes, Dorothy can't seem to take off those golden galoshes of hers. Had to bathe with them on and everything!"

Elphaba's mouth turned down into a frown as she thought about that. "Really? That's rather odd. And obviously uncomfortable! I'm not sure the Grimmerie has a spell for unwanted footwear, but I'll see what I can do."

"Doesn't sound like much of a problem to me," Nessa muttered under her breath. Glinda had to fight to suppress a grin; though she probably partly meant because the magic shoes granted her mobility, any reaction could also have betrayed that Elphie told her something which was not supposed to be told. So she carefully kept her silence.

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"Thank you for all your help today," Dorothy told Glinda as she led her down the steps into the dungeon once more. "I… I can tell Miss Elphaba is the only one who's really cross with me, and it makes sense, on account that I… oh, I never thought I'd be anything like a murderer!"

"You aren't a murderer," Glinda said patiently, patting her shoulder. "The more I think about it, the more it's almost like you were… a deputy Wizard. You know, being asked by the official governmental person to do a task! Almost like you're in the army, or the royal guard! How were you supposed to guess that Elphie's innocent?"

Dorothy squirmed as they reached the bottom. "Well… I still don't know about that. She screamed at me an awful lot when I first met her, and she still looks so…” Clearing her throat, she whispered more quietly, "I am sorry for saying these things, I know you're her friend. But she scares me out of my wits!"

She couldn't help the gentle laugh that rolled out of her as she gently nudged Dorothy back into her cell. "Looking at it from your direction, I can't say I blame you! But… oh, I wish you could get to know her the way I did. She's just so passionate about what she believes in, and her friends, and… oh, can't you see how your house falling on our Fiyero upset her? If one fell on little Toto, you'd be furious at anyone inside, whether or not they were in control of the landing!"

"No!" she gasped out, mouth slack and hanging open. "Not little Toto!" The moment the shackles were off, she scooped up the squirming puppy, holding him close. After a few seconds of his nervous licking at her face — and sniffing at the smells of food coming from her closed fist — she turned her face back to Glinda. "I… I know, and I can see your point clear as day. Do you think
she'll ever forgive me? Maybe, once she knows I didn't mean to hurt him?"

"Maybe. He… meant an awful lot to both of us. But that's another story for another time." Locking the door, she turned to toss the cuffs to the scarecrow through the bars. "You're up next, straw man."

As she began to unlock the door and he snapped them around his wrists behind his back, he said, "You probably ought to know that I can slip out of these pretty easily. I'll wear them, if that's what you want, but what good will it do?"

"Oh. Well… thank you for the tip." Something about the way he spoke was bothering her quite deeply, but she shook it off as best she could while leading him out of the cell. "Don't forget, I can magic you into being a tub of goo if you cross me, and that goes for the rest of your travelling troupe, too!"

"Even Toto?" he asked with a theatrical gasp. Dorothy's gasp was markedly more genuine.

"Yes," she grumbled. "Though I suspect he's only an animal, so I don't think it'd be necessary; it's not like he's going to come after us for revenge. Now, move it, you!"

Once they were halfway up the stairs and away from earshot of the others, the bumbling sack of straw leaned in to whisper, "Thought I'd never get a moment alone with one of you!"

"Don't get any ideas, buster."

"No, no," he chuckled gently. "Glinda… it's been a long time since the Ozdust Ballroom, but it's still me."

And it was him. His voice was different now, sweeter, and too familiar to be denied. Much though the poor witch's widening eyes couldn't believe it, given the lumpy cloth edifice they were focused on, it was Fiyero.

*To Be Continued...*
Chapter 13

"What… how… why are… huh?!"

That was the most eloquence Glinda could manage in the face of her almost-lover. Fiyero, her Fiyero was standing there, with the painted-on eyes and smile, ragtag old hat and straw sticking out every which way from the sack-cloth skin, he looked absolutely nothing like her old lover… except for perhaps the expression. Something about it was familiar, even if stretched across unfamiliar features.

But his voice was what truly made her think of the guard captain. Of the one she had hoped would make an honest woman of her someday, back before her life had taken so many unexpected turns. It was the same velvety tones that had talked and sang to her when they went dancing, that had agreed they were perfect together. His voice. He.

"Sorry about this," he laughed, nodding down at his chest. "But I didn't know how else to bring it up. Actually… I kind of forgot who I was for a little while, you know."

"Forgot? What? H-how does that work?" She couldn't string together her thoughts, they were so busy flitting off in a thousand directions.

"Well… near as I can figure it, somebody put a spell on me after I got crushed by that falling house," he mused as they ascended, Fiyero leading the way since Glinda couldn't seem to make herself walk unless he made it necessary. "The damndest thing, right? But I wasn't able to figure that out right away. At first, my head full of straw couldn't put together a single thought anymore. I ran away, then forgot how to walk. I tried to cry out, and forgot how to talk! A farmer found me limp in the field, out of my head, and decided to stick me up on a pole to make use of me. Can't blame him in the slightest, really."

"Oh. S-so… so you really have been a scarecrow."

"For a day or so. Then Dorothy found me." His eyes filled with warmth, in a way Glinda could only describe as fatherly. "At first, all I could do was tag along after her, hoping someone could help me think better. Someone like the Wizard. But as I got closer and closer to the Emerald City… well, my memories started coming back to me."

That sharpened Glinda's tongue a little more. Swallowing, she whispered, "And what did you do? Coming back to your senses, with Biq and that big Lion along for the ride! You must have been scared of saying the wrong thing!"

For some reason, that only seemed to bemuse him more. "Well, about the Lion — oh, I think I'll save that for later. First, I'd love to meet with Elphaba again. Is that where we're headed?"

"Yes, yes it is. I…" But she couldn't take it any longer. Throwing both arms around him, she pinned him to the wall and huddled close, eyes leaking crystalline tears as she cried, "Fiyero! Oh, I thought you were gone forever, we both did, but you… oh, Fiyero!"

A few minutes passed as he weathered her cries, a limp, thin arm eventually encircling her back; it seemed he had not been lying about the manacles not being fit for a scarecrow. Every time she tried to dry her eyes and speak again, she fell to a fresh fit of sobs. They were tears of relief, but they would not be stemmed, not for anything in the world.

"I am sorry," he assured her as gently as he could, when she was more receptive to hearing again.
"About not saying before, and for the crows. All I knew was that a couple dozen black birds were divebombing Dorothy — I didn't want to see what they'd do to her if they succeeded!"

Glinda nodded before sniffing loudly and pulling back to pet his cloth face. "It's alright! Well, Elphie will disagree, but that's... by Oz, I've missed you so much! And I wish you had said something last night!"

"Couldn't. I didn't know what was going on, but I had a feeling from the moment I met Dorothy that it was important I tag along, find out what her goal was. Even more once the Wizard told us what he wanted us to do! And of course, I knew all along that the water wouldn't do a twigging thing to Elphie, but... hey, the more I kept them thinking it would, the more of a chance you'd have when they tried to melt 'the enemy', right?"

"Clever," she laughed wetly, kissing his fabric cheeks. "Oh, so clever! And you thought you hadn't any brains!" They both cackled as they embraced again. "But now you're here... I can't even tell you what this means, to find out you're alive!"

"If you can call this 'living'," he scoffed.

"Nonsense! Compared to you being dead?! I'd take this in a heartbeat!" Again, she kissed his cheek and then grasped the hand. "Come on, Elphie has to see this! Right away!"

In mere minutes, they were in the throne room. Elphaba had stated that it would look more imposing if she received people there, and Nessa and Glinda were inclined to agree, though due to Dorothy's fright it made as much sense to be more welcoming and warm to her, Glinda had argued successfully.

Saint Aelphaba's namesake sat perched upon the old throne, prim and proper with her hands folded over her knees. Nessa sat in the "queen's throne", which Glinda had to fight down a giggle at the thought of sitting in that throne herself by Elphie's side. Her feelings were all muddled now that Fiyero had returned, when a part of her had been wondering if him turning out to be alive would quash any feelings other than for him. Apparently, that would not be the case.

"Hello, murder murderer."

"Elphie," Glinda tried to hiss, but Fiyero cleared his throat so she fell silent.

"Elphaba. I had to protect the girl; I hope you can understand that. But... if you need to punish anyone for that, punish me."

Recognition flickered in her eyes from him speaking, but she didn't catch on right away. Glinda understood; the concept was so fantastic that anyone would doubt themselves, if they even thought of it in the first place.

"Who are you?" Nessa asked, tone equally cold as her sister's. "Name yourself."

"Why should I? I already have a name, and it's one I like. Even if I haven't been using it much lately."

Elphaba leaned forward, face severe. "You're an unwelcome stranger here. You ought to show a little respect to us!"

"Really?" he scoffed, somehow managing to strike a devilish pose despite the manacles. "Because by the way I figure it, you're the ones trying to invoke squatter's rights in my house! How do you like that?!"
The severe face froze for an eternal moment. Glinda let out the smallest of giggles, unable to help herself — and the sound seemed to shake Elphaba loose from the ice entirely.

"F… Fiyero?"

All he did was nod. It was all he needed to do; the witch who had seemed so dour moments before leapt up from the throne faster than Glinda had ever seen her move, sweeping down off the dais and onto him, wrapping her arms around tight. Unable to resist, Glinda embraced both of them, laughing and even hopping up and down slightly as she watched Elphaba kiss his cheeks just the way she had had before.

"Y-you- it's not possible! How could you be alive now- and how are you this… this… this?!"

"Search me," he chortled. His voice was as emotional as theirs, though he didn't cry; Glinda had to wonder if it was even possible for a man made out of straw to shed tears in the first place. "I woke up underneath a house, and barely knew what I was doing with myself until Dorothy found me!"

As he told Elphaba the same things he'd told Glinda about his journey, Nessa eventually came over to join them, content to stay at the fringes for a minute. When there was a lull, she took a step forward.

"Hello again, Fiyero."

"Nessa!" he gasped, painted mouth agape and hands pressing to the sides of his head. Glinda couldn't help leaning in to see what might be inside said mouth, but it was just straw; she might have known. "Look at you! Up and about! Guess I'm not the only one enjoying a spell or two!"

"It's thanks to my sweet, talented sister," Nessa said so earnestly that Elphaba couldn't entirely suppress the slight flush of forest green that came to her cheeks. "In fact… listening to what you told us, I'm pretty sure your condition is thanks to her, too."

"Hm? How do you mean? I didn't see her anywhere around when I woke."

"That's because we had already flown the coop. Before that… she and Glinda were both trying to revive you, and I assumed Dorothy's shiny shoes had taken both spells, since I never heard anything about you surviving. But what if they only caught one spell?"

Elphaba drew back, unwilling to let him go completely but wanting to get a proper look at her sister. "Yes, my spell went under the house; I saw Glinda's get waylaid." Then she turned up to look at his lumpy head and smiled fiercely. "If I did some good for once… even just one good deed that worked out for the best, then I'll sleep a lot easier tonight."

"We both will," Glinda promised, kissing his cheek again. He grinned.

"Sorry about… what you've become," Elphaba breathed, running her fingers over the seams. "This wasn't at all what I imagined the spell would do."

"Ah, you did the best you could. You saved my life." His words were earnest and warm, and he pulled both women in again, clutching at them as hard as his stuffed limbs could allow. "You both did. Thank you. But I'm afraid I have apologies to make."

"Whatever for?"

"The Crows," Elphaba stilled, but he pressed onward. "They weren't… I hadn't any idea what I was dealing with, they could have been from anywhere! But as I've told Glinda, I am sorry; I didn't hear
one of them speak until the others were all…"

The witch took a step back from Fiyero, manner more reserved than it had been upon first reuniting. "That is… regrettable. I've been sick to death over losing Draven and his compatriots, I… but I do know you, Fiyero. I know how you helped me with that cub, and that you'd never harm a hair — or feather — on anyone's head if you saw another way."

For a moment, he allowed her to grieve afresh, frowning over at Glinda with his cloth mouth. Glinda patted his arm in reassurance. Then he perked up and said, "Actually, I did have something to mention to you, if you might be interested. That cub we rescued…"

"Hm?" she said distantly, still seeing what became of the Crows in her mind's eye.

"He's in the dungeons."

Both of her eyebrows shot up at once. "What? You… no. That Lion is the tiny cub we rescued? The odds are… I don't believe it!"

"Well, believe it," he said with a twinkle in his eye. "He doesn't remember much, but remembers being carried out of Shiz by a pair of Munchkinlanders — and I'll forgive him for mistaking me for one, just this once. Isn't that something?"

"Oh…" Pressing a hand to her mouth, she took a few vague steps toward the door. Then she whispered, "I was worried that he might have to be put down, if he continued to pounce at Glinda, but if… if he's an Animal, if we can reason with him… well, we might at least keep him down there instead of being forced to do the unspeakable…"

Clapping her hands together, Glinda wriggled with glee as she embraced her two friends again. Elphaba remained sober from the mention of the Crows, but did not resist when she gave them both a kiss on the cheek apiece. "Isn't this wonderful? We've been through so much, and… well, I'm sorry you got turned into an old sack of rags, but I'm ever so glad you're here! Isn't it grand, Elphie?"

"Swell," she deadpanned. But then she smiled up at him. "And… I suppose I can forgive you for the Crows. You felt you had no choice but to defend her, I understand. But… you'll help me hold a funeral for them, when this is all over? Won't you?"

"Of course," he told her solemnly. "I'd have done it then and there if the Tin Man wasn't making so much racket about needing to charge ahead, axe at the ready."

"He'll either need to be disposed of, or executed in some way," Nessa said coldly, surprising all there. "I'm only being practical; if he's never loved me a day in his life, and he can't resist trying to kill me… all I ask is that he be taken away, made so that he can't attack me anymore. One way or another."

"Now, Nessie," Glinda sighed. She patted her on the arm, but the arm was pulled away so fast that she had to blink. "It's as much our fault as his; I was the one who encouraged him to ask you to the Ozdust Ballroom. Maybe if I hadn't… oh, I don't know. A girl isn't obligated to return a man's affections, you know! I should have been able to simply tell him outright that I was not interested!"

"But you didn't," Elphaba grunted. "Because you're too nice. Always thought you were, and as far as I'm concerned, this is the proof." Then she took a deep breath. "He's contained for now. Let's focus on whether or not we can trust Dorothy and the Lion and work from there. Morrible and the Wizard should be our main concern from this point forward."

The others all nodded in agreement. Then Nessa said, "What are we going to do? Nobody has ever
dared stand against the Wizard; they all love him so much for unifying Oz and building the capital."

"Enlarging the capital," Glinda corrected. "It's always been there, he just made it shinier and bigger. And maybe he's not a terrible man, but he is a terrible Wizard and not fit to be our Supreme Ruler! We just have to think of a way to get him out of there!"

They all murmured about this for a few seconds. Seemed no one was going to be able to come up with an effective plan to depose the man immediately; further contemplation would have to be given.

"Guess I'll go back to my cell for now," Fiyero said, heaving a sigh. Glinda idly wondered if he really needed to sigh at all, or if he even needed to breathe. "Dorothy and Lion are probably worried. What should I tell them?"

"Oh, do you have to?" Glinda began, but Elphaba shushed her.

"Yes, he does. To maintain their trust, we can't appear to be showing favouritism. But… I do suggest you refrain from lying to them about what we've discussed, or who you are."

Eyes narrowing, Nessa asked, "What are you plotting, sister?"

"Not 'plotting'. But now we are four, and I think — except for the walking stovepipe — the others could be persuaded to join our cause against the regime if they realise Fiyero is already on our side."

Fiyero shrugged as he said, "How am I going to explain my lying up until now? At first I forgot who I was, but once I remembered I never said as much. That won't look good."

"Do the same thing: don't tell them until we're ready. I think… Dorothy should be brought up here tomorrow, as she's already shown that she's open to hearing our side of things. And I think that's just what we should tell her; the whole story. Either it will sway her or it won't."

"It is an awfully long story," Glinda snorted. "But yes, that's a good idea. Then, if that goes alright, we can try that out on the big kitten."

"Maybe we should leave him caged up instead," Nessa whispered. "He is a beast; if he decides once we get there to turn on us, he could tear us to pieces!"

"He's a Lion, not a lion," Elphaba said warningly. "And I have a great respect for the king of the forest, even if he's so far from home. Besides, he seems protective of Dorothy, and if she sides with us it might be enough to gain him into the bargain."

"Hey," the scarecrow said, folding his arms. "Don't forget those two are my friends just as much as you are. It's hard to stand here and listen to you talking about them like they're just pawns in a big chess match."

The women blinked at him a few times, and Glinda looked down guiltily. But Elphaba folded her arms right back, straightening to her full height.

"They are pawns. So are we; everyone is a pawn in the Wizard and Morrible's game. We're just hoping to band together and overthrow the players themselves. United, we stand a chance, but divided…"

The rest didn't have to be said.
"I'm afraid, Elphie."

As Elphaba set her pointed black hat on the bureau, touching her index finger to the tip fondly, she asked, "Of?"

"Of what might happen if we can't trust Dorothy," Glinda sighed, shucking her dress and laying it gently over the back of a chair. She reached for the nightgown and began to walk toward the dressing screen as she announced, "I really think we can, but what happens if tomorrow we're talking to her, and she says something we don't like? Or that makes it obvious she could turn on us?"

"You aren't wrong. That would split our focus, having to sit on top of some girl and her companions while we figure out how we're going to bring down a Wizard with the entirety of Oz under his thumb. It's… oh, if only we could get Morrible away from him! Then the way would be clear!"

"This is so unfair! Here we are, the comeliest witches of the eon, and we have to do all the dirty work! What happened to the royal lineage? How'd the Wizard sweep in and take the throne in the first place? Whose hare-brained idea was this whole crazy crusade?!"

"Mine. Of course, it's really the Wizard's for persecuting Animals in the first place, but I am the one who decided it had to stop, and that in absence of any other volunteers, I was going to be the one to stop it. So… when it comes down to it, I have no one to blame but myself."

Emerging from behind the screen, swapped into her nightie, Glinda sighed and said, "Hey, this is Hiz Wizliness's fault, not yours. A good man would have seen that he was wrong and admitted it. His stubbornness is on his own head."

"That's true enough," Elphaba grunted as she wrestled with her bra strap. "Then it's… just a matter of… oh, I can't get this damn thing unhooked!"

"Here." Glinda's nimble little fingers made short work of the clasp, and it snapped open to reveal a smooth expanse of green skin. With a vague smile, she traced one of said fingers down the line in the middle of her back, earning a pronounced shiver.

"Y-you know I told you not to do that."

She drew back, lowering her eyes. "Sorry, Elphie. I didn't mean to- I'll wait for you in the bed."

Once Elphaba was changed into nightclothes, she put out the light and joined her under the covers, curling her body neatly around the back of her friend and pressing her face into her hair. A few seconds was spent adjusting their positions in subtle motions until they were both comfortable again.

"Elphie?" A quiet hum was her only answer. "Do… you really hate it when I touch your skin?"

"That's… not the right word. 'Hate.' But it does make me feel strange, and… and we don't have time to think about figuring such things out. Not with everything going on!"

Her stomach was wound tight as she rolled over to look into the sharp, alluring features that she had grown so fond of over the past few years. "When is the right time? When we're both dead?"

"What?"

"Don't think just because I'm a pretty face that I'm too dense to know what might happen if we try to take down the two most powerful people in the whole kingdom, Elphie. They might kill us, or worse. So…” She petted up and down Elphaba's back. "Do you really wanna put it off ’til later and risk never getting a chance?"
Green fingertips slid up to ghost over Glinda's lips, and she let them part slightly as Elphaba explored, teased. Did so with much more concentration and thought than the previous occasion they had briefly lost themselves in passion and desperation.

"If I do let myself feel this," she finally rasped, "I want it to be because it's my decision, and yours. Not because we feel we have no decision." Her hand vanished. "Besides, I thought with Fiyero back with us…"

"I dearly love Fiyero. And I dearly love you, Elphie Thropp. Do I have to give you up to welcome him back?"

"That's presuming you had me to begin with." When Glinda raised a hand and laid it across Elphaba's neck, cupping it gently, Elphaba leaned into the touch, eyes sliding closed. "Nnh…"

"We deserve each other. Once, I would have thought that was a mean little joke, but now… now I want you to know that…" Giving up on teasing her, she pushed her face into the area she had been petting, feeling the heat of skin, the scratchiness of the collar further down. "Fiyero can't give me what you can anymore. And even if he could, I… I know it's strange, and maybe some would call it 'deviant', but… I want this from you more than from him. From anyone."

"You're only saying any of this because we were stuck with each other's company for two full years."

"Yes, I am. Two full years to appreciate who you are. To me."

Elphaba drew back, turning Glinda's face up to hers with a firm touch that sent chills straight down into every cell of her body, making her toes curl in, her palms tingle, her mouth open. She didn't kiss her. That was what Glinda had craved and hoped for, but she got something else. Something better.

"I would never have made it through those years without you. And I don't want to lose you, now or ever. You came into my life for a reason; I fully and wholeheartedly believe that, Glinda! In and through you, I have been changed…"

"For the worse?" Glinda said with a twinkle of mirth.

"Maybe. But I don't think so. Either way, it's for good. Forever." Their mouths were close again, within an inch of each other, and it felt wrong and right in equal measure, but Glinda dug in with all her might to keep from abandoning herself again, to respect Elphaba's hesitance.

"Do you want this?" There was clear hesitance, so Glinda tried to help calm her with a compromise. "Maybe just a little taste-test?"

"Yes. But I can't take it. Not yet."

"You can't, it's true. I'm giving it to you. There's nothing to take when it's a gift, Elphie."

"What if you taste so good that I can't ever stop tasting you?"

Glinda's soft little shoulder rose and fell, and she let her eyelashes flutter as she felt a single tear leak from the corner of her eye. It couldn't be helped; her heart was bursting and there wasn't room for them all inside it now. "Sounds wonderful to me."

"I will. I promise you that I'll stop; I promise myself. One taste."

Elphaba kept that promise. Her lips dove in, and Glinda returned the gesture with heat and gratitude,
the way her hands gripped Elphaba's shoulders making it crystal clear that she wanted the moment to stretch on for an eternity. But when Elphaba pulled back a minute later, panting and weak, Glinda let her go with the smallest pang of regret marring her joy.

"That's all for tonight," Elphaba announced numbly as she rolled to face the other way. "S-sleep well, Glinda."

But when Glinda's arms encircled her, it was so much warmer and more familiar than they had ever dared be before that Elphaba had to clutch at the back of Glinda's hand, shivering and trying to let her anxieties pass even as Glinda was rejoicing.

"I always do when you're with me."

To Be Continued…
Chapter 14

The small lump in the corner that was Dorothy only seemed briefly startled when Glinda came to get her the following morning. However, she was far more surprised when instead, she went to the Tin Man's cell.

"So we're going to do a thing," the blonde witch began uneasily. "You... have to have figured out by now that we can't just let you run around willy nilly. You attacked Nessa more than once, and the threats you made were pretty graphictitious! So while I-"

"HMMHHPPHH!" he growled through the makeshift gag.

"Enough of that, now," she warned in a sing-song, as if scolding a small child. "Anyway, you're going to be moved upstairs into one of the other rooms, and I'm going to try to tinker with you for a while. Maybe it'll do some good, maybe not. But all the same, I think we should give it the old Shiz try, don't you?"

Clearing her throat, Dorothy approached the bars and whispered meekly, "You aren't going to hurt him, are you? I kn- I know he hasn't been kind to you, but he's been most kind to me!"

"Don't you worry your pretty little head," she replied in a soft, consoling tone. "I can't promise what I do won't hurt, but I'm not going to do anything purely to hurt him. My hope is that I can help him some way or other. And if I can't... well, I guess we could just pop him right back into this cell afterward. No harm done."

Then Glinda unlocked the cell and went inside, securing manacles around his wrists and arms and legs — ones not bolted to the wall. Once he was secure enough that he could not escape or attack, she released him from the wall and stood back, raising her wand.

"Alright, let's try this one again... bubblitio!" Nothing. She took a deep, calming breath and attempted, "Bulbulous bubblissimo! Bumbulous bumbletonia! Spheroidimax voluminia!"

"Uhmmm," the Scarecrow that was Fiyero said as Glinda waved her wand frantically. "None of those sound like very magical words."

Her lips pouted at him and her brow furrowed. "And just whom amongst us is a witch? You? I don't believe so!"

"You're not much of one, either," the Lion grumbled lazily from atop his paws.

"Hey! That isn't very kind!"

"I'm not much of a Lion myself; no offense was intended."

Shrugging that off, she narrowed her eyes and tried the first word again, focusing hard. "BUBLITIO!"

This time, an almost invisible pink film began to wrap itself around Boq. His metallic eyes went as wide as could be to see the magic actually taking shape this time, and he looked at Glinda with a mixture of anger and betrayal. But she did not acknowledge his gaze, and merely sighed.

"You brought this on yourself." When he didn't react, she shook her head sadly and began to back out of the cell, wand raised to direct the bubble she had formed. "A pity, a real pity, Biq."
He only began to struggle and grunt once the bubble began to move him, muffled though his cries were. Casting a semi-apologetic look over her shoulder at the others, she continued to bounce him up the stairs.

"You and I need to have some serious discussion, little boy of tin. And why don't we try out some things from the Grimmerie, too? That sounds like so much fun!"

~ o ~

Elphaba only waited a few minutes after Glinda left to slip down into the dungeons. Both the Lion and Dorothy recoiled to see her, tall and imposing, green and black, framed by the stone doorway. Fiyero, of course, merely watched all parties with curiosity.

"H-Hello," Dorothy attempted in a nervous tone. "Is… is it alright if I ask-"

"Not yet," Elphaba said, dragging a simple wooden chair from the table by far wall over to the Lion's cell — a few inches out of reach of his claws should he suddenly decide to take an idle swipe at her. But she did not sit just yet. Instead, she opened Fiyero's cage, and simply stood back to let him exit.

"Much obliged," was all he said, cheerful as ever.

"What?!" Dorothy gasped in a hushed voice, watching him fetch two other chairs from the table. "Wh- but I… I thought you were going to let me out if I behaved, I didn't… you aren't even shackling him! I don't understand!"

"No, you don't," the witch said evenly, tossing the same old cuffs through for her to put onto herself. Her eyes were sad and wary, but she did as she was silently bade. As her captor unlocked the door, she went on, "But you will. If you listen, and try not to ask too many questions, I think you'll find you understand a great deal…"

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Hours passed, and Glinda found herself flummoxed. She had paged through every single page of the Grimmerie, skimming the contents with her eyes, and she was no closer to finding anything that would make any difference as far as Boq was concerned. This was made all the more frustrating by the fact that she was not nearly so adept at Lurlinic as her chartreuse counterpart, and the meaning of certain phrases or passages eluded her. Still, she had been hoping that persistence would pay off where education failed.

"Fine," she finally sighed, drooping against the arm of the chair she had sank down into already, the book hanging limply from her hand. "I know a spell cannot be undone once it's cast, but there has to be a way to… to de-tinnify you! Something in here, not to undo the spell exactly, but that would still turn you into a normal Munchkin again!"

Of course, Tin Man had nothing to say. At no point had Glinda felt comfortable removing his restraints, so she hadn't. His large, sad eyes continued to follow her everywhere while she stood to replace the book on a table, as if pleading with her to see more than was visible.

"Enough, Biq. I don't care how long you give me the puppy dog eyes."

Still he stared. Bitter tears began to slide down his cheeks as he sat in the chair opposite her, unable to do anything else.

"You'll only rust if you keep that up." Throwing up her hands, she snapped, "What did you think would happen?! The moment Nessa lets you go, you start to run away? To what, find me?" She let
out a blast of laughter. "Hate to break it to you, Munchkin Boy, but I've never even had the tiniest shred of interest in you! Just because you liked me doesn't mean I had to like you back!"

His face turned away. She wanted to feel less hatred, less annoyance at his attitude and more compassion toward his obvious grief, but it wasn't going to happen. Even though Nessa had done things to him that weren't fair, there were reasons for that. And she intended to set the record straight. "I should have been this honest with you from the beginning," she confessed. "You... you really don't deserve it now, but you did then, and... and so did Nessa. That part is your fault; I know there had to have been a thousand times you could have told her you weren't interested, and all you did was go along for the ride. And then you complained too late, and... well..."

A muffled sob filled the room. To try and put some distance between herself and the source of her annoyance and grief, she crossed to the window, grasping the ledge and staring out over the jagged rocks of the Kells both near and distant, down at the village of Kiamo Ko.

"I know Nessa shouldn't have trapped you in Munchkinland or cast any spells on you that she didn't understand; nobody's saying any different. But does that really make it right for you to try to kill her? None of us is free from guilt for this, Tinny. I wasn't honest with you, and you weren't honest with Nessa. So easy to start out that way, huh? Best of intentions. And we really loused things up."

Turning again, she fixed him with a curious gaze, wringing her wand in her nervous hands. "Isn't it funny how Nessa was the only one who was honest from the beginning? She may have failed in other areas, but by golly, she was always truthful about her feelings for you. Just... funny."

Then she strode closer and spat at him, "But all you know how to do is lie. You lied to Nessarose about your feelings for her, and you lied to Dorothy about Elphaba and I." When recognition sparked behind his eyes, she growled, "Yes, that's right! I know all about that! How could you tell her she and I are... that we would do things like that? To a girl barely old enough to start holding hands?! Shame on you! Makes me wonder if you ever did have a heart in the first place!"

Things were going nowhere fast. Grunting in sheer annoyance, she made a couple of quick swishes with her wand and wrapped his chair with more ropes.

"Obviously, I can't do much for you right now. But I'll... I'll try again tomorrow, I guess. Sorry." The last word might have sounded insincere, but Glinda meant it deep down. She didn't even wait for a response before grabbing up the Grimmerie and heading for the door; even if he did respond, it wouldn't be anything worth hearing.

Within minutes, she was descending back to the dungeons again, having stashed the book somewhere safe. Though she had high hopes everything would have gone well with their other prisoners, she could not risk the Lion pouncing on her and stealing their most powerful artefact.

The scene laid out before her was an interesting one, to be sure. Fiyero was sitting lazily in a chair near Elphaba's, and the Lion was lying in the cage with his great, shaggy head on his paws. The manacled Dorothy, however, was cross-legged in her seat, leaned forward with rapt attention. This was obviously the greatest number of direct answers she had ever received from anyone since being tossed into Oz, and she was drinking them in like a parched wanderer of the Shifting Sands.

"Well, I think you're very brave to try and rescue them," she was assuring Elphaba. "What I don't understand is, why does the Wizard want them to be silent in the first place? Surely he can be the President without doing that, he already is one and they haven't bothered him so far!"

"President?" Fiyero asked, the word sounding as unfamiliar coming from him as it did in Glinda's ears. But Elphaba answered her question instead of focusing on Fiyero's remark.
"He needed a scapegoat — no offense to Dr. Dillamond. As I said, we've had a few droughts, and the Wizard hasn't handled the economic recession very well. It was either start squandering his treasury to balance things out, or find something to distract the citizens of Oz, to keep them from blaming him and rioting. It's a calculated diversionary tactic."

Dorothy bobbed her shoes-that-wouldn't-come-off up and down and frowned down toward the stone floor. "My Uncle Henry says we're just coming out of another one of those 'recessions', too. I don't know much about it, except that we haven't had much to eat, or money for new clothes. That's why..." She bit her bottom lip.

"Go on," Glinda said gently a moment later, startling her and the Lion very slightly. "That's why…?"

"Oh… hullo, Miss Glinda. W-well, I know it's silly, what with everything you're troubled with. But I should like to have my gingham dress back, if we c-can manage it. Aunt Em had to henpeck Uncle Henry for weeks to buy that, because she said a girl ought to have a proper dress for Easter Sunday! A-and the thought of going home without it..."

Once she had shaken off wondering what "gingham" and "Easter Sunday" might mean, Glinda was a little shocked to see that Dorothy looked ashamed. It spoke volumes about her family; she was less afraid of their reaction and more worried about disappointing them, inconveniencing those she loved.

"There, there," she shushed her as she walked over to pet along her shoulders. The girl sighed despondently, but did at least seem calmed. "If the rest of our plans work out, I promise we'll search the palace. And if we can't turn it up, we'll make you two new dresses! The best Oz has to offer!"

Though she rolled her eyes, Elphaba refrained from commenting on whether or not she considered this important enough to discuss. Instead, she told the young lady, "For now, I'd like an answer."

"Answer? Oh…" She gulped, glancing over at Fiyero and back. "I'm just a girl, I can't fight, or use magic, or do anything useful. What difference does it make if I join you?"

"I'm not saying you have to face the Wizard head-on," Elphaba assured her. "Just don't get in our way. Your moral support is better than opposition."

Glaring at Elphaba for the callous way she had phrased things, Glinda added, "And you'll be plenty useful! Besides, we don't only want you around because of that — we like you! Don't we, Elphie?"

"I don't dislike her," she offered more truthfully. "Other than that nasty business of trying to kill me."

"You know we're pals, Dorothy," Fiyero put in, leaning forward with his hands on his knees. "I owe you for rescuing me from that cornfield, at the very least! But I can't ignore how badly the Wizard's treated my old classmates. Ooh, it chafes my straw! So I'm sorry to say it, but if you keep supporting him..."

At that, Dorothy quickly shook her head and said, "No, no, I'd never dream of saying it's alright! What all he's done, and then lied about it all to me! I don't understand how he came to be in charge of Oz in the first place, an old humbug like him!"

The two witches shared a weary look. Never had they expected to be history teachers when they enrolled at Shiz, but that seemed to be their fate for the afternoon.

"Let's go upstairs to get something to eat," Elphaba recommended gruffly, pushing to stand. "Nessa should have one of her infernal stews ready to force down."
"Can you bring me back some infernal stew?" Lion asked as they stood. "I'm so hungry; milk only goes so far for a full-grown Lion, and I don't much care for vegetables. Even an old bone would be something."

"Of course," Glinda told him. "We'll bring it with us when we return Dorothy."

As they ascended the steps, Elphaba began, "The Wizard came to us… oh, a couple of decades ago. We were all too young to remember what the time before he ruled was like, I'm afraid — but we know from our studies that our previous queen, Ozma the Billious, had left behind a newborn when she was poisoned; we don't know the gender, there was no formal announcement — already unusual in and of itself. But it's assumed it was a succeeding princess, because that child vanished when the Wizard flew into our world in a foreign contraption the likes of which we had never seen before."

"Poisoned?!" Dorothy gasped.

"Yes," Glinda supplied. "A pretty unregal way to die, isn't it? Her husband was supposed to look after the heir, but… well, he died, too. Boating accident. Worse yet, nobody knows how it was done, or who's responsible for either deaths or the baby disappearing. Still a mystery."

"But… but that's how my parents died," Dorothy was breathing. "On a boat. Imagine that."

Elphaba was shaking her head. "I wouldn't be surprised to learn it was all the Wizard and Morrible's doing. True, he had not arrived yet when the Ozma line ended, but who's to say he hadn't arranged for it beforehand? Or his 'secretary' could have been laying the groundwork."

"Conspiracy theories are fun, aren't they?" Fiyero observed with a light chuckle. "But it might be smarter to stick to what we know, and what we have to do."

"Right. Go on, then."

Somehow, his painted-on eyebrows arched high. "Me? You know what kind of student I was!" But he shrugged and went on, anyway. "Simple, really. Everyone thought the old Wizard was magical because he flew into our world from another, and that made it pretty easy for him to claim the empty throne. Right place, right time."

Head shaking much like Elphaba's, which amused Glinda to notice, Dorothy said, "If he really did kill either of them… oh, even the baby… that's one of the most awful things I've ever heard! And he's never been thrown in jail?"

"How can we? He's the jailor." Elphaba huffed in annoyance as they came to the kitchen and pushed inside. "And there's nothing we can do to prove what he's done, either way. At least Glinda and I are witnesses to the way he tricked us into transforming the Monkeys. If there are any witnesses to his alleged murders, I haven't found them, and I doubt they'll come forward now."

"Such light conversation," Nessa observed as she toiled over the stove. "I was just standing here, lamenting that you two have taken the more interesting jobs and left me to be scullery maid, but perhaps I haven't missed anything, after all."

"You haven't," Glinda sighed, breathing deeply. "Mmm, that smells good… I'm starvatiously hungry!"

Dorothy glanced down at the plates and silverware laid out for the four of them who actually owned stomachs, then back up to Elphaba. "Can you at least move my handcuffs in front of me so I don't need help to eat?"
As no one much wanted to spoonfeed her again, they relented, and Dorothy did her best not to drip on her dress as they discussed all that had transpired. Nessa looked morose when Glinda reported her failing at improving Boq's outlook on life or his physical condition, but did not say a word; she seemed entirely defeated in that area. Privately, Glinda thought that was for the best - the faster she moved on, the better. Even if she was somewhat spoiled, she deserved better than a man who wanted to chop her head off.

"I'm not sure what I can do for you," Dorothy finally told them as Glinda and Elphaba were washing the dishes and Nessa was disposing of the scraps. "But if you'll just… help me with two things, I'll do whatever I can, anything at all!"

"The shoes and the dress?" Elphaba guessed.

"Oh… three things." When the green lips pursed, she rushed ahead, "I forgot about the dress already! The other thing was to help me get home, if you can. Of cOURSE, I'm only asking you to try your best, you know. If you can't, well… then I guess I'll live here forever with these heavy shoes weighing me down."

"That, we will promise," Glinda said for all of them. Elphaba shot her a look, but she ignored it. "We'll do what we can, and if we can't, then we'll figure out somewhere for you to stay in Oz. Deal?"

"Deal." She held out her manacles to be unlocked, and they blinked at her. Slowly, an inch at a time, she lowered them as she whispered, "Oh… am… I still… going back to the dungeons?"

Glancing at the other two briefly to gauge their responses, Glinda then walked over and freed her. Dorothy turned a smiling face up toward her that was so earnest she couldn't help but grin back. "Good. I'll just take you to get washed up again — even if you'll have to hang your feet out of the tub."

As they walked down the hallway, Dorothy slipped her hand into Glinda's, which surprised her very slightly. But she squeezed it in comfort; she could only assume the girl was still scared of the big, drafty castle, and the less alone she felt, the better.

"Miss Glinda… thank you so much. I know we've only just met, but I… feel like you're how I'd like my mother to have been, if I could remember her."

"M-Mother?!!" Glinda burst out in mild surprise.

"OH! Oh, is that not alright?" she breathed. "Of cOURSE, I didn't mean to say you're old enough to be my mother! Not a w-woman so young and lovely as you, not at all! But only… you're so kind, and thoughtful, and I'm sure it's because of you that I'm not a prisoner anymore. I can't believe I was ever afraid of you, or thought you were a deviant!"

Entirely mollified, the Witch of the North had to chuckle — mostly in chagrin at her own overreaction. "Fine, fine, I'm glad to have helped how I could. You are a sweet little thing, all in all, aren't you?" As they came again to the bath, she said, "Of course, I can't promise you anything… certainly not that we'll live to see the end of this fight with the Wizard, or that we'll find a way to send you back to Amerikansas, but…"

"You'll do your best," Dorothy finished for her, squeezing her hand again before she began to help heating the water. "That's all a girl can ask."
"...and that was the last spell I tried," Glinda was telling Elphaba as they fell to the task that they had both been putting off for far too long: unpacking. It had taken some careful plotting to retrieve their few effects from the cave behind Wicca Falls, and since then too much had been transpiring to worry about opening the pair of disparate trunks and making a good run at their contents. Presently, half of what they owned was strewn across the bed, the rest either hung up properly in one of the wardrobes or stacked on the vanity. Privately, Glinda lamented not being able to use said vanity for its intended purposes, but there was no place for that type of "vanity" in their current lives.

"I can't say I'm surprised, Glinda. You know that spells can't be undone, and it's slippery work even changing them somewhat the way we already have with Boq. Tampering further… if we do succeed, he'll either wind up dead, or completely unrecognisable."

A sigh welled up powerfully from the pit of her stomach, but ended up sounding pathetic and soft when it came forth. "You're probably right, but I'd still appreciate it if you could take a look for yourself. I mean, you're clearly the better witch between us, right?"

"Only through study," she hedged. Then she stood a little straighter, shooting over her shoulder, "At what point did we start embracing the word 'witch' instead of hating it? When did that happen?"

"Search me, Elphie; I just work here."

Tutting briefly, Elphaba laid out a few of her older school effects from within her travelling cloak. A snuffle threatened to break free from Glinda when she recognised the Shiz guidebook, small bound leather tome that it was, lying next to the green bottle and a few spare coins that weren't even accepted outside the Emerald City as valid currency. Much though she protested, her Elphie truly was a sentimental creature.

Something stirred in the back of her mind. It took her a long second or two for it to bob its meandering way along to the front, and until that point, she hadn't even been sure what the stirring was in relation to.

"Nessarose isn't much of a witch at all," her roommate was saying as she put away a few of her dresses, more neatly into one of their closets than previously. Plenty of room to work with in there, now that they had cleared away some of the decrepit old junk. "However, I think she might have an aptitude for magic if she works on it as hard as she's worked at making her awful stew into tolerable stew. Just needs a swift kick in the-"

"That bottle."

"Hm?" Glancing down, she picked the bottle back up, then stared over its mouth at Glinda. "What about this bottle?"

"Didn't you tell me once before that it was… important to you, for some reason?" Even now, Glinda was still barely aware of why this mattered, but the threads were beginning to weave themselves together now.

"I did. It was my mother's. Father would often tell me that it was a prized possession, and she never wanted to be apart from it. When he would ask, she would simply state that it reminded her of her firstborn, but…" One shoulder rose and fell. "I got the feeling that wasn't the full story. Or at least, old Frex didn't believe it was."

"Hm."

"Why do you ask?"
"Oh, nothing." Keeping her tone carefully distant, aloof, she went on, "Just that… it looks conveniently similarly to the bottle the Wizard was drinking from when we dropped in on him."

Elphaba started, glancing between her and the bottle. "Really? Well, it's just a green bottle… no label to say what's in it. Could have been just a similar shape."

"No, not similar. *The same.* I'm telling you, whatever's in his, or used to be in yours, it's the exact same type of bottle, shape and colour."

This silence was a bit longer and quieter than the previous one. Glinda wouldn't have guessed that silences could be quieter or louder; they were either silent or they weren't. Until now.

"No. Well, I mean… maybe she visited the Emerald City. Could have been anything."

"Could have."

"Then why are you bringing this up? We have a lot to do."

"Elphie…"

Exasperated, she threw up both hands. "What am I supposed to do? How do you want me to react to this news? So my mother and the Wizard both have identical vessels for holding liquor. Big twigging deal. Dorothy and Nessa both have shiny shoes; maybe they're related."

"They are. The shoes, not Dorothy and Nessa," she snapped when Elphaba raised her eyebrows at her. "Both are because of our spells! So they are connected! And it might be the same with the Wiz-"

"I don't believe you really believe this, this… what was it Fiyero said? 'Conspiracy theories'. That's what you're spinning. Wilder and more fanciful by the minute, if you think I'm going to follow your logic to where it's leading."

Glinda's hands went to her waist, impatient at the attitude she was receiving. "I'm not outright saying anything! Just bringing up possibilities! What you do with them is up to you!" When she got no answer right away, she approached Elphaba, grasping her forearms to stop her from continuing to dig in her closet. "Elphaba, please? Just… doesn't it sound like something we ought to try figuring out?"

"Maybe. Another time."

"But we don't have-"

"I need to finish this. Either with your help, or without. But for now, I can't…" A slight flicker of pain showed in her eyes before she mastered it, suppressed it and returned her features to their quickly-becoming-normal steely resolve. "We need to worry about how we're going to depose the Wizard and bring peace to the Animals. That's first. Secondarily, we have to keep an eye on Dorothy, and look through the Grimmerie for the sake of a stupid, ungrateful wretch of a tin can."

Feeling stupid for having brought the whole thing up, Glinda strode for the door. "Fine, Elphie. I can tell when I'm not wanted around. I'll see you at supper."

As she slipped out of the room, she just scarcely caught Elphaba's sigh. She probably felt bad for being unpleasant just then, but couldn't quite find the humility to chase after her. Maybe that was for the best; this way, they could both have a few minutes with their own thoughts to ponder the situation and to let their tempers settle.
But she certainly wasn't going to let the matter drop. Not if it meant what she thought it might.

To Be Continued…
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

An extra long chapter this time! It just happened to be the next one, but I figured I would post it tonight in celebration of A Very Wicked Halloween (if you missed it I hope you can find it online - Ariana Grande's performance of "The Wizard And I" was incredible)! Enjoy!

Also... there might be an extra special something coming to this account on All Hallow's Eve itself. Stay tuned.

"Well, the old Lion seems to have followed Dorothy's lead," Fiyero told Glinda the next morning as they tidied one of the basement rooms. It wasn't quite as far down as the dungeons, but also beneath the "ground floor", and seemed to be primarily storage. A lot of it had already been ransacked, and the remaining junk was old, decrepit and rusted. The pile of salvageable materials was a lot smaller than the pile to be thrown out.

"Thank goodness," Glinda sighed as she moved things. For a moment, she paused to glance at the ruin that had become of her once-soft hands. They were still of a dainty shape, and not altogether hideous, but the nails were jagged and short, and callouses were beginning to form from hard work. A slight flutter went through her stomach when she remembered how Elphaba had commented that they were "a real woman's hands" now; though it sounded like an insult to her Gillikin sensibilities, the tone had told her that Elphaba was praising her for not shrinking from an honest day's work, and any praise from her Elphie made her feel a bit giddy, rare as it seemed to be.

"Now, all we have to worry about is old Boq. No progress?"

"None. He's a stubborn little pinhead! But… I suppose he'll just have to work through his feelings on his own. No spellwork can do that, anyway, but I thought we might find a way to turn him back into a Munchkin."

Waving one of his stuffed hands, Fiyero said, "Don't worry about doing that for me. Oh, I'd love to have my old body back, but to be honest… I think I like being a scarecrow better."

"You do?" she asked in bald surprise.

"I do. No one expects much from you when you're made of straw! And besides, I was such a good-for-nothing Vinkan… sure, I was royalty, but I don't think I'd have made a very strong candidate for king. Even as an honorary title in these modern times."

Tutting, she put down the old wash basin she had been carrying — rusted through the bottom, entirely useless now — and came over to grip his shoulder. "Come now, we both know that isn't true. You and I were a lot alike back then, and… well, I think we've grown up a lot. Haven't we?"

"Maybe so," he sighed with a slight smile. She could have sworn there was a twinkle in his painted eye as he went back to sweeping. "Something's certainly different with you."

"Yes, I look like a drowned rat."
"Not your looks. Your whole demeanor, the way you talk. The way you and Elphaba are around
each other."

Her heart skipped over a beat, but she tried not to let on that it had happened. "And which way
would you mean, Winkie?" At his frown, she corrected, "Vinkan."

"Thank you." Collecting some of the dust into an old bucket, he said, "We both know which way.
And if you won't say it, I will, at least in private. You're smitten."

"I am not!" she hissed urgently, cheeks pinkening. And so easily!

"You are! And so is Elphie, even if she won't admit it. And I don't expect her to, as stubborn as she
can be."

"Stubborn as an ox." They were both silent for a long moment, focusing on cleaning and inner
thoughts. As Glinda pulled open the old wardrobe she had finally unearthed, she asked softly,
"Doesn't it bother you at all? I mean… it's… unusual. Not criminal, but you don't see a lot of…"

"'Bunbury Marriages'?"

That made the flush a little worse. During their trip through Quadling Country, she and Elphaba had
made a brief stopover in Bunbury, and Glinda had witnessed firsthand that the reports of its citizens
tending not to pair off with members of opposite gender, but instead with those of the same, had not
been exaggerated. Somehow, the sight of men walking hand-in-hand with other men had flustered
her far more than that of women with women; likely because some of the men were behaving in
ways she deemed to be quite feminine, a sight she was not prepared for in the slightest. Luckily, this
had been before her own feelings for Elphie began to bubble to the surface, otherwise she might
never have been able to stand sleeping in the same bed — which would have been an unnecessary
expense in those days of nomadic life for the two of them.

"Oh, you're such a rascal," she dismissed.

"Maybe, but I'm a rascal that sees you turning red as a ruby." When she only let out another noise of
pure exasperation, he chuckled and went on, "Hey, did I say that I blame you for it, or judge you?
Not at all. I've seen a good many strange things in this land of ours, some of them in my travels with
little Dorothy. You and Elphaba wouldn't even be on that list anymore."

Softly, almost impossible for him to hear, she echoed, "Me and Elphaba… together…"

"She's a catch, she is. But I don't have to tell you that."

"And it doesn't bother you? I mean, that I once had designs on you, and now you've been… well,
not 'replaced' exactly, but that my designs are redesigned?"

His stuffed shoulders shrugged as he began to shift the pile of junk closer to the door. "My designs
had moved from you to her once upon a time, too, so that much I can fully understand. But that was
years ago. Now, I'm just happy that you're happy. If you are, that is… but I suspect you are."

"What's she got that I haven't got?" she groused.

"Oh, she was certainly more mature than you were at the time. More serious, and I think the careless
idiot I was felt drawn to that sobriety. Someone who was less callow, less shallow. It's probably the
same for you, since we were horses of a similar colour."

"High society idiots." They shared a little chuckle, even though Glinda was still flushed to her roots.
"Alright, I guess… you're right. Something about how strong she is, and passionate…"

His painted eyebrows waggled. "Passionate, hmm?" She threw the small copper pot she had just unearthed at him, but he laughed and caught it, looking it over. "Hey, we could probably make use of this."

"Good. Add it to the 'keep' pile, you, you…"

"Handsome straw man?"

"Bale of buffoonery!"

As he continued laughing, she returned her focus to the task at hand, shaking her head. Nothing he had said was inaccurate, even down to the bit about him being a handsome straw man; he was certainly the best-looking scarecrow she had ever encountered. As for the rest… by that point, she was ready to accept that Elphaba might truly be her intended. Even if certain girls from other countries might use the word "deviant", it didn't feel like any sort of deviation to her.

It felt like the yellow brick road leading to her destiny.

So full of Elphaba were her thoughts that she almost didn't realise what she had found when she opened the grimy hat box at the bottom of the wardrobe. It was a broad, handsome belt, glittering with jewels. Perhaps it wasn't made of gold or silver, but the metal seemed to be sturdy and highly polished, even after having lain in a box for Ozma knew how long. Her fingertips traced over the ornate etching along its borders, then to the large buckle. Fascinated, she slid it around her own waist and buckled it, then found it didn't feel quite right.

"Buckles in the back," she observed under her breath, undoing it and sliding it around the other way.

"What's that?"

"This belt I found. It's lovely, don't you think?" Now that it was fastened the proper way, she turned to show off the antiquity to him. "Do you know whose it was?"

"Why should I? This castle might belong to my family, but we hardly ever came up here."

"Ah, that's fine."

"It is a nice enough belt, though. Might you be intending it as a gift to a certain tall, comely witch who's caught your eye?"

Fed up with his teasing, gentle though it was, she snapped, "Oh, I wish you would leave me alone! Isn't it bad enough I'm already-"

But that was as far as she got. Her breath was stolen when she suddenly realised that Fiyero had vanished.

"OH!" she burst out, looking frantically around the room. Where had he gone? Her steps echoed as she ran to peek behind the pile of junk, then craned her neck this way and that. "Come back! Fiyero!"

This time, she actually witnessed him popping in out of thin air. There was a puff of some kind of wispy smoke that accompanied his appearance, which had not been there for his disappearance. She took a staggering step backward, and landed on a mouldy old armchair destined to fall to the bottom of the cliffs surrounding Kiamo Ko.
"Glinda!" he gasped, still looking quite dazed. "What are… oh, wonderful. I think I must have just had a hallucination. Curse my straw-filled head!"

"Where did you go? Just now!"

Surprised by the question, it took him a moment or two to answer. "Well… I thought I was here the entire time, and only had some kind of…" Unable to think of what might have befallen him to make him hallucinate, he moved along to answer her question. "I was in the courtyard, or seemed to be. The chickens were very startled to see me appear out of nowhere. It all seemed so real…"

"Maybe…" The notion was ludicrous. But then again, she was standing there, talking to a living scarecrow, with her green-tinted witch and her cured-of-lameness sister a few floors above. Ludicrousness was a common occurrence by now. "Have you been practicing with the Grimmerie?"

"Of course not. That's nothing I've ever been interested in, I…" Looking stricken, he pressed a hand to his stuffed chest. "You don't think my feeble brains are getting feebler, do you?"

Shaking her head, she pushed a hand into her mouth. "Let me think… I was yelling at you to leave me alone, and you did. If I was holding my wand, I might think I cast a spell on accident, but I wasn't. That only leaves…"

As one, they both looked toward the belt.

"Lurline Above," she breathed.

"Maybe… you ought to take it off," he said in a nervous tone. "Before you say you wish I would fall into a fire. Oh, the last thing I want is to catch fire!"

"I'd never think such a thing!" However, she was beginning to realise that she had been thinking of the courtyard when she demanded for him to leave her be. Just a passing thought, somewhere he could go that would be far enough away that she would not be irritated with him any longer. Now, she was beginning to agree that it might be to blame. "Hmm…"

"What is it?"

"I wish…" What else could she wish for? The possibilities were endless! "I wish for a bowl of cherries!"

Nothing. They waited for a good few seconds, but no cherries appeared. "Ah," he sighed. "Well… that's a shame, really."

"It is," she sighed. "Our food problems could have been over. But life isn't kind enough to simply hand you a bowl of cherries, it's not like that. Oh, how about — I wish for a Tik Tok soldier who will do our bidding!" Again, nothing. "Confound this belt, giving me false hope like that!"

"I'll say," he chuckled. "Wishing for soldiers would have made our battle against the Wizard a pretty easy fight."

"You read my mind. Oh… well, if the only good it does is sending scarecrows outside, then it's not much use." Pinching the bridge of her nose to ward off the headache that was just beginning to brew behind her brow, she sighed and told him, "I'm going up to see Elphie, ask her if there's any spell that can tell us whether some old belt is magical or not."

"Hm?" Elphaba asked, looking up from the Grimmerie. "Not that I know of. Why do you think it's magical?"
Glinda stared in shock. "I… you… Elphie, how did you get down here?"

"Down where?" Her green eyes swept up and down the library, at the rich-but-dusty rugs and the heavy oak shelves filled to the brim with books of all kinds. Light streamed in through the few high windows that bordered the top of one wall. "I've been right here since you left me after breakfast. Studying. Sorry I didn't hear you come in, I've just been trying to figure out whether this is a spell to remove warts or to add them. The phrasing is pretty awful."

But Glinda couldn't care about warts just then. She was too busy trying to figure out exactly how she had found herself in the library. Holding up a finger, she shakily bade her, "Just… one moment, I have to be sure. I wish to go and see Nessa!"

This time, with her eyes open, she watched the world change. Everything grew murky and black for a very brief second, and it was the scariest second of her life. Like she was surging through the very essence of evil itself. But it was over so fast that it was easy to see how one could miss it if they blinked.

Then she was in the kitchens. As she did so often lately, Nessa was bent over the stove, working on her food. Normally, she had the same thought every time she saw her there: that the poor girl really didn't know what else to do with herself, since Glinda and Elphaba were the ones with the most power as witches, so she defaulted to these domestic chores.

However, this time she was distracted by Nessa's companion squeaking and dropping a cake of soap to the floor.

"AH!" Dorothy cried, leaning back against the sink where she had been about to start scrubbing pots. "Miss Glinda, where- how did you get in here?"

Turning at last, Nessa only remarked, "Oh, there you are. Finished in the basements already?"

"No, I… well, I think I found something quite interesting." This was going to be a real test, and her fear was beginning to shift to giddy excitement. "Dorothy, Nessie… I'm going to try a spell. If you find yourself someplace new, try not to be frightened!" Then she gripped her belt and said, "Take all three of us to Elphie!"

And it did.

"WHAT?!" Elphaba cried out, falling back from where she had been hunched over the floor onto her behind. If Glinda had to guess, she would say she had been examining the spot where her roommate vanished to see if there was a hole or a trap door there.

"Sakes alive!" Dorothy was breathing, also falling down bonelessly. Nessa merely staggered and leaned heavily against Glinda, as they were now standing quite close together.

"How did… you do that?" Elphaba demanded, slowly rising with a wary eye on her companions. "I haven't come across a spell that can do something like that yet! Were you reading ahead when I wasn't looking?"

Beaming, she rested her hands on her hips as she gazed around at her friends. "Not at all. Just enjoying the benefits of an honest day's cleaning!" Her index finger tapped one of the jewels embedded in the belt's surface. "This little beauty may just be the answer to all of our problems. Or a couple of them, anyway. Wait, hold on — all of us ought to be here. Fiyero?"

An instant later, he was popping into the room, as disoriented as ever. When he fell back onto the floor, the thump was a lot softer than those of Elphaba or Dorothy, the latter of whom made a
second *thump* in shock at him appearing out of thin air.

"You could at least warn a guy!" he snapped.

"Wouldn't know how to if I wanted to. It doesn't come with a messaging service! Now then... I think we have some planning to do."

~ o ~

Late that evening, they were all about as prepared as they might be. Without any miraculous way to cure Boq of his unfortunate attitude, and deciding it was best to leave Chistery and his band of Monkeys behind to guard the keep, they were an invasion force of six: Elphaba, Glinda, Nessarose, Fiyero, the Lion, and a very knock-kneed Dorothy. As often as they tried to reassure her that they would do their best to shield her from harm, they couldn't promise everyone would come through the experience safe and sound. It saddened Glinda, but it was just the reality of their situation. If they didn't make this push to change everything...

She didn't want to think about that. What might happen if they failed. To them, and then the Animals... and then to Oz with no one left to stand in Morrible's way. She was the true threat, even above the Wizard.

"Guess that's everything," Elphaba sighed, checking the straps on her pack. She had fashioned one that would hold the Grimmerie against her back, hidden beneath her cloak once it was in place. And, of course, the black hat was already stuck upon the top of her head.

"Now I'm sorry I even found that belt, Elphie. I'm not ready to be a... an encroacher!"

Fastening the cloak, she turned to look her dead in the eyes. "Nor am I. Even if my skin is suited to blending into the background once we reach the Emerald City."

"You'd have to be completely nude," Glinda teased.

"Oh? And you prefer that plan, do you?"

For a few seconds, Glinda only sputtered while Elphaba favoured her with one of the wolfish smiles that turned her innards to jelly. Then she snapped, "Do you have to do that?!! Out-tease me all the time?!"

"Only when it's fun."

"I'll show you fun! I'll give you a big barrel of fun, just you wait!" Her hands came up and curled into fists, miming a fighting pose she had seen once. Poorly. When Elphaba only chuckled at her, she wilted. "Suppose it's my own fault that teasing me like that works, isn't it?"

That prompted Elphaba to look away slightly. "Suppose so. But we can't think about such things right now. Maybe when we get back... if we get back. The others are waiting for us in the courtyard by now, and I don't want to give the Wizard and Morrible any more of a chance to track us down first. The sooner we drop in on them, the better."

She moved toward the door. Something swelled within the pit of Glinda's stomach, and she knew that it would be a mistake to let the moment slip past for any reason.

"Wait," she breathed, latching onto her forearm.

"Yes?" But when she saw the look in Glinda's eyes, she frowned at her. "Come on, we don't have
time for sentimentality."

"It's not just sentimentality. It's mentality. It's…"

"Glinda, I know. But this is war. Or it's going to be war if we can't stop it, and we need to try. Or worse… it won't be a war at all. Just a mass destruction of an entire race."

Much though she wanted to argue that the Animals weren't being destroyed, she knew that as far as Elphaba was concerned, taking away their ability to speak and think was an unacceptable loss. So she didn't try. Instead, she focused on what she wanted to say.

"Elphie… when we get back, we're going to discuss this. For real."

"Of course. I…" This sigh was more scared than the ones she had given when they were thinking about confronting the Wizard. "It's been long overdue."

"Can I have another taste-test before we leave? Just…" Her voice grew tight. "Elphie, if we never come back, and I didn't have a chance to tell y-"

No words would have been adequate. Elphaba was truly a woman of action lately, and the action of taking Glinda's lips hard and fast was merely the latest example. She melted into her strong grip, painting her arms over her shoulders as she leaned up into the sweet mouth, eyes closing to the world and all their problems. In ways she could never have thought possible being brought up in Gillikin high society, she belonged to Elphaba. There was no world without her in it.

And it was equally like Elphie to draw back a half-breath too soon, to brokenly whisper, "We'll… finish this discussion… another time."

"We will," she agreed with a fervent nod. Her lips pushed into Elphaba's chin, unwilling to let the moment go entirely, and she could feel the indecision in her roommate's body. Torn between returning the affections, and doing what she felt was most important to do. "Alright… alright, we should go. Shouldn't we?"

"Nobody else is going to do this for us. But…" A ghost of a smile flitted across her lips. "Thank you for being so stubborn. And such a fantastic kisser."

Glinda's cheeks bunched with the force of her own grin. "Bet you say that to all the witches."

~ o ~

Dorothy Gale had never been so frightened in her entire life. And she had been frightened for a good many reasons in the past days. First, for being caught up in a twister, the entire house shaking around her as it sailed through the skies. Then for finding herself in a strange land, surrounded by a queer little folk that she had never dreamed could exist. Furthermore, facing down bears and lions, and kalidahs, and even having a Wizard order her to kill a real live witch! How was a humble farm girl from Kansas supposed to accomplish such things? She wasn't a policeman, or a soldier in the army. She wasn't even one of the big, strong farmhands who could wield a hoe or a rake to drive off a fox from bothering the hens!

But everything had changed. Now her poor, simple head was filled with concepts she never imagined.

"It'll be alright, Dorothy," the scarecrow comforted her, gripping her arm with one hand and patting hers with the other. He had a name, they had told it to her, but she had got so used to calling him Scarecrow that she forgot it often. "You'll see. I… I trust them."
"Well, I don't," the Lion hissed in his shaky tone. A little yip from Toto seemed to be in agreement. "This seems like a bad, baaad idea to me!"

Trying to be reasonable, she whispered, "Hush now. We're... the palace is just up ahead. If we keep jammering on so, we'll be overheard, and then we'll really be in the soup!"

"She's right; we probably ought to get moving. Nobody's going to pick us up in a horse and buggy and take us inside."

Having said so, the scarecrow took a step forward, redoubling his grip on the enchanted broom. The Lion on her other side leaned in closer, and she wound her hand into his mane for both their comfort. Steeled as best they could be, the trio made their way the last few steps along the Emerald City street to the front doors of the Royal Palace, Toto trotting in their wake.

To herself, she whispered, "Just remember what Aunt Em would say: 'we all have to make the best of our lot in life.' Then she rapped on the green-painted wood.

"Yes?" the guard asked. Then he leaned further down through the lookout hole in the door to view Dorothy's glimmering shoes, green mustache bristling as he whistled to see them. "Oh, it's you! Well, now, we've been expecting you for some time!"

"Thank you," she said, her curtsy somewhat awkward due to her unwillingness to let go of her two companions. "Might we go on up to see the Wizard, if it please you?"

"You may, indeed." In a quieter voice, he added, "Though I hope for your sakes that you've got good news; the Wizard is fairly easy to please, but that new press secretary of his..." Instead of elaborating, he merely pulled a face before pulling wide the door.

On the other side, she was relieved to see Jellia Jamb waiting to escort her. At least there was a familiar face. The young page bowed stiffly, then motioned for Dorothy to follow.

"Jellia? Or shall I call you Miss Jamb?"

"Call me whatever you like," Jellia said as she walked briskly, nose buried in a small notebook full of little notes. Her tone was neither unkind nor overly affectionate; a professional. She reminded Dorothy of the woman who worked at the general store in town.

"Right, y-yes. Well... I wanted to ask... do you like working for the Wizard?"

Withdrawing a pencil from behind her ear that had been hiding within her green hair, she answered, "Doesn't matter one way or the other. It's my job."

"Oh, and of course it is — and of course you do a fine job, you really do! Only... well, don't you have any opinion as to if you like doing it? Is the Wizard a nice man to work for?"

For a time, they walked on in silence. She exchanged a glance with the scarecrow; maybe Jellia was so pressed for time that she had no time to answer such trivial questions. But around the time they were ascending a great staircase, she did respond after all.

"This job was... simpler before he took on the new press secretary."

"Oh?"

"Yes. And that is all I feel comfortable stating. Now, if you need for me to fetch you a new dress before you see His Wizliness, or to have a bath drawn, or some cakes sent up, I can handle those.
duties just fine. But I can't give you any deeper opinions, Miss Gale." Her eyes seemed very vaguely sad as she glanced over her shoulder, but the look was so quick that she could have been mistaken.

"Oh. Well, that's alright. Thank you just the same." Glancing down at her knees, at the clean-but-ragged dress she had been given within the Emerald City in the first place, she sighed and forced herself to say, "N-no, I would like to see the Wizard right away. He'll understand."

And even if he didn't...

Soon thereafter, Jellia let Dorothy into the great hall that was so like the one in Kiamo Ko, except grander, and still fitted with rich finery and jewels. On the throne sat the great head, but she tried to remember what she had been told. It kept her from turning tail on the spot.

"I AM OZ! THE GREAT AND POWERFUL! WHO ENTERS HERE?"

"It is I, Dorothy! The small and meek! Your… remember me? You sent me to try and kill the Witch of the West?"

"YES! AND HAVE YOU DONE THIS?"

Perhaps the largest obstacle to this plan was that Dorothy hated to lie. Not only that, but she found herself so afraid of the consequences of being found out for lying, for hurting anyone in such a way, that she couldn't bring herself to do it easily. But there were always ways around obstacles if one knew where to look for them.

"Well, I did what you said!" It was true: she had thrown water upon Elphaba. Mopping the sweat from her brow with the back of her hand as best she could, she went on in a carrying voice, "And… and you said that I ought to bring back something of hers?"

Her round head nodded toward her companion, braids bobbing. The scarecrow stepped forward and held the broom out with both hands. Only a moment passed before Jellia hopped to attention, bringing the broom from his hands to lay before the Wizard's great head.

"VERY GOOD. NOW YOU MUST GO AND LEAVE ME BE. YOUR SERVICE HAS BEEN NOTED!"

After only a brief pause of surprise, she started forward. "B-but wait! You were to… I thought you said you'd help me get home if I did what you asked! It isn't decent to break a promise!"

"PROMISES WERE MEANT TO BE BROKEN! BUT FEAR NOT, CHILD — RETURN TOMORROW AND YOUR WISH MIGHT BE GRANTED!"

Unfortunately for the Wizard, "might" was not "definitely," and Dorothy was not satisfied. However, she had not expected to be; this was all for effect. The entire time they had been conversing, her eyes were darting from side to side, and she was leaning slightly to help afford her a better view of the back of the head itself. Only now that she had been bade return on the next day did she finally spot what she was looking for.

"But I want help going home now! Or else… I'll have to talk to the real you!"

"I DO NOT KNOW WHAT YOU MEAN!" This time, even though the voice thundered and seemed to shake the very foundation of the Palace itself, it did seem the slightest bit less confident.

Dorothy motioned for the Lion to stay put, on alert, and began to creep forward. When Jellia's eyebrows shot upward, she raised an index finger to her lips; it was a silly thing to do, for she
expected the servant would still shout for the guards, or at least warn her to step back. However, Jellia actually did as she was requested, and straightened her back, staying silent but watching with wary eyes. She had a feeling that if she produced a sword and attacked, the girl might spring for her, but as long as she continued not to be a threat she would treat the guest as precisely that: a guest.

"Well… I mean… this!"

When Dorothy threw the curtain aside, she had been expecting to see a fiendish man, a devil out of the illustrations in Sunday School. Instead, here was a small, wrinkled old man with very sparse white hair and spectacles, his suit handsome but also rumpled from his stature. Fascinated as she was by that sight, and her own disbelief that it was true, she was very slightly distracted by the sight that had so captured the Wizard's attentions that he couldn't even focus on the matter at hand.

A woman who looked more angelic than mortal twirled within a glittering diamond cage. Hair like waves of gold cascaded down her shoulders and along her back, skin glinting like a lighter hue of bronze, and her eyes were closed in a bliss that Dorothy likened to tasting the first spoonful of fresh jam her Aunt Em had canned herself. The vision's dress seemed to be spun from the air itself, or else spiderwebs, and even changed colours when they caught the light. As she twisted and flowed from one pose to another, elegant, trim arms weaving symbols in the air that seemed only to fade after the hands had moved along, legs nearly a blur, she could swear the entirety of girl and her robes turned translucent, and she could see to the other side — but then she would be solid again, and Dorothy wondered if she had imagined everything.

It was the dancing woman who noticed first; the Wizard was too enraptured by her display to have eyes for anything else. A breathy "oh!" escaped from her when she spotted Dorothy standing there, agape. A half-moment later, the dazed old man whirled.

"OH!" he repeated. "What are- that is, YOU DARE-"

The last had been spoken into a device like the broad end of an ear trumpet, and came booming out of the great head behind Dorothy, but he seemed to realise with a start that it would do no good to attempt deception any longer. Frowning in annoyance, he dropped back from the horn and the surrounding levers and cranks that reminded her of the inside of a train engine, nearly bumping against the near side of the large diamond cage.

"So it's true!" she breathed in disbelief. Even up until that point, she had been uncertain, in the same way children always want to believe in the deities of their parents because they've been told for so long that they are real. "You really are a humbug!"

"Now, now," he attempted with both hands raised. "Let's not be hasty. And how dare you throw around such accusations!"

"But you are, you old fraud! Oh, how silly I feel — this is nothing but a… a big puppet!" Her hand reached up and thwacked the cheek of the head, and it made a hollow thunk that definitely didn't make her think it was alive. "And ordering me to go and kill the witches! How could you?"

Frowning yet deeper, he went on, "Alright, alright! So you've found me out. How can you blame me? The Ozians want theatrics and magic, and I'm only good at the former, so… the latter had to be feigned to keep up appearances! Don't you see?"

"But you're so…" This was scarecrow, who was too shocked by what he saw to hold his tongue. Especially since he technically didn't own a tongue anymore. "I mean, that's Oz!" His finger levelled at the girl in the cage. "At least, that's how he appeared to me when I asked for my brains!"
The accused was most definitely afraid of these reactions, shrinking even further to the back of the cage. In a calming voice, her jailor said, "Shhh, it's alright! Oh, don't frighten her so; Polly really is a sweet girl. I invited her to play my part once in awhile, to switch things up. Isn't she something? Oh, I could watch her dance all day… an old man can get lonely cooped up in a big palace such as this, you know."

"You have her locked in a cage," Dorothy countered.

"So? I can't have her running away all the time; no, no, that wouldn't do. Though I do let her out during cloudless days, when I can be sure she won't get far if she tries to escape. Really, it's not so bad, is it?"

"It is! You can't just keep young women in cages, that's an awful thing to do!"

His pout was more that of a child than of a cunning old man who had become the Supreme Ruler of an entire nation. "But… well, she can't be allowed to escape now. She's seen too much, knows too much! The best I can do for her is provide a nice, comfortable bed in her cage."

Looking back and forth, Dorothy said, "But there isn't any bed. And besides, it's the keeping her locked up part that's unkind!"

At this, Jellia appeared at their sides and pulled a secret lever. The floor beneath "Polly" changed, rolling over until a fairly large and comfortable bed was now revealed in one corner of the cage. Its occupant approached, hesitant but hopeful, glancing back at the Wizard as if to silently ask if it was alright.

"Go on, my dear. You've done more than enough for today."

"Can't she talk?" the Lion asked, as if too surprised that a woman couldn't where he could.

"She could, once upon a time. But the hex Morrible placed on the cage when she captured her…" The telling of this seemed to pain him, and he looked away. "Oh, but it would be nice to have someone to chat with again…"

Dorothy was through listening to his excuses. "And you let her do these things! Really, a man of your age ought to know better! She ought to be let go, and you've been doing Heaven-knows-what to her, and… oh, how shameful! My Uncle Henry would send for the sheriff!"

Her scolding did seem to be having an effect on the man, and his cheeks warmed. But he finally reached his end and stood a little straighter. "Now, just you listen here! Seems to me you're insinuating something that isn't true, and I'll put that to rest forthwith! I haven't harmed so much as a hair on Polychrome's head, much less anything more unseemly, and I'll thank you not to throw around such accusations!"

"Accusations like what? Keeping prisoners? Because she is — that's a cage if I've ever seen one! Like she's a parakeet!"

"Begging your pardon, Wizliness," the scarecrow went on in a softer tone, "I, um… I don't think she's saying what you think she's saying. Little Dorothy isn't the sort to think about such matters."

She hadn't been thinking of anything besides Polly's well-being and freedom, it was true. Her straw-headed friend had been very protective of her innocence, up to and including the incident in which Tin Man had been telling her scandalous things about Elphaba and Glinda. They had nearly fallen to fisticuffs over the matter.
"Oh?" At that information, the Wizard seemed to notice afresh that Dorothy was a younger girl, and wasn't quite looking at him with the level of disgust he had been expecting. "Oh. Well... alright, we can leave that lie. I might be a humbug, but not a cad." Then he cleared his throat. "Now then, to business. You seem to have unearthed a little secret that I really would prefer didn't reach the ears of the rest of the Emerald City. You've done me a great service in ridding me of the serious challenge to my power, and for that, I'm quite grateful. Might we still hold to the original deal?"

"Just a moment," she warned him, holding up a finger. "Let's you and I talk about that. Can you explain to us why you're being so mean to the poor Animals, like my good friend, the Cowardly Lion?"

The Lion merely hung his head a little lower at that description. Not that it was undeserved; Dorothy meant no disrespect, other than to point out the fact in the hopes he would continue to be more brave to combat such a label.

"Now, now, that's an internal matter," he tried to warn her with a genial smile. "Nothing for a pretty girl like you to worry her pretty head over."

"And if you're such a keen Ruler, you can tell a pretty girl like me all about it. Even in a way I might understand." This might have sounded sarcastic to the Wizard, for he bristled slightly, but Dorothy meant it in earnest; she knew next to nothing except how a farm is run, and a handful of other things. Still, she felt as if she were entitled to that much of an explanation.

And it was making the Wizard uncomfortable. They had caught him red-handed, and he had no choice but to capitulate. "Very well. You see, where we come f- that is, er... oh, but they are Animals, aren't they? Lions eat little girls! So it only makes sense to me that we tame and domesticate them, not let them go around teaching at universities! It's just preposterous!"

"But Dr. Dillamond was a fine teacher," the scarecrow volunteered. When they turned to him with surprise, he went on blithely, "Or so I've heard. So you can't say he was going around bleating and kicking the students, because it simply isn't true. Not a student who's ever been in his class would say so."

"I agree that having Lions walking and talking isn't something I'm used to," Dorothy said. "Or having them around at all, not in Kansas! Not unless the circus is in town! But, well... it seems to me if they talk and think and can be civil, then they ought to be allowed to, oughtn't they?"

"My dear, my dear, come now. As I said, I'm the Wizard, and the current ruling head of the Land of Oz. I brought unity to these four countries where there was only division when I arrived! No more squabbling with the Quadlings, no more trade embargos with the hinky Winkies... what I'm doing, I'm doing for the good of these fine people! So might I be given the benefit of a doubt when it comes to this, as well?"

Even before he finished, Dorothy was shaking her head. It frightened her to be disagreeing with an authority figure of any sort, but this one had already proven himself to be a charlatan and a swindler, and had attempted to trick her into murdering a group of highly-slandered "witches". Her aunt and uncle had always encouraged her to do what was right in the eyes of the Lord, and even though no one in Oz seemed to have heard of that particular Lord, that didn't mean she could turn her back on her convictions purely because she was abroad.

"I'm sorry," she told him earnestly, taking a step back. "But... I'm afraid... I don't think you're fit to be the President here, Sir Wizard. Not if you're going to tell Lion he can't talk anymore, or... or send me to hurt three perfectly lovely ladies who only w-want to help the Animals! Especially if you might have k-killed an innocent little baby! You're a very bad man!"
At the last condemnation, his brow furrowed. He was about to ask her what she meant by that, but Dorothy was already springing into action. Completely mortified by the idea as she was, she whipped the hem of her dress up to reveal a pair of culottes that had been hidden underneath; probably had belonged to some long-dead resident of Kiamo Ko. Around the waist of said culottes lay a wide, shining belt, glittering with jewels. Luckily, he was at least chivalrous enough to avert his eyes when she did this, but that chivalry would prove to be his undoing.

"Bring the witches to me!" she announced firmly as her hands closed around the belt. And in a blink and a puff of smoke, it did that very thing.

To Be Continued…
Even though she knew she shouldn't be, Glinda Upland felt smug to hear a very soft "No" fall from the Wizard's lips when they stepped toward him. His eyes were pulled wide, back sliding down the shining bars of the cage behind himself, a fist at his mouth as he whimpered in fright. In the cage, she could see a trim, willowy figure lying upon a bed, though she was leaned up on one elbow to anxiously watch the scene play out.

One more nail in his coffin, as far as she was concerned.

"Hello again, Wizard," Elphaba told him in a firm tone. "I think we really ought to chat."

"AH! Miss Elphaba, welcome, welcome!" His panicked geniality was almost charming, and Glinda exchanged a glance with Dorothy, who looked too shaken by her entire role in this coup to be of any further use. "I, ehrm… can I get you anything? Tea, or something stronger?"

"I've had enough water for one lifetime." Dorothy shrank further at the witch's words.

"We're here to discuss your resignation as the interim king of Oz," Nessarose went on, trying to get to business as quickly as possible. Until that moment, Glinda hadn't given much thought to it, but of the three of them, she did have the most experience in government. She also looked glad to be of more use than as a cook and scullery maid.

"Oh, are we? And what gives you the right to make such demands? I may have made a couple of minor missteps, but I've still done my best to steer this country into the future — and a rather good future, at that! Can you honestly say you're any more highly qualified?"

Elphaba only hesitated a brief moment, sparing Glinda a brief look of fear. But when Glinda squeezed her hand, she snapped, "We're going to find out. I've given you chances before now to cease your mistreatment of the Animals, and you brushed them aside. It's too late."

"You should have listened!" Glinda put in, tutting and shaking her head. "Now, I think we ought to switch your places with your concubine. See how you like it in a cage!"

Said concubine sat up straighter, then pounded her fist on the mattress in protest. However, she didn't say a word, so Glinda couldn't be sure of what she was protesting against.

"Alright, alright!" he said in a more reasonable tone. "I admit, perhaps… well, I've been a bit hasty in dismissing your concerns."

"You think?!" Fiyero burst out.

"However! All of this was done for the good of Oz! Perhaps I wasn't thrilled with Morrible's plan, but she made a very compelling case! Silencing the Animals would rile up a few of the populace, concern the others, and the farmers would gain more livestock overall. So it served a twofold purpose, don't you see?" At their blank looks, he sat up a bit more, reaching into his coat.
"Careful!" Nessa warned, raising her iron poker. Seemed she had grown fond of its potential as a weapon.

"Relax! It's only drink!" When he withdrew another green bottle, they all did relax slightly. "Anyway... as I was saying, it served two purposes: firstly, helping the farm industry during this awful recession, and secondly, providing a distraction for the people. Civic unrest is... not productive, it does nothing to boost our economy. So by the time the hubbub with the Animals would die down, hopefully, the crops would be stronger, trade negotiations would be settled, and all would be right as rain again. Without such pesky bumps in the yellow brick road as calling into question why I couldn't just 'magically fix' everything, being the Wizard."

"Because you aren't a wizard at all," Elphaba snapped immediately. He nodded, only very slightly put out that she had called attention to his lack of qualifications. "At least you're being forthright with us for once. Do you really fail to see just how despicable your actions are? That you sacrificed an entire people just so you wouldn't have to hear a few complaints about your administration? Maybe I'm not as clever as you, but to me, that sounds like the mark of a truly incompetent leader!"

Cringing from the last attack on his character, the Wizard took a long swig. "Alright, alright! You've said enough, I know it's not ideal! But it was the best plan we came up with, and... and I was too afraid of what might happen if I didn't try it!"

"Too comfortable in your lofty throne, hm? Well, we shall soon fix that."

"Elphie," Glinda whispered.

"Perhaps we can find a spell to sew your mouth shut, hmm? Give you a taste of your own-"

"Elphie!"

"What is it?" she hissed back. "I'm busy threatening!"

"The bottle..."

As one, they turned to look down at the man. Elphaba took a step forward and jerked him to his feet, ignoring the yelp of shock. Then she demanded, "What do you keep in that bottle?"

"Oh, this? Well, it's... just an elixir of mine. Cures what ails you! Why, would you like to purchase-"

"Wizard..."

"Well... alright, it's whiskey, of a sort. I have it made here in Emerald City from the Munchkinland grains, a couple of other local seasonings." Sighing, he offered the bottle again. "A stiff belt now and then helps keep my inner demons from tormenting me too loudly. This is a very thankless job, you know!"

But Elphaba wasn't interested in his excuses for drinking. Even while noticing Dorothy was crinkling her nose at the idea of him drinking in addition to everything else he had done, Glinda also saw Elphie withdraw her own bottle from inside of her cloak. She held it up beside the half-full one in the Wizard's hand. They were, as Glinda had suspected, completely identical down to the faded label.

"Hm? Where did you get that?"

"It was my mother's. She always said it reminded her of me, but she wasn't that much of a drunkard. And poor Munchkinlanders, even those of nobility, certainly can't afford imported Emerald City
spirits. So I wonder how she got some silly bottle in the first place?"

The Wizard was silent for a few seconds. They felt like extremely _long_ seconds, to be sure. Then he said in a falsely cheerful voice, "Your guess is as good as mine, m'dear! By the way, this may sound like an odd question, but… how old did you say you were again?"

"Just passed my twenty-first birthday. Why? Are you totalling up how many presents you owe me?"

The room was so silent that anyone could have heard a pin drop. Therefore, it was that much more deafening when the doors to the royal chamber crashed open a half-minute later.

The invasion party whirled to see Madame Morrible herself striding up to them along the runner in the center of the throne room, Jellia trotting along in her wake. At least that answered how she had been alerted to their presence. She looked as fishlike and haughty as ever, and angry into the mix. Robes of rich green velvet hung around her frame, and she had a wand held high to point at the invaders. Despite all their preparation, the knowledge that they had the element of surprise on their side, careful planning, and that they were _justified_ in their attack, they took an instinctive step backward.

"YOU!" she thundered, whirling the wand above her head. The air began to grow darker just above her; at first, Glinda wanted to make a remark about the stench coming off her, but the darker it got, the denser, the more lights flashed from within its depths… this was a mighty spell she was conjuring. Much though she seemed to love protesting that she was only skilled in finding talent in _other_ girls, it seemed the power-hungry old hag possessed a fair bit herself.

"Enough of that!" Elphaba snapped, extending her hand and causing the air that had just begun to turn into a cloud to explode. Morrible looked shocked, and she took the opportunity to step forward. "You've done more than your share of terrorising us, 'Madame'! I think it's time you were terrorised _by_ us!"

At this, Glinda seized her chance. Her own knowledge of the Grimmerie's contents was rather paltry, but she had to try, and it was now or never. Using the same spell, she cast it at the wand in their former headmistress's hand, and created just enough of a _pop_ to send it up into the air a foot or two.

"AH!" Morrible gasped. "How dare- that's _mine_!"

She hopped upward and snatched it, but at that very moment, the Lion charged her and tackled her to the ground with his great forelegs. Fright swelled in Glinda's breast — would he snap her head from her neck with his powerful jaws? He had called himself cowardly, and Dorothy and Fiyero seemed to corroborate that, but he was, after all, the king of beasts.

"We can't let up for a second!" Elphaba shouted over the growls from Lion and the squawkings from Morrible. Her hands began to weave a complex pattern in the air, slowly parting as her green flame swelled to fill the expanding space between them. The center turned bright orange, even as the outer edges remained their usual verdant hue to match the conjurer.

Not that she had a chance to use it as intended. Finally, Morrible managed to get her spell off, and a great rush of wind tossed Lion toward Dorothy and Glinda, who both sprang to either side to avoid being squished flat - the former with assistance from Fiyero. The marble floor took issue and Glinda felt that a trio of mighty bruises would soon live on the heel of her left hand, her elbow, and her left knee. At the same instant, the fireball was loosed forward, but the wind caused it to change direction, it hooked back around…

It was bearing down on Nessarose. The woman wouldn't stand a chance; a ball of that size, travelling
that fast, would either incinerate her on the spot or cause her to live a life of pure agony from that day forward.

"NO!" Elphaba cried — but Nessa at least had the wits about herself to do the only thing she could to avoid the blast. She fell back onto her hindquarters, letting out a cry of pure pain and raising the poker in a futile gesture of defense, and the fireball sailed over her head to scorch the far wall, sending a tapestry up in ashes. Glinda winced, worrying that her roommate's sister's tailbone might never be the same. But she would live.

Or would she?

"TWO YEARS!" Morrible was booming, white hair fluttering around her wild eyes as she conjured the winds to spin faster and faster. Elphaba seemed to be attempting another spell, but the distraction was proving substantial. "Two years, I've been wasting precious time and resources, trying to snuff out your little uprising! Your… annoying, useless, puerile insistences that the rights of a few Animals are more important than the entire land of Oz! Do you know how much of our food stores has been gobbled up by the soldiers we've had to draft to send on search parties for you?! Ingrates! I took you under my wing, I began your instructions in the arcane arts, and this is how I'm repaid?!"

Just then, her tirade was cut short by a piercing scream. It came from Dorothy. At first, Glinda was terrified that the poor girl had been attacked, though she saw no such attack begin. So then, what was the matter?

Rounding the Lion's bulk showed her. It was nothing. Dorothy was fine… in body. But her eyes were focused on the swirling air above Morrible's head, which had grown faster, more full of debris from inside and out of the throne room. A grim reminder of the terrifying moment that had so recently changed her life. Words showed themselves in her screaming eventually, though they were almost impossible to make out.

"TWISTER!"

Even over the cacophony, Elphaba's barking vorpal blade of a voice could be heard. "So it was you! Sending the house to flatten my sister! Oh, I know you intended her to be your target — Fiyero shouldn't have been in that region of Munchkinland, but Nessarose was already there, out inspecting the Guild troops! And you got what you wanted! Just didn't go the way you hoped!"

Having picked up on what she meant, Glinda added, "And you ruined this poor girl's life to do it! Look at her! No, you old hag — LOOK at her!"

"So what?!" Morrible snapped, smile dark and unhinged. Sweat was running down her forehead from the effort of maintaining her spell, cutting thin tracks through her white makeup. "What's one less stupid little girl in the face of a grand administration?!

"Do leave me out of this!" the Wizard cried, downing another large gulp.

"How dare you try to assassinate me!" Nessa finally shouted, finding her voice before she found her footing. That hardly surprised Glinda, given that she was a lot less used to walking than the rest of them. "I... I was cooperating with you and the Wizard! You really would rather have sacrificed that on the off chance that... that me dying might have made my sister appear?"

The eyeroll was so impatient that Glinda felt angered to see it. "I didn't care one way or the other, you tart! You already had sullied your own reputation! No good to us that way, so... might as well be of one final use! Just as you might as well be now!"
Morrible's arms turned in a wide circle, first pulling the eye of the cyclone backward so that it began dragging at the tapestries and ornaments along the wall, and then flung forward to send it at the group. Both Lion and Nessarose were helpless to escape. Glinda ran, hating herself for her brief panic but hoping belatedly that she could find an opening to attack once the danger had passed. Elphaba stood her ground, erecting a shining shield of pure light…

And positioning it in front of her sister, and the Lion. Even making it cover just their vitals seemed to stretch her to her limits, and there was no time for her to join them behind it.

That was the moment Glinda knew that she could never have hoped to be worthy of Elphaba. The girl she had thought to make her new "project", that she had looked down upon with disdain when they were stuck in the same dormitory. Woman that she had become, Elphaba Thropp was a warrior worthy of admiration. She was a paragon of virtue.

She was the only one she could ever love from that day on.

For all the good that did her. Even as she looked on, love flooding into her heart like the Truth Pond had sprung a leak, the love turned to horror when she saw the ornamental spears and swords hurtling from Morrible's tornado toward them all. Dorothy was just in front of her now, and she reached forward but knew she would be too late to save even her. As for Elphaba…

"ELPHIE!" she wailed as she felt the silk dress's sleeves just touching her own fingertips. Her vision left her. Everything was going to cease to matter in a few moments, anyway; her eyes simply didn't see the point in waiting for it to transpire.

A sickening *thunk* filled the air. Not from in front of her, which would be some relief at a later time. She knew where it was coming from, even without seeing.

Somewhere off in the distance, she heard an "OH!" from a female voice. Her blurred eyes opened, and she gripped Dorothy's arms harder. Tried to stand, to do anything…

The first thing that came into focus was Dorothy whispering, "I'm alright," which at least prompted her eyes to open fully. It was true: Dorothy was right as rain. Lying in front of her was a spear and an axe, neither of which had left a single mark on either her clothes or her skin; she was good as new. Shaking like a leaf, but whole. Then she forced her eyes to move, to seek out Elphaba.

"No," she breathed… until she could focus on the scene. When it changed to "Oh no."

Elphaba was kneeling over the prone form of the Wizard, who had a gleaming saber stuck through his belly. Red blood pooled beneath him as she cradled his head in her lap, sheer disbelief having overtaken her expression. Not sadness, not rage, not distress — she simply couldn't quite wrap her mind around the moment they had entered in time. One hand raised shakily to the wound and fell short, resting on his jacket.

"Oh… I've… been impaled," he chuckled weakly, a few stray drops of blood spraying from his lips onto the lapels of his white shirt. "Gracious…"

"Wait, don't move," Elphaba bade him, voice as numb as she looked. "Just… stay still, a-and we'll do someth-"

"It's fine, m'dear. Fine. I…" His weak chuckle had an encore. "You were right. All of you. Terrible man, terrible Wizard. Simply terrible on all fronts. But at least I could… protect my…" Wheezing, he turned to look around at all of them. There seemed to be a lot he wanted to say, but he knew as well as anyone how little time he had left. "Oh… for Polly…" He withdrew a charm that hung around his
neck from behind his shirt, only able to do that much before letting it drop. "Break this. It will… release her. At least I…"

His breathing became laboured, and he stopped speaking. Frowning up at Glinda, Elphaba couldn't even bring herself to ask what else to do. Her mouth flapped wordlessly, and Glinda could only shrug. What did you do for a dying man? Everyone, even the fish-faced enemy that had done this to him, was completely speechless.

"Well… I've been practicing this out for a while…" Squirming, Glinda raised her wand and waved it at the Wizard. The wound was a mortal one; doing nothing would most certainly lead to his death. "I'll try! It's the only… yes, well… contrarum spanum gia ena leptum!"

The sword instantly flew out of the Wizard's body, clattering across the cold marble floor toward Morrible, who sidestepped it easily. That was it. He did not rouse, the blood did not vanish — as she had been hoping. Biting at her nails, she watched as Elphaba shook his body to no avail.

"Wait," Dorothy whispered, rushing over to crouch beside them. Her hand probed the wound. "He's not bleeding anymore; it's closed up. But… oh, he's already lost ever so much blood… what'll we do?"

"Look at what you've done," their former headmistress breathed. "You've killed him. Our Wizard…"

Of all of them, Nessa was the first to recover, slowly trying to push back to her feet. Her eyes were full of rage and pointed only at Morrible, though not even her anger could seem to pick her up off the floor. One of her shoes had come loose during all the commotion, and it seemed that she needed to be wearing both for the spell to help her walk; she collapsed again, legs moving but far too feebly to be of any use.

"I hate you," she told her baldly. "I… hate you, I hate you!"

After a moment, Elphaba breathed in a hollow tone, "I think that's supposed to be my line. But… right now, I just… want this to be over."

Something had come over her Elphie. All Glinda could do was look on helplessly as the imposing girl, newly orphaned yet again just seconds after finding out she was an orphan no more, sent a torrent of pure white light from her hands toward Morrible. No chant uttered, no shape or form to the spell; Glinda knew it was magic in its purest form as a wave of force. It knocked the woman back into the wall, pressing into her so that her skin appeared slightly flattened as she struggled uselessly, eyes peeled wide and staring down at her opponent.

"No… you don't understand! None of you! This is… for the good of our-"

"Silence." Morrible was silent. Whether or not it was her own choice or Elphaba silencing her with magic, Glinda couldn't say. "You've done enough. In fact… I won't break that charm. Dorothy?"

"What?" Dorothy asked in a hushed voice, completely distracted by the scene before her. By that point, Glinda definitely knew what she was thinking, but then again, she had seen a fair bit more magic than the poor Kansasian girl ever had the chance to.

"Use the belt. They may trade places."

"Trade? They… the charm?"

"That girl in the cage," Glinda hissed. If that was the only help she could be at that moment, she would lend it.
"Oh… OH! Sure, yes, of-" Without finishing that sentence, the girl's doughy hands clasped around the belt and she said, "Bring Polly out here, and put that wicked old woman in there!"

It worked too literally. Morrible was in the cage, to be sure, but poor Polly was now plastered up against the wall by the forces of Elphaba's aura. A high scream pierced their ears as she feared for her life. Noticing the exchange had been made, Elphaba blinked in pain at the sound, then withdrew her hands. Unfortunately for Polly, this meant the magic vanished instantly, and she crumpled to a heap upon the floor.

"Oh!" Fiyero gasped, rushing to her side. She had to give him credit for trying to be of service. He didn't have a good deal of strength in his limbs now that he was made of straw, but the wispy girl was obviously not much of a challenge for him.

"Sky Above, I'm so glad to hear myself!" she gasped first. "And to be out of there, and… oh… oh, my ankles hurt, but… thank you all!"

Elphaba had no mind to reply at the moment. Nessa was still crawling toward her shoe, so Glinda took it upon herself to curtsy and say, "Think nothing of it, dear. And whom do we have the pleasure?"

"Oh, her name is Polychrome," Dorothy answered right away. Glinda noticed Polly seemed affronted to have been spoken for, but said nothing about it. "I think, well… the Wizard says he wasn't doing anything more than watching her dance and talking to her, and I should really hope that's the truth, because if he's been fibbing… oh, I hate to think if they were using a lovely girl like her as a slave!"

The "slave" part didn't worry Glinda as much as what type of slave. But Polly did a curtsy so graceful that it made Glinda's look like it had been performed by a hippopotamus with a head cold, then answered, "Oh, do not worry; I was most unhappy to be trapped in such a cage, away from my clouds and my sisters for a hundred sunsets or more, but I was not mistreated. The woman who's taken my place was my jailor; she caught me and put me there to help keep your Wizard happy and entertained."

"Apparently, it worked," Nessa said in an offended tone as she finally pulled the other slipper on. Dorothy reached down for her once it was in place and helped her stand. "We're pleased to meet you, Polly. Where might you come from?"

"The sky," she said, as if they should have known about it. "My father is the rainbow, and I'm sure I'm sorely missed… but I wouldn't know how to get home from here. I can make graceful jumps but most certainly can't fly, and our clouds are so far upward…"

Ignoring the rest of what Polychrome was saying for the moment, Glinda approached Elphaba and knelt down next to her. The Wizard was as still as he was before; breathing, but shallowly, and definitely far from consciousness. Before her spell, he would have breathed less and less until it ceased entirely. Now… they could not be sure.

"What do I do, Glinda? He looks… dreadful, but what if he survives? Do I want him to survive? I've spent all of this time admiring this man, and then hating him, and now…"

Glinda understood. Not that it was entirely the same, of course, but she had spent so many hours quietly furious with her mother for turning them away — worse, calling for the authorities! Understanding why she had done it was nowhere near the same as agreeing with her decision. It wasn't easy separating one's personal feelings for a family member from one's estimation of their character. And here was her strong, noble Elphaba, full of magic that could make all of Oz tremble,
and all she had ever wanted was to right wrongs and be seen as someone good. Which were the only things continually denied her.

So in the end, all she could think to do was put an arm around her shaking shoulders and whisper, "I don't know, Elphie… I really don't know."

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The royal physicians proclaimed that the Wizard had slipped into "the sleeping death". Whether or not he would wake from it was impossible to know; Elphaba's continual demands that they see to his health had them thoroughly confused, because they were naturally under the assumption that she had wrought this condition on her own.

Luckily, Jellia Jamb was there to straighten that much out to the battalion of guards who were trying to decide whether or not to attack the witches — or try, since the enormous greenish fireball Elphaba had conjured kept them from rushing forward too hastily. Despite having taken the initiative to fetch Madame Morrible, the assistant's dedication to the Wizard was a lot stronger than any dedication to Morrible could have been. She had gone to retrieve her to help her liege lord, and it had wound up nearly killing him instead. She was only too ready to corroborate their claims of innocence in the Wizard's mortal wounding. It did quite a lot to keep there from being a mutiny mere moments into the Palace being under new management.

"Thank you," Glinda whispered, wringing Jellia's hand between both of her own as the others filed out of the Wizard's bedchambers. "I'm glad to see you at least aren't holding a grudge for… well, the way things have turned out."

"Let's make something clear," the green-haired woman responded softly, voice clearly stricken. "I had no love for the Press Secretary, and I have no love for you or your… your cohort. But I am loyal to him. And… and at no point did I see any of you attempt to harm him. Strongarm him into listening to your fanatical ideals, yes, but a healthy debate rarely gets anyone killed."

The words caught her off her guard. "Well, I… of course we… but I didn't mean to say…" Forcing herself to stop and clear her throat, she gave a stiff and uncomfortable bow of her head. "I'm sorry about old Wizzlepizzle, I really am. We were hoping to make him help the Animals, not to hurt anybody."

"I'm not sure I fully believe that. But the evidence would say you're probably telling the truth."

Without a further word, she went back in to wait on him.

Lacking any superior notion, the lot of them congregated in the royal dining chambers. This was not the same room as the royal dining hall, which was downstairs and quite a lot larger. No, this table could only seat a dozen comfortably, maybe a few more if everyone squeezed in; meant for family dinners with a guest or two. It was better than trying to make themselves heard in the throne room with its irritating acoustics that made every voice sound like a score.

"Well… now what?"

"I don't know, Glinda," Elphaba answered. She did at least seem less distraught than before, but had defaulted back to her no-nonsense persona that had been driving them forward for the past two years. Albeit with less anger and panic than before. "Well… word has likely not spread yet, but when it does, we'll be prime targets. The average citizen of Emerald City loved the Wizard without any reservations, and we came along and skewered him."

"But you haven't!" Dorothy pleaded, as if Elphaba really needed to be informed. "That horrible
"Woman did!"

"Morrible," Glinda corrected without thinking.

"What?"

Sighing, Elphaba pinched the bridge of her nose. "Yes, yes, but they won't see it that way. Such a smear campaign has been dropped on our heads that we could save a burning orphanage and they'd accuse us of setting the fire. I… don't really know how to combat such a black cloud."

"First of all, I think telling them ourselves is probably a good idea," Nessa put in right away, as if she had given the matter a lot of thought. Which she probably had in the past hours, while everyone else was fretting over their former dictator's plight. "Get out in front of the rumours. The people will respond better to having heard the news from us than from whispers in the taverns."

Fiyero nodded vigorously. "That makes a lot of sense. Half of the awful things the Ozians believed about you three were never told to them by Morrible; she didn't have to. Just stated a few things about you being evil and their imaginations took over."

"Maybe you can help us," Dorothy said to Polychrome, who looked distantly confused by all of their strategizing. "After all, you probably knew the Wizard better than most of us."

"Me?"

"I agree," Elphaba cut across them. "Her?"

Though Dorothy did look a little put out that she was being questioned, and ashamed of speaking up to her 'elders', she only dipped her head a little and went on, "Well, she was trapped in that cage behind his throne for… goodness, didn't you say it was a hundred days? Not that I'm insinuating that you're a snooper, of course, but it would be awful hard to miss overhearing a lot of his meetings with important types and the like!"

"Yes." Looking down at her pale, sometimes-insubstantial hands, Polly blinked her wide violet eyes as she tried to collect herself. "It was my only form of entertainment some days. Oh, how I do love dancing, to keep myself warm and to celebrate the joys of this world, but… when I might only dance on one spot, and have a blood-person gazing at me all the while… it had so much less joy. But to listen to him meeting with others gave me a sort of window into the lives and minds of you Ozians."

"That's what my Uncle Henry says about Aunt Em reading the gossip column in the papers," Dorothy responded, while Nessa was frowning and mouthing the words "Blood person?" to herself.

"Though I couldn't tell you much. I do not understand how you live in Oz; I don't know why you make roads instead of dancing on clouds, construct large boxes to live inside and not to sleep under the stars, and I could not learn what 'taxes' or 'tariffs' are, except they are good to some and bad to others. But it seemed to be that your Wizard was upset about there not being enough food coming from a place called Munchkinland. I tried to understand the rest — it was like a fun game, a puzzle to solve — but the puzzle became too difficult for me, and I would feel frustrated and sad."

The rest of them took that in for a moment. Elphaba had been listening, even if initially doubtful. Then she leaned on one elbow to ask, "Did he say anything about the Animals? Any hints on how he and the old gill-lips implemented their plan to silence them? Or why they focused on them in the first place?"

"Oh, he was very sad about that," Polly told them. "Some days, he would try to explain to me why it was really fine that he and the frightening woman had done it. Others, he would cry and ask me to
forgive him — which left me very confused, because he had done it to them, not to me. When he asked me to forgive him for putting me in the cage, I could not, though at least I understood why he asked!

"I wouldn't, either," Glinda snapped, exasperated. "The gall! 'Oh, sorry about keeping you in a cage! I can't let you go or anything, but if you'd forgive me, that'd be really comfortatious for me! Thanks a bunch!' What an old piece of… of- well, something I won't say, but if I did say it, you would all be shocked!"

"Not that shocked," Nessa snorted, though she was at least smiling at Glinda's bluster. "You're a lot less pure and innocent than you let on, Upland. Don't forget that even though we just seized power, you're still technically a fugitive."

"We all are. Even Dorothy, now that she's defected. Hate to have done that, she's such a sweet young thing…"

"She's also close enough to knock her kneecaps," Dorothy said in a patient tone. She and Glinda exchanged a smile. "But it's alright. I'm… well, I can't say I'm happy to be on the wrong side of the local law, but I also know the Lord wouldn't abide me doing any different, knowing what I know."

"You mention him a lot," Elphaba said, sitting up a little straighter. "Is the Lord your Wizard? Or a deity? Sometimes, it feels like it could be either one, though you also keep mentioning this 'President' person."

Dorothy seemed caught off guard by that question. "The Lord is… well, He's the Lord!"

"Ah. Well, thanks for straightening that out."

Leaning forward on her elbows, Nessa said, "Hate to interrupt your budding theological discussion, dear sister, but we really need to establish order right away. There is a chain of command to be followed and implemented, positions of government to assign… we can only trust those here in this room, and perhaps that Jamb woman. So we need to set everything in motion."

"You don't have to tell me, Nessa. But it's not so urgent that the walls will topple on our heads if we don't decide it this very instant." Still, she rubbed at her face and contemplated for a moment. "Well… let's do it this way. Dorothy is not from Oz, so I feel she shouldn't be given any official position. Therefore… what do you think about the three of us stepping in as a sort of… high council that must decide by vote on any changes to current law? I really don't relish the idea of being the new Wizard myself, and also don't think the populace will readily take to any one of us having all the power, regardless of which witch is Wizard."

"That's a mighty tongue-twister," Dorothy whispered to Glinda, who giggled.

"You laugh, even though you would be the one they would obviously elect."

Glinda sat up a little straighter. "Me? Why me?! I don't know anything about government! Nessa's the obvious choice — it's a hop, skip and a jump from Eminent Thropp to Empress!"

"No, no, I think Elphaba's right," Nessa said thoughtfully, tapping her chin. "Much as I hate to admit it, she is pretty smart sometimes." Elphaba rolled her eyes, though Glinda thought her cheeks might have darkened a bit. "The people like someone who's gregarious and personable, like you; they hated me by the end of my reign over Munchkinland. But I think if a powerful witch, a personable witch, and an experienced politician who is a witch by association are all part of a council, they may just see that as a decent balance."
"I think we know why Elphaba would elect Glinda," Fiyero snickered. The former of the two witches sparked a tiny green flame between her thumb and forefinger in warning. "Or not! My mistake!"

Tiredly rubbing the bridge of her nose, Elphaba said, "Alright, alright. It's settled, then; council of three as the official ruling body of Oz, and Dorothy and Fiyero are welcome to advise us. Lion can stay on as official bodyguard if that's the position he's most comfortable with."

"Actually…" They turned to the shaggy-maned beast, and his head dipped lower at being the center of attention. "Well, I th-think I'd like to go back to the forest. See if I can be a little less cowardly. The Wizard never gave me the courage he promised me, though… oh, maybe I should stay here. At least the humans tend to be frightened of me on sight, which is better than nothing."

Even while Dorothy was patting one of his great paws, Glinda's mind was turning. "Hmm… a little healthy fear to keep them from testing you. That's a good idea."

The others went on speaking for a moment, but Glinda was lost in thought. Lion's words really set a snowball in motion within her brain, and it was gathering momentum and snow into an avalanche of an idea. Her entire body turned away from the table slightly as she prodded at her chin with her magic wand. After a few minutes, Elphaba seemed to notice and motioned for the others to be silent.

"What is it?"

"Oh, nothing. A silly little idea of mine. But I think… it could make this whole 'transition of power' thing go a little more seamlessly."

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The crowd gathered on the Royal Boulevard was an anxious, noisy one the morning following the Wizard's dispatchment. All into the night, the citizenry of Emerald City had been concerned with the reason behind so many noises and flashes of light coming from the windows of their Palace. Was it a show of the Wizard's power, or was it something nefarious? Though the near-unanimous opinion was that their Wizard had been a good and gracious substitute for the conspicuously absent Ozma line, there was a lot more suspicion toward his new Press Secretary. Rumours were flying wild that she had usurped him, or else challenged his power and lost, or any manner of variations on those notions. But with stony silence coming from the Palace walls, they were merely that: rumours.

Until the royal horns blew, signalling a speech would be made from the balcony overlooking the Boulevard. Hopeful eyes turned up to be reassured by the grey-haired old man, genial as he always was. They widened in shock at what they saw instead.

"SILENCE!" thundered the green-faced horror of their nightmares. At first, the mutterings only turned to screams, and then quieted down for fear of what she might do to silence them. As if to redouble this point, she again called for silence — with an accompanying BOOM in the air just in front of the balcony.

That time, it worked.

"Thank you. Now, what follows is a royal proclamation. For those of you who have kalidah dung in their ears, it will be repeated an hour past noon." The blonde witch, the pretty one from the North, elbowed her, but she seemed not to notice, for all her focus was on the very official scroll she was unfurling. In a clear carrying voice, she went on, "Ahem. 'Citizens of Oz, there has been a change in the ruling structure of our fair land. Negotiations to share the burden of the office of Wizard were interrupted by your former Press Secretary, who took it upon herself to attack the proceedings. Her
actions caused minor injuries to most of the parties gathered. The Wizard lives, but is not presently fit to resume his duties as your affable overlord."

This kicked up further mutterings and gasps of shock. A few of the women fainted, and one or two of the men, as well. He had well and truly been a popular almost-king. The wicked witch let this muttering go on for some time, then clapped her hands for silence, waiting for the voices to die down before continuing.

"Yes, yes, I'm sure this comes as a shock. There'll be time for you to cry into your Gilligin later. Anyway… where was I? Ah yes — 'As Morrible has proven herself an enemy of the Land of Oz, and no other remotely qualified party stands ready to accept the reins, the Eminent Thropp is the most likely candidate. However, as Nessarose Thropp was already of mind that the ruling of the entire kingdom is too much for any one Ozian but a descendant of the Ozma royal line, she has conceded that an interim council of three is the most most prudent arrangement, until such time as the Wizard reawakens, or the Ozma line returns to power.'"

The outcry was a lot more pronounced this time. Screamings and bellows were heard from all through the crowd, and there came some shaking of fists. The Wicked Witch of the West's entire posture was that of someone about to shout, but a calming hand on her shoulder from the Gilikin witch seemed to bring her a measure of calm. Turning to spare her a nod and a smile, she returned her attention to the gathered subjects.

"'As of this very moment and not a moment later, Oz — including the Emerald City and its entire surrounding lands, the Vinkus Country, Gillikin, Glikkus, Munchkinland, Quadling Country, and all mountains and territories within — is now under the rule of the Throppland Council.'" She paused for effect, giving the crowd a moment to gasp and mutter. "'Our first official action is to strictly forbid any further persecution and domestication of Animals, of the speaking and sentient variety. Any Animals currently being subjugated will be immediately be granted their freedom. Those Ozians caught treating Animals as animals within this first week's period after this decree will be warned, and ordered to comply; no further punitive actions taken. Following that weeklong grace period, they will be jailed for flouting the Council's decree, pending a trial.'"

"Elphie, the reparations," Glinda whispered; only a few in the crowd could catch the words, but they would be repeated to others for many weeks after by the Ozians who had witnessed this proclamation.

"Ah, yes. 'Any wronged Animals may air their grievances before the Council beginning in one week. Times the Council is available for these airings will be posted at that time. Furthermore, a copy of this speech will be tacked to every lamppost, doorpost, and signpost around the Emerald City, and sent by courier to the official governmental seats of each city in Oz, to be reviewed and digested.'"

Loud enough to pierce above the din of mutterings, one man shouted, "You wretched hags won't get away with this! Our Wizard would never give the Palace over to a bunch of cursed women!"

"You, sir," Elphaba said, voice as brisk as before without being any more cruel or angry. "Name yourself."

The crowd edged away from him, not wanting to be associated with someone so outspoken. As it turned out, he was scarcely more than a boy, about Dorothy's age, and lean yet rugged, his dusky skin partially darkened by labour in the sun and standing out starkly against the red fringe that peeked from the brim of his hat. He did look briefly alarmed to have so much attention focused upon him, but then recovered and cleared his throat.

"Tippetarius!"
"Well, Tippetarius, you may air your grievances at the same time as the Animals. One week from today."

"That isn't good enough! I challenge you to a duel here and now, for the right to see the Wizard's condition for ourselves! To know that you speak the truth instead of... of the lies of a witch's tongue!" There was some muttering of agreement with him from the crowd, a stirring of dissent.

"SILENCE." This was a lot flatter than her previous insistences, though no less sharp. "The decree has been handed down, and no challenge to duel will be recognised from an upstart boy! Should you attempt to force your way into the Palace before the appointed time, you will be met with strong resistance."

"Oh, really? And what kind of resistance might that be?"

Instead of answering with words, the witches of the West and North wove a couple of spells together. Conjuring a fireball roughly the size of a garden shed in the air far above the gathered throng, then exploding it from within so that it ruptured and sparked like a sun, served as a mighty demonstration of their power. The boy named Tippetarius crouched down and covered his head with both arms, though he did not run. Very few did, though they all reeled back or gasped.

"One week from today!" she flung at the boy and the surrounding people. "Not a moment before! The Council has spoken, and woe betide anyone who crosses them!"

The three witches held their six hands high. In one of Elphaba's was the re-rolled scroll, in one of Glinda's her usual star-tipped wand, and in Nessa's — a nice touch, if overly sentimental — the flag of Oz, combining the four colours of each country into one with the green star in the center to signify their capital. The crowd's reaction was a mixture of panic, fear, and some genuine respect for the feat they had witnessed. The land would certainly never be the same.

To Be Continued...
Chapter 17

The proclamation was repeated an hour past noon, as promised. However, by that time, the Ozians had already been muttering and whispering about old legends. Vague predictions by generations long dead that three witches would rise to power. In that short a period, they were already being dubbed…

"The Coven of Oz?!"

Sighing in such a weary way that it made her sound years older, Jellia sipped at her tea before continuing, "I'm afraid so. It's nonsense, especially since I've seen myself that Nessarose has no witchly powers of her own, but… well, you know how superstitious these people can be sometimes."

"I'm glad we took that precaution," Elphaba went on, while Glinda plopped down into her chair. She wanted to go to bed, maybe take a long, hot soak beforehand to hopefully melt away some of the mounting stress, but that would have to wait. "Sending you out there incognito to find out what they really think of us."

"But I have performed a few spells," Nessa said. "Not many, and not well, and… of course I don't remember any of them the way my sister can. Still, if you accept the premise that a 'witch' is any Ozian woman who performs magic spells, then I guess I fit that description."

"Does that make me one, then?" Dorothy asked as she came in from the other room. She had been walking Toto before the sat down for supper together. "On account of using the belt?"

Glinda patted her arm. "Of course not. That was a magic artifact; you're no more a witch than… well, than your little furry friend there."

"But if you want to learn a few spells, say the word," Elphaba muttered distractedly, paging through a book. Not the Grimmerie, but a tome on Emerald City law that her sister had lent her. Nessa had spent most of the morning going through the law books and finding a few things that would help them be more adequately learned in what life would be like for the lot of them in the coming days.

Dorothy flushed slightly. "Th-thank you, all the same, but… w-well…"

"And getting me home," she finished for her in a rush. "But I only meant if you wanted to help me with anything, I'd prefer it be that instead of a magic spell. Especially because I'm not all-fired sure that Aunt Em and Uncle Henry would approve; you don't seem to hold by the Good Book in this country, which I suppose is alright for Oz! When in Rome, and all that. But witches aren't decent in the sight of the Lord, a-and… I know you're kind, and wouldn't hurt anyone, but I don't think it's smart of me to learn witchcraft and bring it back to Kansas."

"Fine," Elphaba said easily enough, flipping a page. "It was an offer, and you're well within your right to refuse the offer. But I have a feeling that you'd have an aptitude for it if you ever changed
Rolling her eyes at how gruff Elphaba was being, Nessa whispered, "It's okay, Dorothy. We can be mostly-non-witches together." They both shared a little smile, even if Dorothy's was through pinker cheeks.

"Jellia," Glinda asked, "you would probably know where Dorothy's dress wound up, wouldn't you? The one she had on when she first arrived. That should be the easiest thing to fix."

"I believe I do, ma'am." A puzzled expression crossed the servant's features. "What... term of address would the council prefer? Councilwoman?" The three sisters glanced at each other, then one by one, nodded their agreement as the royal cooks brought in covered dishes. "Very well. I'll fetch the dress after dinner."

"Um..."

Glinda looked over at Polychrome. "What's the matter?"

"I... can't eat this," she whispered in a serene-yet-apologetic voice, looking down at the steaming plate of meat and vegetables that had just been given to her. "I'm on a dewdrop-only diet."

"What? You only eat dewdrops?"

"Yes. Well, I used to love indulging in mist-cakes and cloud-buns, but... I'm putting on so much lately. I almost weigh an entire pound!"

The rest of the women there groaned in vague annoyance. Polly seemed confused by this, but only poked her fingertip into the fingerbowl at her place setting, raised it to her mouth, and, unbelievably, began to lick at it. Not lick up the entire droplet, but lick at the fingertip so that a tiny bit of moisture disappeared with each pass of her pale tongue. And she seemed perfectly contented to do so.

"We need to get her out of here before we send Dorothy home," Elphaba sighed. "I can't handle comparing my figure to hers every day."

"Now, now, she's a rainbow-spirit," Glinda said reasonably. "And for a not-rainbow-spirit, you look stunning, Elphie. There's no need to feel like that." Even if that sentiment was a bit unexpected coming from a formerly-vain Gillikinese. Clearing her throat, she picked up her fork. "Now, let's dig in and worry about all those other things another time."

But of course, none of them could fully put those worries out of their minds. Before they could finish off their dessert, which was a lovely pudding that sparkled in the light in a way that made Dorothy's eyes wide with delight, Glinda felt her stomach constricting with worry and had to step away. Bowing her head and smiling as she bid them goodnight, she made for her new rooms.

Which felt cold, and empty, and forbidding. She knew within her mind that the bedchamber was beautiful, but even the cave behind Wicca Falls had felt more like home than this gleaming, pristine palace. It was even unlike her chambers in her former spacious estate, all those years ago when she had lived in the Upperuplands. Her hand glided over the foot of the four-poster bed, then up one of said posters and lingered there as she gazed toward the window at the night sky, the twinkling lights of the Emerald City casting a green glow over everything through the green-tinted glass.

"Ohhhh, where am I?" she mused softly, leaning her cheek against the post. "How did I get here?"

"By magic belt, if memory serves."
Without turning, she whispered, "Elphie, it seems like so much time has passed, and none at all. Like this is a very long dream I'm having while still at Shiz. Am I losing my marbles?"

"Yes," her roommate joked, sliding her arms around Glinda's waist and leaning her chin on her shoulder.

"You'd really tell me, wouldn't you? If I was just very confusitated and none of this was real?"

"I would. But you're fine, Glinda. Everything's going according to plan — far more than we had any right to hope it would. The future is frightening, but… I think it's a future I can live with. As opposed to the future with no more Animals left." Then she sighed, beginning to rock from side to side very gently. "But things certainly got very intense, very quickly."

Gliding her fingertips over Elphaba's, she whispered, "Do you ever miss… when it was just the two of us? Before we picked up a stray Nessa here, a wayward Dorothy there?"

"All the time. But it's also of great comfort not to have to be alone in this fight anymore. So… mixed blessing."

"That's a good way to put it," she chirruped. Then she turned to wrap her arms tightly around Elphaba, touching their noses together. "Hello, my tall, strong stalk of greenliness."

Pursing her lips for a moment to suppress a laugh, Elphaba allowed them to push out just enough to graze Glinda's chin before pulling back. "I feel like we just barely admitted our feelings five seconds ago, and you're already picking out curtains for our love nest."

"Oooh, look who said the 'L' word first!"

"What? Love?" Rolling her eyes, she reached up to poke Glinda in the side, earning a little giggle. "Oh, you stop that! It was a figure of speech and you know it. Although…"

Raising an eyebrow, she echoed, "Although?"

"Is that how you feel? Do you love me?"

"Of course." The readiness of the answer made Elphaba's smile vanish, eyes fluttering open and closed. "Are you really all that shocked? Wow, I haven't been sending the signals I thought I was!"

"Well… you just said it. So easily." One shoulder rose and fell to convey that she wasn't sure why she was surprised. That she wasn't sure of much of anything.

So Glinda leaned up to peck her lips very softly before she continued. They both needed that. "Because you're easy to love, Elphie. I mean, I've been wearing holes in the floorboard from pacing, trying to figure out just how much love I have for you, but… it's definitely there, and I've known that since even before we left Shiz. Just didn't know if 'two best friends' was accurate, or, um… inadequate."

"I think I know exactly what you mean. But… I probably spent a lot more time fighting even the notion of that second option's existence. Just didn't want to believe that I might…" Slowly, a grin spread over her lips. "That I might feel this for a woman where I only did for a single man before. And that the woman would be the poppycake-sweet pain in my posterior that you are."

"Hey!" she burst out in a gasp, ignoring Elphaba's chuckle in favour of swatting her on the upper back. When the chuckles settled down, she was smiling again, leaning her head to one side to better appreciate Elphaba's strong jaw, her perfectly-chiseled lips and nose, and the eyes more clever than
any pair she had seen in her many travels.

"What is it?"

"Nothing. Just… pretty sure I'm done pacing."

"You weren't pacing." Then Elphaba's eyes widened. "Oh. You mean before, with- nevermind."

"You're all caught up?" she laughed. Then she noticed all at once that they were still swaying in a small circle. "What the Quox are we doing?"

Elphaba shrugged, slipping one hand down into the small of Glinda's back, the other sliding to take up her forearm, pulling it out to one side and clasping her hand once they were extended. Glinda felt her breath catch, her heart speed up, the backs of her knees tingle and threaten to give way. But they didn't. She wouldn't let them spoil this moment in time.

"Dancing through life with my bubble-brain."

Normally, Glinda would have put her in a bubble for the insult. But when she purred it in that soft, sultry voice of hers, and while they were dancing without music in the Royal Palace, eyes only for each other… it was different. It was endearing, and private, and sweet. So she said nothing more, letting herself be swept away and romanced, even if romancing wasn't exactly the goal. Just being close, and feeling like they were flying while firmly on the ground.

But it didn't mean she couldn't give back as good as she got. "You've got me all artichoked up."

The dance ended abruptly when she literally flung the giggling Glinda onto their bed.

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Two days after the proclamation was first made, the city seemed to have settled down. When the ground didn't open up and swallow the entire population, the average citizen seemed to realise that the "Coven" wresting control of their governing body was not the end of the world, and went about their usual business. Of course, there were a few stubborn shopkeeps or farmers that refused to part with their Animal labour, but they were the exception rather than the rule.

On that day, the public trial of Madame Morrible was held. Some citizens called for her head on a platter, others said she was innocent and the witches ought to feel ashamed of mistreating her, as she should have been next in line for the title of Wizard. With the Council acting as judges, they remained as impartial as they could — though Glinda lost her temper once or twice, and had to be brought back in for a landing. Fiyero, hoping to prove himself useful, acted as the prosecuting attorney; despite thinking himself brainless, he made a good many sharp points. Jellia was asked to defend the accused but declined, as she could not be objective knowing what she knew, so the task fell to an Emerald City solicitor.

And it did not go in Morrible's favour. The witnesses of her misdeeds were not many, but they were enough to cast aspersions on her character. However, the deciding factor that kept her from turning aside the accusations was something provided by the Church of Lurline: water from the faraway Truth Pond. One small sip was enough to unearth all manner of plans and devilry that she had been plotting against the Animals, and, most importantly, the truth of how she and the Wizard had tricked Elphaba into transmogrifying the monkeys, then shifted the blame to Elphaba afterward. Rage mounted in her features until she could contain it no longer. The invocation did send a few guards rattling across the room into the wall, nearly killed an innocent bystander, and therefore it earned no noises of disapproval when the Council returned a guilty verdict forthwith.
"Well, I suppose this is it," Glinda sighed as they watched Dorothy packing up her few meager things from her rooms. Most of them were mementos she had gathered along the way, and a new silk dress to go along with the gingham one that Jellia had finally turned up at some juncture.

"Suppose so," Dorothy sighed, glancing down at her golden shoes again. "Though I am a little worried about… well, that."

Shrugging, Elphaba kicked at them again, and grunted in pain. Anytime they tried to attack the shoes in any way, it was like trying to injure a mountain. "Agh! Stupid shoes. I really thought one of those spells we tried would do the job…"

"Don't worry," Glinda said as she leaned in to kiss Dorothy's forehead. "If we ever find a way to get them off, we'll send for you with the belt. And if not, well… I hope someone in Kansas can figure it out."

"Doubt it. Nobody there has any magic like you folk do. Real pity the Good Book says it's devil's work…"

Reaching forward to pull her into a tight hug, Glinda whispered into her hair, "I'll miss you, sweetheart. We all will. And I really didn't think we'd be saying that after how we met!" As Dorothy giggled, she let her go and stood back. Then nudged Elphaba.

"Ah, r-right. Well… what Glinda said." But at an impatient tutting from her roomie, she sighed. "Very well. You're welcome back in Oz anytime, Dorothy. It's… been nice having you around, and your presence rivals Polychrome's in radiance. There, happy?"

Coy smile flitting over her little bow mouth, Dorothy said, "You can't fool me, Miss Elphaba. And I like you a whole lot, too." Elphaba only sighed when she was hugged, patting the top of the girl's head until she let go. "Alright, I think I ought to get along before I wear out my welcome. Is… everyone going to meet me there? How are you going to handle…?"

"Don't you worry about that. We're going to travel in two separate factions. Now that we're political figureheads, we can't all three travel together for fear that we'll be targeted. Or we could, but it's unwise. So I'll follow with Nessa and the others. You and Glinda will travel with the Lion; I'm most worried about your safety, after all."

That seemed to be all that needed be said. They headed down to the entrance hall, where Lion and Polychrome were already waiting. It seemed that the featherlight fairy was hoping she might spot a rainbow while they travelled and could be reunited with her family. If not, they would get back to looking for a spell to send her skyward soon.

"Oh, I'll miss walking alongside Scarecrow," she sighed, still not getting the hang of his true name. He didn't seem to mind, only smiling genially and patting her on the shoulder.

"Daresay you would have made a great father," Elphaba muttered to him. He pretended not to hear her.

The troupe walked to the gates of the palace. Nessa remained upstairs, trying to study up on some obscure law or other that she swore would be of great importance eventually. Glinda had to smile to think of it; she had found her place. Not as a "beloved" ruler, exactly, but one who was fair and just, and wanted to make sure she was doing the job better than the last time it had been put upon her.
Seemed to her that it was best that she had her load lightened by two other witches, so she wouldn't get overwhelmed and bitter again.

Her thoughts were interrupted by an outcry from the bushes to one side of the Palace entrance, near the royal carriage awaiting its travellers. She and Elphaba exchanged a worried glance before the guards emerged from the bushes, dragging along...

"Ah," Elphaba said, a crease in her brow forming as Tippetarius was yanked into view by the collar around his neck. "I was wondering if you'd actually manage waiting a week or not."

"Let me go!" he cried out, legs windmilling in the air. They seemed to be curiously long legs, if the sheer dismay on the guards' face was any indication. "I wasn't doing anything wrong!"

"Weren't you? Because this behaviour is highly suspicious, boy. Especially coming from someone who so recently challenged us to a 'duel'."

Jutting out his bottom lip, he said, "I'm still going to that meeting next week. But I wanted to see what you were up to; you might have been running away so you don't have to face me!"

That got the witches and Fiyero laughing. Dorothy was too shy around new people, Polly too confused by the inner workings of Ozians to find it funny, and Lion too busy sizing up whether or not the boy presented any real threat — taking his job seriously. Once the humour had petered out slightly and Tippetarius was under control, Glinda folded her arms over her chest.

"Alrighty, Tippytop, you've had your fun. But we're going to have to ask you to go away."

"Why should I?" The guards jostled him, and he yelped, "Ow!"

Impatient, Elphaba snapped, "We have a very important task before us, and no time to worry about your annoying shenanigans! So I'll thank you to settle down, or we'll throw you in jail until the grievances are aired. Is that what you want?"

"Coward! Filthy witches, running from a challenge!"

"Hey, watch your tongue!" Fiyero snapped, uncharacteristically annoyed. Usually, he let things roll off him like water down a duck's back, but the boy's continual insulting of the women in his life had gotten under his skin. Or whatever passed for his skin lately; probably burlap.

"But they shouldn't be here! This is the Wizard's place and they took it by force! What makes them any more qualified to run the Land of Oz than he is?!" The guards jostled him a little again, more or less just to get him to realise the position he was in, and he lowered his voice — slightly. "All I've ever heard of growing up is how great the Emerald City is, how great the Wizard is, and nobody ever said anything different! And here you come, saying he's not good enough anymore! Who died and made you the experts?!"

Glinda just barely kept herself from saying "The Wizard". For one thing, he wasn't quite dead; for another, it would have been insensitive to Elphaba.

Instead, she walked over and grasped Tip by the earlobe. "Now just you listen here." She began to drag him along, but all she got was a yelp of pain; she shot a glare at the guards, and they hastened to match her pace as she walked back to the group. "You were given a time and place to tell us all this, but noooo, you had to be all impatientful and ambush us outside the Palace! So you owe someone an apology!"

"I'm not apologising to you!"
"Not to me!" She came to a stop in front of Dorothy. The girl took a half-step back, but held her ground despite the fear evident in her eyes. "To her! It's her day you're trying to ruin!"

Tippetarius opened his mouth and pulled in a lungful of air, but all he got out was one loud "I'M" before he saw her flinch away, and he seemed to lose all momentum. This close, Glinda couldn't help noticing that he had fairly sweet features for a boy, as if he would be perpetually youthful somehow. Maybe it was because for once, he wasn't shouting.

"W-well," Dorothy finally said when no one else spoke up, face flushed at being the center of attention again, "it's alright, really. Don't s-suppose it will make any difference if we get there a few minutes later. I've already been gone for weeks, haven't I? Though I should like to get back soon…"

"Get back?" Tippetarius asked, as if unable to help himself. Then he clamped his mouth shut and looked away.

"Yes. I'm not from Oz, I'm afraid, so I can't exactly call this 'home'. Though it is ever so nice a place to live! Still… Aunt Em and Uncle Henry must miss me something fierce, s-so…"

Swallowing hard, he lowered his gaze, the little pointed cap covering his reddish locks slipping slightly. A few more strands spilled from under the brim, and Glinda felt her curiosity piqued: they were very long. A lot longer than she would have been expecting.

"Begging your pardon, miss. I have no quarrel with you; I'm sure these witches only led you on a wild goose chase, promising you all kinds of things if you helped them. And now-"

"And now they're going to make good on their promises," she cut him off, irked at him speaking ill of her friends but still shy. "Right now, we're going to try and send me back to Kansas, which is what they said they would do. And they found my dress! And, well, it isn't their fault they can't get these pretty shoes off… I don't know any spell to do that, so it seems to me that expecting them to know it isn't really fair, since I don't understand magic at all."

The more she spoke, the more ashamed of himself the boy seemed. His eyes still glared when they found the witches, but turned baleful and dark when focused on Dorothy, and then on the ground where he cast them as he said, "I guess. It's only that Jack Pumpkinhead and I came here to see the Wizard and the city, and then we walked into this… this whole crazy thing. I can't just stand around when I know in my heart that they shouldn't be in charge of everything! And I don't know how I know, but I do — something about this isn't right!"

"Maybe not," Dorothy hedged, not able to meet anyone's eyes. "But I don't think the Wizard should have been in command, either, if he was treating Animals so poorly! They have as much right to speak as you or I, and he and that Morrible woman up and decided they shouldn't, which isn't right, either!"

"Oh…"

Speaking up again, Elphaba snapped, "Oh? Is that all you have to say? You don't know the first thing about what we've been through, and yet you passed summary judgment on all of us without so much as a conversation beforehand."

"You're witches," he countered, as if that settled the matter. "And you aren't the first I've met, either. One of them raised me, and she was about as cruel as cruel could be. So don't act like I have no idea what I'm talking about." This time, as he bowed his head, the hat fell free…

Gorgeous curls of red cascaded down his back and shoulders. They didn't seem to suit his rugged
appearance, but they were definitely real, if a bit unkempt from being stuffed into a hat for so long. When he felt them move, he looked up in surprise, then around at those staring at him.

"Oooh," Polychrome breathed, dancing toward him and reaching out to run her fingertips through the strands. He swallowed hard and tried to back up, but the guards were still holding him fast. "Such lovely hair; nearly as lovely as one of my sisters' would be. How do you keep it so soft? Normally, blood people have such coarse, scratchy hair…"

Swallowing hard, he whispered, "Can… I have my hat back, please?"

Now Dorothy was approaching. Even moreso than when Polly toyed with his hair, and she still was, he flushed and looked mortified when the Kansasian girl petted through a few locks on the other side. "She's right; it's like one of those expensive dolls from the city! Or a pony's mane…"

"Yes, and it's quite long," Elphaba said, hand at her chin. "Unusual for a Gillikin boy, unless I miss my guess? You don't much seem like a Munchkinlander, and definitely not a Quadling."

"He's a Gillikin," Glinda confirmed. "Though the red hair isn't usual up that way. I wonder if he had a Munchkinlander parent, or somewhere in the ancestry…?"

Waving the matter aside, she put her hands on her hips and snapped, "This doesn't matter in the slightest. He's going to keep being a nuisance, so we'll put him in a cell until the airing of grievances; it's only a few days. Then we can figure out whether or not he's learned his lesson, or if he's going to keep pester ing us."

"Oh, must you?" Dorothy asked. "After all, he hasn't really done anything more than talk…"

Blanching, the boy said, "Y-you don't have to defend me. Aren't you on their side?"

"Not really. I don't think there are two different sides here; you just want to see that whoever's the best to run the Emerald City is the one doing it, don't you? And you haven't hurt anyone, or done anything worse that a lot of yelling and making us late."

The whole situation seemed to be confusing him even worse than it was confusing the others. All of his certainty and righteousness had left him, and now he looked like he scarcely knew where he was. Clearing his throat, he looked away and said, "Sorry."

"What's that? A little louder, perhaps?" Elphaba needled. Glinda tutted, but she was smiling in amusement.

"I said… I'm sorry. For making you late for whatever it is you're doing, Miss… Kansas."

"Miss Gale," she corrected him gently, curtsying. "Dorothy Gale, that is. And your name was… Tippo… something?"

"Tippetarius. But you can call me 'Tip' if it's easier, Dorothy." His voice had been growing warmer as he went on, and he seemed to notice as he shook himself. "A-Anyway, you can throw me in jail if you want, as long as you promise you'll hear me out with the Animals and the other Ozians!"

"We will," Glinda promised, though she was still distracted by good many of the other thoughts bumping around in her brain. But they could wait. "Guards, please see to it that he's fed and clothed properly, and not mistreated, but keep him under lock and key. You!" The guard saluted. "Make sure Nessarose is told about this situation."

"Yes, ma'am!"
The lot of them began to march away. At the last moment, Dorothy yelped, "Wait!" Scooping up the hat, she rushed to his side and pulled it down over his head. She didn't bother trying to stuff his hair up into it again, and the effect was interesting, if a little strange. The curls framed his face even more than they already had been.

"Thank you… sweet Dorothy." Again, he seemed to have no idea what he was saying, and shook his head violently as if to rid himself of the odd mood that had come over him.

"Careful, or you'll lose the hat again," she giggled. His head stilled. "G'bye, Tip."

"Goodbye. Hopefully I'll see you again." His brow furrowed in confusion at himself as they led him away.

When Dorothy rejoined the group, Polly let out a wistful sigh. "I should have liked to have him around; his hair was soft as clouds."

"We have enough to worry about," Elphaba grunted, gesturing to the carriage. Lion hopped up inside first, followed by Polly, who turned to help Dorothy up while Glinda did the same from behind. Then the two witches were left standing at the curb. "Ah… how strange to say goodbye."

"Yeah. Seems like it's been a while."

"Think of me fondly while you're away?" she murmured. Her eyes flicked back and forth, as if she wanted to say or do more, but then merely turned to look back at Glinda fondly. That would have to be enough.

Actually… no, it wouldn't. Glinda made up her mind about what kind of person she wanted to be. Until that moment, she had debated a lot that she should perhaps be more discreet, but she didn't want to be. They had done enough hiding.

Reaching forward, she cupped either side of Elphaba's neck and drew her face down to capture her lips, humming and lifting one foot daintily. There was only the briefest yip of shock before strong hands were clamping onto her waist, and lightning shot its way up her spine from the contact. There were a couple of gasps from around them, but she ignored those. They didn't matter nearly as much as the love that burbled up within her heart, like a cauldron over fire.

When they parted, there were no more words. Everything had already been said; Elphaba merely caressed her face once, then helped her up into the carriage. Glinda turned to wave out the window as they were guided away from the Palace and toward the roads. She kept it up until her love was out of sight.

"Ahhhhh," she sighed pleasantly as she turned back to her companions. Lion and Polly weren't terribly affected, though the latter was giggling behind her hand. Dorothy, however…

"S-so, um," she attempted, face not only red but blotchy now; it would probably still look like that for a day or two. "Y-you… wh-what I was saying about d-deviants, I d-didn't… Miss Elphaba obviously c-cares for you v-very m-much, and it's n-n-none of my-"

"Have a pastry," Glinda cut her off, gesturing to Dorothy's basket. They had packed it with sweets and small sandwiches for their trip. Lion immediately warmed to the change in topic, sniffing at the wicker, but the basket's owner was far too distracted to be distracted.

"Goodness me, are you- I mean, I don't know if women m-marry other women in Oz, but… is that… well, I've never seen a kiss like that before!"
Besotted and floating high on her cloud of happiness, Glinda gazed out the window as she whispered, "Neither have I."

~ o ~

The sight of the dilapidated old farmhouse filled all of them with a mixture of emotions. Glinda felt sick at the thought of Fiyero being crushed, but an odd warmth when she thought about how the incident had led to Nessarose joining their cause, even if not of her own volition. It had also been the first time they met Dorothy, and she had been immediately charmed by the girl, even if Elphaba was less so.

"Oh my," Dorothy whispered, hand over her mouth. "It looks so small now…"

"Home always looks small when you return to it a little older, a little wiser." These sayings seemed to be coming to her more and more freely; when did she turn into her mother? Shaking off that weird little flutter, Glinda patted Dorothy's shoulder. "It's alright. Everything's going to be wonderfullious."

The girl flinched. That had happened a few times ever since they departed, and she was reminded powerfully of the reaction when they first met. Of course, they had discussed that matter once or twice during the long ride through Munchkinland, but with Dorothy blustering and assuring everyone that she was fine, and they didn't need to discuss it, they couldn't make a lot of headway.

So when Dorothy hopped out to go look at her house, see if it looked any worse than when she had first set out, Glinda turned to the others. "Could you wait outside?"

"Of course, Glinda," Lion said with a fairly regal bow of his head. But Polychrome was distracted.

"Ooh, look — more blood-people! I shall dance for them."

"Why do you call us 'blood people'?!" Glinda demanded.

"Why? Because you have blood. Is… it not so? My sisters told me everyone who lives on the ground has blood, but if it isn't true, I shall have to scold them for deceiving me when I get home."

Rolling her eyes, Glinda decided not to bother answering that and to go after their young Kansasian friend.

The inside of the farmhouse was about the most lackluster accommodations Glinda had ever seen. Even compared with the cave, which she had thought was the bottom of the barrel; at least the cave had charm, and sparkling rocks, and a grand view of the back of a waterfall. This was just… drab, in every sense of the word. Drab curtains, drab wooden floors, drab table, drab sink, drab beds. Books that looked drab on the surfaces and were probably filled with drab subject matter.

"How… quaint," she remarked.

"It's home," Dorothy sighed, running her hand over the door to what seemed to be the lavatory. She didn't even want to think about how different that might be. "Or it was, anyway. Might not be worth savin' once we get it back to Kansas, but it sure belongs there more than it belongs here."

Coming up behind her, Glinda put a hand on her shoulder to reassure her. "It'll be over soon." But Dorothy froze, so she pulled it away. "You're still upset."

"Me? Upset? Don't be s-silly!" Her smile was fairly earnest when she turned to look at her, even though she was shaking. "Just nervous about going home."
"Just nervous because you saw me kiss Elphie, you mean. Don't kid a kidder, kiddo." When Dorothy didn't answer, only looked away guiltily, she went on, "Hey. If it makes you feel any better, I was about as surprised as you are now. The first time, I mean; obviously I'm not still that surprised. But a little."

"It's none of my business. Aunt Em always warned me not to go poking my nose into other people's fenceposts, or I might get it tweaked, and I'd have earned it if I did!"

"Do you think I'm going to suddenly pounce on you?"

What an unconvincing "No..." the foreigner was offering!

"Do you want me to? I mean, I think Elphie would be okay with giving you a little smooch for the road..."

She giggled, "No, I don't! I really don't. I... know you're a good friend, Miss Glinda, and... oh, I don't know, the Tin Man's still got me all worried over nothing, and what the Good Book says, and... but I know you now, and I trust you. So I don't know why I feel all mixed up and crazy!"

Sighing deeply, Glinda opened her arms. "Come hug me. You start it, so you don't feel like I'm jumping all over you." Dorothy did, albeit reluctantly, and she wrapped her arms around the shorter young woman. "There. Now, doesn't that feel just fine the way it always has? I'm not going to hurt you. And trust me, the only one I want to give more-than-friends kisses is Elphie. Do you believe me?"

"I do." After a few long seconds, Dorothy's posture relaxed and she nodded, sighing into Glinda's shoulder. "Oh, I'm ever so sorry! I didn't mean to make a big to do about it. Just... I mean, I'm still not sure how to feel about something like that, on account of never having thought about it before, but that's not your hog to wrangle, it's mine. Is... is that alright? Do you hate me?"

"Of course not," she laughed, not quite sure why they were talking about hogs but more or less having understood the sentiment. Stepping back, she clapped Dorothy on the shoulders and smiled down at her. "Here now." Her lips pushed into Dorothy's cheek, and the girl gasped, but then she was already pulling away. "How do you feel about that? Truthfully."

"I feel... like Aunt Em kissed me," she finally admitted with a lopsided smile, and Glinda giggled. "Thank you ever so much for b-being patient with a silly girl who's got her head on backwards."

"Very, very alright. Tell you what — how about we finish off your basket of food while we wait for the others?"

~ o ~

Which is what they did. By the time they got to the bottom of the basket, having conversed easily with each other and with Polly once she was through entertaining the Munchkinlanders, the other carriage could be spotted on the horizon. This was because it was hauling something quite a lot larger: Morrible's cage. The sight of it made its former captive tremble, but Dorothy petted her shoulder reassuringly as it loomed closer and closer.

"I'm afraid we'll need that belt back," Glinda told Dorothy. They had left it with the girl, deciding it was the least they could do to help loan her some form of self-defense. If anyone attacked her for being affiliated with the witches, she could either wish them away or wish herself someplace else. But they weren't comfortable letting it be taken out of Oz — and there weren't likely to be any enemies waiting for her in Kansas.
"Oh! Thank you for reminding me, I clean forgot I had it on!" Quickly unbuckling it, she handed it over as the other carriage came to a stop in front of the house. "Was kind of worried the Lollipop Guild would kick up a fuss and I might need it again."

"The who?!" Fiyero asked.

"Thank you," Glinda interrupted before Dorothy could try to explain. "Now then, if Elphaba's finished her project, then I think we should be able to help if anything goes… sideways. But it shouldn't, really. I mean, Morrible's life is on the line; either she does what she's supposed to, or she'll wish she had by the time we're through with her!"

As the carriage came to a stop, Glinda and Lion approached the side and pulled the door wide, helping Elphaba down. Fiyero hopped out on his own. Two other guards exited, and immediately went around to the cage.

"Are we all set?"

"We are," Elphaba sighed as she withdrew the little pendant the Wizard had been wearing. "A little studying, and now I can work this thing without having to destroy it." Without wasting a moment, she walked over and touched a certain spot on the cage, and the pendant vibrated. "Good, it works."

Not long afterward, the door swung open, and the bars seemed to lose some of their iridescence. Immediately, Morrible's awful voice was bellowing out, "I will hex every one of you! Nothing will be left off-"

"SAVE IT," she boomed, and Morrible glowered. "There are more of us here than of you, and you remember what happened last time you crossed us! Now, are you going to uphold your end of our agreement, or are we going to have to revisit the death penalty?"

A long pause went by before she seemed to decided there was little point in obstinance. "Alright. Alright, I'll do it — put the little mongrel back in her shack."

"Toto is a he," Dorothy piped up. Then she caught on and lowered her eyes. "Oh… n-nevermind."

"There's no need to be nasty," Glinda admonished Morrible. The withering look she got in return could have destroyed Gillikin crops, and she curled her lip. "Even if it does seem to be your day job."

"Don't worry, I won't let myself get hurt," Dorothy assured them all, trying not to let herself get too depressed by Morrible's words. For which Glinda was proud of her. "A-and I'll tie myself to the bed, with pillows on top of me, so that I can't be hurt!"

"Take this, as well," Elphaba said, draping a necklace around Dorothy's neck. The pendant was silvery, and stood out from Dorothy's chest a bit more than the disc-like shape would suggest that it should. Strangest of all was the black jewel shining in the center; something about it was unnerving to Glinda. "It'll help protect you. If you ever need our help, just make a sad face while looking at that jewel and we'll do what we can."

"Oh? Goodness… I can't take this! It must be worth a pretty penny!"

"It's yours and only yours, Dorothy. If you give it back, it will belong to no one."

That silenced any further complaints. Glinda was shocked at this show of generosity, but then again, maybe she shouldn't have been; Elphaba only liked people to think she was unkind. Then they were leading Dorothy to the front door. Her eyes were misty, but she managed to keep from shedding any
tears as she leaned up to hug first Elphaba, then Fiyero, then the Lion, then Polychrome, who wept ghostly tears of her own. Finally, she shooed Toto back inside and went up the stairs.

"No goodbye for me?" Glinda chuckled.

"Huh? Oh, well… I kind of got to say a longer goodbye to you, so it felt greedy to do it again," she said with a small smile. But being asked about it got her trotting back down right away and throwing her arms around the golden-haired witch. "Thank you for everything!"

In a quiet voice, she whispered, "No, thank you. I… don't think we would have succeeded if not for you being the wonderful girl you are, Dorothy. Or things would have turned out a lot uglier, one way or another." The girl looked a little surprised at the sentiment. So Glinda pecked her forehead, and she gasped at the touch but recovered more quickly than the last time. "For luck. Now, in with you!"

"G'bye! G'bye, everyone, I'll miss you!"

Dorothy went in. The gathered company shut the door for her, then returned to the carriage, wheeling back along the road just a bit further. The Munchkins that had been watching with some interest seemed to think everything was over, and started back toward town.

"I can't believe I'm doing this…" But Morrible did as she was bade. Using her powers, she began to kick up dust and leaves as the air began to blow harder and harder, coiling directly around the little half-ruined farmhouse. Little by little, it rose into the air.

"Gently!" Glinda whispered, but Morrible paid her no heed; it rose a little faster and faster, until it was a goodly height above the ground. Concentrating, she sent it in a southerly direction — the way it had come. Before long, Dorothy was gone from the land of Oz.

They had to remain put for a while longer; Morrible needed to do her best to guide it to the spot where it had come from. As she had explained to them, she had a general idea of where she had summoned the storm from, though she could just as easily be dropping it into a lake. Without any way of seeing where she was going, all she could run on was guesswork.

"That's what I have this for," Elphaba said as she withdrew from within her cloak the old eyepatch.

"Wait," Glinda whispered. Then she jumped a few inches into the air. "OH! Oh, goodness, the eye! You put it in the- so that's why you gave her- oh no, did you really save an eye of a dead bird?! Isn't that rather ghastly?"

"Hey, don't speak to me about what Draven would and wouldn't want. I knew him better than you, and he definitely would prefer to be of help than rotting in the ground." The eyepatch in place, she turned to Morrible. "Alright… well, I can't see anything but the inside of the house, but Dorothy seems to be alright. Clinging to the doorway of the facilities. Out the window… well, I just see clouds. Bring it down?" Morrible cursed a few times, but did as she was told. "Hmm. That looked like a stretch of some kind of crops. You say it's near where you summoned the first tornado?"

"It is."

"Good. Now, if you could possibly set it down more gently this time…"

Their prisoner performed as best she could. They all waited to see what would happen, and Elphaba only held up her hand to forestall questions. Then she smiled.

"What, what is it?" Fiyero asked urgently. "Did she make it?"
"Will you settle down? She's still untying the ropes from the bed. Alright, now she's opening the door… I think we may have missed the exact spot, she looks disoriented, but also like the crops are familiar. She must be home; she has to be."

Hopping up and down, as if this would somehow help her see inside of the eyepatch, Glinda hissed, "But she's alright? How about her little dog?"

"Her little dog, too," Elphaba snorted. After watching for another moment, she flipped the patch up to rest on her forehead. "So… so I guess that's that."

"Good!" Morrible burst out. "I feel like I've been thoroughly used, and by you upstart usurpers! This has been most humiliating!"

Temper rising immediately, Glinda strode over to the bars and snapped, "You were asked to undo the damage you did, silly old biddy! What kind of crabby child are you to complain about that?!" Rolling her eyes, she snapped, "Elphie, lock her up!"

"Now, just you wait a-"

But that was as far as she got; it was Fiyero who actually slammed the cage shut, but Elphaba didn't seem to have minded in the slightest. Instantly, the spell kicked in again, and her voice was completely silenced.

"Ooh," Polly whispered, shivering all over from the dark memories.

"Let's be off. There are many things to tend to that don't involve standing around Munchkinland, picking our noses and waiting for the grass to grow."

Without further ado, Elphaba climbed back into the carriage and waited for it to depart. Glinda didn't have any better ideas, so she did the same in the other one, joining Polly and Lion. It was true: there were pressing matters waiting for them. A great many.

To Be Continued…
"...and what about my penonias?!!"

For the hundredth time that morning, Glinda felt like she wanted to do nothing more than crawl off to bed and pretend the day had never occurred. A large percentage of the "grievances" had nothing to do with the new law forbidding mistreatment of Animals. The citizenry seemed to have taken this as their golden opportunity to complain about any pointless little thing in their lives. Nessa had tried to warn them that this was what would be awaiting them, but they had both scoffed at the idea; surely, the good people of Emerald City wouldn't be nearly so petty and mundane!

Except, apparently, they were.

"Your penonias are no concern of mine," Elphaba droned, leaning heavily against her arm. "Now then, Miss Minkos, could you be so kind as to give the stage over to someone who…" A yawn interrupted her. "Who isn't trying my patience? Not to mention my ability to stay awake."

With a huff and a "WELL!", the Minkos woman stalked off the dais and into the gathered crowd. There was some murmuring of unrest, so Glinda decided she had better do her job of smoothing things over.

"Wonderful!" she called out, clapping her hands together. "That's quite a lot of you taken care of! I'm not even sure there are any left out there; we addressed the worries about how to take care of transportation, and fair wages for Animals who wish to enter employment in their previous servitude rather than search for new employment. Very good, very good, we're really making progress!"

She overheard Nessa muttering, "I don't know how she stays so perky all the time," and saw Elphaba nodding, but chose to pretend neither of them existed for that brief moment.

"Next up…" Jellia looked down the sign-in list, having to unfurl the last bit of the scroll. At least they were nearing the end. "A man named… Wooblebug? Do I have that right?"

"That's Wooblebug," an overly-refined voice called out as he approached the dais. And he was, indeed, an insect, though overgrown to be nearly as tall as Glinda. "Professor H.M. Wooblebug, T.E., if you please. And I should like to talk about the state of your educational system. For many years now…"

The proceedings stretched on and on. By the time they finished with the grievances for the day — which had booked up their time completely, and there were a few names on the spillover scroll for the following week — they needed to break for a belated lunch. As they fed, glad for the chance to replenish their energy and mental stamina, Glinda asked a highly pertinent question.

"The eyepatch? Ah… well, I've tried it again, but either Dorothy has her necklace shut away in a
box, or the spell has stopped working."

"What? Oh no, so you have no idea how she's doing now?"

"Sorry, but I don't. She'll just have to get along without us. We sent her back to her precious Kansas; now it's up to her if she can survive there."

"Just awful," Polychrome sighed, nursing the single droplet of morning dew on her saucer. "I was very fond of Dorothy, and wish I could go and see her. But I'm afraid that without being able to catch a rainbow… I will not be able to do so."

Curiosity piqued, Glinda asked, "Didn't you ever learn how to do that? Y'know, what your father can do?"

"Summon rainbows? Goodness, no. A sky fairy must study for many years to learn how to move the rainbows and clouds, and I just had no head for that work. Now I wish I had tried harder! Ohhh, will Father ever find me? What will I do if he does not?"

"Then we'll shoot you into the sky out of a cannon," Elphaba threatened. Glinda swatted her arm.

In no time at all, they were back to address the final matter of the day: Tippetarius. Glinda really found herself dreading this confrontation, given that he was such a young boy and really seemed to believe in what he felt was right. But that didn't mean they could let him keep speaking out against their rule; it would only stir up stronger resistance.

"You have been accused of attempting to ambush the Throppland Council," Elphaba read out from her scroll once the boy was brought to the dais in front of their seats. He looked no worse for wear, and his hair was stuffed up into his cap once more. Glinda did have to wonder why he grew it out so long only to hide it away. "And of disorderly conduct outside during the original address. How do you plead?"

"Not guilty! By reason of… of my love for the Land of Oz!" There were a few murmurs of agreement from the crowd.

"That's enough hyperbole. Explain your reasons for being outside the palace."

"To find out what you were up to. You said you were going to give us audience in a week, but what if you didn't? What if it was part of some… scheme to distract everyone while you filled the streets with soldiers, turned us into slaves?"

Nessa had had enough. "Your imagination is very colourful. But we're here to speak about specific charges, alright? Please, don't make up all these stories and try to stick to the facts."

That seemed to upset the boy a little more; he looked as if they had slapped him across the face and insulted his parentage. "But I am! You asked why I was outside, and… and I answered! I was keeping watch on the Palace to make sure nothing crazy happened, and if it did, I might alert someone!"

"Who would you alert?"

"Well… I hadn't figured out that part." There was a slight ripple of quiet laughter from the audience. After a few seconds, he went on as his cheeks pinkened, "You still haven't answered some of my questions."

"You're the one on trial!" Elphaba burst out in exasperation.
"How can we know that we're in the best hands? How do we know the truth of what you told us about the Wizard? You just… showed up here, after being fugitives for years, and tell us all to take you at your word!"

"You've forgotten the trial of Madame Morrible. We already gave her water from the Truth Pond, so every word out of her mouth was genuine. And she admitted that she had coerced everyone into believing we were responsible for the winged monkeys, we were trying to 'attack' the Wizard instead of being tricked into- why am I re-explaining this?"

Glinda sighed as the murmurs rose in the audience. "Y'know, some people just really don't care about who's right. They only care about who seems like the victim, and if it's the Wizard or this little boy, they're more ready to believe it."

"Men really are babies," Nessa muttered. Likely her opinion wasn't entirely objective, due to how the situation with Boq had failed to be resolved, but Glinda had to admit she found herself agreeing from time to time.

A little late, Tippetarius grumbled, "I'm not little."

"Children always say that."

"Alright, alright," Elphaba sighed wearily. "If you agree to taking a drink from the Truth Pond, we can cut through this a little faster, but you won't have it forced upon you because you haven't attempted murder. Entirely voluntary; it's up to you."

He hesitated. It was actually highly conspicuous, and stretched on long enough for a cough to be heard in the nearly-silent room.

"What's the matter? Suddenly you're the one with too many secrets, hmmm?"

"No, no! Just… I don't want to answer just anything in front of all these people." He pointed up at the council seats. "You promise just to ask about my duel and things related to that, and not a bunch of gossipy secrets? You know how women are."

Even while a tick flared up in Elphaba's jaw, and she gripped the bench in front of her a little tighter, Glinda hurried to answer, "Of course not, dear. We have no interest in gossip, just in getting this matter settled."

The translucent green glass of Truth Pond water was already prepared. After the success of using it against Morrible, they had all unanimously agreed that it should be of great use in further trials. Although it was expensive, given that the Truth Pond was in a far-off corner of the Vinkus, they could always fly down and gather another jug of it themselves. That was Elphaba's reasoning, at least.

The accused regarded it warily, lip curling. Drinking pond water of any kind certainly didn't sound appealing, but realising that it was either that, or going back and forth with mistrust, he raised the glass. And paused.

"Boy, we haven't all day," Elphaba prodded him.

"Why don't you have to drink it, too?"

"I've had just about enough of-"

"No, really! If I have to be honest, then so do you! Unless you're really afraid of what you'll say,
which sounds to me like you're not any less of a humbug than the Wizard!"

It was actually a pretty smart argument. Not that Elphaba enjoyed that it was; she growled under her breath, and Glinda slid a hand behind the bench to alight on her thigh, since she was reasonably sure her roommate had been about to shoot to her feet and possibly conjure a fireball to rid the boy of his stupid hat.

"I'll agree to the same terms," she said, glancing at the two sisters, who were a little surprised. "You can ask me about things that apply to being a Councilwoman of Oz, or your trial. We'll both take a sip. And Elphie and Nessie don't have to do any such thing, because they are not on trial. Jellia?"

In short order, Glinda had taken a sip. There were things about her relationship with Elphaba that she would rather not mention in front of a full audience, but otherwise, she would only be too glad to explain some of what the three of them had been through without anyone being able to question her honesty. With a shaky sigh, she handed it back to Jellia, who took it over for their prisoner. This time, he took a large swig, even larger than Glinda's, without any hesitation whatsoever.

"Good," Elphaba said, turning to her. "What is your name?"

"Glinda Upland, of the Upperuplands. Formerly Galinda."

The slight smile on her love's lips made her stomach flutter, but she was already asking, "And your age?"

"I… it's twenty-two, now. Isn't it?" That was her honest answer; she had sort of lost track somewhere along the way. They didn't celebrate birthdays in the cave.

"And your weight?"

"Probably about eight… and a half stone." Her cheeks were colouring now; she knew she had put on a little weight, and that made it one of the worst questions Elphaba could have asked her. But it was also a relatively inconsequential way of confirming that she was telling the truth.

"Alright. Now…" Turning back to the dais, she said, "What is your name?"

Something was already different about the boy. His voice was a little different in the same way Glinda's was, devoid of any societal nicety or bravado or any of those other trappings. Earnest and sincere. But that wasn't the most remarkable thing about his answer, even though it had been such a mundane question.

"Ozma."

"What? What did you say?"

"Ozma." He looked very confused by his own words, but he kept on, "But currently Tippetarius Mombi."

There was a startled murmuring all around the room. That one word, Ozma, had stirred up a thousand emotions in all gathered; they knew the power it held. But how preposterous for a boy to be named Ozma at all! Even Elphaba looked incensed, but also quite curious; it really was the water of the Truth Pond, and they had watched it slide down his throat. Even some droplets ran down his chin, so even if he hadn't truly swallowed, there would likely be some compulsion to avoid falsehoods.

"How old are you?"
"I'm… nineteen, as far as I know."

"As far as you know?"

"I haven't had a birthday party that I can ever remember."

Elphaba could sympathise, and Glinda could sympathise with all three of them, so she didn't contribute. As long as she was compelled to tell the truth, she felt more comfortable letting anyone else helm this interrogation. "Fine, fine. Why did you come to the Emerald City?"

"To get away from Mombi."

"But that's your name."

"It's my adoptive mother's name. But she was a bad woman." He slapped a hand over his mouth. "Oh? Tell us about her. Just the short version; in what ways was she bad?"

"She locked me up and told me my name was Tippetarius Mombi, and that I was her slave. Eventually when I didn't run away, she let me do the chores without being chained up, but… she… would beat me if I disobeyed. Told me that little boys deserved it for being rowdy. And she always told me to cut my hair but I hated cutting it."

"About that," Glinda couldn't help asking. "Why do you keep it so long?"

"Because it feels more natural," he admitted… and his voice was a touch higher in pitch. The way it sounded, the timbre and inflection, Glinda was almost positive that he had been deepening it intentionally before now. "Mombi always wanted me to cut it but I told her 'no'. She would whip me, or send me to bed without supper."

Completely at a loss, and distracted from their goal of finding out what Tip was doing in the Emerald City, Elphaba leaned forward and asked, "What's happening to you right now?"

"I don't know. My voice sounds higher." That much was obvious, but of course, he couldn't tell a lie — and even a pithy joke about it such as "Why don't you tell me?" would have been a sort of lie, after a fashion.

"Why did you say your name is Ozma?" Nessa asked, wanting to get to the heart of that right away. She looked keenly interested, in a way that even Elphaba didn't, who was also leaning forward intently.

"Because it is." He still looked quite shocked to hear his own voice, including the words it was forming, and he was beginning to tremble. "Because… it was the name I had when I was a baby. But I barely remember it, I mostly remember Mombi telling me 'Your name is no longer Ozma, it's going to be Tippetarius from now on'. So now it is."

"But it isn't really?"

"No. It's Ozma."

Silence reigned in the courtroom, even though there had been some mutterings before; everyone was too fascinated to hear what would come next. Elphaba pushed a hand into her mouth, and Glinda could tell her mind was racing; she always got that same look in her eyes. Perhaps Mombi had simply been lying to the boy, but if there was any - any possibility that he had been told the truth, then a decades-old mystery was about to be solved. Glancing at the other two women behind the
bench, neither of whom had the slightest idea of what to say, she looked not at Tip, but at Jellia.

"Remove the prisoner's hat."

Tippetarius did flinch back at first, but then seemed embarrassed that he had and let the hat be removed. Instantly, the dark red hair fell down in gentle curls… and seemed to be a little longer than before. With this out in the light, he definitely looked more bashful, the freckles on his cheeks darkening. The effect was unmistakable.

Almost as one, the entire crowd looked over the door to the courtroom at the portrait of Ozma the Warrior. Perhaps because of her being the most powerful and striking of the Ozma line, the similarities between she and the ragamuffin boy before them were impossible to deny.

"Boy…" Glinda wished she had a less clumsy way to ask, but she couldn't think of one. "Are you a girl?"

This was the first time Tip seemed to fight against the compulsion of the Truth Pond's water. To no avail. "Y-yes."

"Then why are you dressed as a boy?"

"Mombi transformed me into a boy with her powers," he went on, and even while speaking, his body seemed to be changing subtly, his voice lightening, escalating in pitch. There was still a mixture of panic and disbelief in his eyes, even if his tone was absolutely certain. "She figured no one would ever think to look for me if I were a scruffy boy instead of a girl."

Elphaba had a sudden thought. "And… did you know any of this before today?"

"No, ma'am. I knew I was being hidden, but couldn't remember why."

"Are you Ozma, descended from Ozma the Billious?"

"I don't know that. I only can remember growing up with Mombi. But I remember her telling me that my name was no longer Ozma, and that I was a boy, and… and that she would kill me if I ever said otherwise." The last seemed to cost him something to admit, because he shivered.

"Would you be more comfortable if we call you Ozma?" Glinda asked.

"No."

"Why?"

"Because I didn't remember that I was Ozma before just now. I'm Tip." Tears were streaming down his cheeks by now.

"Would you rather be called Ozma?" Nessa asked, head tilted very slightly. Glinda had to admit that she would never have thought to change the phrasing of the question in that way. "Does that sound more correct to you than Tippetarius?"

"I… I don't know. I don't know!"

Unable to help herself, Glinda stepped out from behind the bench. "I'm not going to hurt you," she said when he flinched. "And you know that's the truth, don't you?"

"I do."
"You seem like a nice… boy." She wasn't sure which to pick now, but decided to stick with the previously-accepted pronoun until it was proven otherwise. As she continued, she walked to the dais and stepped up onto it with him, which caused fresh mutterings to break out in the crowd; that was highly unusual in the middle of a trial. "I'm sorry we asked about all this in here, where you had to tell everyone the truth. We didn't mean to make you embarrassed, but we had to make sure you weren't going to interfere with our plans."

"And what are your plans?" he asked smoothly.

"To help the Animals. And to remove the Wizard and Morrible from positions of power, so they couldn't keep hunting us and corrupting the government." She hadn't meant to say the last bit, but it came tumbling out because of the water.

"And how long have you been planning this?"

"Not very long. I didn't want anything to do with that at first; Elphie was the one who wanted to help the Animals the most. But after being chased around Oz for two years, it seemed like we either stopped them, or we would be killed or put in prison. So we had to plan a way to get in here and capture them."

The crowd muttered a little about that, as well, and she cast a helpless frown over at Elphaba. For her part, she was completely unflustered.

"Did you plan to kill the Wizard?"

Even as she was trying to keep her mouth shut, it was already saying, "Yes, if he didn't listen to reason or try to negotiate with us. After all, he'd already sent an innocent little girl to kill us; he would have deserved it." Before that moment, she hadn't been entirely certain she believed the Wizard did deserve a death sentence. Apparently, deep down, she did.

"Guess I can understand that," Tip said — and with every passing second, he looked less like a "Tip" and more like an "Ozma". Still rather stout and toned, quite strong, but his hips were a little wider, his neck a little more slender. The Adam's apple had more or less vanished. That confirmed something Glinda had been wondering: this Mombi character had definitely cast a spell on the baby, not just stuck her in boys' clothes and told her that her name was Tip.

For she was Ozma. There was no sense in pretending now that the magic of the Pond had revealed her.

She put an arm around Ozma's shoulders and leaned in close. "I'm sorry. This must be very strange. But… I think we have to call you 'Ozma' now, because you're definitely she who was descended from the throne of Oz."

"I must be," she replied with a lopsided smile. "It doesn't sound like a very common name."

"Actually, it's illegal to name a common child Ozma, and considered to be in very poor taste besides," Nessa supplied. "Disrespectful to the throne. Well… it was before the Wizard's reign, at least."

"Oh."

Glinda lowered her voice. "But you're really a very sweet looking, um, young lady. I thought so when you were still Tip." She hadn't meant for that to pop out, and cursed the water in her belly yet again. "A-anyway… do you still think we're trying to pull a fast one on the whole Land of Oz?"
"No." The answer seemed to surprise the younger woman, as if she hadn't realised it before that moment. "Well... you can't lie if I can't lie."

"Exactly. So are you going to keep challenging us to duels and other preposterosities?"

Even while Ozma-nee-Tip was shaking her head, looking thoroughly ashamed of being so hasty and reckless, Jellia cleared her throat. When both Pond-influenced women turned to her, she ducked her green tinted head.

"Begging your pardon, Councilwoman... but I think you have something else to consider."

"Hmm?"

A highly stunned Nessa answered for her. "She's Princess Ozma. We... I mean, I know she wasn't raised to take the throne, but..."

"The rightful heir has appeared," Elphaba finished. Her face was a lighter shade of green than Glinda could ever remember seeing it, as were the faces of every member of the gathered observers. Ozma was trying not to look like she wanted to sink down into the dais due to a roomful of stares. "This changes literally everything."

END OF PART TWO
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

This is where we advance several months. It's also the final story arc for this fic, so I hope you're ready for the final wild ride! (Also my apologies for taking so long to get this up)

PART THREE

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Truer words had never been spoken in the history of Oz. And Elphaba didn't even need a drop of Pond water.

Over the next week, the lost Princess Ozma was hastily given just enough training in how to act like a "lady" so that she could participate in her own coronation ceremony. Etiquette, table manners, proper terms of address for nobility. Hair was fussed over, dresses were cut and hemmed, shoes were fashioned. She seemed to take to most lessons and changes very naturally once the initial shock had worn off.

And she positively clung to Glinda. The three witches had assumed their services would no longer be needed now that the rightful heir had turned up from the least likely place imaginable. Instead, Ozma desperately pleaded with them to stay on and help her figure out how to rule an entire kingdom.

"Oh, I thought you wanted to challenge us to a duel?" Elphaba had needled her as she was fitted for a high collar.

"Yeah, yeah," she replied in a grumble, spitting into the corner. Instantly, Glinda swatted her with her wand. "Ow!"

"And how will it look if the new queen of not one, but four countries, is seen spitting during her coronation?"

Pouting as she looked down at her stocking feet, Ozma tried to hide a blush. It was always present when she was in especially feminine garb. Though she had accepted such far more readily than someone who had spent their entire life as a boy ought to, that didn't mean her discomfort vanished. "No idea. I just keep forgetting these things. There's so much! A farm boy never had to balance books on his head, so why do you witches think I'm bad when I drop them?"

"We're conveniently 'you witches' whenever you have to do something you don't like," Elphaba cackled. "Instead of Auntie Glinda and Auntie Elphie…"

Tutting at her fellow Councilwoman, Glinda told the princess, "We're not saying you're a bad girl for forgetting! Just trying to motivate your memory. Now, stand up straight…"

Little by little, the young Ozma began to grasp things, and her learning gained momentum. Within her first month as queen, she was acting as if she had been bred for it all her life — in public, at least.
In private, her behavior could only be described as "tomboyish". Not quite as masculine as an average boy raised in the country, but neither as ladylike as Glinda and Jellia would have liked.

Elphaba didn't seem to mind at all. In fact, the two of them would often laugh about how silly some of the customs expected of women in so-called "polite society" were. Though of the three witches, Ozma felt most secure around Glinda, trusting her completely, she definitely felt freest to be herself with the green-tinged Thropp. Their shared disregard of pomp and social niceties ensured that.

Two more months along and she even made a few changes. They were minor, but only endeared herself to the populace more. The Lurlinic Pike Guild was given right to refurbish their bunkers and procure shiny new pikes to replace the rusted ones. Mombi was hunted down and forbidden to practice magic any further, her spellbooks seized and her potions impounded. The library, which had been closed, was reopened and staffed with Animals, as part of hers and Elphaba's initiative to help return them to the respectable workforce. A statue of the Wizard was removed from the square and replaced with the statue of Ozma the Billious, then replaced again with a statue of the current Ozma by popular demand. It seemed the Emerald City had a new darling in its young Ruler.

When asked what she wanted done with the Wizard's statue, Elphaba asked it to be put in a corner of the Palace gardens. Despite his motives and methods, he was her father, and hadn't been so terrible that he deserved to have his name stricken from the record and his statue demolished.

Truth be told, it was Nessarose who did the largest share of actual governing in the government. It wound up being quite the ideal situation: Ozma could learn at her own pace and be pretty, Glinda was fantastic at smoothing over rough patches in diplomatic relations and getting people to drop their guard, Elphaba had freedom to work on her passion projects, and Nessa got back to precisely what she had been doing in Munchkinland on a larger scale. Now that she'd been fed a dose of humility, and didn't have an unattainable man lurking around to distract her, she was fantastic at the job. Eventually, they were able to replicate the spell they used on her shoes on a pair of anklets, so that she might wear different shoes from day to day. She did remark that the level of control was not quite as high, but it only took a small period of adjustment.

But she still wore the original silvery shoes from time to time. They remained her most prized possession.

Boq was rusted completely by the time they fetched him from Kiamo Ko. Without any sharper idea of what to do with him, they decided it was best he met the same fate as Morrible: tossed into the Forbidden Fountain. Once he had climbed free, as with Morrible, he had no memory of anything at all. Despite Nessa's temptation to tell him he was her long lost husband, they agreed that the truth was the best policy. While the mindless Morrible was employed at Shiz, and only as a teacher's aide, now Boq knew that he had transgressed, and his punishment was to have to start over as the guard of the Prince of the Vinkus.

As for the fate of Fiyero, he sadly could not be changed into a flesh-and-blood Vinkan again. So he decided to make do. Upon returning to his homeland, bringing along a freshly-oiled Boq and a few more royal guards on loan from Ozma to ensure he would be welcomed, despite his new form, he took his rightful place as Prince.

Conversely, Jack Pumpkinhead - whose name turned out to be highly accurate - was given the job of Palace gardener so that he could be close to his old friend. Ozma took many luncheons in the gardens for that reason.

The Lion always watched over her. Given her similar age and ineptitude, he seemed to be using her as a surrogate Dorothy, which made Glinda laugh. What a sweet old beast he was! Though on very rare occasion, she did witness him being ferocious when someone would try to sneak onto the
grounds to get a look at either the witches or the queen. It was usually innocent enough, someone hoping to get an interview for the papers or to simply meet such a stunning ginger in the flesh, and Lion could usually roar and swipe at them with his claws once or twice to drive them away. Only once was it someone who claimed to believe Ozma was an impostor, and needed to be subdued until the guards could haul him away. Lion got an extra large portion of meat for his supper that evening, and ate it with great relish.

Polychrome went home to her father. There was a tearful goodbye, even if her tears instantly evaporated, but it was for the best; Oz was not her home any more than it was for Dorothy. She promised to visit again someday, though for an ageless sky fairy — who turned out to be many hundreds of years old! — that "return visit" could be when they were all elderly.

That was something Elphaba had turned her attentions to, once the Animals had been mostly restored to their previous standing in Ozian society, the minor revolts against the Council petered out, and there was no change in the Wizard's condition. First, she tried to examine how a girl that ought to be her own age could be a few years younger. The only answer she could grasp at was that the spell to disguise Ozma's gender had probably also returned her to a state of infancy, dialing back those first few years. However, the magical tests that she and Nessa had devised together seemed to hint that the young queen was also of the fairy folk, as Polychrome was. She couldn't be entirely certain of anything more. It drove Elphaba batty trying to figure out how this could be so, given that she had a father, she had a mother, as so many do. One parent had to have been a fairy in disguise, and yet neither were; the history books clearly showed Ozma's parentage to be noble, but mortal. It was quite the mystery.

Many a night, Glinda had to urge her roommate to abandon the books and come to bed. Although the term 'roommate' began to feel less and less accurate as time went on. Every night, they became more comfortable with this new level of intimacy. Glinda wanted to kiss her during the daytime, as well, but they could only find so many stolen moments.

One thing befuddled her: why did they continue to hide it? It wasn't as if relationships between two women were illegal, even if uncommon. Besides, they were now in positions of great power, and Ozma only seemed faintly flustered when she caught them sitting a little closer than was strictly professional. At some point when she walked in on them kissing at last, it became necessary for them to sit her down and explain their relationship, and the queen's reaction was pure joy, and an inquiry as to when they might marry. That was more heartening than she cared to admit, and the two of them embracing her made Ozma giggle and hug back, even while fussing about them being "too mushy".

This was one of many matters on Glinda's mind as they entered the fourth month of Ozma Tippetarius's reign. Running a kingdom, even with the responsibilities divided amongst four women, was no easy task, but they shouldn't ignore personal matters, despite Elphaba seeming to be alright doing just that.

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"Married?!"

Rolling her blue eyes, Glinda continued digging through her corner of the attic space. Many of the former Ozma line had taken to stashing useless things there, and the Wizard and Morrible dubbed everything "useless" since it was from a bygone era. It seemed only right that they help clear it out and see if anything might be salvageable. She couldn't help remember doing a nearly-identical chore with Fiyero once upon a time. That felt like years ago now.

"Not tomorrow, Elphie. Just... y'know, a woman likes to think she's worth keeping around."
"I don't see what difference it makes," Elphaba groused, tugging an old sword free. When she unsheathed it, the blade was rusted through and snapped off, so she sighed in disgust and relinquished it to the discard pile. "I have you with me, and you know I'm not leaving. Do we need to make a ridiculous to-do?"

"Yes! Because I want to celebrate!" Tutting, she paused to put her hands on her hips. "Right now, we are actually standing pretty close to the spot where we began our journey together, if you didn't notice."

"I noticed," Elphaba told her. In a voice so rich with affection it nearly derailed her roommate.

"R-right. So you should understand! We spent so long flapping around the countryside like jackdaws that I don't want to hide it anymore!"

"So stop hiding it. You're the one who always acts flustered if I hold your hand at public dinners."

Giggling, Ozma brought over a jewellery box and placed it in the "take downstairs" collection. She was back to wearing trousers, but at least she was wearing a tasteful green blouse with sleeves that billowed around her arms, which gave a regal, elegant effect despite the somewhat genderless ensemble. Her excuse had been that puffy dresses weren't suited to jobs like cleaning and sorting, and despite Jellia trying to insist that Ozma need only supervise the job, she insisted on working herself.

"You two sound already married. Might as well make it official."

"See?!" Glinda burst out, gesturing to Ozma and making her dip her auburn head in slight alarm. "The queen agrees with me, and you can't go against a royal decree!"

"I didn't 'decree' anything!"

Elphaba laughed harshly as she tried to shift a large dresser aside. "That was a pretty feeble attempt, Glinny. Still… oh, I suppose it can't hurt anything."

"It can't. Unless you plan on leaving me," Glinda added petulantly.

"Not ever." She paused to pace over and loop an arm around Glinda's waist, pulling her body in close. Making a show of tittering and fanning her face, she leaned up to kiss her love's strong jawline, and Elphaba hummed her appreciation.

The wistful sigh from Ozma brought them around, and they all cleared their throats and got back to work. Glinda started sorting through a chest of old clothes that definitely wouldn't fit the current queen and asked, "What time of year would you like? Autumn is so lovely…"

"Thought you would go for more of a Springtime wedding. But… well, Autumn suits me just fine. The trees turn a lot of striking colours, if you wanted to have a more traditional ceremony."

Traditional Ozian weddings were held in the forest. All parties wore a thin, gauzy dress dappled like the leaves, and were always patterned after however the trees looked during that ceremony. If it were in Autumn, they should be red and gold and brown instead of green. Of course, more modern weddings typically took place in chapels, but as witches, belonging to a religion even older than Lurlinism, they would be expected to go back to a more natural setting.

"Well… we could do something about halfway," Nessa contributed as she dropped a chamber pot on top of the other trash. Her muscles were quite a lot stronger, and even though she would always need magic to walk, she could now run and jump as any other Ozian did, so long as she wore the shoes or
anklets. The healthy colour it had given her made both Elphaba and Glinda smile, as they could well remember how sickly the younger sister could look due to inactivity.

"Halfway how?"

"Have the ceremony in the gardens. The bride and groom- or, sorry, the *brides* would wear modern wedding gowns, but the wedding party and attendees will be in the Robes Of Leaves. Perform the Dance Of Seasons, the tying of the legs, but still have a minister make the proclamation. Some combination like that. What do you think?"

Glinda had stopped working and was pressing her hands together in front of her wide smile. Then she burst out, "OOH! That sounds so wonderful!"

"Sounds like a chore," Elphaba snorted, but the way she was smiling gave away that she wasn't opposed.

"And then, once the ceremony is over…” She fluttered her eyelashes suggestively. Ozma was already stifling a giggle, but Elphaba merely paused to lean against a wardrobe door.

"What? Then we have cake and spiced meats, and put up with your mother's dreary speeches for an hour?"

Throwing up her hands, she turned back to pull at a curtain along the wall. "Hopeless. You are well and truly hopele-

AAAH!

The curtain came free from its rungs, and not having expected the sudden release of opposing force, Glinda fell back onto her behind. Instantly, Elphaba was there, gently raising her up from the floor by her shoulders. A moment later, Ozma and Nessa were bending over them, worry in their eyes.

"Oh, I'm fine, I'm fine," she reassured them with a wave of her hand. Her grunt as she made it back to her feet didn't seem to corroborate that claim, but she still smiled. "Just my backside. Plenty of padding there!"

"I like that padding," Elphie muttered into her ear, and her cheeks turned pink enough that Nessa rolled her eyes and turned to leave… but then she froze. Green eyes distracted by that, she looked up and asked, "What?"

"That painting… it was of a large body of water the last time I looked, but desert just now. And look, it's turned into a waterfall!"

Even as the other pairs of eyes turned to the painting that had been hanging behind the large curtain, it changed again — to a lovely forest full of tall, pointed trees. The way the images almost seemed to *melt* into each other was highly fascinating. The longer they waited, it turned into several more scenes. Once it showed some small village in the Quadling Country, they turned away to look at each other.

"I wonder if this thing would ever show Colwen Grounds?" Nessa breathed, running her hand along the frame — and immediately, there was Colwen Grounds, looking as proud and formidable as it had the last time Glinda had flown away from it at top speed. Nessa jerked her hand back in alarm. "What- I… how?!"

Approaching at a half-step, Ozma licked her lips. She shrugged at the other two, then turned back to the painting and stated, "I'd like to see the statue of the Wizard in the gardens!" Nothing happened. "Huh… did I do it wrong?"
"Nessa, ask it something else," Glinda urged.

"How about… show us Fiyero." Nothing happened. "Well, I wasn't doing anything that different. Does it have to be in the form of a question?"

"Could we see Fiyero?" Elphaba tried. The scene did change, but to that of a river. "Blast. Maybe it was a coincidence."

It was Ozma who figured it out. In hindsight, Glinda felt a little stupid that she hadn't noticed and the youngest of them had, but then again, Ozma had proven herself to be fairly bright, despite having been essentially mentally starved all her young life. As she had explained when they marvelled at her quick progress in a variety of subjects, the witch Mombi did at least allow her to read during her spare time between many chores, and she kept her mind sharp that way, even if she sometimes preferred running around and pulling minor pranks as forms of entertainment.

"Wait…" Her hand moved forward to touch the frame, as Nessa had done. "Show me Lion! What's he doing right now?"

The picture immediately shifted to show their furry guard. He was lounging at the bottom of the stairs to the attic, sleeping peacefully on his paws. A fly buzzed around his ear, and it flicked to drive the insect away. The four women were fascinated but still confused.

"It's magic, isn't it?" Ozma asked them excitedly. She was still fascinated by all things relating to magic, now that she had access to such things from a source that didn't despise her and treat her like a slave.

"Definitely. And powerful magic, if I'm not mistaken." Only hesitating a moment, Elphaba reached for the frame, and Ozma removed her hand. "Show me… Shiz." A map of Shiz appeared. Except that there was some slight stirring in this map. After a moment, she breathed, "Oh… it's a bird's-eye view. This is what it would look like if we were on my broomstick."

Sliding her hand around Elphaba's waist, Glinda whispered, "I can't believe we never thought to go check in on Shiz while we were fugitives. Not that there was much for us there, other than a few books and dresses. Oh, my dresses! Do you think they still have them?"

"It's likely," Nessa told them. "Everything you owned wound up in a storage closet when you ran-well, when it became clear you wouldn't be coming back to reclaim anything. Just depends on if they decided to clear it out or not."

"Awww. Well, that's legitimately disappointing."

"Oh," Elphaba breathed all of a sudden. When Glinda fixed her with a curious glance, she instead looked at the painting and asked pleasantly, "Show me Dorothy. It has been awhile since the eyepatch stopped working."

What they saw next chilled them to the bone.

They were looking into a dark room with wooden floors and brick walls, painted white and covered in what looked like some sort of thin mattresses. Even the floor had these mattresses along it. There was a very plain bed, also with a thicker mattress, and a few books piled next to it though no table upon which for them to rest. And there, seated on the bed with one of the books open in her lap, was…

Maybe it wasn't Dorothy. As opposed to the apple-cheeked girl they had met, full of life and just pleasantly plump enough to tell a person she never lacked for anything, here was a gaunt young
waif. Hollow cheeks and dark bags under her eyes spoke of sleeplessness and malnutrition. Though she did look vaguely contented, one could guess that was a rare moment in her day-to-day life. But the facial features and hair colouring, height, and a certain indefinable quality she possessed told them that there could be no mistake. This was Dorothy Gale, whatever had become of her.

"It's so ghastly," Glinda whispered, as if speaking too loud would break the spell. "There isn't... any colour at all! No Gillikan violet, no Munchkinland blue!"

Nessa whispered, "What do you suppose this room is for? That can't be how bedrooms simply look in Kansas, can it?"

"So there's Dorothy," Ozma observed, voice quite hushed and eyes wide as she gazed at the painting. "I thought I remembered her being... taller. And healthier. No, this doesn't seem right; she doesn't seem right."

"I concur fully," Elphaba was muttering as she pulled her hand away. The picture remained on the scene, despite this, though nothing else happened; the girl's slippered feet kicked back and forth weakly as she read on. "It's... what if we made a mistake? She wanted to return to Kansas, but this doesn't look like anywhere I would wish my worst enemy. Well... maybe an enemy, after all, but not a friend."

Patting Elphaba's arm, Glinda craned her neck this way and that, hoping to spot some heretofore unknown benefit to this location of theirs. "Well... it looks fine to me, but you're right that it isn't very interesting. Maybe that's her new home. The other one was equally drab, even if not so... cushioned. So we shouldn't pass judgment."

"Might we wish her here?" asked Nessarose. "That would be simple enough with the belt."

"Yes, but I don't know if its power reaches that far, sister. Or if we would be able to send her back if we did succeed — and now that Morrible's mind has been erased, she won't be able to conjure another tornado to send her home. That's a great risk to take if it's a one-way trip and she doesn't want to return to Oz."

They all lapsed into silence. From what they could see in the painting, Dorothy didn't look quite as joyful as she had when she left Oz, but neither was she hurt or sobbing. Just drawn. Maybe she had simply taken ill and was in recovery; the room could be a hospital ward. There was no way to know for certain without asking her, but that was no more possible than conjuring a new tornado.

"What if..."

They all turned to Nessa as one. "Hmm?" asked Glinda. "If you have a better idea, let's hear it."

"What if one of us were sent there with the belt? Then we could ask Dorothy ourselves how she's doing. After... oh, let's say a full day has passed, we'll use this Magic Picture to look in on you again, and bring you home if you look like you're ready. Then you can tell us whether or not Dorothy is happy with her current... uhm, accommodations."

"Shouldn't we take the magic belt with us?" Glinda asked. "Especially since I have a feeling I've been volunteered for this mission for some reason."

"It's too risky," Elphaba said, and Nessa nodded, already thinking along those lines. "If we lose the belt, we're stuck wherever we are. And Morrible never elaborated how far away Kansas is; we might not be able to cross the desert any other way."

"But what if we try this plan, and the belt can't get us back?"
No one had an answer for that.

They might not have tried any plan at all if not for the little sniffle that came from the picture frame. By the time they looked up, Dorothy was wiping her cheeks and returning to her reading. There was no further crying, no evidence that she had cried. But nobody was capable of feigning that they hadn't heard the sound.

"I'll go," Ozma volunteered bravely, though she was trembling slightly in her determination. "If she really is important to you, then it seems like it's my duty as the queen to try and, um... what's that word? For speaking to another kingdom."

"Establish diplomatic relations?"

"That's the one! Diplomatic!"

"We can risk you even less than we can risk the belt!" Glinda admonished her, and Ozma looked sufficiently chagrined. "You're a good queen for wanting to help, but the citizenry would never forgive us for letting anything happen to you. And we wouldn't forgive ourselves, besides."

Her boot kicked at the wall by the painting. "Makes me feel so... claustrophobic sometimes, like I can't help anyone or go anywhere. But I know it's important for the people to have a leader they trust, too..." When Glinda's hand found her shoulder, she smiled glumly. "I'm fine. Sorry for complaining all the time."

"You're complaining just enough, dear."

"I'll go," Elphaba surprised them by saying. When they only stared at her, she asked, "What?"

"Well, I didn't think you cared enough for Dorothy to risk yourself in that way," Nessa said in a matter-of-fact voice. "Ever since she gave you a bath."

While Ozma giggled, Elphaba straightened and shouted, "That was an assassination attempt! And I have forgiven her, if you didn't care to pay attention! I'm allowed to be upset about something like that and work through it in my own time, aren't I?"

Shrugging, she turned back to the painting. Now it had finally changed to show a breezy meadow; seemed that once no one's attention was on it, the painting decided they had finished looking at Dorothy. "Fine, fine. But I agree that it's important we send someone. I had a special kinship with her; we were the only ones who knew what it's like to have to wear a pair of shoes all the time, without ever taking them off."

"For different reasons," Glinda muttered.

"True. I mean, I took mine off at bedtime and needed help reaching them in the morning sometimes, but she couldn't even do that much. It was nice having someone around who understood that part."

Turning back to her sister, she sighed and said, "If you do this, let yourself be wished to the Land of Kansas without being sure you'll return, I'll definitely believe you've forgiven her."

Letting out a long sigh, Elphaba placed her hands on her hips. "Then it's settled. Tomorrow morning, I will steal away to Kansas and find out what I will. I only hope it isn't the last choice I ever make."

*To Be Continued...*
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning for racism. To be historically accurate, I should have used a certain word other than "negro" but I can't bring myself to type it.

This chapter and the ones following were hard enough to write as it was. Apologies to anyone who might feel offended or upset by parts of this chapter, but as I said, I was trying for historical accuracy, and sometimes that means writing awful, difficult, uncomfortable things.

Also, I was listening to American McGee's *Alice* soundtrack while writing these chapters. Seemed to fit.

They made sure to bring the Magic Picture down and have it hung in Ozma's chambers. That way, it would remain safe in the safest of rooms in the Palace, and be somewhere easy to view at anytime. Nessa had expressed a worry that it wouldn't function if removed, but that turned out to be groundless, for it continued shifting to show prairies and lakes and mountains all the way down the stairs and halls to its new home. A few times, it shifted to show someone they were speaking about during their idle conversations while moving it — including Ozma, and it was a strange sight indeed to see Ozma carrying a painting of herself, carrying a painting of herself, carrying a painting of herself, ad infinitum.

"You'd better come back to me," Glinda told her as they got ready for bed. Her eyes were drawn to the smooth green skin that she so often had to force herself not to caress. She didn't always succeed. However, Elphaba was so uncomfortable going any further that she refrained. It had begun to worry Glinda. She knew things would function differently between two women, and she was past the point of worrying about it and ready to embrace finding out what those differences might be. But her sweet artichoke was not ready. To snuggle, and kiss, and occasionally caress, yes, but not to explore beyond those activities. She understood, even if it was a bit frustrating.

"I will, you worrywart," Elphaba sighed impatiently, tossing the dress onto the bureau and reaching for the nightgown. But before she could catch hold of it, two arms slid around her stomach. "Ooh… wh-what is it?"

Leaning her cheek against the bare back of the woman who had come to mean everything to her, Glinda urged, "You'd better." Then she kissed her shoulderblade. It only took a moment before Elphaba turned, and she kissed again, from collarbone up to neck. Fingertips were ghosting over her back through her own dress.

"Want some help with this?" Elphaba asked in such a soft tone that it was like a shower of eider down, caressing her cheeks as it fluttered past toward the ground.

"Yes. I do, so much…"

In no time, they had it off and resting next to Elphaba's. Her gaze was fixated on Glinda's as she reached for their nightgowns again, as if knowing she would be stopped. So when she was, it was
not nearly as much of a surprise as the first time. Hands touched, eyes met. Stomachs brushed against each other as they began to slowly spin, wrapped up in each other so deeply that all else fell away.

"Elphie… do you ever regret… any of it?"

As was her way, she never spared Glinda's feelings. "Parts of it. But not this."

"You don't wish… Fiyero…?"

Even if it might have been a slight fib, Glinda couldn't pretend she wasn't pleased with Elphaba's response. A green thumb and forefinger pinched her chin, and a soft voice whispered, "Fiyero who?"

The next kiss lasted nearly twenty minutes. And led to many more, and a few other experiments besides. It certainly made her leave-taking that much more memorable.

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"Make sure you remember her name is 'Dorothy Gale'," Nessa was fussing the following morning as Elphaba checked and rechecked her pack, making sure she had a few basic essentials. Mostly spare clothing, apples, some bread and cheese. They had found a few drab old dresses in one of the shops in town, which Elphaba was wearing now; they all remembered too well the hideous thing Dorothy had been wearing when she arrived, and the only slightly better one she had changed into for travelling. The Grimmerie most certainly couldn't be taken along, but Elphaba had a fair bit of it memorised already; that was her best line of defense.

"Yes, Mother."

"And that they might not have our level of magical understanding; a lot of really normal magical things seemed to shock her when she was here."

"Yes, Mother."

While Nessa was rolling her eyes and tutting at that, Ozma was sizing her and Glinda up. She had been helping prepare, of course, but was distracted during the work.

"Something's different."

"What's different?" Glinda asked innocently.

"You two. It's like you have this kind of… extra energy."

"Oh, don't be silly, Little Ozzie! We're just nervous about sending Elphie into another country, that's all."

"No… no, I don't think that's it." But she couldn't seem to quite place her finger on the real cause of the healthy glow in their skin. Glinda decided that the sooner they got Elphaba sent off through space and time, the less likely the virgin girl would be to catch on. All in all, she had to thank her lucky stars that their queen was so very young, and Nessa so very inexperienced despite her age.

"All set?" she asked Elphaba, as they exchanged a bemused glance when the others couldn't see.

"I am, Sugarsnap. Ready as I'll ever be."

Ozma rounded Glinda and embraced the taller witch, head falling to her shoulder. "Oh… I feel like such a bad ruler, letting you run off! Doesn't it make more sense to send a guard? N-not that their
lives are worth less, but you just… these past months, I've really…"

Glinda had to giggle at how affectionate she was being. Once they had gently wafted away that brusque bravado Tippetarius had blown into the Emerald City with, there was such a sweet, caring, earnest girl underneath. If she and Elphaba ever had children, she wished for a dozen or more, and for them all to be exactly like Ozma.

"I'll be fine," Elphaba reassured her, pushing her back gently to arm's length. Nessa put a hand on her shoulder to help reassure. "It's no use sending a soldier to do a friend's job, and a friend's job is to look after other friends. Even ones who tried to kill her once bef-"

"Oh, enough, Fabala!" Nessa grumped. "Learn to let it go, or we'll all spend the rest of our lives sighing when you bring it up!"

The use of her childhood nickname was what silenced Elphaba, and it was a dirty tactic… that tended to work when coming from Nessarose. Glinda only got smacked for it, so she had ceased to try.

"Alright, Ozma," Glinda said in a voice of forced cheeriness. "Do the belt-thing! The sooner Elphie takes care of business, the sooner we can put all this behind us."

"Now, you remember the signs," Nessa said firmly. "If we look in on you this time tomorrow and see you holding up a hand, palm-out, we'll know you want us to wait. Otherwise, when the hour comes…"

Elphaba nodded. "Yes. You'll wish me back, I know. Alright… whenever you're ready."

As Ozma wrapped her fingers around the magic belt, Nessarose stepped to the Magic Picture and said, "Show me Dorothy."

This scene was no better than the one before. She wasn't reading, but curled up on the bed, no blanket to cover her. There was some small comfort in seeing her pink feet twitching against each other, for it meant she had found a way to prise loose the golden shoes, but that was more or less the only heartening aspect of the scene. The creature in the bed was forlorn and wasted, her gown a little grimy from not having been washed recently enough. Glinda could bear to look at it no longer, but she forced herself to do just that; this was their friend, the one who had helped defeat Morrible and oust Elphaba's father. And this was what had become of her. It was unjust and offensive to her Gillikin sensibilities.

"Alright," Ozma said, widening her stance. "Just now… I think you will see something interesting."

And they did. For this time, Ozma only screwed up her lovely emerald eyes and glared at the painting, as if it had made a jest about her weight. And with no more than that, no uttered word, Elphaba vanished from the real world, and appeared in the one comprised of tinted oils.

The first thought that came to Elphaba was that something felt wrong. If asked to explain what, she would have been unable to come up with it off the top of her head at that moment. However, if asked later, she would know she felt constricted somehow. Heavier, as if her bones were comprised of lead weights. It wasn't a pleasant feeling, but somehow, even though she didn't know why, she knew it was because of Kansas, not something within herself.

After a moment to try getting used to that sensation, she noticed Dorothy had not even stirred. It took a few seconds, during which she had begun to hesitantly walk toward her bed, before Dorothy
even blinked. Another few steps, and her eyes found the visitor.

"Nnnn?"

"Hello," Elphaba whispered. Not that she fully understood why she was whispering; just an innate feeling that she should be that tingled up the base of her spine. "Dorothy… do you remember me?"

Her eyes drooped a little more. "Nnn… don't remember… any negro woman…"

Those words made no sense to Elphaba, but she had other matters that were of pressing importance. By now, she was standing by Dorothy’s bedside, hitching a pained smile into place. Her roommate was always better at that sort of thing. "Glinda and Nessa and I, well, we’ve all been very worried about you."

"Glinda? Nessa?" Her eyes focused a little more, and she rolled her head so that she could look up at her. The sunken eyes and standing-out cheekbones were a lot easier to see from this angle. "Oh… is that you, Miss… Elphaba? Only you don't seem… the same… what are you doing here?"

"Trying to talk to my old friend, if you can believe that. Not that you're much for conversation. What in Oz is the matter with you?"

"Oh… that's the… medicine…" Her eyes flicked to a small metal cup on the floor near the bed; it reminded Elphaba of an overlarge thimble. "It makes me… tired, and not feel like… doing anything…"

The word 'medicine' certainly sharpened her focus. "Are you ill? Come now, what's happened to you since you got whisked back here?"

Her sunken eyes filled with sorrow, making her appear haunted. Perhaps she was. "It's… dreadful… but I don't… they've just given me another…" This time, she couldn't seem to get the word out because it was quite simply too difficult for her to voice. "Ooh…"

"That's alright," she hurried to reassure her, petting up and down her side through the dingy gown. "You don't have to come up with all the gory details. Just answer me this: are you happier here? Did you find what you wanted to find in Kansas?"

That only seemed to make matters worse. Tears swam in Dorothy's eyes, even if she couldn't quite articulate why. However, before Dorothy could find her voice again, the door to the room creaked open noisily, filling the air with the sounds of metal scraping.

"What are you doin' in here, girl?!

Elphaba looked up at her, stomach tightening. It was a woman about twenty or more years her senior, if the wrinkles and bags under her eyes were any indicator. She knew she couldn't trust that people of Kansas aged quite the same as people of Oz. She was somewhat plump, and her messy brown hair was pulled into a taut bun at the base of her skull. Over her plain, pale blue dress was an apron, and in said apron’s pocket bulged several small articles.

"Begging your pardon," Elphaba began hesitantly. This was a difficult situation; she didn't want to alarm the woman. "This girl seemed very upset, and I wanted—"

"Ain't your job to look to the patients' health, girl! That's for the doctors! You're only here to tidy! Now go on — git!" She shooed her hand toward the door, stepping to one side. Elphaba didn't much care for being spoken to as if she were no more than a pet, so she bristled as she stood.
"I haven't any right to ask how she's feeling?"

"You mind your place! Y'know, I told 'em — I told 'em we can't emancipate the coloureds and give 'em jobs, they just ain't trained for any such thing, and here I's right. Can't even think to mind y' own business. I'll have you out on your ear if I catch ya sittin' on a patient's bed again, y'hear? Now the sheets'll hafta be bleached!"

Now, she was far more incensed than she had been before. How dare this woman who spoke so bizarrely treat her, a complete stranger, as if she were some sort of unclean animal? But she didn't have much choice but to take it; if she riled up the locals too much, she wouldn't have a chance to ask Dorothy the question again and try to catch hold of an answer.

But there was something else she could do. Raising one hand, she chanted under her breath a little sleeping spell she knew; it was as likely to simply make the other woman yawn as to drop her to the floor, but it bore testing out.

Nothing happened.

"Whatta you mutterin' there?" Then the woman began to look vaguely panicked, swallowing hard, her double-chin bobbing up and down. "Don't you try that- that voodoo on me! Unchristian nonsense! Get on outta here, girl, g'wan!" She snapped her fingers and gestured swiftly at the door.

So Elphaba had no choice. It was either capitulate, or find herself in the kind of serious trouble that might have consequences for one or both of them. She muttered, "Yes, ma'am" and took her pack, heading for the door. The woman definitely eyed the pack with some suspicion, but didn't stop her; now she was too focused on Dorothy, on getting the unwilling girl to stand so she could strip the bedclothes off to be laundered.

What on Oz had she landed herself in?

Once out in the hall, she saw another woman with dark, smooth skin like that of some of the Vinkan regions, scrubbing the floor with a mop. She only hesitated a moment; it was much too important that she have answers than to worry about upsetting another local. Besides, now she might have a bit more success because she was more mentally prepared to meet one than before. She walked up to her and kept her voice low, for fear of incurring the plump matron's wrath.

"Excuse me, I'm afraid I'm a little lost," she whispered. "I thought this was…" What excuse could she make? "I thought this was the apothecary."

"Apothewhaaa?" the woman asked back, eyes widening and eyebrows shooting up. "Lord, I ain't never heard o' nothin' like that, miss!"

"My mistake. Then… where might I be now? If not there."

The woman stood back and whistled low. "You talk mighty fine. One o' them educated coloureds what the Union likes to brag about. Ain't expected of us, don't have to put on airs 'round me none."

The way this woman spoke confused Elphaba as much as the other woman. Did everyone from Kansas jumble up their words in such a strange fashion? Dorothy had as well, to a lesser degree, but the longer she had spent with Glinda and Elphaba, she had seemed to lose that strange tendency to let her tongue wander. Shaking the thoughts free of her mind, she put her pack down and sighed.

"Nevermind my diction, friend. What's your name?"

"Angeline, miss. An' yours?"
"Elphaba." Another whistle, and a slight chuckle. "Something funny about that?"

"We ain't supposed to carry on with those old names! Not that I heard that one before. Y' mama musta been stubborn, or proud on account of bein' a free negro. But fine, fine, I like the sound of it. 'Elphaba'... mmm-mm. Like a cousin o' mine, named Phoebe."

Feeling distinctly confused by whole concepts within that response, she then repeated, "Where am I, Angeline? I wouldn't want to upset anyone if I'm in the wrong place."

"Why, Topeka Insane Asylum, Miss Elphaba. Ain't you seen the sign above the door when you came in?" Then she looked a little suspicions, shrewdly squinting at her. "Y' did come in the front door… right?"

"I didn't notice any sign," she said truthfully. Simply leaving out the part that she hadn't used any door, either. "My apologies. Did you say… an asylum for the insane?"

"Yes'm. All kind that ain't right in the head here. Some worse than others."

"What about that girl whose room I came from just now? She seemed… tired more than anything."

Her eyes lowered to her mop handle in regret. The kind of vague regret a person holds for a total stranger in a dire situation, but whose life doesn't affect their own. "Shame, that girl… runnin' her mouth all the time about flyin' brooms an' houses, talkin' lions, an' I don't know what else. Been through the talkin' cure, and put her on medicine to keep her all calm-like. An'..."

The specific way Angeline went quiet told Elphaba something worse had happened. It was obvious as anything could be, but she was trying to do a good job of pretending it didn't affect her. She suspected the woman spent a lot of effort pretending the goings on within the asylum were not, in fact, going on.

"Angeline..." Maybe she shouldn't, but she reached out and laid a hand on the woman's shoulder. "I can't stand idly by while an innocent girl is hurt."

"What's it matter t' us? Some white girl sees crazy things. Maybe... maybe it really will help her..."

Those words, she definitely didn't believe, even as they were coming out of her own mouth.

"What will?"

"The shocks." She swallowed hard, her multiple braids bouncing as her head swung back toward the door, then she leaned in to whisper to Elphaba, "'Y ain't heard none o' this from me. But they beat her, miss. Not too bad, not like a man come home from a bash, but I seen the bruises. Talkin' doctor couldn't make her see sense on his own, an' musta tried to beat the crazy outta her. Slapped her once or twice, I reckon. Blacked her eye. Then... they went on with 'lectricity. Been tryin' to use that over in Europe, I hear tell, and this fancy talkin'-doctor said to try it on li'l Miss Dorothy. Ain't right, I think, but... I ain't get paid to speak my mind. Lucky to have work with pay, now, ain't I?"

A long moment of pure horror kept Elphaba from answering. An insane asylum. They didn't have such things in Oz, but they did have the occasional person who was too mentally unstable to be allowed to live amongst the other citizens. Their usual method of treatment was isolation, and to have a doctor check in on them and speak with them at length. Hopefully untangle the knots within their mind. It sounded like they had tried that with Dorothy, as well, and had not been satisfied with the results. The beating was horrendous enough; she wasn't sure she wanted to know what 'shocks' meant precisely. The worst part was...

*It was all their fault. If Angeline was right in her assessment, or in what she had overheard at any*
rate, the reason they locked Dorothy up and tried to "treat" her was because she had mentioned the many things she saw in Oz. Though she had often remarked that they didn't have talking lions, or a good portion of other wonders she marvelled at that Elphaba thought mundane, she'd never given any thought to what the reverse meant. That Kansas was a place without such wonders, and speaking about them would be perceived as madness.

"How… how many times?" she croaked.

"Only once, so far. Ain't heard if they plan for more; she still a little shook up from the first time. Poor girl."

"Listen," she went on in a whisper, eyes pleading. "I've got to have time to speak with Dorothy. At least a few minutes. Is there any way you could help me arrange that?"

The woman's eyes squinted again. "You some reporter? I ain't never seen one of us workin' for the papers. Then again, you pretty light-skinned; some kinda poster child for education." Still, she let that line of questioning go easily enough, gaze sweeping the corridor. "Come back at nine, miss. They ain't check the patients again 'til come up on ten. An hour enough?"

"Bless you," she whispered urgently, squeezing her shoulders and making the woman laugh at her again.

"You're the craziest one here, I reckon. Stickin' a negro nose in where it don't belong. But…" Her eyes softened slightly. "I also reckon you the only one who might care what happens to that poor girl. Lord wouldn't have me ignorin' that, would He?"

"Daresay he wouldn't," she agreed, even though she wasn't sure what Angeline meant. But she'd often heard Dorothy mention "the Lord", so she supposed he must be in some position similar to that of Wizard or King. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me for nothin'. 'Cause I ain't told you nothin'… remember?" She tapped the side of her nose before going back to mopping. Elphaba wasn't sure what the gesture was supposed to mean, but regardless had figured out that the entire discussion, officially, never took place.

Not knowing what else to do with herself until she could speak with Dorothy again, Elphaba found the nearest washrooms and went inside, staring at her face for a few seconds. It took that long for the reality of the situation to fully register.

Her skin wasn't green.

A few of the comments Angeline had issued made more sense now; her skin was a brownish tint, though not so deep as her new acquaintance's. It took her fully five minutes to remember why she was there and what she was doing, so distracted was she by the sight. Oh, how many times she had wished her green away! It was a dream come true!

"I'm beautiful," she breathed as she gazed into the mirror at the chestnut skin, fingers probing her cheek gently, watching the skin dimple and flex. Proving to herself that this was real. Of course, there were still a dozen minor things about her face and her body that she would change if given the chance, and she was vaguely worried about how she had lost her verdant hue… but in that moment, none of those mattered. She was finally degreenified. Free!

Then she shook herself from this vain lapse in judgment to refocus on the task at hand. There would be plenty of time to indulge in that later. She glanced into her pack as she thought furiously about what her next move would be. It occurred to her at some point that she had no idea what time it was,
so she couldn't exactly know when nine should strike… so she had to venture out into the hallways prematurely.

Except the moment she did, she had another grand surprise awaiting her. In light of that, she was starting to think she may have had her fill of surprises for a good while.

"Oh my- HELP!" screamed some young woman in a white outfit, wearing what Elphaba could only think of as an entirely stupid hat that served no aesthetic or functional purpose. "Th' toilets… a coloured girl!"

After a second or two, she noticed more murmuring around her. This wasn't going well. Even though she couldn't understand what had happened, or why some of the gathering staff and patients looked highly affronted, she flashed them a pained, embarrassed smile and pushed through the crowd. Belatedly, she heard a few men shouting the words 'whites only', and that they should follow her-

But she had already taken up refuge in a closet. Elphaba had seen plenty of unruly mobs before, due to her two-year stint as Wicked Witch of the West; she knew what the forming of one was like, the shape it took before evolving to a higher form of ugliness. Much better to spend an uncomfortable stretch of time sitting on a stack of dirty old rags than to have to run for that entire time, instead.

Footsteps sped past, but none of them ever so much as hesitated in front of the closet door.

"What in Oz was that supposed to mean?" she muttered to herself once the commotion had died down. "What are 'whites only'? Was that a laundry room? Imagine, having a laundry room for each different colour of clothing. How pointless! People in Kansas know how to squander their resources."

As she gazed down at her blue dress — apparently the 'wrong' dress — she tried to recall if she had seen what time it was. She hadn't. Then she remembered something else that had been bothering her.

She had no magic. Of course, now she knew what the strange sensation she had been feeling when she first entered the world of Kansas was: her power leaving her. Or perhaps it was being suppressed? Either way, there was something about this country that separated her from the magic that she had so long enjoyed. Even before enjoying it, she had thought it a burden, but it had been a part of her. For the first time in her life, it was a part cut off entirely. Permanently, or temporarily? That terrified her even more.

But either way, she had a job to do or she'd never get out of Kansas. When all was quiet, she slipped back out into the hallway and took a few steps; there was no sign of the mob. A little further along, she spotted another such room that said "COLOREDS", so she nipped into there.

The difference was striking. It was an indoor toilet, as she had thought the first was until all the laundry talk took place. But this one was more rudimentary. A lot of the surfaces were made of old wood, and the floors were dingy and unpolished. And the commodes themselves looked distinctly less comfortable.

"Now I'm glad I don't have to go," she muttered to herself.

"OH!" gasped another woman as she entered, clutching at her heart. "My goodness, you- why…" Then she squinted. "You new here? Ain't seen you around before."

"Elphaba," she said shortly. "Do you have the time?"

"Time for what? Oh-" She smiled when she caught the meaning before needing Elphaba to explain.
"Yes'm, it's... well, it'll be half past eight now."

"Thank you," she sighed, turning to enter one of the toilets. She didn't have to use it, but figured it was easier than engaging in a full conversation with a total stranger. Those had varying levels of success thus far.

As she listened to the other woman washing her hands, perched on the closed lid of the commode with her elbows resting on her knees and chin resting on her clasped fists, she tried to make sense of what she had been seeing. People being angry about laundry, which was done in toilets. Lack of magic. An entire building purely for those who were mentally infirm, and one that seemed to believe they were fragile as glass if the padding on the walls and ceiling were any indication. And for some reason, she had this sense that she wasn't welcome by some people. Whatever the division was, maybe it had something to do with her clothing.

Some time later, she heard another person enter the washroom. It had been roughly the right amount of waiting around. Stepping free, she again asked for the time, and found it to be just a few minutes after nine, so she nodded to herself, took up her pack, stopped to briefly drink from a water fountain, and again forged her way down the darkened halls to Dorothy's room.

It was locked.

"Curse this infernal place," she muttered, jiggling the handle. The door was reinforced with metal of some kind, so she knew she wouldn't be able to break it down. This was going to put a serious crimp in her plans!

Then she heard a tinkling on the floor next to her. A key. Big, ugly, and rusted, but it looked like it might fit the lock. By the time she looked over, Angeline was already pushing her mop further down the hallway, barely even glancing over her shoulder to make sure Elphaba had noticed. And that was all. She had to wonder just how connected this member of janitorial staff really was if she had such an easy time coming up with keys to locked doors... but now was not the time.

Once the key was in the lock, it rasped loudly as it turned, and Elphaba cringed. But at that moment, Angeline was the only one in the hall, so she quickly slipped inside and shut it behind herself. All she could hope was that no one came to investigate.

Dorothy was basically exactly as she had left her, except facing the other way. Even having their attention forcibly drawn to her, the so-called caretakers hadn't thought to change her gown yet. Didn't they bathe the patients? Didn't they care about them at all? This time, Elphaba crossed the room and crouched on the other side so that she could look into her face — and perhaps duck out of sight if anyone came to check on her. It was a vain hope, given that there was practically nothing to hide behind, but if someone were rather careless, they might miss the second person in the room.

"Dorothy."

It only took a moment for her unfocused eyes to flutter open. Then she smiled. "Miss Elphaba. It was you... I didn't dream... the whole thing."

"Can you speak to me?"

"A little better today, I reckon. On account of..." Her hand opened, showing that there was a large white oval in her palm. It looked as if it had been partially dissolved. "Spat it out when the... old hag left... more ornery than a goat."

"You haven't taken your medicine? Won't you get worse if you don't take it?"
Dorothy frowned across at her, swallowing thickly. Her breaths were slow and laboured. "Nothin'... wrong with me, Elphaba. They think... 'cause I wasn't very bright and told them all about Oz... that I'm... that I lost my marbles. Don't know why I... wasn't very bright... almost believed 'em, that I was crazy, but... I know you was no hallucination, or whatever they... say you were."

It was clear to her now that she had been right about the reasoning behind Dorothy's incarceration in this institute of insanity. She only hoped Angeline had been wrong about her treatments. A vain hope, perhaps, but she didn't want to think about something so ghastly befalling her young friend.

"Are you happy here?" she asked bluntly as she took what was left of the pill and stuck it in her bodice to hide the evidence. It was best to ask the question immediately.

"Am I...?" Her face screwed up as if she might cry, though she was too weary to manage the feat. "Oh... I don't believe I am... m-my Aunt and Uncle, they came and got me... once they heard tell I turned up again. Only they didn't think I was in my right mind, they... looked at me like... I wasn't kin to them anymore, sent me away... and nobody here'll believe me, Elphaba..."

"I believe you," she told her earnestly, without any hesitation. Not since she heard of the plight of the Animals had she felt so strongly about something. "I have an important question for you, Dorothy. Please try to focus. I know, after what they did to you..."

She couldn't finish, but Dorothy didn't need her to. "Go on, ask me."

"Do you want to come back to Oz?"

Her eyes leaking, she whispered, "I would. Ain't any point in staying here anymore, is there?"

Elphaba caressed over her hair. It was matted and dirty, and not braided as Dorothy would usually have it fashioned. More than ever, she felt protective of the child in a way she never thought possible after the way they had met.

"Then that's where we'll go." Glancing at the door again, she leaned in to kiss Dorothy's forehead, and she heard the girl sigh, saw her smiling weakly when she sat back. "It won't be until tomorrow. For now, just... keep quiet, remain here and try not to worry so m-"

The door burst open. There was the annoying matron again, looking flustered and carrying a dressing gown. Elphaba did duck down, and at first it seemed to work.

"Dorothy, turn around. I plum forgot 'bout your dress. Change out of that for me an' y'can have a clean one. Hurry up, now."

"Nnnhhh," Dorothy feigned. It was a pretty good feigned groan for a novice actor.

"Nuh-uh, none o' your sass, now. Up we get, li'l missy."

Hiding beneath the bed, but not directly beneath it so that the matron wouldn't catch sight of her underneath, Elphaba watched as her feet swung off the bed and sank into the padded flooring. There was shifting of cloth, and the view of her legs was partly obscured by the dirty gown being draped over the bed. Dorothy made a ghastly noise a second later.

"Ohhh, look at that there. Have ta change your bloomers, too. Bad little mutt."

"I... didn't... can't stop that from happening... the m... medicine..." She feigned her own droning way of speaking when medicated quite well, also.
"Sit, girl. Be right back, doncha put on that gown yet!" Sighing as if put upon, the woman spun and headed straight for the door, slipping out and into the corridor.

"Elphaba!" Dorothy hissed a moment later. When she poked her head up and over the bed, she saw Dorothy's soft back dotted with a few freckles and moles, the hair falling around her shoulders, but she wasn't moving.

"Should I make good my retreat?"

"Surely would be smart," she went on softly. "I... w-well, I bought you some time to get out. She'll be mad as hops if you're still here when she gets back! S-so go now. I'll see you soon?"

Elphaba curled her lip. She hated to think of Dorothy having to do something so repugnant as dirtying her undergarment on purpose to help her flee, but she knew if she was caught, they might attack — and though she was rather strong, she had no spells to ensure her survival. So only stopping to kiss the top of the girl's head, she sprinted for the door.

And bowled over the matron. It seemed she had been quicker about retrieving a clean pair of bloomers for Dorothy than either of them had hoped she would be. The only good thing was that she really did knock her all the way to the ground, so she could rush off in another direction.

"STOP HER!" the woman was screaming behind her as she tried to find an exit. She first spotted the toilets she hadn't been allowed in before, and tossed the key in through there so it wouldn't be missed. Then she pelted around in the direction she hoped would lead to the entrance-

And into the waiting arms of two large men who were only too ready to capture the offender. Of course, running hadn't helped her case any.

"Let me go!" she snapped at them. And they laughed. They laughed as she struggled, and as they hauled her into a room. She clawed and bit, but they were a little too familiar with the procedures for holding down patients to fall for any of that.

And then she felt a cloth being pressed into her mouth. Before she could demand to know why, she was already losing consciousness.

To Be Continued...
Chapter Notes

Trigger warning for gross male behaviour and attempted sexual assault. And continuing racism.

And yes, I know it's a dumb thing to throw in a Back To The Future easter egg when that has nothing to do with the Wizard of Oz. Leave me alone and let me have my fun! I had always intended to have something like this happen in this chapter, but seeing the #MeToo stories after Harvey Weinstein was accused (yes, it was written that long ago) made me feel it was necessary to make sure it was part of the fic, to not just gloss over it. Writing these kind of scenes is always very tricky, especially to make them real and graphic enough to make an impression on the reader without making it seem like I enjoyed writing them. I don't, didn't, and can't. Hopefully this hits the intended note.

"I said, wake up, girl!"

The word "up" had been punctuated by a slap across her face. Elphaba jerked up, eyes fluttering as she tried to shrug off the disorientation.

She was in some sort of office. The trimmings were bare and grubby, and a wooden desk was off to one side of her, laden down with papers and assorted odds and ends. Much more of interest to her were the two men, wearing some sort of domed helmets with emblems on the front of them, and blue button-up shirts with stars over the left breast. One had a handlebar moustache, curling up at the ends; the other a full beard.

"She's comin' 'round," one of them muttered. Her eyes were still a bit blurry to focus fully on which had spoken.

"Wha… where am I? Munchkinland?" The blue was her only hint so far.

"Police station," the bearded one said shortly.

"You're in a heap o' trouble, missy," the other one chuckled. "What 'n the Sam Hill d'you think you was gonna do with that poor li'l girl? Or don't I wanna know the answer?"

Now her brain was beginning to demystify, and she sat up a little straighter. "Me? What are you doing with her? Drugged up so badly she can barely move, she can't control her bladder! It's disgraceful!"

A hand reached up to fist in her hair, drawing her head back. Elphaba felt her heart drop, pain flare along her roots, but she kept her eyes narrowed and stabbing up into his all the while. "What you say to me, negro? I oughtta-"

"Jeb," the other man sighed warningly. A half-second later, Jeb sat back and released her, and he rolled his eyes toward the ceiling before he said flatly, "Y'know you ain't supposed to be in there. Staff only, and that don't mean cleanin' girls."

"It seems to me that you should be asking why a perfectly normal girl has been shocked, and beaten,
and given medicine that she doesn't need," Elphaba snapped immediately. She saw Jeb straining to react, but he seemed to remember the other man's warning and restrained himself.

"Ain't your business, y'hear? An' what were you tryin' to do with all that in the pack?"

When Elphaba didn't respond right away, not sure she should, Jeb stood and retrieved said pack. Inside were her spare dresses and the fruit. "Ain't never seen no dress like these before. You straight from one o' them boats, come to America?"

"Excuse me?" Not that she knew what an America was.

"Maybe she ain't coloured in the same way," the bearded man mused, stroking it as he thought. "Could be an Injun girl. Skin ain't dark enough."

"Is that what this is about? My skin tone?" That was the most absurd thing she had ever heard. She'd finally gotten rid of that absurd green hue, and it still wasn't good enough for these uniformed hooligans! And her current colouring was perfectly normal! Some people just wanted to find something to fight about, no matter how preposterous.

"Hush up," Jeb snapped. Then he leaned a little further forward. "Seems to us you was about to kidnap that poor filly. Don't know what a coloured girl wants with a white girl, 'cept to sell 'er off."

She moved to fold her arms over her chest, and only then did she feel metal enclosing her wrists and keeping them behind her back. The metal was warm by now, which might have been why she didn't notice right away. "You- those are my things. Didn't have a thing to do with Dorothy; I only wanted to stop in and see how she was doing, and good thing I did!"

"You really don't know what you done wrong? I ain't never heard a coloured girl try and weasel her way outta trouble so bad as this. Know what I think?"

"Jeb…"

"Think you're one o' them queer women. Like the widows over yonder in Boston." He stood and began to walk in a slow circle to stand behind her. "Kidnappin' a poor li'l farm girl… or maybe you's thinkin' you'd ransom her back to her folks, if she had any. Or white slavery, like I said afore."

"Enough." Sighing again, the bearded man turned back to Elphaba, all business. "Don't matter why you done it. Trouble is, even if you ain't been caught doin' more than just bein' in the wrong place, we can't turn y' loose into the street; gotta make an example of you."

The man with the mustache smiled at his companion. "Put her in the pen for the night? Ought to make her think twice."

"Reckon that'll do it," he sighed, looking distinctly queasy about the prospect. Not that Elphaba understood much of this; she understood she had trespassed, due to needing a key that didn't belong to her in order to enter Dorothy's room, but given that the girl was being kept against her will and mistreated, she couldn't summon any remorse for her own actions.

"Fine," she snapped in irritation. "Put me in this 'pen' of yours." After all, she wouldn't be in there for more than half of a day at the most before a magic belt would rescue her. The simplest solution was to stop fighting against these matters and wait for them to resolve themselves with her complete and utter disappearance.

They seemed to readily accept her suggestion. In short order, she was dragged out of the chair and thrown into a small cell bordered by iron bars, taking the cuffs off just before shutting the door — or
gate, as might be a more accurate description when it was made entirely of bars. A handful of other prisoners were in there already, but most of them were seated against the wall or curled up against the bars. One bench was in the cell, and it was already taken up by a lump of someone trying to sleep.

"A night in there oughtta make you more cooperative," Jeb sneered.

"As if I haven't been entirely cooperative up until now!" she shouted at their retreating backs, completely affronted. "You're the ones who've been treating me without any shred of courtesy!"

Realising they weren't going to bother with her any further for the rest of the night, she watched as the bearded man chatted with Jeb for a moment before leaving the room, then Jeb settled himself in a chair. Bored, she turned back to the rest of the cell.

Immediately, she noticed several sets of eyes focused upon her. Some felt like leers, some were openly hostile. But some of them were merely curious. Elphaba looked around for somewhere to sit away from the door. There was no empty space. So she stepped to one side of the gate and leaned back against the wall, trying to make herself comfortable.

It was some time, perhaps the greater portion of an hour, before one of the men staggered over to the latrine. Elphaba averted her eyes.

"Whassa matter, girl?" One of the other prisoners was addressing her, not the one relieving himself. "Never seen one o' those before?"

"I haven't," she told him firmly through her teeth. "And I've survived this long without it, so no thank you."

"Whoo-ee! You sure do talk purty."

Elphaba decided against acknowledging the dubious compliment. Instead, she pretended to be vaguely interested in a spot on the ceiling. After a moment or two, another man joined in: "Yeah, one of them educated coloureds. Bet we can find more better uses for that mouth."

While a couple of them chuckled, one in the corner with extremely shaggy hair, beard and eyebrows groaned, "Lyle, will you shove it? Some of us is tryin' to sleep."

"And I'm tryin' to have a little fun here. We got us a woman in here with us, can't go nowhere, an' all you wanna talk about is sleepin'? You ain't a real man."

"And you ain't no gentleman or you wouldn't talk like 'at." There was some booing, so the man fell silent, but he had made his point known.

Things grew silent for a while. Elphaba was beginning to think maybe the novelty of her arrival had worn off, and she would be able to pass the time in relative silence. It was a bit premature.

"Listen," said "Lyle" as he approached her an hour or so later, voice quieter. He smelled strongly of some powerful kind of drink, and looked as if he normally shaved but hadn't bothered in several days. The hair atop his head was thinning and he was missing a tooth, and even without these factors, he wasn't a terribly appealing specimen. "You and I both know you ain't a lady, so it ain't any kind o' discourtesy for me not to be no gentleman."

"We do, do we?" she muttered shortly.

"Yeah." His hand came to rest on her waist, and she had to resist the urge to immediately fling it off.
But she was biding her time. "C'mon, now… let's have some fun, girl. Stuck in this hog pen… we can have ourselves a waller."

Her smile was ingratiating. She had seen Glinda do it enough times to manage a similar effect, even if not quite. But the man was drunk enough that he couldn't catch the biting sarcasm. "Enlighten me. What is a 'waller' and why should we have it?"

"You know."

"I don't. But perhaps if you explain it, we could find out my opinion on the matter."

One of the men whistled and then laughed, and Lyle shot him a glare. But he didn't bother to divert his attention from his current goal any further. Turning back with a grin, he leaned in close to her ear to whisper, "I'll make a woman outta you. Right here up against these bars. Open you up and see if you's brown on the inside, too."

"Mmm," she cooed. "Well, I definitely know exactly what the chances of that are."

"Oh, you do, do you?"

"Yes."

There was something about Elphaba and her habits during their days on the run from the Wizard's forces and Morrible's wrath that almost seemed unimportant. Even though she did learn a few spells that would help she and Glinda clean and keep house, mostly, they had learned to do it by hand. Two years of housekeeping, scrubbing, shifting boulders or furniture, woodworking to make new furniture. It got even worse during the weeks at Kiamo Ko Keep; there was a lot of work to be done, and they all pitched in to make the space liveable. Once they had made the Royal Palace their home, Elphaba had fully intended to put those days of hard physical labour behind her completely… but she had only spent a few nights lying awake, feeling too restless to sleep, before she figured out why. After that, she had resumed a regular amount of work; when the Palace staff rebelled, telling her that it was their job to take care of such things and not the job of a Councilwoman, she began doing some of the same actions without any obvious gain other than maintaining that use of energy to which her body had become accustomed. And a bit of woodworking as a hobby; Glinda and she had done it together, and occasionally, Nessa joined them.

All of which might appear to some as irrelevant… until Elphaba grasped the man's wrist and forced it away with relative ease, despite his superior size.

"O-ow, hey, what're-

"The chances are less than zero," she told him in a firm tone, her smile turning cold and sinister. Something else she had a lot of practice with now. "I am not a 'girl', and I am not interested in a 'waller' with you. And regardless of what hue I am on the inside, you will never discover that. Do we have an understanding?"

"Listen, you bi- AH!" The twisting of the wrist in the direction that it certainly didn't go cut off his protestation, and his face contorted in sheer pain. "Giddoff, giddoff!"

"Do we… have… an understanding?"

"Yes'm! Leggo, please!"

Finally, she did, and he cradled his arm as he slunk back to his corner of the cell. Now she could tell most of the eyes were on her, regarding her with suspicion, wariness. Anger as if she had
disappointed them by not being at all what they had been expecting. Only one man looked faintly amused and pleased, and that was the one who had told Lyle to calm down earlier.

It was going to be a much longer night than she first predicted.

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It was the wee hours of the morning when Lyle struck again. Elphaba had been dozing off and on, as had most everyone in the cell. The man who had been sleeping on the single bench was released by Jeb at some point, and another man along the wall took his place when no one else claimed it fast enough. She felt somewhat offended that no one had thought to offer it to the single lady present, but then again, these men of Kansas seemed to have no idea about proper manners. It was the kind of thing that would have had Glinda screaming at them to behave.

The thought of Glinda had made her smile as she curled up against the wall, where the man now in the cot had been. Feeling the slight warmth of the floor in the spot and finding it comforting in a moment when she had little comfort. That, and the thought of her beloved.

That's what she was, after all. They were right to plan for a marriage. She had only been resistant to the notion because such pomp did not suit her preferences, which were to keep to herself and her circle of friends. Being in charge of the fate of Oz, even partially, had not been something she sought on its own merits — only to ensure that their world was not made any worse. Now that Ozma could be in charge, taking the larger share of the spotlight and being the people's favourite, she was much happier.

But Glinda wanted to do things properly, and she wouldn't deny her that. Besides… even if she didn't feel the same need to show her off in front of Lurline and everyone, she was proud of her roommate. Proud and highly fond. Two lovers often married if they intended to remain lovers, and if that was expected of her, she would gladly do it. For Glinda's sake.

She couldn't know how much time had slipped past while she slept when she felt a hand somewhere it certainly didn't belong. Her eyes flashed open to see Lyle's smirking face as he continued to pet up and down the back of her thigh.

"No."

"Now, now, I gave you time to think on it," he whispered, not stopping in the slightest. "Hopin' you'd see sense on yer own. But you ain't."

"No, Lyle."

His smile vanished, replaced by a colder look. "Ain't no negro woman gonna tell me 'no'. We can either have a good time, or you can have a bad one, an' I'll have a good'n anyhow. Really want it that way?"

All the while he spoke, her stomach had been churning to feel him doing something that was not his right to do. If she had her magic, he would have been incinerated for daring to ignore her wishes. As it was… "You're not going to have any kind of time. Get… your hand… off."

"Suit yerself." And he began to pull her dress up.

This time, when she grasped his arm, he was ready, and his other hand came up to stop hers. The arm beneath her body was trapped, so she couldn't use two on him, and was busy struggling with the one as his hand was free to keep pulling until she was partially exposed. Her face flushed with embarrassment and anger, and she wanted nothing more than to kill him where he stood. Why did
she feel trapped? He was nothing to her, and his strength negligible. Somehow, the fact that he was
attacking her in such a disgusting way made her feel a certain shame that she couldn't quite articulate.
As if speaking out against him, or forcing him away, would be admitting that this was happening in
the first place. And she didn't want that.

"Don't fuss now," he kept on as he pet her bare thigh. Bile tried to make its way up her throat, and
her eyes stung. "A little fun an' you can go back to sleep." When she tried to sit up, he shoved her
back down. "I said... don't fuss."

But she was definitely going to fuss. It seemed that he had thought that little show of force was going
to be enough to quiet her protests. It wasn't; instead, it was just enough to prompt the stubborn witch
into action.

"GUARD!" she shouted in a voice that might even have carried outside the building. "Handle your
prisoners!"

The hand on her arm moved up to clamp over her mouth. That might have cut off another shout, but
it also was the wrong move. She was able to pop up to a sitting position with her other arm propped
up against the ground. Even better: due to the way he was crouched over her, it was a simple matter
for her other arm to flash upward and injure the part of his anatomy driving him to perpetrate such
acts of perversion.

The howling of pain was what brought Jeb to the door of the cell. By the time he arrived, a few of
the other prisoners were awake and staring at Lyle as he curled in on himself, rolling around and
clutching between his own legs. Elphaba was fully sat up with her back straight, eyes narrowed
down at him.

"Wasn't that fun?" she flung at him in a growl.

"Alright, alright!" the guard snapped at all the men who were either wincing or chortling at Lyle's
misfortune. "You already causin' trouble, girl?"

"She got me good! Oh... oh, I ain't never gonna have no kids!"

"Like you was gonna have kids, anyway, Lyle." His eyes swept back to Elphaba and he glared right
back at her. "Don't make me come in there after ya."

Grin dark and vicious, she snapped, "I don't care what you do, pissant. Clearly, you are tasked with
keeping order in this place, and clearly, you are not up to that task."

There was a whistling and a laughter of a different kind coming from the rest of her fellow inmates
now. Jeb didn't appreciate it, as the way his cheeks flushed and his eyes narrowed seemed to suggest.
Curling and uncurling his fists, he reached for the keyring and snapped at her, "Get up, girl."

"What if I don't?"

"I'm gonna put you in a different cell. Don't get up, and it'll be just you and Lyle."

"Fate worse 'n death," said the man who had also jeered at her along with Lyle. A few chuckles
accompanied her as she pushed her dress back into place, then slowly stood and approached the bars.

"Hands behind your back, and turn around." She obeyed. Once the door was open, he immediately
put the manacles he'd used before around her wrists. They were of an unusual design, and tightened
just enough for her wrists; even while she was still furious about what had happened, annoyed that
no one seemed to care, she was curious about how such a device was made.
"Can we come, too?" asked one of the men in the corner. He was ignored, though a couple of the others laughed. They seemed to do that a lot.

Jeb took her around the corner to another cell. This one was much smaller, filthier, and had only a wooden plank in the corner to serve as a cot. He unlocked the door and shoved her inside, and she staggered to lean against a wall before she could regain her balance. Then she whirled to glare at him.

"You know, the way a man treats his equals is not a measure of his character. It's how he treats those in an inferior position. Think about that every time you remember how you shoved a woman in handcuffs around."

Jeb glared at her for a long moment. Then he drew his hand back and brought it hard across the side of her face. She felt her body collide with the wall, the room spun, but she did not fall. She fought off the dizziness and forced herself to stand again, to glare at him as a copper flavour began to blossom along her taste buds.

"Had just about enough o' your mouth, whore. Come in here, makin' me look bad in front o' Hoss, in front o' the other prisoners. An' you jus' a coloured girl, ain't nobody important, actin' like you is. That's enough outta you, y'hear?"

Elphaba glared daggers at him for a long moment. Then she worked her mouth until she had a good, thick gob and spat it into his face. The splotch of red blood mingled with the saliva made quite a pattern outward from his cheek, and he flinched in shock.

"What colour is that on your face? My blood. That you don't deserve to touch, but you caused it to be there. What a disgusting excuse for a person you are."

He reached up to backhand her again, but this time she ducked the blow and he connected with the wall instead. Taking her opportunity, she lashed out with her leg and shoved at his stomach so that he staggered back out of the cell. Desperately, she wanted to break free, to run, but he was already struggling to his feet, he would definitely catch her with minimal effort. She didn't even know if she could turn the knob to the entrance of the building with her arms pinned in such a way.

So she kicked the door to the cell shut. It latched with a loud CLANG.

"Damn you!" he snarled, rattling the bars. He went for his keys, but she spat at him again, and this time he pulled back out of the way. "SICK! I don't want none o' your... your darkie diseases!"

"Then you'd better not come in here again, or I'll spit on you until you're covered in them!"

They regarded each other for a long moment. He seemed to realise that she meant business, and that nothing he could do would change the situation. Then he grumbled, "Lyle's plum crazy. Wants anything to do with some girl like you... plum crazy."

Then he was gone. For the first time since that moment in the closet, she felt well and truly alone, and found it to be a relief. Even if she would have wished for Glinda to be there, to put her arms around her and tell her everything would be alright... if she couldn't have that, she would take solitude with a glad heart.

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Uncomfortable though it was to lay down with her hands still bound in the small of her back, Elphaba did manage to get a little more sleep once her racing pulse left her alone. It took a long time. Thoughts continued to crash through her mind. When she wasn't dwelling on Lyle or Jeb's misdeeds,
differing in variety of transgression as they were, she was worrying about Dorothy's wellbeing. Missing Glinda. Everything had turned into such a mess in a small fraction of a day. How could the Kansas girl ever have wanted to come back to this awful place?

She was awoken by a banging on the bars. "Get up," said another voice she didn't recognise. Blinking stupidly, she tried and was unable. "Hurry now."

"I can't," she croaked, throat dry. Only then did she realise she hadn't eaten since before she first arrived. Or had more than a brief drink of water.

There was a put-upon sigh. By the time the man had entered, she realised this was another uniformed person, but not either of them from the evening before. His mustache was of a more traditional sort, bushy and covering his upper lip, unlike Jeb's which had been waxed to curl at the points. He reached down behind her, and she tensed all over-

And hated herself for doing it. After one single incident, one she thought was stupid and ridiculous, she had expected that he would do what the prisoner had done. Her stomach tightened, her pulse ticked up in speed, and her breath stopped entirely until she heard the key sliding into the lock of the restraint. Only then could she breathe again.

He noticed. As he was drawing the metal cuffs away, he squinted at her reaction, but then continued to stand. "Up ya get, girl. C'mon."

Elphaba managed to stand. He neither helped her nor further tried to chivvy her along as she worked to regain her footing. Once she was standing, swaying slightly, he turned and exited the cell, then waited for her to do the same.

As he led her past the bars of the other cell, Lyle saw her and scrambled to his feet to throw himself up against the bars. His eyes were full of unbridled fury, and his knuckles turned white where they clutched at the bars. Spittle ran down from the corner of his mouth as he watched her go.

"You'll git yours, slut! Just you wait an' see!"

"Here, now!" the officer barked, and drew out a smallish wooden club from his belt and slapped it against the bars. Lyle leapt backward in alarm; it had just barely missed his fingers. "Settle down in there."

"You'd better do as the man says," the shaggy one who had admonished Lyle before said, merriment in his eyes. "She ain't nothin' to ya, and you ain't nothin' in the first place."

While everyone else was guffawing and chiding him for his outburst, Lyle's face burned with mingling rage and embarrassment. Good, Elphaba thought. Now he knows the tiniest fraction of how he made me feel.

The officer was leading her to a tiny office, one with a door, unlike the desk she had been at when she first awakened in this gaol. The door shut behind them. On the desk were two simple metal platters, piled with a sticky-looking greyish substance. A little clearish-yellow puddle was in the dead center.

"Et up," he told her as he sat down on the other side, taking up his spoon.

Elphaba sat. After a moment of watching him stir the muck around and begin eating it, she did the same — and it hardly tasted like anything. She pulled a face. Still, it was food, and she was starving. Once the muck was stirred a little more, the flavour seemed to gain a hint of saltiness that hadn't been present before, which made it more palatable. Enough to stomach the rest of it.
About halfway through, she paused and wiped at her mouth, swallowed. Then she asked, "What are you feeding me for?"

"Hm? Ain't you eat?"

"Well… I do, yes."

"Then eat."

Left with no other choice, she finished her plate. Then she sat back and sighed pleasantly.

"Good." He took the time to dab at his mouth, then looked up at her. "You aim to tell us what you were doin' slinkin' around the loony bin?"

"Loony…? Ah." Caught off her guard, Elphaba fumbled, "I, um… well, I was visiting a friend."

"That girl, Dorothy? Ain't got any friends, way I heard tell. Her Ma and Pa dropped her like a sack of ol' potatoes."

"Uncle and Aunt."

"Eh?" He glanced down at a notepad that was open in front of him. Until that moment, Elphaba had paid it no mind in the slightest. "So they were. Orphan girl, I hear."

"That's right. Her Aunt Em and Uncle Henry took her in after she lost her parents." As often as she heard Dorothy mutter those two names, she practically had them tattooed on the inside of her skull.

"Mmm. Poor thing. But I can't figure how a coloured girl'd know Miss Gale, or why she'd sneak in to see her. I mean, what with negroes bein' free an' all nowadays, cain't be their kept girl."

Again, the stipulation that she was "free". As opposed to what? Costly? But Elphaba was trying her best not to let it become readily apparent that she was not native to the Land of Kansas. So she merely shrugged her shoulders and muttered, "She's a friend, as I stated before. And I was worried about her welfare — and rightly so! Do you know they've got her locked in a room with practically nothing? Dosed until she can barely move, shocked with… with I don't know what!"

By now, the bristle-mustached officer was a little surprised at all of her unnecessary explanation. She could have kicked herself, but it was too late for that. So she merely waited for him to finish nodding down at his plate, and then to speak again.

"Yep. So you says. Reckon you wouldn't have much use for her otherwise, and you ain't have anything like a gun on ya to scare off anybody tryin' to stop ya. Mighty stupid… and I don't peg you for a dummy."

Elphaba only understood every third word the man said, but it sounded like he was agreeing with her, so she didn't try his patience. "Sorry for the trouble I've caused."

"Mm. Jeb was jammerin' on this mornin' that you spit on 'im, kicked him outta the cell. That true?"

"I… I'm afraid it is." Her entire body braced for the impact of his retribution. Instead, he only chuckled, eyes crinkling in a way that his mouth couldn't show from behind that mustache. "Sir?"

"Funny as heck to me, miss. Coloured girl with her hands cuffed licks one o' my men? He oughtta be tarred and feathered, and thrown out into th' streets. Not fit to be an officer of the law."

"Begging your pardon, but I'm glad he wasn't very fit, or I might not be alive."
He nodded, his laughter finally petering out as he scrutinised her face. Then his nods finished up with a stronger one. "Maybe so. Too much fire in that boy's belly. Glad you gave 'im a little humility; good for 'im."

"If you say so."

"Tell you what. Y'ain't seem t' me like much of a risk, or a dangerous type. Another night in the cell, I'll turn ya loose. But you better see Little Miss Dorothy through proper procedure next time, y'hear?"

"Well, I suppose I ought to find her aunt and uncle first. Do you know where they are now?" An idea occurred to her. "Ever since the storm, I'm afraid I'm not sure where they're living."

"Not sure? Ain't you their mammy?"

Elphaba had no idea what he meant by this, though it sounded like he was implying she was Dorothy's grandmother. Deciding that probably wasn't it, she said, "Just a family friend" and left it at that.

"Fair 'nough." He thought for a moment, tapping his chin with the end of his pencil. Then he said, "Tell you what. On account of you rilin' up the men in the drunk tank, how's about I take you down t' see Hank an' Em? Maybe we can straighten this whole thang out."

"Oh, they wouldn't remember me," she said with a laugh. "Dorothy does, but…" Still, she might be able to work this to her advantage. "But I would like to speak with them all the same. The doctors really weren't forthcoming at the asylum, because they couldn't seem to believe I was Dorothy's guest."

"Ain't many coloured women want anythin' to do with that place."

"Maybe not, but I don't appreciate being called a kidnapper."

"Might be one. I ain't seen any proof different." Still, he was already standing, reaching beneath his shirt to hitch up his pants. "Let's git to goin'."

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Apparently, this "goin'" was to be accomplished in a horse-drawn cart of some sort. Elphaba's escort took them outside the city proper and its drab, lackluster buildings, into the surrounding cornfields and featureless pastures with somewhat odd beasts grazing in them. The way was quite bumpy, and she felt obliged to hold on for dear life as they bumped over the road toward their destination. The police captain, whose name turned out to be Will, said very little along the way, but he did ask a question or two that Elphaba did her best to answer. Some of them, such as "Where at in Africa your kin from?" meant literally nothing to her, so she had to throw out such winning responses as "Don't remember".

Eventually, after what felt like a year of unpleasant riding, they reached a small farmstead. The house was much larger and more noteworthy than the tiny shack that had landed near Nest Hardings; there was a tiny amount of pale yellow paint adorning the eaves and the shutters. Elphaba found herself wondering if they had entered the Vinkus before she caught herself.

A brief knock brought a young woman to the door. She looked to be about Dorothy's age, perhaps a bit younger, and her russet hair reminded her strongly of Ozma's. Bare feet stuck out the bottom of a dingy dress of muted colours that swished around her ankles, still moving quite a bit from her most likely having run from several rooms away to see whom had knocked. After smiling at them, she
seemed to be startled enough by the mismatched pair that her smile vanished, and she ducked her head shyly.

"Evenin', missy," the man said, doffing his hat. Underneath, he was very nearly bald, and what hair was left was grey and wiry. "Might I inquire after Hank and Em Gale?"

It took her a moment of staring openly at Elphaba before he found her voice. "M-mama?" she asked distantly. But a moment later, she seemed to come back to herself and called more loudly, "MAMA! Policeman at the door!"

Not long afterward, another woman, her own hair a darker blonde and wispy, came to the door to greet the strangers. She was more primly dressed, more polite, and had a better handle on her own manners, curtsying in front of the officer and then showing them into the parlour. Her daughter was shooed upstairs to hide away, since she was clearly uncomfortable around strangers.

"Sorry about my Frances," she told them in a pleasant-yet-flustered tone, shooing him into a chair. "Afraid we don't get many visitors out these parts. Can I fetch you a drink, sir? Cider, or anything stronger? I could put the kettle on…"

"No, no, ain't stayin' that long, miss," he assured her with a crinkle at the corner of his eyes. Elphaba resisted the temptation to comment on their host not offering her a beverage; she was beginning to accept her hypothesis that her skin tone meant she was of lower social standing, ludicrous as that was.

"Begging your pardon," she said, startling the woman and causing her to blink rapidly, "but might there be a Henry and Em Gale here?"

The woman didn't answer right away, but looked to her escort. When he nodded, she still directed her answer toward him. "Indeed there is. Sad story, it is; poor old things."

"Nasty twister, that one was," he sighed with a slow nod, staring off toward the parlour window. "Bunch o' folks lost good homes. Land."

"That's why we took them in, y'know. Em's so good with livestock, and my Frances, and Hank can work all day like I never seen; good and decent, Christian folk. Shame about their niece."

That most certainly caught Elphaba's attention. Sinking down onto the settee next to the "policeman", as the girl had named him, she asked, "What about their niece? I went to pay her a visit, and everyone behaved as if I was trying to kill someone."

But this woman, mother of Frances, was highly distracted. The way she was looking at Elphaba was the look of someone who had seen something highly unpleasant. She hadn't looked at her that way before. When no answer came right away, she glanced over at Will, hoping for some sort of revelation. He, too, seemed vaguely surprised, but not nearly as shocked or affronted as the hostess.

"I… well, alright. It's alright." Turning back to the hostess, Elphaba caught her sighing and passing a hand over her forehead before continuing, "We're part of the Union, after all. Just haven't ever had any…"

"Dorothy, ma'am?" the officer prompted.

"Right. She's off her rocker, I'm sad to say. Can't be all that shocked, as a good many people saw her go up in that house. Darned if I know how she survived! But that kind of thing can't be good for your mind, y'know. So… well, when she came back down, they found her and took her name, and brought her back to Em and Hank. Only she wouldn't quit jawin' on about nonsense, flyin' monkeys
and I don't know what all! Well, that ain't the sort of thing I want fillin' my Frances' head, so... well, Em and Hank took care of it on their own, o’ course. My Seamus never had to say a word, they already knew what was best."

That completed the picture that Elphaba had already more or less filled in along the way, save for a few details. So she had come back, been reunited with her family, only to have them dismiss her tale as the ramblings of a madwoman and have her sentenced to eternal isolation. It was abominable. Worse — it was unfamilial.

"And you and Seamus let them take care of the matter," she supplied in a numb tone. Again, she saw how uncomfortable the woman looked whenever she spoke, but she paid that no mind. "Could I ask them a few questions? The poor girl was so distraught when I tried to see her, I thought if I might learn a little more, I could talk some sense into her the next time I try."

"And... no offense intended, miss, but what good's a coloured woman from the big city goin' to do Dorothy?"

"Big city?"

"Sure. I mean... obviously, you come from New York or somewheres, talkin' like you do. Educated negroes don't much live 'round here."

Her jaw tightened in annoyance at all the sidetracking, but she tried to remember that shouting at her — or slapping that strangely condescending-yet-afraid look off her face — wouldn't make any strong progress toward her goals. So she forced the grimace into something like a smile.

"Listen, miss... what was it again?"

"Maggie."

"Maggie, yes. I'm an acquaintance of Dorothy's; we had a good many conversations, and she's a charming young woman. At least, she was before all this happened." She just barely kept from mentioning that the 'all this' to which she referred was what the doctors had done to her. "I'd like to see if we might restore her to who she once was."

Maggie scoffed a little. "And how on earth can you do that? Voodoo?"

"Might be. I do have a trick or two up my sleeve." When the hostess gulped, actually frightened now that she hadn't denied it, she turned back to Will. "Hope you don't mind? If we could get everything straightened out today..."

"Course not," he sighed. He did look weary, but also as if grateful for the shortest route to settling the matter. "Ma'am, if you could point us in the right direction? Cain't take but a few minutes."

Curtseyng slightly to show her deference to him as an authority figure, she shot Elphaba another wary glance as she whispered, "Right this way." But her eyes remained on the woman as she led them away from the parlour. Elphaba repaid that courtesy in kind.

Emily and Henry Gale were out in the barn. Both of them were hard at work, though not at any sort of frantic pace; happy to be of use. Elphaba spared a thought for how much their lives must have changed in the past months, since losing their home and everything they had ever held dear. Including Dorothy. Still, she wouldn't forget what she had seen — what they had done to their niece.

Henry was a man with about as much hair as Will, skin spotted with age and from working in the sun all his life. He swiped his forearm across his forehead as he got up from where he was helping
another man, hair as bright red and blazing as the sun itself, fixing some sort of wheeled contraption meant to help them move produce from one place to another.

"Maggie!" Seamus called out, shadowing his eyes. "Who's this yer bringin', then?"

Unlike him, she didn't shout back, but waited until they were closer to call, "Officer William, from in Topeka! Says he has questions for Hank and Em!"

"Me?" asked Henry. He had been about to make himself scarce, believing this to be none of his business, but now turned back again, stunned. "Whatever about?"

In short order, they had all gathered around a horse trough while Seamus and Will shook hands, and Maggie went inside to fetch Em. Again, Elphaba felt soundly ignored, but she decided that soon enough she would be back in Oz and could forget all about the unprecedented rudeness she had found in Dorothy's homeland.

From everyone except Angeline, and to a lesser extent, Will. That would bear some remembering, even if everyone else had made the worst impression imaginable.

"Alright," Will said once they had all been introduced. Toto had come out of the barn, and Elphaba felt a slight flare of surprise to see him there; she had almost expected they would sell the dog off once Dorothy was no longer there to take care of him. "We had a couple o' questions about your Miss Dorothy, is all. Well… Miss Elphaba?"

The elderly couple looked a little surprised that the query would be coming from someone they had been ignoring since they got to the barn. Elphaba decided to sidestep that frustration and begin with, "I don't believe you'll remember me, but I'm an old acquaintance of Dorothy's. In passing, I heard that she had been put in that awful asylum and I tried to visit her. Can't begin to even explain how unacceptable the treatment I received there was, and what I've seen-"

"Sorry, but I don't know of any negro women our Dorothy was acquainted with," Em said in an astonished voice. "Fact, other than a few farmhands… I don't reckon she knew any negroes."

"You know, you all spend a lot of time using that word," Elphaba observed with a little more bite than she intended. "As if it automatically settles a lot of things that it most certainly does not! How about we forget 'negro' for a moment, whatever that's supposed to connote, and focus on the heart of the matter: that Dorothy is being gravely abused in that institution of yours!"

"Abused?" Henry blustered immediately, hands curling into fists as Toto barked to hear his stern tone. "What've they done to 'er?"

"Only fed her medicine that caused her to drool like a toothless old kalidah! Shocked her with…" It took her a moment to come up with the word. "'Lectricity, and even beaten her when she was uncooperative! It's bad enough to have shut her up in a room where she can be forgotten conveniently, but in my opinion, physical injury is a step too far! This would never happen in Oz, you know!"

Everyone fell silent at these accusations. However, it wasn't the sort of silence Elphaba had been vainly hoping she might enjoy. They were not outraged, they were not angered. Only saddened and uncomfortable.

"Well… yes, I s'pose that could be," Em said.

"Oswego?" Seamus mused quietly, having misheard Elphaba. "Never been that far south, can't say I've heard they have an asylum there."
"Didn't you say she was demented?" Will prompted, hoping to keep their discussion focused. "Saw nonsense things, talked 'bout 'em?"

"She was," Henry admitted, as distraught as the others. "We tried t' reason with her a bit more, get her to admit she dreamed up the whole mess, but when she got Frances all aflutter and scared, seemed only right we give her over to th' doctors. I ain't any expert on brains."

Elphaba wanted to scream. At them, and in general. This was really all the regret they could summon? But she forced herself to fire at them through her clenched teeth, "She's your family. Why aren't you more upset that she's being hurt on a daily basis?"

"Ain't that simple," Em said, though she was squirming. "The doctors know best; we're simple folk, mind. Can't know what to do with a child who's got a head all twisted up like that."

Finally addressing Elphaba himself, Seamus seemed to come to a realisation — even if he was the only one, and even if he only grasped a piece of the problem. "Look, lass. None of us wanted to have her sent away, did we? But she was ill of the mind, she was. Not a place for her here if she was ill. Had to take her somewhere she might get looked after better than by us, bein' uneducated farmers."

That much made sense. Even if they were quite wrong about the Topeka Insane Asylum being somewhere "better". Her rage had nowhere to go, so she spun on her heels and faced away from them, eyes threatening to stream tears as she stared out over the fields at the setting sun. The countryside was somehow beautiful when lit up in such a manner, even if it couldn't hold a candle to Oz and its splendour. A simple kind of elegance.

"Well, I reckon that's it," Will observed once a short silence had passed. A fresh sob burst from Em, but she still didn't turn to acknowledge it. "Thanky kindly for your time, sir, ma'ams."

"No trouble," Maggie said quickly, ever the hostess.

"Wait," Elphaba said, mastering her emotions and turning back to regard them coldly. It was the best she could do; Glinda might have been able to summon a smile after all that, but she wasn't Glinda. "I would appreciate some kind of... I don't know, decree, that I may visit her. The persons in charge there were highly opposed, and had me imprisoned for attempting to force my way in."

"An' somehow, she ain't the crazy one," Will muttered. But he wasn't trying to stop her.

In short order, Henry and Em signed a brief note stating Elphaba Thropp would be entitled to visit Dorothy — after they had finished with goggling at her unusual name — and the officer signed it as well, bearing witness to the event. Then they walked the guests to the front door.

"Take care, now," Henry told her in a pained voice, scratching behind Toto's ears.

"Tell Dorothy we'll come an' see her soon as we're able," Em said.

"I will. I will tell her that." Perhaps her tone, if not her words, conveyed that she would think far less of them if they never followed through on such a promise.

To Be Continued...
Officer Will took Elphaba straight back to the asylum. They were not at all pleased to see her, and the old matron put up the biggest stink of all, stomping and shouting and carrying on. But when shown the note from the Gales, giving permission for her to visit, she was robbed of further protestations and simply stood aside.

"Through here," another doctor said, unlocking the door. As he did so, he said, "Now, she ain't dangerous, but she has tried to bolt 'afore. I'll have to ask you to stay with the negro woman as she visits, officer. If you can."

"The 'negro woman' is capable of defending herself against one girl," Elphaba muttered. But no one paid her any mind.

Just as they were being led into Dorothy's room, she caught sight of Angeline working a broom and a dustpan a little way along the hallway. She smiled at her, and received a little wink and a smile in return. She had never felt so much kinship with another person without needing a single word. Well, other than Glinda, and that was a completely different matter entirely.

"Miss Elphaba!" Dorothy cried out, sitting up immediately. When she saw the policemen, she seemed to lose a little of her joy.

"It's alright," she told her. "This is a friend; his name is Will. Or at least, he isn't an enemy."

She dipped her head a little, hands fidgeting in front of her waist. "N-nice to meet you, sir."

"So she knows ya," the officer muttered in acknowledgement, nodding his own head. "Go on, have your visit. I'll stay back this-a-way."

As he leaned against the wall, Elphaba moved to sit on the bed by her friend. Finally, she felt like they could actually discuss matters. "How are you feeling today?"

"Much better." In a quieter voice, she whispered, "Do you have what I gave you?"

"Hm? Oh..." She patted her heart, feeling the tiny pill was still mostly there; sweating had dissolved it a bit. "I believe so. Might explain why I slept so soundly last night after such a hellish day; probably absorbed a little of it."

"There's more in my chamber pot," she confessed. They shared a grin. "Rinses it away and makes it invisible."

"You cunning little girl." The praise made Dorothy's cheeks glow. "You're doing alright? After the shocks, and the beating..."

Dorothy shook her head. "Sometimes, I get stray thoughts now that I can't explain. But... I can tell that's what they are. Like... that I ought to eat a squirrel, or... that I used to be able to grow a tail..."
but a moment later, I can remember 'that ain't real'. Never had those thoughts before they shocked me, not at all, but they're startin' to fade the longer I go since they did it to me."

Such news nearly broke her heart in two; Dorothy had been entirely of sound mind before, and now she might never be fully whole. But it was heartening to hear that she was recovering, even if only partially, gradually. "Good, that's good. And… and what about shocking you again? It seemed you were worried…"

"Don't think so now. I've started tellin' the doctor that I miss dreamin' about Oz. Seems to do the trick; he thinks all his talkin' cured me, plus the one shock, and the medicine." Her eyes were quite sad, even if one was twitching very slightly in a way that made Elphaba feel sick. "Wish I didn't have to tell fibs, but… I can't be shocked again. I just can't."

"It's okay. Dorothy… I have to ask you that question again. Now that I've spoken with your aunt and uncle."

For a moment, Dorothy only nodded glumly. Then she seemed to more fully grasp what she was being told, and perked up. "Oh? You… you saw Uncle Henry and Aunt Em? Oh, how are they?!"

"They seem to be doing fine," she answered shortly. What she wanted to say was, 'They're a couple of old goats who don't care about their niece,' but she knew that wasn't entirely fair to them, and would only upset Dorothy and distract her. "And that they want to come visit you, but it might be some time."

She looked a little disappointed, but only vaguely. "I'm glad they're alright. Hurts me that I can't be with 'em anymore. Rightly scared 'em half to death, I guess, goin' on about Oz."

"And you scared that Frances of theirs."

"Oh, her," Dorothy snorted with a slight smile. "Really a nice girl, once you get to know her — and isn't red hair just the prettiest? Hers and her daddy's. But… well, she didn't like me talkin' about Oz, either. Suppose it's my own fault for gettin' carried away sometimes."

Catching up Dorothy's hand, she gave the back of it an earnest pat. "Don't worry about them now. I have to ask you something."

"About goin' back to Oz? Well… I've been thinkin' on that. Now that my brain ain't mucked up with whatever's in those pills anymore." Only after a brief hesitation, she whispered, "I… will go with you."

"You will?" When Dorothy only held perfectly still, not elaborating, she guessed, "But you don't want to."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Aunt Em and Uncle Henry. I know I can't see 'em anymore, anyhow, but… well, they're all the family I've got left in the whole wide world! And if I left here and went to Oz again, I don't think I could ever come back or they'd catch me and put me back in here, a-and… that means if I do go, I can't see them ever again, doesn't it?"

The answer to her question did not need to be spoken aloud, but in that moment, it was no longer important. Elphaba wrapped her up in a tight hug, stroking along her back and letting her cry until her frustration and grief had been vented. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Will looking
distinctly uncomfortable, but he made no comment.

"It's alright," she breathed as she pulled back and petted along Dorothy's hair.

"I know," she sobbed, then cleared her throat. "I know. Sorry 'bout that."

"Nothing to be sorry for. Anyway… I would understand if you want to stay here to be with them, but fact of the matter is… you won't be with them at all. You'll be here, shocked and drugged, or having to lie to avoid being shocked and drugged. Maybe they will eventually pronounce you cured and you can go home, but…"

"But it won't be the same," Dorothy finished for her, already knowing what she was thinking. "Now I'll be looked at like I'm crazier than Aunt Em's crazy-quilt, even if I never say another word about Oz again." Her lip quivered. "Just isn't fair… I didn't ask to be sent there, a-and all I did was tell my folks about where I'd been, and now…"

Elphaba almost pressed a kiss to Dorothy's forehead, but decided this was probably already torturous enough for their policeman friend. "There, there. Morrible really made a mess of our lives; that was what she did best. But I really need an answer before I go back: not a wishy-washy, half-formed decision, but a firm, conscious one. Because as you said… if you disappear again, and then come back, you'll never hear the end of the questions. And I need to know you really would prefer living in Oz and are committed to going."

"Yes, I'm going," she told her firmly, smiling through her tears. "Maybe… maybe someday, I could come back just to see Aunt Em and Uncle Henry again… but when it comes to somewhere I can live, and be happy… I've a feeling my home's not in Kansas anymore."

"You're sure?"

"Sure as can be. Oh, it'd be wonderful to live with you and Glinda, and Nessarose! How is everyone? I didn't get a chance to ask before!"

"All in good time," she chuckled. "They're fine but there's a lot to tell you. For now, I think I had better conclude my visit." In a softer whisper, she added, "Until we can get you out of here, you ought to tell them that I've agreed to come visit you again soon, and that we're old friends. At least, that's what I've been explaining to everyone."

"But we are old friends," Dorothy protested with such an earnest smile that Elphaba couldn't help returning it. "And I've missed you ever so much! But I'll have another 'visit' to look forward to, and that can explain why I'm pleased as Punch until then."

Gripping her forearms, Elphaba did finally kiss her on the cheeks, prompting a cheerful giggle from her. "Just do that, and keep any Oz talk to yourself as you have been, and you should be safe. But it won't be long; I can promise you that."

"Alright. And… oh, I'm honestly shocked you'd come for me after how we met."

"Well… as Glinda and Nessa have been telling me quite often, I need to learn to worry about the future and the present, not the past. And that incident has most certainly passed, Dorothy."

"Good," she breathed, and her eyes closed in very real relief. From then on, Elphaba resolved to make a real effort to stop joking about assassination attempts. Dorothy did what she had to at the time, and it was no one's fault but the Wizard and Morrible.

Standing from the bed, she returned to the officer, then called over her shoulder, "I'll see you very
soon.

"See you! Safe trip!"

Once they were outside, Will asked of her, "'Safe trip'? You headed somewheres?"

Inspired by the earlier conversation, she said, "Oswego. I'd like to arrange travel, if that's possible? But I'll be returning again. You saw how much my visit cheered her up."

"Sakes, but there must be somethin' mighty special about Oswego that I ain't aware of. Mighty special." Still, he was more than happy to lead her outside. The little wave she gave Angeline was returned with one even more enthusiastic. Between the two of them being Dorothy's guardian angels, they had turned the girl's future around completely. She only wished she could tell Angeline that.

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It didn't take long for Will to take Elphaba to a train station. Asking as few questions as she could, so as not to give away her true level of ignorance of how things worked in Kansas, she was able to learn that she could take one of these "trains" — which seemed to be large structures capable of carrying many passengers at a time, much moreso than the horse-and-buggy they were riding in presently — to a place called Lawrence, and from there, down to Oswego. Even though she had no intention of doing any of that, she thought the information might prove useful.

"Pleasure meetin' ya, Miss Elphaba," he said with a doff of his hat, once he had unloaded her and her bag. "Can't say I've ever met a negro woman quite like you."

"Can't say you have, either," she said bluntly, and he chuckled. "I appreciate your efforts to help me out of this unfortunate scrape. I'll never forget your kindness compared to the cruelty of others."

At that, he nodded slowly. Contemplating. "Well... it's a different world now for your kind. Some folks'll take a might longer to see sense'n others. But it'll change, it'll change. In due time."

And then she was alone.

Elphaba stood in wonder at the majesty of the locomotives as they pulled into the station. Though she felt afraid to get on one, she didn't mind seeing them come and go; they were powerful and large, and gleamed like coal, puffing smoke like a mighty dragon. If she ever returned to Kansas, which she hoped not to, she would have enjoyed finding out precisely how one was constructed and operated.

Her father might know. Then again, he might not ever wake up to tell her about it.

So enraptured was she by the sight that she didn't even notice the hand clamping over her mouth until it was too late. Rather muscular arms dragged her backward away from the bench she had been standing beside, into the shadows by the platform. Her limbs worked and flailed, her throat made sounds, but they were caught by the palm before they could escape to alert the workers and other passengers. Steam from the train and its accompanying noises were enough to mask the struggle.

There were only two persons she could have expected to see. However, it was neither of these.

"Gimme all yer dough," a rough-looking man demanded.

"What?" she breathed. "I don't have any dough, I'm not a baker!"

"Funny, real funny." His face was masked by a kerchief of some sort, and a hat sat low over his face,
shadowing all but his eyes. "Negro woman dressed up nice like you, travelin' on her own? Gotta have somethin' worth takin'...

There was a look in his eyes much like the one in Lyle's. So she snapped, "Save it. I'm not interested, and you aren't doing anything if I'm not interested."

"I'll be takin' somethin'. You jus' get to decide what, girl."

Elphaba sorely wished time would advance a little quicker. Soon, a day would have passed, and her friends would wish her home… but she had to live to see that moment first. And not just for her own sake, but for poor, drugged-up Dorothy, stuck in her hospital room…

*Drugged-up Dorothy.*

"Alright," she said slowly, as the idea began to form. "I have a little something. But you have to wait for me to give it to you. And I need my arms. Do we have an agreement?"

"No deal. You'll try to claw my knife away."

Until that moment, she hadn't even noticed he was holding a knife. Now, it seemed highly obvious, gleaming down by her hip; she just hadn't thought to glance down in that direction. Her heartbeat thundered in her ears. "A-alright, alright. One hand. And you'll get something special."

Nodding, he released one hand, keeping a tight hold on the other arm as she turned around slowly to face him fully. The other hand held the knife a little higher so she could see it; a cold, silent reminder of her predicament.

Elphaba began to undo the front of her dress. From the neckline down, the once-nice garment that was now a bit tattered opened to reveal her creamy skin, and the man's eyes went slightly unfocused to see it. A little more, and her brassiere was visible… he began to pant. Her fingers began to tug at the fabric of the undergarment and he had eyes for nothing else.

"Right here," she whispered, showing the white-smeared section of her skin. "Taste this, and you'll never dream of tasting another woman."

What he said was, "You ain't no woman." But her teasing had piqued his curiosity. Leaning down, he ran his tongue over the top of her breast, and she tried not to vomit directly onto him as he did so. The knowledge of the revenge he would soon suffer was enough to reassure her.

"Good?" she asked.

"Bitter," he growled, drawing back to spit to one side. "Ain't know that negroes was bitter like 'at."

"Now you do. Don't you love it?"

"Naw. Ain't… ain't good."

"Well…" The hand that had opened the front of her dress reached over and closed around the wrist holding the knife. He tried to stab down at her, but she held the slight upper hand now that he had been drugged by whatever Dorothy had given her, and had slowly melted within her brassiere.

"Maybe you just need a little nap, hmm?"

He shook his head violently, which seemed to be quite the wrong thing to do if the way he groaned afterward was any indication. "Ooh… what… choo do to me, ya ugly…"
"Given you a taste of your own medicine." Cackling madly at her own joke, she yanked off his kerchief and used the side that had been facing outward to wipe his disgusting saliva off her chest. Underneath the disguise, he wasn't altogether hideous, even if his behaviour was; an average man with a below-average set of morals.

"You'll never get… away…"

"And you'll never do this to anyone again," she growled. It would be so easy to stab him through with his own knife now… and perhaps she should. Save any other women from enduring the same fate in the future. Still, she decided another punishment was in order.

So she used his own shirt to tie his wrists in the small of his back, as the police had done to her with their metal restraints. Then she did up the buttons on the front of her dress just enough so that her cleavage was no longer on display and shrieked, "HELP!"

Immediately, she heard movements from further along the train platform. Deciding it would look best this way, she dropped the knife at their feet and backed to the wall.

"Here, now!" said another policeman. "What's all this commotion, girl?"

Again, Elphaba wondered why everyone kept mistaking her for a child despite the fact that she was most certainly a fully-matured woman. But now was not the time nor the place. "He… he attacked me! Tried to pull off my dress, wanted to… w-wanted to…"

Not that she could actually cry on command, but she buried her face in her hands and heaved her shoulders. A strange woman put her arm around her shoulders and held her close.

"Come along, you," snapped the officer in a disdainful tone of voice. She peeked between her fingers and watched him being hauled away, and grinned behind her palms. Not that anyone else needed to know she had.

"Are you alright, dear?" asked the other woman. She was rather tall and spindly, and wearing spectacles on the end of her nose.

"I- I'm f-fine," she played it up. Maybe she was something of an actor, after all. "Might there be a… somewhere I can…"

Already knowing what she meant, the woman guided her to the toilets. Still covering her face, she thanked her, and went inside. The most difficult part was squelching her triumphant cackle so that it wouldn't carry out to the platform.

From there, it was a simple matter to wait until the magic took hold of her. If it hadn't, she was quite sure Topeka was a highly dangerous place for her to stay, but luckily, that problem never arose. Just before the hour she had first entered Kansas the day previous, she exited it again with a highly self-satisfied smile on her face.

To Be Continued…
"Elphie!" Glinda cried as soon as she was back in the Royal Palace. All night, she had tossed and turned, trying not to worry too much about her love but unable to help the niggling in the back of her mind that told her she should be worried. But as it turned out, her worry was all for nothing.

Or was it?

Though her no-longer-green paramour had seemed fine when they checked on her progress in the painting, worn but fine, in person they were able to see that she was quite a bit more ragged than the last time they had been together. The split in her lip, the way the neckline of her now-grimy dress hung open slightly, all spoke of a rough time on the other side of the painting that Glinda almost wasn't sure she wanted to know about. But the smile told her that it wasn't so awful of a time that she had been unsuccessful.

"Elphie?"

Green hands gripped her forearms. Indeed, the longer she spent back in Oz, the more of her original hue began to rush back into her skin. "Oh, Glinda… I'm so glad to see you again."

"It's only been one day," she breathed with a slight chuckle that she didn't truly feel. "What happened?"

"Nevermind that right now. Let's..." Turning to the painting, she laid her hand upon the frame and said clearly, "Show me Dorothy, right now."

With no hesitation, the paints upon the canvas changed to display the room that had become too familiar to them now. There was the woeful patient, cowering before the matron who had been so cold to both of them in turn and was now shaking her fist at Dorothy. When squinting, Elphaba could see something in the palm of her other hand… several small, white somethings.

"She found the medicine this time," Elphaba breathed. "She didn't have a chance to dispose of it."

"Medicine?" Nessa was asking, worry creasing her flawless forehead. But as they looked on, Dorothy was being dragged outside.

"Painting?" Elphaba asked — though it seemed to be unnecessary. The image flowed and shifted into a display of the hallway outside her room, where there was a chair with wheels fastened to the legs waiting. Two large men were waiting, as well, and now they were wrestling Dorothy into it, tying her down with straps.

"Oh no," Ozma whispered. Glinda turned to her as if to ask her to hurriedly wish her away, since the sight of them fighting with such a small girl was clearly wrong and needed to be righted, but Ozma was ten steps ahead of her — already grasping the belt with a grim determination they hadn't seen
from her since before the Truth Pond's water revealed her to be their rightful queen. "Bring Dorothy Gale to me!"

Mass confusion flared up between the woman and her strapping accomplices, who were all suddenly scrambling to fasten belts around nothing at all. Clearly, they were panicked, gasping in shock as they shot backward from the inexplicable disappearance. For some reason, that seemed to please Elphaba an inordinate amount.

That was the last they would ever see of Topeka Insane Asylum, for the scene changed immediately to that of Ozma's bedchamber, with all of them gathered around a disoriented Dorothy. Then Glinda turned her attention from the painting to her friend.

"Oh," Dorothy breathed, bow lips wide in shock. An instant later, they split into a true grin. "Oh… oh, it's true, I'm here. Miss Elphaba?"

"Behind you," Elphaba chuckled, and opened her arms for Dorothy as she sprinted the few steps to embrace her, laughter tinkling like high bells, bare feet windmilling in the air and forcing Elphaba to grunt and support both their weight. "Alright, alright! So you're not disappointed to see me, I would surmise!"

"I'm in Oz! I'm in Oz, I'm in Oz!"

Glinda and Nessa clasped hands, happy to see her but not wanting to crowd Elphaba, who tended to get flustered by too much physical affection all at once. Of course, their friend was even more gaunt in person than in the painting, but the joy at being reunited with her friends was enough to make that worry fade into the background. The simple dressing gown that was her attire was at least freshly laundered, even if they didn't see fit to put her in her slippers before trying to tie her to a chair. And her braids weren't clean, but they were somewhat neat, as if she had rebraided them recently.

When she finally calmed enough to step back from Elphaba, her green hands held onto her elbows as she said in a gentle voice, "You did a good job, keeping the pills from them for that long. What was she saying to you?"

"Oh, they were going to shock me again," she said in a put-upon tone, as if it were some nominal punishment like going to bed without supper. "But they didn't get to. Am I really here? Am I dreaming?" Elphaba pinched her, and she yelped, "OW! No, not dreaming!"

Chuckling with true warmth, Glinda touched her on the shoulder and said, "We're as real as you are. So either everything's a dream, or nothing is. But that's one of those philosophical questions I'm no good at answering."

"Miss Glinda!" she cried, hugging her now and prompting laughter from all of them. "I've missed you! Oh, I'm so glad, I'm- where's the Scarecrow and the Lion? Are they here?"

"Lion is just outside," she tittered, sharing a grin with Elphaba over Dorothy's shoulder. "Scarecrow went back to help mind the Vinkus, but I suppose we could send for him. Or wish him here with the Belt!"

"Glinda, we shouldn't abuse the Belt like it will always be here," Nessa said reasonably. "What if it only has so many wishes in it?"

However, Dorothy couldn't bother worrying about a belt just then. She turned to Nessa and beamed at her, vibrating as if trying not to hug her with all of her might. So Nessa smiled and took care of it for her, enveloping the young woman in the tightest of embraces. Not quite so squeamish as
Elphaba, and knowing Nessa wasn’t, either, she pet up and down Dorothy’s back to help console the overwrought girl.

"Welcome back," Nessa laughed easily. "And I see you got rid of the shoes at last! How did you manage it?" Glinda chuckled, thinking that of course it would be Nessa who asked.

"Didn't have to 'manage' a thing! Soon as I got back to Kansas and walked 'round a bit, they come off easy as anything! Shame they weren't gold anymore, either, though. Can't figure out for the life of me… w-well, anyway, it don't matter none now!"

"Certainly doesn't," Glinda whispered gently. Hoping to reassure her that she didn't need to worry.

"I'm so happy! I… I was sad about leaving Kansas again, but now that I'm with you all, I can't… I c-can't…" Now the tears truly began, fat and glistening as they slid down her cheeks. "I'm s-so glad I got to see you all again, I thought I never would!"

All three of them let her bawl her eyes out, leading her over to perch on the corner of Ozma's bed and petting along her shoulders. Ozma, however…

Ozma was gone. Glinda distinctly remembered her standing back and smiling at them before Dorothy had hugged her, but couldn't quite remember her leaving the room. However, the reason for this seemed to present itself a moment later.

"Dorothy!" boomed the Lion in his deeper, richer voice as he bounded toward the bed. Though Glinda knew him by now, trusted him deeply, she couldn't completely suppress a flinch to see a huge beast of the forest leaping directly for her.

That was not a sentiment Dorothy shared. She swept her arms wide and cried, "Lion!" as he tackled her, and she wrapped her arms around his shaggy neck. Even as he lapped at her cheeks to dry them of tears and she giggled at the scratchiness of his tongue, Elphaba and Nessa moved just enough so that they were sitting on either side of her, petting along her back to add further comfort. Such a welcome had not been seen in the Royal Palace in generations, up to and including Ozma.

Speaking of which…

"I'm glad to see you're safe and sound," Glinda told Dorothy earnestly, leaning down to kiss her forehead when she saw a break in Lion's playful nuzzling. Her hand caressed over her hair as she added, "I'll be right back, okay?"

"Okay!" she laughed, so thoroughly overjoyed that she couldn't even fully spare a thought for why Glinda was leaving. After all she'd been through, that was fine.

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It only took Glinda about ten or twenty minutes to track down their princess. She was back in the attic they had so recently cleared out. However, it wasn't exactly Ozma who she ran into up there.

"Oh!" gasped the small voice as its owner backed up toward the sturdy beam supporting the roof. "Glinda!"

After a moment to collect herself, debating a few different responses to what she was seeing, Glinda stifled a chuckle and made a small curtsy. "Why, Tippetarius, it has been some time!"

Ozma looked down at her scruffy old outfit. Clean and well-pressed, sure, but as threadbare as the day she had first entered the Emerald City. Now, it hung quite differently on her, for the Truth Pond
had revealed the womanly figure she had been entitled to before Mombi cursed her, but the effect was not altogether unappealing. Merely unusual.

"I… well, I was thinking…"

"Go on?" she prompted after a moment.

"Well, Dorothy has never met Ozma. So I thought she might prefer to see a familiar face rather than an un-familiar one. And it's probably a very stupid idea, I don't know what I'm doing up here!" Frustrated with herself as much as with the situation, she whipped off the old pointed cap and threw it on the ground, letting her hair spill out from where it had been hidden.

Sighing, Glinda bent down to pick it up for her. Only then did Ozma look as if she regretted her outburst. "There, there. Not a stupid idea. But… well, I don't really think you need to do it. Dorothy's a very sweet girl! She'll be as glad to meet who you are now as who you were then."

"B-but what if I'm not ready to meet her as Ozma?" she whispered, taking the hat back and wringing it in her hands. "What if she thinks I was better as Tip, and now I look too frilly, and dainty, and… I don't know why it makes any difference now, but I just-"

"Okay, okay," Glinda giggled as she embraced her with one arm. "You're the queen now, so if you want to meet her in those clothes, then that's your right. And even if you weren't the queen I'd say the same thing."

"Really? You don't think I'm acting foolish?"

"Maybe a little. But I've done far more foolish fings- I mean, things. Certainly you're entitled to feel a teensy bit self-conscious about how you look in front of a guest." With a little smile that she hoped would set her friend at ease, she whispered, "But we're going to have to do something about a couple of things."

"What things?" When Glinda poked the side of her breast, she sucked in a breath of surprise, then lowered her eyes. "O-oh, those. Yeah, I did notice… they st-stick out. Not that they're very big, but big enough to be, um, difficult to hide."

Nodding to herself as she considered the matter, Glinda looked around the attic for inspiration. She could attempt a spell, but most of her spells weren't suited to this kind of problem — and she didn't have Elphaba at hand, or the Grimmerie. When her eyes settled on the sash that had adorned the waist of Ozma's royal dress-of-the-day, she smiled wider.

"Alright; off with your shirt. I think I have an idea that may just do what you need it to do."

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"...and it got dreadfully lonely, cooped up all those months, but I had books to keep me company. So you mustn't think it was as bad as Elphaba's making it sound!"

Nessa was laughing as the door creaked open again. "Leave it to Dorothy to make being imprisoned sound like an evening in a pleasure paradise."

"It was awful," Elphaba snapped resolutely with a little nod. "Nothing like our prisons, and they didn't even call theirs a prison! But I can tell you what the actual prison was like, and that was even w-"

"Ahem."
The others turned toward the door, seeing only Glinda. As she had planned. One by one, they fell silent. Already, she could see that one of Ozma's dressing robes had been thrown around Dorothy's shoulders and cinched at the waist; they were of a somewhat similar size, but in the morning there would probably be a call to make some dresses specifically for the farm girl.

"Yes, Glinny?" Elphaba asked.

"If I have all your attention," she began, staring at Elphaba and then Nessa, and even Lion. "I've got somebody here who wanted to meet Dorothy again."

Then she stepped to one side to reveal Tip. She still looked a bit more feminine than she had before, but at least the sash was keeping her chest flat enough for the time being. A single curly lock of red was hanging down in front of her eyes, but most of the rest of it was stowed away inside the cap, and she had managed to use a bit of powder to make her cheeks less rosy, her lips less plush and pink. The best that could be done under short notice.

"What…?" That was as far as Elphaba got, for Glinda's sharpened glare silenced her in short order.

"Oh," Dorothy was breathing, dipping her head in a brief bow. "Begging your pardon, but… I don't recall your name, sir? But I'm ever so glad that whatever had been the matter seems to have gotten straightened out while I was in Kansas."

Surprising them all, Tip executed a very gentlemanly bow, even though it still looked a bit like a curtsy to Glinda. "Tippetarius. I… well, the moment I found out you were back, I wanted to say… to say that we… that it's an honour to have you in the Emerald City again."

Even while Dorothy was approaching, Tip's eyes remained pointed down toward her bare ankles. Her smile was a little flattered, and curious about the way "he" was regarding her. Glinda moved over to join Elphaba and Nessa, pressing a finger to her lips even as her eyes twinkled with merriment.

"What are you plotting?" Nessa muttered out the side of her mouth.

"Wasn't my plot at all."

"She-?!"

"Shhhhh!" she warned, barely able to keep from giggling again.

By now, Dorothy was curtsying for someone she didn't realise was someone else, despite having bowed a moment before. "It is a pleasure to make your, um… re-acquaintance? I guess."

"The pleasure is all mine," Tip breathed, taking her hand up and pressing a light kiss to the back of it. Dorothy tittered and her face flushed, which caused the same to happen in kind on Tip's cheeks, even through the powder. "I'm… sorry to hear that you went through so much misfortune while you were gone."

"Well… it can't have been so bad. I'm alive, and here, and meeting my friends again. Do… you count as my friend now, too? Because if you wouldn't mind terribly, I think that sounds awful nice."

"Very nice, indeed."

A moment later, Nessa whispered, "Nevermind. I withdraw my questions."
Somehow, they made it all the way through luncheon without anyone letting slip to Dorothy that Tip was really Ozma. Glinda went down to the kitchens to warn the staff, who looked a little perplexed but did not wish to question an order from their queen — even if it wasn't a direct order as such. Naturally, the small dinner party couldn't entirely refrain from mentioning Ozma at all, so their guest began to get quite curious about this person who was supposedly a benevolent Ruler, adored by all and worthy of such adoration. Ozma declined to comment on these matters herself, except to once say "Yeah, I guess she's alright".

Otherwise, they mainly spent the time filling in each other on what they had missed. A good many gasps were uttered to hear Elphaba's tale, and Lion roared in approval when she mentioned fighting off her attackers in the Kanssian jail. Elphaba did admit that her skin still chafed a little where the pill had partially dissolved against her breast, but hoped that would clear up in due time. They also learned a bit more about Dorothy, for there hadn't been time to hear the entirety of her tale during their sparse conversations thus far. Seemed that she had only been in the asylum for about two of the past three months; it had taken that long for everyone involved to be "sure" she was best placed there. Glinda and Nessa assured Elphaba that she had not missed much in a single day, other than the appointment of a new head soldier, Jinjur, to the Pike Guild.

There was a brief discussion of using the belt to fetch Dorothy's black-furred companion from the farm where the Gales had taken refuge, but in the end, she decided against it. When asked why, she simply stated, "He's at home there, and he doesn't belong in Oz." This was not stated without a few tears, but privately, Glinda admired her for deciding based on what was best for Toto and not for herself. She really had grown into an admirable woman.

For Dorothy, they had a lot more news… which required some omissions. It was easy enough to paint Ozma as a completely separate person from Tip; they merely neglected to mention the initial revelation. When asked where this mystery princess came from, it was Elphaba who replied, "Sometimes, the person Oz needs comes in a package no one expects. And you should know that best of all, Dorothy."

Once their bellies were full, and Dorothy had eaten the most of them all to make up for having so little appetite the past months, they said they ought to take a little stroll through the gardens. After all, it was such a bright and pretty Summer afternoon. However, as they stood, Tip changed the itinerary slightly.

"You all can go on ahead; I think I'd like to show Dorothy around. That is, i-if she wouldn't mind?"

Obviously pleased at the interest, she favoured "him" with a slight blush and a sweet smile. "That sounds delightful. But not for too long! I want to spend some time with my other friends, of course — you do understand, don't you? Bein' a gentleman."

"Of course," he said with another bow. Nessa held a hand in front of her mouth so only Glinda could see her silently mouth the words "Can you believe this?" All she could do was grin and shrug her shoulders.

However, once out in the gardens, Glinda's curiosity got the better of her. She said, "I'll be back in a jiff."

"Glinda…" When she turned back, it was to see Elphaba with her hands on her hips. "Leave them alone."

"Who? I was just going to-"

"Meddle?"
"To monitor the situation. Just in case little Ozzie needs my help!"

Shaking her head, she went on, "It's not decent to spy on them, and you know that. Even if your intentions are good. But I won't try to convince you if you're really dead set on-

That was as far as she got before she noticed Glinda was off like a shot.

It took her a minute or so to locate the two young ladies, due to all the hedgerows and flowering bushes, and her billowy dress making stealth almost impossible. Finally, she did catch up with them in a small clearing. It was obvious that the garb was relaxing Ozma into her old ways, and she had her hands stuffed into her pockets in a most unladylike fashion. Somehow, after so many royal balls and appearances, this had a quaint adorableness that brought the Gillikin woman a wistful smile.

"...some kind of- of spell over us," Dorothy was prattling on, always happy to have someone listen to her. Glinda couldn't help but think what a pity it had been that for the past three months, no one had wanted to do that except for a talking-doctor telling her everything she said was wrong. "But Scarecrow and Tin Man were able to help us get away from the poppies. And no one hurt us at all, of course, so it wasn't as if we were in true mortal danger! W-well, unless you count the wildcat, but Tin Man took care of him quick as a flash!"

"Did he?" Tip said with a queenly grin.

"He did! Oh… but I s'pose he ain't the same now, is he? What with the forgetting spell. Still, after how he tried to hurt poor Miss Nessarose, it's only right he get punished, and at least they didn't have to kill 'im. And he and the Scarecrow can still be good friends, can't they? Fill his tin head with new memories."

"Of course."

Dorothy glanced up shyly at the princess. "Oh, but I do go on, like an old housewife at a quilitin' bee! Sorry about that. Don't know why my mouth runs away with me so."

"No, no, it's alright!" she told her hastily. "Just… I like to hear you talk. Your voice is one of the sweetest I've ever heard."

Even as Dorothy was tittering into her hands, cheeks reddening, Glinda muttered to herself, "Not bad, Ozzie."

"Tippetarius, I've half a mind to think you're sweet on me! Might be more careful with a girl's heart."

"I like your heart, too. It's kind and good, and better than most."

"O-oh? And…" Swallowing, she fidgeted with her fingers as she asked, "What makes a heart good? If'n you know so much." The last bit was a little tease, but more aimed at her own uncertainty that her heart was truly "good" than at the expense of her present company.

Shrugging, Ozma looked off toward the cloudy sky. "Things that can't be learned. Like kindness, strength, humility… love. A-and I don't just meant that kind of love!" she laughed, cheeks glowing. "But love for your friends, and family, and… like how you told Elphaba you wanted to stay behind for your aunt and uncle, even though they had you sent to that horrifying place."

"They didn't know what to do with a girl who'd lost her mind," she said softly.

"But you hadn't." Taking up Dorothy's fidgeting hands, she squeezed them tightly, causing her to go completely still with her mouth very slightly open in surprise. Ozma's emerald eyes sparkled with
intensity as she told her, "I think your mind is my favourite. And... m-maybe I've known it since before you even left Oz. I don't know how, or why, since we haven't spoken much, but I just know. There's something very special about you, Dorothy, and I'm not the only one who sees it. Everyone in Oz does! So... so please don't think that just because Kansas isn't the place for you, that it's because you're not good enough. Because you are!"

After a moment of listening to Ozma breathe heavily, shaking all over with the force of her own passion for reassuring Dorothy, the slightly shorter girl swallowed hard. Then she whispered, "Tip?"

"Yes?"

"With you... all afire like that... you remind me a bit of... well, I don't want to say."

"Who?" she asked, needing to know now.

"Wouldn't want your manhood to be, um... hurt, or however that works."

"Don't worry about my manhood," Ozma chuckled with a secret humour that only Glinda could share in that moment, hiding behind the hedgerows where she was. "Please, tell me."

"You remind me of Miss Elphaba. So much fire in your belly, and eyes blazing green... gives me gooseflesh."

That pleased both of the women listening. Ozma smiled at her and whispered, "Don't tell her, but... you couldn't pay me a higher compliment. If I'm half the woman Elphaba is, I'll be a worthwhile person all my life."

Dorothy giggled. "You just said you were a woman!" Before a mildly panicking Ozma could respond, she sighed and looked down at their hands. "Suppose you do have soft hands, though. And a sweet smile. Not that I'm teasin', mind."

"O-of course not," she breathed.

"Sorry." Then she added as she tilted her head, "But... I think I could like a boy as pretty and sweet as you. Never did have much interest in the rough-and-tumble boys in Kansas. They're fine and all, but..."

When the silence had grown heavy, Ozma asked, "But?"

"But I prefer your company," she said firmly, bold for Dorothy in an area of conversation in which neither of the young women were at all experienced. By now, she was blushing worse than Glinda could ever remember, including the time she had believed she was about to pin her to the wall and kiss her.

So Ozma did the next best thing to that. She again graced the back of Dorothy's hand with her lips, but this time, it was longer, contemplative, and with her eyes fully closed. The simple farm girl's breath caught, and when the lips did not move away as soon as she had been expecting, she let out a little soft coo of surprised joy. Her free hand drifted up to press into her heart through the dress Jellia had found for her.

"Tippetarius," she finally breathed in disbelief.

At that, "Tip" seemed to come back to herself, standing up straight and flushing as badly as Dorothy. "I... w-well, I didn't mean to get so... s-sorry if this is sudden, y-you just got here, and I'm already-"
"It's alright," she tittered, even more pleased than she had been before. "But I'll expect you to behave like the gentleman you have been so far if you're comin' a-courtin' me."

"Of course!" With that, she offered her elbow, and Dorothy daintily slid her hands around it, as if she were attending a high society function.

"Great start, kind sir," she giggled.

"Y-yeah. Although… well, I feel like I should tell you something before you, um… get too, um…"

Glinda couldn't help muttering an "oh no" under her breath. She had been afraid of this moment, and didn't have time to properly warn Ozma about a small facet of Dorothy's upbringing. Even though she had come a long way in being accepting, she was initially quite alarmed by the idea of two women having any romantic entanglements — mostly Boq's fault, for which she still wanted to toss him into the Shifting Sands. For it to come up this suddenly was admirable on Ozma's part for wanting to be honest, but perhaps not wise.

"What is it?" Dorothy asked.

"I'm… well, I've always thought you were quite charming." When "Tip" flattered her, Dorothy dipped her head in chagrin as they began to walk, and Glinda had to work to follow and eavesdrop, as she most certainly shouldn't have been doing at all. "Really, I was sad to meet you only for you to have to return to your Land of Kansas. But when I learned you might come back to Oz, after being a little excited, well… I couldn't help being… afraid."

"Afraid? Of li'l ol' me? Aw, I couldn't hurt a fly!"

"Not afraid in that way! But of what you might think of me now. Of… how things might have changed."

Dorothy was still looking at her in mild confusion as they rounded a corner, and bumped into someone that had not been warned about Ozma's wishes in regards to her identity. And Glinda had to bite down on her fist to keep from crying out to the heavens in sheer frustration.

"Ozma!" cried Jack Pumpkinhead in delight as he stood from where he was tending the rows of pumpkins. They were his prized project. As a man made entirely of hickory branches and a large jack-o-lantern for a head, there could be little else to occupy his time. Much like Dorothy's friend, Scarecrow, he did have a set of clothing, but it was quite mismatched; pink vest with white polka dots over a red shirt, purple trousers, and golden slippers. The latter had been a recent addition.

"O-oh!" Ozma cried in shock. "Jack! I… well, I didn't think we'd run into you here!"

"In the garden? Of course you would! Where else would you think I could be?"

"Y-you're right, of course! Oh — Jack, this is our friend, Dorothy."

"Dorothy Gale," she introduced herself with a little polite curtsy, finally letting go of Ozma's arm to do so. "A pleasure to meet you."

"Oh my! Miss Dorothy of Kansas, finally I meet you! Why, Ozma talks about you all the time!"

"She does?" Dorothy asked in puzzlement. Under her breath, Ozma hissed, "Jack!" but he paid it no mind.

"Sure! Every day, it's 'Dorothy' this, 'Dorothy' that. Wondering what Dorothy's up to now! Oh… but
it really is good to put a face to the name at last! Seeds alive, but you do seem as sweet as they say!"

"My, but you're a funny pumpkinhead," Dorothy giggled. "And Ozma seems wonderful! Everything anyone's said about her has been good things!"

"She truly is. But I haven't seen you wear that in a long while," he observed, gesturing to the clothing on his old companion. "I thought you'd told me you were getting used to the new way of things."

"Jack, don't worry about that," Ozma tried to laugh, tense and desperate. "L-listen — we'll love to have supper with you later, but for now I'd like to finish my walk with Dorothy. So we'll be seeing you!"

"Oh, sure thing! Bye-bye — and nice meeting you, Dorothy!"

And the collection of sticks and clothing ambled off, giant pumpkin wobbling on his shoulders as always it did. Glinda cursed "that gourd-brain" under her breath, still irritated that he had needlessly confounded what was already proving a difficult situation for poor Ozma.

"He seems a wonderful sort, too," she gushed, turning back to the princess-in-disguise. "Queer, but wonderful. Not sure why he was so worried about your clothes… or did he mean your hat?"

Dipping her head, Ozma whispered, "Oh… it's a long story."

"But I bet you would look better without this old thing!"

Giggling, she took it off Ozma's head before the queen could muster a reaction. It only took a few seconds for the waves of red curls stuffed up inside to begin to fall, and eventually they all came tumbling down around Ozma's cheeks and shoulders. Now that she had stopped keeping it cut short enough to be easily hid, for she had never been comfortable with truly short hair, it was so long that it came halfway down her back.

Dorothy stood transfixed by the sight. At first, she didn't seem to know what to say. Then she whispered, "Golly…"

"I…" Ozma was beside herself. "I can explain. A-and I was going to… but we…"

They both fell silent for a moment. Dorothy ran her fingers through the thick red curls for a moment, mesmerised. Glinda wondered at that; it was almost as if she had a preference for red hair. Ozma's eyes closed in bliss, loving the sensation perhaps more than she ought to have. Then the hand came to rest on her neck.

"It's beautiful."

Shy and self-conscious, the queen looked down and away. "Th-thank you."

"You almost look like a girl. Well… really, you are as lovely as a girl, and you were before. Not that I mean any offense by it!"

"No, no, I'm not offended," she assured her with a slight smile.

"Good," she sighed in relief. "You know how some boys get about things like that. Or, well, I s'pose I don't know how Oz men are, but where I come from, calling a boy 'beautiful' might get him to throw mud at ya."
Every word seemed to be making Ozma feel worse about her slight deception. It might have been true that she wasn't encouraging Dorothy to believe she was a boy, but neither was she clearing things up for her. Glinda was pained to watch this go on, but she felt she had to be nearby to provide Ozma some support if Dorothy reacted poorly; the queen meant too much to her now to let her do this completely alone.

"Suppose… I'm not worried about that… because I'm not a boy."

"Hm? Oh," she laughed easily. "Would you rather be called a man? I'm sorry, you do seem about that age."

"Just suppose," she went on stubbornly, though Glinda could tell she wanted to abandon this discussion and let things alone. "I do look like a girl, don't I? What if I was one? Would it change much?"

"Then you'd be wearing awfully silly clothes for a girl as lovely as you." Leaning up, she pecked Ozma on the cheek, causing both of them to gasp in slight surprise. "O-oh, I didn't- that was a might bit impulsive of me, huh? I'm s-sorry."

Ozma shook her head, a smile beginning to replace her shocked expression. "It wasn't. This is."

Glinda turned away when she saw Ozma lean forward. It was already indecent of her to be eavesdropping, and she had to draw the line somewhere. Even so, she could still hear vague noises, a surprised sound that tapered into a pleased hum. Sighs through nostrils. Her own heart beat wildly for the two of them, and she couldn't help thinking fondly of Elphaba.

"Tip…"

"I have to go," Tip said. And she was quite right; Ozma would have duties quite soon, and could not delay them forever. "I… oh, Dorothy, I'm sorry. I only meant for this to be a little walk in the garden, and for us to talk. Not for… well… so much to…"

Shaking her head, she whispered, "It's alright. I'm… no good at this kinda thing, either. Believe you me! Never had so much as a caller before, let alone courtin'." Another kiss, this one initiated by Dorothy, and Glinda simply covered her eyes until she heard them part, trying not to giggle. "But I can't say as I mind a bit."

"Listen. You need to know… well, if you come to the Royal Court this afternoon, I think you'll understand. I'm sorry we ran out of time for me to explain." Glinda turned just in time to see Ozma putting her cap atop her head again, this time amidst the auburn hair instead of concealing it. "Take care."

"G'bye, Tip. I'm…" Dorothy seemed to realise belatedly that she wasn't sure what she would say, and merely tittered into her hands. "Bye!"

Once Ozma had gone, Glinda waited for a minute or so. During this time, Dorothy did no more than sigh to herself, picking a flower and smiling as she breathed in its gentle aroma.

The very picture of a girl in love.

That was when the Witch of the North decided her attentions were needed elsewhere. She had intended to chase after her queen and console her, but there was something else she might do that would be of more use in the long run.

"OH!" Dorothy gasped when she saw Glinda arrive, clutching her heart and shivering all over. "M-
Miss Glinda! You… you scared me!"

She couldn't help thinking that this was unlike Dorothy, to react as strongly as that. It was probably a leftover symptom of that awful treatment they had given her at the asylum, and for that, she wanted to use the Belt to pop over to Kansas and give every person there a good spanking! But knowing that her magic wouldn't work there, she decided it was best left alone.

"Sorry," Glinda chuckled. "I wanted to make sure you were alright. Plus, sometimes I worry about Tip."

"Well… I do appreciate that, Glinda. Oh, but you needn't worry about Tip! He's very… he's such a gentleman, and so sweet. Can't believe we ever thought he was going to hurt us way back when."

Glinda's eyes crinkled with amusement. "You're right; that is a funny thought." Then she sobered as she said, "But I think you may want to alter how you think about our Tip before this afternoon."

"What do you mean?"

"Only that… things aren't always what they seem. And sometimes, they are how they seem, but we can pretty well con ourselves into thinking they're a different way because it's easier for our brains to accept."

Now she had definitely puzzled the Kansas girl. Dorothy looked away a moment, then back to her as she asked, "Are you telling me he's not a nice boy? B-because, well… I-I don't think you're right! He is! You're only lookin' out for me, and I appreciate it more than I can say, but-"

"That wasn't how I meant it," Glinda assured her before she got even more defensive on her new beau's behalf. "You're absolutely right; Tip is quite charming, sweet, and earnest. A more loyal friend, you could never have! Only… I hope that's what matters most to you: what kind of person your special friend is. And not other things that don't matter so much."

Silence fell again for a few moments. Then Dorothy whispered, "You ain't talkin' sense. But… I think you're tryin' to tell me something, and maybe I just ain't smart enough to catch what it is."

"More like… it's not my 'something' to tell you, Dorothy. Really, I would explainify a little more if I could! But that isn't my place." She paced over and gripped her shoulder. "But later, when Tip tells you this something, I hope you'll remember what I said. Okie-dokie?"

"Um…" Dorothy laughed nervously, clearly unsettled by so much vagueness. Glinda was annoyed by it, as well, but she couldn't divulge Ozma's secret herself. It simply wasn't right. "Alright, I'll do my best. It ain't anything bad, is it? Like… he's ill and won't get better, or some such?"

"No, no. Nothing that worrisful. And that's all I really ought to say on the matter." She put her arm around Dorothy's shoulders and began guiding her back toward the Palace. After a few paces, Dorothy leaned her head against the older woman's shoulder.

"You really are like my fairy godmother, y'know that? Watchin' out for me. You and Miss Elphaba."

Feeling distinctly guilty, Glinda said, "I'm trying to, at least."

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To Be Continued…
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

Sorry to the Gelphie shippers for these Dozma chapters. I haven't forgotten you! You'll see!

And of course, sorry for taking so long between updates. Boring IRL things distracting me - one of which being Camp NaNoWriMo last month. The upside is, you're about to get not one, but two new fanfics from me soon! so hopefully that makes up for me dragging my feet on getting this one posted.

Of course, within the hour, it was time to hold court. Glinda had hastily explained the developments to Elphaba, who remained with Dorothy to help monitor the recent immigrant. Then she bolted up to Ozma's chambers to investigate the current situation.

"No, tighter, Jellia," Ozma was urging her as the servant tried to cinch her dress closed. Never in a demanding, condescending tone; that just wasn't how Ozma treated other people, regardless of station. But she did sound more anxious than usual. "Sorry, I know, it's as tight as it goes, but… I need to look my very best! So we can't do anything halfway today!"

"Your Highness?"

"What? Oh… hello, Glinda." She looked a little cowed when she saw the disapproving frown on Glinda's face, and glanced down at her pristine white heeled boots. "Jellia, that's fine; thank you."

"Quite welcome, Majesty," Jellia said with a bow of her green head before she retreated, having enough sense to be able to tell Glinda wanted to talk to her alone.

"Are you alright?"

Laughing weakly, she turned to her full-length mirror and observed the effect. "I'll have to be, won't I? The court awaits."

"Ozzie…" When she didn't answer again, she bit her lip as she thought for a moment. Then she asked, "Do you like wearing these get-ups? You could probably pass a law. 'No queen shall wear anything but old trousers and pointed caps during royal ceremonies' or something."

That did earn a little more of an earnest chuckle. "Honestly?"

"Sure. I like honesty."

"So do I." Swishing the skirts around, she smiled vaguely. "I thought I might feel more comfortable in those old clothes. And I did, in a way… but not as much as I thought. They don't fit me anymore."

"Well, we know why that is," Glinda joked as she gave a light tap on Ozma's behind that made her squeak in surprise. They both giggled. "Not that I'm saying it's that big, of course."

"Of course. Just… no, I didn't mean only that the actual size is wrong. They don't suit me anymore. I think I might like to wear… suits tailored to my new shape sometimes, because they are more
comfortable than these highly regal gowns. But that doesn't mean I don't like wearing these."

Glinda tilted her head a little again. "Can you clear that up a little for me? I'm not saying you're
wrong, just that I'm not following your chain of thoughts quiiiite yet."

Ozma paused, truly pondering her words. She turned so that Glinda could really take a look at her.
What a breathtaking beauty she had become! Quite youthful, but serene, her perfect auburn ringlets
framing her cheeks and slender neck and supporting the silver circlet as if it had been made to rest
there. Sunkissed skin, no longer as tan as when they had first met her but still not as pale as that of a
spoiled princess, gleamed from above the neckline that began the concealment of the rest of her form
in puffs of white fabric and sparkling green ribbons. Truly a regal presence, and one that was a joy to
behold, unlike the frightened respect that the Wizard had demanded via use of his puppets. This was
definitely an improvement.

"I love feeling this pretty. It's something that was deep inside of me that I didn't even know was there
until you helped reveal it. But sometimes, I still feel like… I don't deserve it, or I'm not really a girl
because I grew up as a boy. Which I know isn't true! This really is who I am, I believe that with my
heart and soul. But the doubts come back and I can never seem to make them completely go away.
So that's… that's what I meant."

Smiling gently, Glinda reached up to cup either side of Ozma's sweet face. "Oh, little angel Ozzie…
it must be tough, having to always 'be the princess' in front of the whole Emerald City when it's such
a new thing for you."

"Yeah. That part doesn't help; the… public part."

"But you're doing a great job. And you know all you have to do is ask Jellia to make you a few suits
for casual afternoons, working in the garden with Jack, or just days when you aren't feeling quite up
to the frills and frippery. She'd be happy to! You're the one in charge, so do what you want. We'll all
support you."

Ozma nodded. "Thank you, Glinda. I don't know what I'd do without the coven around."

"Council," she corrected, and they both snickered. "Also, if you ever want to take a little vacation,
we could probably arrange for that. Get away from the responsibilities of queendom for a week or
so."

"I'd like that. As long as you and Elphie and Nessa came along."

"And Dorothy?"

Sighing, she turned back to the mirror, regarding it with a frown this time. "Do you think… she'll
hate me for this? I thought easing her into the idea by turning up as Tip was a better plan, but now I
feel… stupid."

"Only one way to find out." She didn't want to comment on whether or not the plan was stupid;
privately, she thought it was, but she also fully appreciated why Ozma tried it in the first place. Being
honest with Elphaba about her own feelings had been one of the most difficult choices she'd ever
made, and she had been terrified of rejection. It was probably much the same for her forlorn Ruler.

"That's true. Do I look alright?"

With bald honesty, she whispered, "You look perfect." Then she leaned in to kiss both her cheeks
and boop her on the nose with her index finger, earning a slight giggle. "And cute! Now go out there
and face the music; your people await."
So Ozma did just that. Glinda quickly took her place with Elphaba in the bench on the righthand side of Ozma's seat of power; Nessarose was on the other side, and there was room for further seats on each side, though the chairs were not present. The idea had been to allow for space for a larger Council, should the need ever arise, but so far it had not. When visiting the Emerald City, Fiyero would sometimes take a seat next to Nessa, as an honorary Councilman.

Glinda kept her eyes focused on Dorothy as Ozma entered, glancing back to make sure she could monitor how the princess was doing now and then. The girl had snagged herself a spot very near the front of the crowd, wanting her first glimpse of this regal being to be a good one.

"Hail to the Queen Ozma!" Jellia announced.

The crowd, appropriately, responded with "Hail!" and then burst into cheers and clapping. In the first few days of her reign, Jellia and the Council had tried to discourage them from causing so much commotion, but right away Ozma had told them to let the people celebrate if they wanted to. As Ozma sat, Glinda saw that Dorothy was clapping along with everyone else. Her brow was creased a little in very mild confusion, but she was otherwise as pleased as everyone else.

"Thank you all," Ozma said. Even though she was nervous, it barely showed; despite being a very young and inexperienced ruler, the ability to act "professional" in front of her subjects was something that came naturally to her. "Today, we will be hearing reports from outlying cities of the Land of Oz. If you have a grievance or report from within the Emerald City outer walls, or the cities nearest the walls in Gillikin, Munchkinland, Vinkus, or the Quadling Country, please refrain and hold your remarks for another date, wherein we will be welcoming them from your areas."

As she spoke, Dorothy's face began to come over with pure shock. To be fair, she did not make a scene, but it was readily apparent to her old friends that she had figured out Ozma and Tip were the same person without needing any explanation. Clever as she was, that came as no surprise.

"Well, there goes the neighbourhood," Elphaba muttered into her ear.

"Shh, Elphie." Still, she had a hard time disagreeing. A quick glance at Ozma showed that she wasn’t paying Dorothy any attention. Purposefully. That was very like her to do, making sure that her focus remained on the matters at hand and to worry about personal issues later.

One by one, the reports were received. A band of thieves was trying to interrupt emerald mining in the Glikkus. Some city in the south of the Vinkus was in dire need of fresh water, for their well had run dry. The Quadlings wanted fairer trades for their wares. Most of these matters were settled in short order, though there was occasionally some debate needed to resolve the problem to the satisfaction of all parties involved. At the end of the day, however, the people remained as thrilled with their new ruler as before.

However, just when they were wrapping things up and the crowd started to stir and get ready to leave, Ozma called out, "One final matter for the day." After some brief murmurs, she added, "Dorothy Gale of Kansas."

A hush fell over everyone else. Slowly, Dorothy first pointed at herself, and then awkwardly pushed to her feet.

"Welcome to Oz. Myself and the Council wish to make it known to all here that you are forevermore Princess Dorothy of Oz, and should be afforded all the rights and respect that this title offers." There was only the briefest of hesitations before she went on, "And you may take a position of authority
over any of the countries in Oz if you so choose, or decline such, and reside wherever you wish. For the services you have rendered us, we remain in your debt."

Glinda's heart sank. She was offering Dorothy a way out. Now that she knew Tip was Ozma and there was a possibility things might be awkward between them, she wanted Dorothy to know that she would not be required to continue living in the palace if she wasn't comfortable with the idea. It was a magnanimous gesture, but also could sound like she was sending her away.

But while the crowd was applauding the brief speech, all Dorothy could do was look stunned. When the clapping died down, and she noticed everyone was looking at her, she managed an ungainly little curtsy, then announced, "Th-thank you… Your Majesty." It seemed to be all she could come up with.

"Thank you," Ozma countered. Then she hastily said, "This concludes today's audience," and turned to step down briskly from the seat and leave the audience hall.

Immediately, the rest of the council followed her, but Glinda thought her efforts were best applied elsewhere. She whispered to Elphaba, "Tell Ozzie I thought she was very brave," then slipped down into the rest of the crowd to seek out Dorothy.

She had to chase her down. By the time she got to the audience seating, Dorothy was already out in the hall, so she had to push through the throng until she caught up with the dazed girl, leaning against the wall a little further down.

"Hey," she said in an imitation of her usual cheery voice. "Doing alright?"

"What? Oh… oh, yes, Miss Glinda, of course," she laughed — and it was a bit manic. "Why shouldn't I be? I'm… I'm a princess now! A-and so is…"

"So is Tip."

"Are you… really alright? Honest-to-Oz?"

"Sure! I mean, why shouldn't I be? Girl like me from nowhere, gettin' to meet a real live princess, a-and then become one? It's like a dream come true! I'm… I'm just over the rainbow about it!" But when Glinda only frowned, Dorothy turned away. "A-and she looked very nice up there, in that… dress, and the pretty crown…"

"Dorothy-"

"You know, maybe I will go and visit Scarecrow after all. See how he's doin'. A-and then I can come back and… and figure out what to do with myself. Can't just sit around bein' a big nuisance all the time! Aunt Em always said…"

But she didn't finish that thought; bringing up her aunt only took away her false joy. Glinda placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Dorothy… come on, you don't have to act brave if you don't feel brave. I'm your friend."

"I… I know. And you tried to tell me somethin' yesterday, but…" Her shoulders shrugged, taut and full of tension. "I wasn't listenin' properly. Thing is, I ain't wired like you and Miss Elphaba, so… I don't know. I need to clear my head, but after that, maybe… I can find a way to…"

She drew her in for a tight hug, and Dorothy only put up a fight for the first few seconds before she
melted into it, shivering. Not crying, but clearly struggling to suppress some reaction. Whether that be sadness or anger, or something else, Glinda couldn't quite say. But she held on for some time. Eventually, the shivering petered out, and she took a deep, bracing breath.

"I'm alright now," she said with a false brightness, drawing back to beam up at Glinda. "Thanks."

"You are not. But… I'm glad you're better. Do you want to go and have lunch? We could take it somewhere… somewhere else."

Dorothy could definitely tell that Glinda was carefully not saying "somewhere without Ozma." It was written all over her face. After a moment, she nodded. "If you're sure it's alright? I mean, Miss Elphaba-"

"-Will survive one meal without me," she laughed, taking Dorothy's hand and patting it gently as she led her off to find another hall in which to dine. There were plenty in the Palace.

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Dorothy did set off for Kiamo Ko the next morning. As she had told them, even without "other things" being a factor, she still wanted to reunite with her old friend, and to see whether or not Boq was adjusting to life now that he was no longer carrying around so much rage and murder in his heart. After all, he had been nothing but good to Dorothy, so there was no pretending he was wicked through and through. Maybe the new lease on life would be enough to set right what had been darkened within him.

Ozma was distraught by this news, of course, but Glinda tried to reassure her that it was a temporary absence. If Dorothy came back and decided she was moving away, they could fret over it then, but for now there was no use worrying.

So they turned their focus to other matters. Tending the queendom, as was always pressing. Elphaba was still perfecting some new spells to make all their lives easier, and Nessa trying to change certain outdated laws in the hopes that governance would run more smoothly. Glinda busied herself consoling Ozma and meeting with members of Emerald City nobility when Ozma wasn't feeling up to it. Though they missed the girl who formerly wore the Golden Shoes, there was no shortage of distractions.

Finally, on the third night after she had gone, Glinda walked in to find Ozma was again wearing the Tip costume. Rolling her eyes, she came and sat next to her on the bench in front of her vanity.

"That's not going to fix anything."

A moment or two passed as Ozma stared forlornly at her reflection. Then she said, "Mombi was able to curse me once. What if… we found that spell in her books and did it again?"

"Then we would be robbing Oz of its rightful heir."

"I could still be a prince as easily as I could be a princess."

"Is that who you believe you truly are?"

"NO!" she burst out, slumping down so that her head thunked against the lip of the vanity. "But I… I can't stand the thought of… of being this way, only to have…"

Sliding an arm around her, she whispered, "Listen. I know this is hard; I know you want to do something about it. Really, we've all found ourselves in a situation where… what we want is so hard
to get our hands on, and it's tempting to change something about yourself that's really important to get it. Like... me with Fiyero."

"Fiyero? What about him?"

"Both Elphie and I were in love with him once. Or we thought we were," she added in a mutter. "But he obviously cared more for Elphie than for me, after the initial charm of my good looks wore off." More as a force of habit, she fluffed her golden girls with one hand.

"I see," Ozma snorted.

"So I tried being a little more altruistical. A little more... giving, and kind, and thoughtful of others. Not because it's the right thing to do, which is more how I do things now, but because... I thought it would make him like me better. And it didn't; he's admitted to us now that he was a lot more interested in Elphaba for being... well, genuine, I guess."

For a moment, Ozma simply nodded. Then she pulled at her long, perfectly-coiffed hair and growled, "I feel so stupid, though! Dorothy is... is perfectly entitled not to feel the same way now that she knows I'm a woman. I keep telling myself that! What's wrong with me?!"

"Whoa, whoa! Alright, you're way too tensed up. Come over here now. No, no, come here."

Glinda led a very pouty Ozma away from the bench to two chairs arranged around a small table. The usual purpose for these chairs was for her to take tea with one of the Councilwomen, if and when they needed them — though usually, the small dining room was used. She pushed Ozma into one and then sat across from her.

"Here." At first, when she pulled one of the princess's old "boy shoes" off, Ozma rolled her eyes, but the minute she began to knead into her stocking foot with her thumbs, the annoyance and uncertainty vanished. "There now. Relax."

"Ahh..." A few seconds passed as Ozma did her best to resent melting at the pleasant sensation. "Alright, I get it, Glinda. You're right. I'm... worrying about this... too much. You don't have to..."

A little sigh. "Keep going..."

"Was that 'You don't have to keep going', or 'You don't have to, and then you changed your mind and asked me to keep going'?"

Chuckling just a little, Ozma favoured her with a grateful smile. "Was supposed to be the first one. But thank you. I don't know why you keep doing things like this for me yourself when I'm sure we could get the royal masseuse. If we have one of those."

"Not yet, but we should!" They both laughed. "But I don't mind. Honestly... it might sound a little odd, but I like having you around to take care of. Maybe it's my motherly instincts having nowhere to go, especially since I like taking care of Elphaba but she's even more self-sufficient than the two of us put together."

More laughter, and this time Ozma reclined a little, letting Glinda finish the job and move on to the other foot. "So I'm your surrogate child? That seems a little funny when we're technically the same age. I just haven't known I was a princess so I have to relearn everything as I go along."

"Ah, but you lost those early years, so I'm older now," she teased, wiggling her toes through the stocking fabric. For that, Ozma picked up a napkin lying on the table and attempted to throw it at her, and it fluttered to the floor uselessly. "Wow, you really have fully transitioned into being a spoiled royal girl."
"That wasn't a serious throw. You and I both know I could pick up this teaspoon and chuck it hard enough to split your nose." That made Glinda laugh so hard she snorted like a pig, and Ozma really lost it then, pulling both legs back so she could double up and wrap her arms around her sides, tittering until breathless. "OH! Oh, Glinda, that's t-too much!"

Wiping her eyes as she laughed along with her, Glinda Upland regarded the sweet princess in her old, worn-out clothing, briefly broken from her dark mood. She did deserve to be happy. If Dorothy would make her happy, and she would make Dorothy happy, it was really quite pathetic for any other factors to get in the way. So she realised that she had two immediate goals. First, to determine whether or not Dorothy's feelings for the illusion that was Tip had been infatuation, or the elusive "true love" that some spent their entire lives searching for. And second… to figure out how to get them fixed up together.

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"Hello, everyone!" Dorothy cried out as she skipped in through the dining hall doors, eyes full of unshed tears. It had only been a week, give or take a day, but she still acted as if she had been gone for another dozen years.

And the Formerly-Wicked Witches reacted as if she had, as well. They all forsook their dinners to stand and envelop her in a crushing embrace, petting over her hair and laughing gaily as they welcomed her home. Dorothy squirmed and giggled freely, cheeks bunched with the force of her happiness. Even Jellia couldn't suppress a smile, despite her typically detached and professional demeanor.

Once the initial joy wore off, they turned as one to Ozma, who had at least stood to approach them but was hanging back, uncertain.

"Get in here," Glinda urged her through her toothy smile.

"N-no, I'd… better not," she said with a slight flush to her cheeks.

"It's alright!" Dorothy insisted, then covered her mouth with a shy fist once she had heard herself speak. Clearly, she hadn't meant to do so that suddenly. "I m-mean… I've missed you, too, Tip!"

"Ozma," Nessa corrected in a whisper.

"Ozma! R-right! Princess Ozma, y-your Majesty!" She did a curtsy, and her elbow connected with Elphaba's ribs. "Oh, s-sorry, I'm… awful clumsy sometimes!"

Before anyone else could try, Ozma was there to help steady her. Their hands remained in each other's as she gazed across into her eyes, smiling gently. "I'm… so happy to see you again."

"Oh? Happy?" Dorothy seemed to fixate on that. If Glinda were to hazard a guess, it was because there were two very different potencies of "happy" that the Ruler could be.

"Very happy. But, um… I believe I'm weary just now. I'll retire to my chambers and let you all catch up." Reluctantly, she slid her hands out from beneath Dorothy's and took a step backward. "Perhaps I'll see you tomorrow?" Dorothy nodded. Without any further comment, Ozma curtsied and left the dining hall at a quick pace.

And then they were left to look at each other. After a moment, Elphaba said, "So Glinda explained things to us. Which you can't be surprised about, but I'm sorry if you feel your trust is betrayed."

"Not really," Dorothy said with a little shy smile. "But gosh… I didn't think she'd look so… I dunno.
Hurt, I guess? She looked hurt, and I didn't mean for her to be."

"You didn't hurt her," Nessa said in a reasonable tone, patting her on the shoulder. "And of course
you didn't mean to. But… I think she had an unrealistic expectation that you didn't meet. Knowing it
was unrealistic didn't make it go away."

Though she looked as if she already knew the answer, she squirmed and asked, "What 'spectation is
that?"

"That Tip turning out to be Ozma wouldn't matter," Elphaba sighed. "What a silly thing to assume."

"Not silly," Glinda hissed at her roomie, who rolled her eyes toward the chandelier above them. "But
yes, that's what she was hoping. You would see she was a princess in disguise, say 'oh my
goodness!' and then move on from that. And when you didn't, even though your reaction was quite
understandable…"

"I made her sad." All three of them nodded, and Dorothy walked over to the table and plopped
down. "Well… I've been thinking on that a lot."

"And?"

"And… I ain't the kind to think a whole lot. But it seems to me that… that I should start over. Get to
be friends with Ozma, like I did with you three."

Elphaba's smirk was nearly criminal. "You're going to throw water on her?"

"Hush up," she giggled, and they all shared a relieved look. It was torturous seeing Dorothy as
anything less than happy. At least her drawn appearance was slowly beginning to even out; she'd
been packed off with plenty of bread and cheese and cakes when she left, and had probably been
richly served in the Vinkus, as well. Not quite the plump girl she had been when they all first met,
but certainly healthier.

After a moment, they returned to their seats and called for some bread and jam for Dorothy, and they
listened to her tales of her travels. As it turned out, they did run into a few interesting characters
along the way, including a cat made of glass and a boy as bright as a button, but more or less her
journey was blessedly free of complications. Fiyero had been a wonderful host. Alas, Boq was a
little odd and distant, but at least he had been pleasant and spent no time complaining about former
matters. After a couple of days, she felt she had reminisced long enough and started making her way
back.

Which led them to ask her about Ozma. At first, she tried to ask them about the goings on within the
Emerald City to distract them from the topic, but that didn't work for more than a pair of minutes.

"Alright, alright. Like I said, I want to start over. Because… I think I let Tip bein' a boy go to my
head, and got wrong ideas. Maybe led him on? Well… not on purpose, but I think I did, anyway. If
I'd known he was a she, I mighta been able to just… be friends! Like two normal people! Don't
know why I acted so silly around him, I've never acted like that around boys before…"

Nessa smiled a knowing smile. "You grew up, Dorothy. I mean, you're still fairly wide-eyed, but
you're an adult woman now. Really, I'm surprised you never chased any boys before now."

That earned her a disapproving gasp from the Kansas girl. "Oh, I couldn't! Chase a boy? Me? No,
no, that's not how a lady behaves! Aunt Em told me…" She came over melancholy again, but
pushed through it more effectively this time. "Well, that it ain't proper for a girl to chase after a boy;
the boy is s'posed to do the courtin', and the lady waits for him, and…" Her voice faded with
"That may be how they do it in Kansas," Glinda conceded with her arms folded over her chest, "but sure as heck not how we do things in Oz. You like somebody, you tell them; simple as that."

Of course, she wanted to say more. She wanted to point out to Dorothy that she and Ozma had already kissed, whether the poor girl and her strangely restrictive views about romance wanted to remember the event or not. But it was painfully clear to her that Dorothy needed to take a step away from that aspect of their relationship for some reason or another. It seemed to mostly be because of Ozma being a woman now, but she wondered if it wasn't also because of how young and inexperienced she was. After all, from their many conversations, all she ever heard about from Dorothy was about the farm, the farm, and in rare moments of great variety, the farm. The girl was the furthest thing from Ozmopolitan one could be.

"This is stupid," Elphaba finally sighed. "Just talk to her. You have to start there, or you won't get anywhere."

"Exactly," Dorothy sighed.

"No, I meant right now."

"Huh? Oh… n-no, I don't wanna bother her! She said she had to lie a spell…" At their staring, she dipped her head a little. "D-do you think if I came to breakfast, a-and tried to act like everything’s peaches 'n' cream, that… th-that it'd be alright?"

Feeling bad that they were pushing her so much, Glinda rested a hand on her shoulder. "Of course. And if you're not feeling up to it in the morning, that's alright, too! We just wanted you to know that Ozzie's going to be happy to see you if you do pop in, and not upset. Alright?"

Elphaba looked like she had a lot more to say on the topic. However, she merely let Dorothy nod, and Jellia hastened to make sure her things were taken up to her rooms in the palace. But hoping that would be the end of it was something Glinda wasn't nearly foolish enough to try.

"You really think we're doing the right thing?"

Glinda's head lolled over to glance at the nude form in the bedsheets to one side of herself. Not that Elphaba was much for putting her body on display; something she understood too well herself. Still, that insatiable part of her heart wanted to see as much as possible every waking moment.

"Of course, Elphie. Ozma's no older than us, and has had to do a lot of growing up as a woman in only a few months. And Dorothy's… Dorothy."

Nodding, she turned her green eyes toward the light streaming in through the green-tinted windows. They had both been meaning to commission someone to fashion them clear panes, so that the natural colouring of the rooms could be enjoyed — at least in the private rooms within the Royal Palace. They could stand on tradition in the public audience chambers like the throne room.

"This whole thing is stupid." Her hand fell to find Glinda's and wrap around it. "They're only resisting nature's pull because Dorothy's worried about pointless gender issues, and Ozma's worried about Dorothy."

"I know."
"Then we ought to do something about it."

"Like what?" she giggled, rolling over to curl her body around that of her lover. Silky skin against her own made her stomach flutter, but it was a flutter she had grown used to. Not in a way that removed its thrill, but she no longer panicked and tried to run from the room.

And she saw Elphaba flinch. That was happening fairly often, ever since she got back from Kansas. She knew the reasons by now because they tried to be open and honest with each other about everything, but it still hurt to know Elphaba had her comfort levels with that variety of touching shaken by something that should never have occurred. Little by little, she was going to erase that discomfort. Even if it took the rest of their lives.

"Like… shove them into a closet and tell them they can't come back out until they kiss." Her further giggling made Elphaba crack a smile, and she rolled her eyes as she admitted, "Alright, alright. I know it's supposed to be none of our business."

"I think forcing two people to kiss isn't exactly the best way to cause 'love' to brew, Elphie."

"You're right, of course."

"But… I understand." Her lips pushed into Elphaba's neck, earning a sigh that caressed through her own golden waves of hair, down across her bare shoulder. That was better; she was relaxing, welcoming the reassuring touches. "Ozma's never been this worried about anything in all the time since she first took the throne. Once she was sure she wasn't going to be thrown out of the palace, I mean. Probably because…"

"Because?"

"Well, you saw how Tip looked at her."

"I saw how they looked at each other," Elphaba murmured, and Glinda snickered. "Like you used to look at Fiyero, and Fiyero used to look at me."

"You weren't supposed to look at Fiyero looking at you while I looked at him," she teased.

A dark chuckle floated out of her. The kind that set her skin ablaze, her heart to racing.

"Where's that rule written down?"

"The Grimmerie. It's somewhere in the back, you haven't made it that far in yet."

"Oh I haven't made it! The only one of us who's read the entirety of the book!" They both laughed, and Elphaba rolled to embrace Glinda back, smiling through her mirth. "Ohhh… you're such a nuisance."

Glinda's cheeks glowed. "You only call me a nuisance when you mean to say 'I love you'."

"You say it enough for both of us." Still, gruff as she was, Elphaba wasn't too good to follow through once in awhile. So she kissed Glinda very gently, softly, and whispered, "I love you, Glinny."

"Gosh…"

"You don't have to act like it's a surprise every time."

"What if it is? Every time you say it, I'm shocked that I get to hear it from your lips. That it's meant
A green hand drifted up and perched on her glowing cheek, thumb tracing its way gently up and down along the skin as she gazed across at her, raven hair spilling out over the pillow in the most artful of ways and making Glinda want to reach past and slide her fingers through it. But for now, she was content to perch hers on Elphaba's ribcage.

"You shouldn't be. Winsome girls with golden curls are the ones who always find love. It's me who's lucky; I'm-"

"Just as beautiful," she cut her off, knowing what would come next. The self-deprecation, the eye so critical that it would tear her own appearance to shreds at any given opportunity. "Moreso for being unique; cute blondes are a dime a dozen in Gillikin."

"If I could have a dozen of you for a dime... my purse would be empty."

Lines like that always worked on Glinda. She had figured they would wear off once they settled into a relationship such as the one they were now enjoying, but every last time, Elphaba could make her feel sixteen again. Tittering and burying her face in Elphaba's shoulder, she heard her chuckle and felt strong arms wrapping around her back, holding her close. Caressing every inch they could reach. Lips pressed into the crown of her head before they whispered again.

"You make my heart leap, Glinda. Every day we're together."

She pulled back to lean up and take her lips, unable to hold back for another second. There was no reason to, and she couldn't have if there were. Elphaba's response was not as enthusiastic, but that wasn't her way; she was patient, she was earnest. But that in no way meant she wasn't passionate; it was just a different passion than her own. And that was what made them work.

A few minutes later, when Glinda raised her thigh a little higher to slide between another pair, Elphaba shivered and drew back. The thighs were the worst of the zones; she always flinched from that. But now, the reactions were equally alarmed and excited. It was progress.

"Again, so soon? You normally don't try for twice in a night."

"Can't get enough of your..." Glinda's cheeks flushed. Neither of them were very good at talking about this topic in detail, even after months of trying. "Your rose and your pearl."

That got Elphaba to push her hand into Glinda's face, cackling and rolling away as if she were completely through with her. But when Glinda reached past her hip and resumed their play, she certainly didn't fight her off a second time.

To Be Continued...
Ozma was pacing impatiently in her bedchamber. Dorothy was supposed to meet her for tea between breakfast, in which she had announced she would be doing precisely that, and lunch. In the time since then, she had nearly broken down and quickly struggled into the old Tip costume once again. That would be admitting defeat, however, and she had sworn that this would be the day she faced things head on instead of dancing around the issue. It was a promise she intended to keep lest she lose all self-respect.

Maybe she wasn't coming. After all, ever since she had revealed herself to be a princess in a farm boy's clothing, Dorothy had reacted by running off to another country. Was it too much of a stretch to believe she would simply decline to attend their tea? A little rude, of course, considering it was her idea in the first place. But not altogether surprising.

"Jellia," she asked another few trips around the room later.

"Yes, Your Majesty?" she asked with a slight bow.

"Can you check again that the door is unlocked?"

"It's unlocked," she told her without even moving to the door.

"How can you be sure?"

"I can see the latch from here." Taking pity upon her, she sighed and added, "It's barely five minutes past the appointed time. Please be patient! All is not lost."

Now Ozma felt bad. She knew Jellia liked to keep her nose out of personal matters, especially pertaining to romance. "Thank you. I'm sorry… nevermind, I'll just… sit."

But that only lasted about five minutes before she popped up again to start pacing back and forth, hands wringing in the small of her back. Luckily, there was a sharp rap at the door before she had gone more than two or three more circuits.

"Yes?"

"It's me!"

Dorothy. Her pulse raced and her palms began to tingle, but she forced herself to suppress that reaction as much as was possible. Clearing her throat to keep her voice from squeaking, she called out, "Come in!"

Dorothy looked quite lovely, in a simple green frock that fanned out around her knees, with a large white bow around the waist. She also looked like she didn't know what she was doing there. After a brief hesitation, she took a step forward, then another, and then the door was slamming shut behind her and causing her to yip in surprise, taking a longer leap into the room.
"Just in time," Ozma lied. It was only a little lie; really, it wasn't Dorothy's fault that she was so anxious about this meeting that she had been ready since fifteen minutes before when she was supposed to be there. That only made Dorothy's five minutes of tardiness feel like a hundred.

"I am not," she sighed, fretting with the bow. "S-sorry about that. Just couldn't decide on what to say, or…. How to… anyhow, sorry."

Shaking her head, she gestured to the table with the teapot and cups laid out for them. "Don't be. Please." Dorothy sat. She wanted to take her hand and help her into the chair, but she had told herself that she would hold herself back and away. To give her space. Instead, she moved around and took her own chair, Jellia scooting it in for her. "Thank you."

"I'm glad you weren't sore on account of me running off to see the Scarecrow," she gushed, clearly hoping to fill the silence with idle chatter. Probably to make them both feel better. "J-just, well, I didn't know what to say, and I meant to visit him anyway, s-so it seemed like a good way to kill two birds with one stone!"

"Oh, I was a bird to be killed?" When Dorothy blinked, she ducked her head. "N-no, sorry… I didn't mean for that to sound so bad; I just haven't heard that expression before."

Smiling a little more, Dorothy pulled the teapot closer and began to pour. Apparently, Jellia had read the room and made herself scarce, and Ozma felt a slight flutter of panic in her belly; being alone with Dorothy wasn't part of the plan! "It's alright. Not bein' from Oz, I'm sure I'll say a lot of things that don't make a lick of sense to you."

"Such as 'lick of sense'," she giggled, and Dorothy's face looked relieved. "We can learn from each other the longer you're here. But again, I… I wanted you to know that if you'd rather find a dwelling somewhere else in Emerald City, I believe we could arrange for that. You're not required to live in the Palace just because I've made the room available."

"That's awfully kind of you, Miss- Tip- I mean, Majesty!" Both of them laughed this time, and she passed the kettle back to Ozma, who took it delicately, avoiding touching Dorothy's hands. It would be an insignificant matter if she did, but it was too much to expect Dorothy not to care.

"And I'll continue calling you Dorothy, since that is your name. But you may call me whatever you're more comfortable with. Even Tip, since that was my name when we met."

"But it aint your name now, is it?"

"No, it isn't. That doesn't mean I'll hold it against you if you use it."

"Wouldn't be right for me to, I think. Since… well, it'd be like callin' a filly a colt, even after you know she's not a colt, wouldn't it? I've been in the habit, but lookin' at you now…"

Dorothy never finished her thought. After she had poured her own cup, she chanced a peek up at her to gauge her mood, and saw the girl was carefully avoiding looking at her. This went on long enough that Ozma had time to set the kettle down, then fold her hands calmly in her lap and wait.

"Hm?"

"You were saying something about how I look now."

"Oh," the farm girl burst out with a shy smile as she pulled the sugarbowl closer. "Well, I didn't mean anything mean by it; just that you're such a pretty lady now, so it feels awful silly to call you by
Ozma started when she heard the gasp, and shot to her feet. "What's wrong?" In the process, she bumped the table, and the teacups tipped over, spilling Ozma's tea across the tablecloth and Dorothy's straight into her lap.

"OW!" she yelped aloud, shooting backward from the table and waving at the front of her dress. "Shoot fire, that hurts, it's hot!"

"Lurline Above, are you alright?! Oh no, what did I-"

"It was just sugar," Dorothy chuckled, even as she was flapping a cloth napkin at her clothing to try and abate the scalding feeling. "Sorry, I didn't mean to s'prise you! Awww, this poor dress is ruined, I'm afraid; though we might be able to get the stains out with a… a little… Tip?"

Alas, there was too much going on for either of them to pay much mind to Dorothy slipping up and calling Ozma by the wrong name. Mainly that the princess had now buried her face in her arms, leaning down against the tabletop and paying no mind to the tea gently cooling in the cloth. She didn't want to see Dorothy just now, didn't want to acknowledge the size of her mistake. How carefully she had planned this tea and how badly everything was going, a mere few minutes in!

She didn't know how long had gone by when the quiet voice asked again, "Your Majesty… I… I'm alright, really, it was only a little tea."

Taking a deep breath, she forced herself to say in a firmer voice, "You may leave now. I've already made a mess and I… don't want you to have to hang around making me feel better about how stupid I've behaved."

"Oh no, I don't mind you being stupid!" They both winced; she could practically feel it from the other party, even without hearing it in her voice when she hastily amended, "I m-mean, um, you weren't — and besides, everybody makes mistakes, right? I… I spilled my sugar because I wasn't payin' attention, and hollered about it like a baby, and that's all my fault; it startled you, I guess. I'm sorry."

"You don't have to make excuses for me. I've behaved… most un-queenlike."

"Aw, you're doing great. Both of us have been a little funny around each other."

"Suppose so." Slowly, she managed to sit back a little, wiping at her face. "Still, I can't believe I knocked over the tea like some clumsy child! What on earth is the matter with…"

Her words tapered off when she noticed Dorothy was staring at her. She swallowed hard, then whispered, "Were you, um, crying?"

"What? Oh… y-yes, I suppose I was," she chuckled, swiping harder at her cheeks to get rid of the evidence. "Stupid, isn't it?"

"Are you crying because…" She seemed to realise something all at once, even though Ozma sort of wished she wouldn't. "This was really important to you, huh? This tea."

"Y-yes."

"Why?"

Shrugging her shoulders, she picked up another napkin and dabbed at her face to clear it of tea drips.
"You're a very special person. You were even before you were made Princess Dorothy. So... I just wanted to... hopefully move forward, in whatever direction that is. As friends, o-or just as acquaintances, o... anything is better than not being able to speak to each other, I thought."

"That's true," Dorothy admitted in a quiet voice. "But you're wrong about me bein' anything special."

"No, I don't think I am."

"You're the one who's Princess Ozma! Or Queen Ozma now, right? You're an actual fairy princess! And you are awful pretty; I thought that when you were Tip, too, but y'know how sometimes boys look a little like a girl, or a girl might look a little like- well, anyhow, you're very lovely, and kind, and the whole Land of Oz loves you! And next to that, I'm... just some farm girl who got caught in a twister once."

"And I'm just a farm boy who made a pumpkin-headed scarecrow once. We both didn't mean to... to become more than we were, Dorothy!"

"But you were Princess Ozma, just in disguise! Right?"

"W-well..." Swallowing, she pushed to her feet to regard Dorothy more evenly, trying to ignore how she winced and took a step backward. Either intimidated by her station, or by what had gone on between them in the garden. "I didn't know I was. But maybe... you were always Princess Dorothy in disguise. Couldn't that be just as true?"

Smile as shy as a smile could get, she looked down and whispered, "I don't think so. I'm only a princess now because you felt bad about... about fibbing."

"I didn't fib." Catching herself, she added, "Okay, so I wore my old clothes, but they were my clothes. I am Tip. I was before, and I'm... still that person, even if that person is also Princess Ozma now. That sounds crazy, I know!"

"Oh, I understand! The same way I've heard tell that Scarecrow used to be Fiyero, and now he's sort of both, isn't he? I didn't mean- well, you didn't mean to lie, but you kind of did when you got everybody to keep calling you Tip, didn't you?"

She definitely had her dead to rights now. "Alright. Yes, I did; I'm very sorry. But I thought you had already met Tip, and you would rather see him again first than meet me. It was stupid; of course you were going to find out, and I would have told you! I just didn't expect..."

They both fell silent. Ozma turned away slightly, hands on the tabletop and eyes pointed at her bed, for lack of somewhere else to focus. When she felt a hand on her back, she didn't dare move, didn't attempt to respond to it for fear that she would drive Dorothy away.

"You didn't expect me to kiss you."

"No."

"Really? Because after I left the garden, I couldn't help thinking, 'That Tip was one of those smooth-talkers my Uncle Henry warned me about.' Ozma snorted, and Dorothy leaned down to catch her eyes. "But... I s'pose we were both a little scared. Now I understand why you were a little better."

"Yeah. I... I was, and I still am. Scared of doing the wrong thing."

"Because you like me?"
"Of course."

For a moment, the hand was still. Then it moved up to rest on her shoulder. "Still don't understand that, bein' that it's against the Lord's will. But like they said, this is Oz, not Kansas, and the Good Book isn't around here anyplace, so…"

"What are you talking about?"

"Nevermind. So I guess… if I can see Miss Elphaba and Miss Glinda love each other, and it don't seem all that shameful or bad when they do it, I feel like I'm… what's that word? One of those people who tell other people to do right, but do wrong themselves?"

Ozma pondered for a moment. "A… hypocrite?"

"Yeah. I'd be a hippo-crate if I told you off for bein' sweet on me, but don't tell off Elphie and Glinda. So… I won't do that."

This seemed entirely natural and logical to Ozma, of course. But she could tell that Dorothy had worked long and hard to get to that mental milestone, so instead of saying "So what?", she smiled and reached over to take her hand between both of her own, patting the back. "Thank you. And I certainly wouldn't scold you for not being with a woman, either, so that seems fair to me."

"Yeah," she giggled. Then her cheeks came over much rosier when they were left standing there, her hand between both of the queen's. "Um… can I ask you a question, though?"

"Of course."

"Well… I've been a little… scared to ask Elphie and Glinda too many questions about that. Just didn't seem like my place. But why would you want to be with another girl, anyhow? We couldn't have babies, and there'd never be a new prince or princess. And I ain't prettier than you, and I sure ain't handsome like a man. So the whole thing just plum flummoxes me."

The point about heirs to the throne was a fair one, even if she didn't much care about that. But the rest seemed so trivial to her. "Dorothy, of course you're more beautiful than me. As for the rest… well, can't it just be that I really like who you are? And I want to talk to you, and be close to you?"

"But we could do all that while bein' best friends."

"What do you think a girlfriend is?" she laughed. "A best friend you also kiss. But… I won't ever do that again if you don't want me to, of course. Please don't worry."

"I wouldn't worry! You're so good and kind, I know you wouldn't do a thing like that. And besides, you ain't a boy, and it's only boys who try to kiss you or pull your hair when you don't want 'em to."

That made Ozma laugh a little louder, and Dorothy smiled. "But…"

"But?" she giggled.

"Guess… I might want… to be kissed by Tip again. Oh, I'm such a dimwit! That don't even make any sense! Silly little dreams, I guess."

However, it made complete sense to Ozma. Dorothy had made it clear from the beginning that she had felt an attraction to Tip, and it didn't seem as if her attraction did not extend to her once she was revealed to be the Ruler. It was a difference that was a lot more distinct within her mind than it was to anyone else in Oz. And it gave her an idea. Yet another stupid idea.
"What if you could?"

Dorothy blinked at her for a moment, then sighed. "Ohh, well thank you, but it wouldn't be the same now. I know it's you in that hat and those scruffy old trousers."

"A kiss goodbye, then," she attempted. "I think… it was really rude of me to take Tip away from you so suddenly, when you'd only just gotten acquainted. So what if I brought him back and you can say your goodbyes? I know it won't really make up for how I handled this whole thing, but…"

Now she was really thinking about it. Her green shoes clicked as she paced back and forth, cheeks rosy. Finally, she shook her head. "I can't ask that of you. Not when you've already been so kind and hospitable an' all, and… it's just gonna make you have to do all that extra work."

"It's no trouble! And it's my fault you were left in such an odd limbo, so… alright, please stay put, I won't be but a moment!"

And Dorothy stayed. She hadn't been sure she would, but as she nipped behind her dressing screen and quickly scrambled out of her dress and into the old ragamuffin clothing that she had been unable to fully escape, she never heard the door to her chambers open and close. They both also seemed too nervous about the situation to attempt idle conversation, so the room was silent other than the rustle of fabric and an occasional clearing of the throat.

Once through, she knocked at the frame of the screen. Startled, Dorothy asked, "What's that?"

"I'm knocking at the door!" Ozma whispered. "You have to let me in!"

"Oh! Sorry!" Another throat-clearing, and she called out, "Who iiis it?"

"Tip!" Ozma said in a slightly deeper voice, which earned her a giggle. "May I come in for a minute?"

"Sure!" When she rounded the screen and Dorothy saw her with the cap over her hair, she grinned and just managed to prevent another laugh. "Ah, my good friend, Tip! My my, you look very handsome today!"

"Thank you," he said with a bow. The hat almost fell off, for she had put it on too hastily to secure it properly, but she managed to stand up quickly and catch it. "U-um, I'm glad you could see me today."

Smiling slightly, Dorothy curtsied for "him" and said, "Me, too. What's the matter, sir?"

"I'm afraid I have unfortunate news. I must go away. It's going to be a permanent trip; I'm going to…" Where should Tip be going? "The Land of Ev, which is impossible to reach because of the desert. So I won't be able to come back, and you won't be able to visit."

"If it can't be reached, then how are you going to reach it?"

On the spot, Ozma squirmed. "I… well… I have a special sand-boat! Yes, a boat that will only go across the desert once, and then I'll be there forever. Yes, it's very sad."

Laughing aloud at her, Dorothy leaned in slightly with her hands in the small of her back. "How very unfortunate! Poor Tip, has to go far away on a sled!"

"Boat."
"Right, a boat. Where is my mind?" Another curtsy. "Well, I'll be sorry to see you go, of course. You were my betrothed, and... and a real nice fella."

Ozma gasped. "Your betrothed? Oh, if I'd known that, I wouldn't have said I'd get on the boat!" They both laughed, and Ozma felt suddenly at ease. This was much better; it seemed to be precisely what they needed to help move past the unpleasantness. "But perhaps I will find a way back to your side, beloved. Maybe not this year, or the next, or the next hundred. But if there's ever another sand-boat..."

As she spoke, Dorothy's cheeks had begun to pinken a little. She couldn't guess at why, other than the way she was always nervous about this topic. She stepped a little closer, hands falling to her lapels.

"Dorothy?"

"That goodbye kiss. I m-mean..." Trying to get back into character, she said, "A girl ought to give her fella a goodbye kiss. Or else it ain't a right and proper goodbye."

"That is true. We must do our best to make the thing official."

Ozma was sure that Dorothy would do exactly what she intended: to kiss both her cheeks and wish the illusion that was Tippetarius farewell forever. And that she did. However, she also kissed her lips, as brief a peck as was given to her cheeks. And then did it a second time. Ozma put her hands on Dorothy's hips, intending to push her back to get a better look at her face, help figure out how she was feeling. But instead they merely ended up gazing into each other's eyes for a minute.

"I... wish you didn't have to go," Dorothy whispered, and Ozma gave her a nod. Suddenly, she urged, "Can you... leave on the boat tomorrow? Oh, but I'd like another day before you have to go away; we missed out on a whole week."

That was so tempting. But she knew it would do no good to draw things out. "Afraid not. I must go, and today, or else... the desert will get worse, and I may not survive." Why not? It was as plausible as the sand-boat notion was in the first place. What she didn't count on was tears blossoming in Dorothy's eyes. So she immediately added, "Sorry. This was a bad idea."

"No, I..." Clearing her throat, she whispered, "I just don't want you to go, Tip. I really don't."

"We both know Tip can't stay."

"Please? Just..." The shame was evident in Dorothy's face. She heard herself, and felt stupid for the words coming out, and Ozma was embarrassed for her. "I know... b-but I want... just five minutes? Anything?"

Heart breaking, she whispered, "O-of course. Five minutes."

Dorothy kissed her again. And this time, the kiss did not end for five minutes solid. By the end of that time, Ozma found she had been backed to sit upon her bed, Dorothy next to her and a hand sliding up under her hat to wind through her hair. Not sure what to do with her own hands, one hand ended up on Dorothy's waist and the other on her shoulder, hoping that was a "manly" way of kissing a girl. Not that she had any idea about such things, really.

About the time Dorothy pulled back, the hat tumbled from Ozma's head, and the hair spilled down around Dorothy's wrist and she tensed... but did not pull away. Merely froze, still as a statue.

"What is it?"
"You… turned back into a pumpkin, Cinderella." She seemed to think that was funny, even if she was too distressed to do more than let out a single little laugh at the look of confusion on Ozma's face. Then her smile faded. "Guess that's what I get for bein' selfish, and wantin' another five minutes with Tip. He left before I was done."

Biting her bottom lip, Ozma fought down a dozen responses. She wanted to ask Dorothy again why it mattered so much. She wanted to offer to put the hat back on. She wanted to cry, to scream, to run away. So she bit her lip and stayed put.

"O-Ozma?" She still didn't respond. "Do you think I'm… crazy?"

"What?"

"Because of the shocks. 'Cause this is crazy, for me to… be okay kissin' you as long as you're wearin' a hat… ain't that stupid? A-and I'm worried that what they did to me in the 'sylum really… hurt my brai-"

"Dorothy, you are perfect," she told her firmly, Tip fading away and leaving only a princess who truly cared for her friend. "Please don't think it means that! You just… have trouble with me turning out to be a woman, because you didn't expect it. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to ruin everything, or to confuse you, or…"

Her voice faded as she ran out of things to say. Then Dorothy embraced her with both arms, hard and crushing, shivering as Ozma clung back to her.

"I'm scared! My heart's tellin' me this is alright, but my brain's tellin' me it's alwrong, and I don't know which one I ought to listen to right now!"

Taking a chance, Ozma pushed Dorothy back into the bed. She squeaked, but didn't seem as if she was about to complain or throw her off. She hovered over her, hair spilling all around them, closing them off from the rest of the room. The girl stared back up at her, obviously terrified but a quality of desire keeping her from complaining, or calling out. They were so very well-matched in that regard, other than one of them being more certain about what she wanted. Not that it erased the anxiety.

"I'm Ozma," she told her firmly, even though her voice was trembling. "And… and I like kissing you, but I don't want you to be upset, or… or you to feel like you're compromising yourself somehow. So if you want me to, I'll leave."

Dorothy stared up at her for a long moment, uncertain. Then she whispered, "But we're in your room."

"It'll be your room today. We'll switch back tomorrow morning."

"That's silly; I could go back to my room, I'm… I'm a big girl."

"So go on. Please! I… I want you to go if that helps."

"Then get off me."

"I'm not on you, I'm just… over you."

"Then get out from over me," Dorothy said with the ghost of a smile returning to her ruby red lips. "It's like havin' a canopy bed."

"Do you want a canopy bed?" she asked, sitting back. But when she did, Dorothy caught one of her
forearms. "What?"

"I want a canopy bed again." Ozma resumed her position. "It's… kinda nice. All that hair everywhere, like a curtain. Never had a canopy bed before."

Ozma smiled. "You are a very peculiar person, Dorothy. But I'll be your canopy if that's what you want."

"Somethin' tells me you'd do anything I ask. If I said 'hop up and down on one leg', you would."

"Yes."

"But that's all wrong! You're the queen, you're supposed to tell me what to do!"

Grinning from ear to ear, she leaned down closer, and Dorothy gulped. But all she did was whisper into her ear, "Hop up and down on one leg."

"OH, HUSH!" she cried out, shoving Ozma to one side and cackling right along with her. But she also seemed to want to stay rather close. As their laughter began to simmer down to a low boil, eyes smiling as much as their mouths, Dorothy leaned over her and said, "I lost my canopy."

"Hold on, I think I can find it." She reached up to undo Dorothy's braids. The girl seemed a little surprised, but didn't make any remark as the royal fingers nimbly removed the ribbons and undid the lacing of her brown hair, pulling it until it hung loosely around her face. "There."

They were both quiet for a moment. Dorothy bit her lip. Ozma swallowed. Even though she had already known Dorothy was the most beautiful woman she'd ever laid eyes on, long before she had realised it and longer still before she admitted it to herself, seeing her undone hair made her look so uninhibited, and that did something to her on a physical level that she couldn't quite comprehend.

"Thank you," she finally breathed.

"I like being in here with you."

"Me, too. It's… crazy. Feels safer somehow."

"Not crazy, remember? Just… new." Her hand came up to cup Dorothy's cheek, and when it leaned into the touch her breath caught. She couldn't believe how her lips parted, her eyes closed in bliss. Didn't think this would be something she got to experience with the only person she'd ever thought about experiencing it with.

"Ozma?"

She grinned and caressed her cheek with her thumb. "Thought I was 'Tip'."

"Ozma," she said more firmly, eyes opening. "That's you." Her hands raised up and rested on her shoulders, forearms just pressing into the breasts hiding beneath the shirt, and she shivered but did not draw away. "This is you. And if I liked you before, then… it would be crazy t' say I shouldn't now just 'cause you turned out to be a girl. Since you still act like you did in the garden. Just as sweet, and… and tender. Always thinkin' of me."

"That's true. But I still don't know why you liked me then, either; I might be a princess, but I don't have much else to offer in… that way. We could still be good friends and you'd be welcome in the Palace anytime. Everything else could be the same."
This time, it was Dorothy who found Ozma amusing. "Silly. I liked you when I thought you were some ragamuffin boy. What's bein' a princess got to do with... with how you feel? Just thought you'd have plenty of people to choose from who'd love to court a princess."

"Ah, but that's the most crucial part, isn't it?" she mused with a serene smile. "They would all date Princess Ozma. But only a woman as caring and fun and bright as you would bother to court scruffy old Tip. Just for being me, without any of those other details. Just me."

It seemed the time had come for her to admit it. As she leaned down, mouth inches from Ozma's and about to begin a kiss that would last many more minutes, Dorothy Gale whispered, "Just you, my canopy."

To Be Continued...

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